Green and Gold

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Green and Gold

by [PhoenixTakaramono](http://archiveofourown.org/users/PhoenixTakaramono)

Summary

Due to the newest crop of alleged Death Eater sightings overseas, British Division Head Auror, Lord Harry Potter, was sent to Muggle Japan to thwart the renegade from performing
another Dark Resurrection Ritual on a sacred site, thereby from desecrating a national magical monument—the Bone Eater's Well. For his troubles he lands himself as the minder of a 500-or-so year-old dog daiyoukai his magic tore from a distant past. Aloof and flexible morals aside, he doesn't know what to make of the feudal lord and sovereign. Yet. Similarly, Sesshomaru cannot help but be intrigued.

In the meantime, a storm is brewing in both eras, both in the magical UK and magical Japan...and perhaps even in Europe or America itself.

TUMBLR: Atmospheric hints for the next chapter
STORY PLAYLIST: "Green and Gold" Mix | List of Songs
DELETED SCENES: Tales of Natsukashii
I've decided to create an A03 account for this story in particular. Just in case...fair warning, the "steamy romance" will take quite a few chapters to build up to, as I'm trying to keep them as in-character as I can, but it's worth the payoff!

**TRIGGER WARNINGS:** eventual graphic or disturbing imagery/events (deaths and violence), eventual adult content, eventual possessive behavior, manipulative behavior, mentions of past abuse and PTSD, and scatterings of coarse language and bigotry. The eventual main pairing is a homosexual relationship. You have been warned.

**DISCLAIMERS:** "Green and Gold" is inspired by the "Harry Potter" (book series and movies) and the "Inuyasha: a Feudal Fairy Tale" (anime and movies) franchises! Credit is due to JK Rowling and Rumiko Takahashi for their masterpieces. Thank you for crafting such inspiring, lovely works for the generations!

**SFW VERSION:** on fanfiction.net
**DELETED SCENES:** Tales of Natsukashii
**TUMBLR:** Hints & Sneak Peaks
**STORY PLAYLIST:** "Green and Gold" Mix | List of Songs
**ART:** Please see Green and Gold: Art Masterpost for more.

"We've arrived at the Higurashi Shrine, Pottā-sama," the Asian wizard moonlighting as a Muggle taxi driver said respectfully, pulling the car to a smooth stop along the curb. The stars stood out among the dark night sky, beautiful in this wondrous occasion. Dark eyes surveyed the still figure in the back seat, said infamous wizard who had his eyes closed throughout the long drive from the Apparition Point in the Narita Airport. With an awed smile, the young man lowered his gaze reverently from the Boy-Who-Lived. Turning the ignition off, he added, "I shall accompany you to the spiritual grounds as per Shacklebolt-san's request."

"No need, Takeda-Mushin-san," the posh but gentle British accent startled the Japanese man. Bright *Avada Kedavra* eyes snapped open. Without his trademark eyewear, the Head Auror's sight was sharp and penetrative, honed by years of hard experience during the War and its aftermath. Takeda-Mushin Kohaku suppressed a shudder as those green lasers levelled off to the side, taking in their immediate surroundings with a trained eye. "What I have to do from here on out is considered classified by the British and Japanese Ministries." As if realizing the callousness of the dismissal, the Auror added almost hastily, "You have my thanks though for taking me this far, Agent, as well as
having the gratitude of our department."

Kohaku nodded numbly, his shoulders slumping against the stalwart force that made up the well-known Potter stubbornness. There was no resistance to be offered once the wizard had his mind made up. Lord Potter Harry seemed to have gathered enough intelligence for the while for the wizard reached into his pockets, digging around for the Galleon-converted-into-Muggle fare and depositing the appropriate amount into waiting hands.

"You said the family has been notified?"

"Yes, Pottā-sama," he responded dutifully. "The grounds are open to your investigation for the time you are here. With the exception of Higurashi Kagome, the entire Higurashi family is awaiting your exalted presence."

"There's no need for deference," the Auror replied bemusedly, patting his pockets for a quick examination of his miniaturized inventory. "You may just call me Potter-san, not 'sama.' I tell you what, after this is done, what say you to a friendly round of drinks with our friends? I owe you for utilizing your contacts effectively under tight time constraints."

Kohaku raised an eyebrow at the forwardness of the invite. "Not that I mean you offense, but surely you would have more important things to do?"

Lord Potter was giving him an odd look. The foreigner then chuckled, shaking his head. "Well, that's not a resounding rejection from you at least. Trust me, after securing the area, I'll need a stiff drink to loosen up. Companionship is just a perk."

"If that is what'll make you happy, Pottā-sama."

With a final perusal of his person, one media-toted wizard extraordinaire wrenched open the left door handle and, much to Kohaku's protests, got out of the taxi before the Japanese wizard could release the remote latch. Under his trained eye, Kohaku could make out the vague shape of the notorious Holly wand sliding down his arm from the wand holster hidden under the Brit's grey suit. There was a quick wave and incantation to ward against any eavesdroppers as the Lord Potter trotted over to the driver's window, gesturing for the window to be rolled down. The Englishman leaned down to whisper, "For appearance's sake, I'll give you a call when I need to be 'picked up.' Until then, you are relieved of your escort duty from me."

"Of course." Kohaku bowed his head deeply. Kohaku turned the spluttering engine back on and pulled away from the Higurashi property without a backward glance, pulling away from the soil where his ancestors—one yōkai taijya and one monk—had pledged their eternal loyalty and protection over even in their deaths, a vow that the Takeda-Mushin descendants honored today.

Harry smiled politely, waving goodbye until the black Sedan turned the corner and sped down the inclined hill. What a nice boy Takeda-Mushin was. While he had taken a light nap in the backseat, he could feel the lingering glances the Japanese agent kept tossing his way.

In a way, he reminded Harry of the deceased Colin Creevey. That particular brand of hero worship seemed to follow Harry wherever he traveled. It no longer bothered him that his fame had crossed over English soil. Over the years, he had learned to take the reverence his presence brought to the masses with tired resignation rather than his teenage indignation and embarrassment.

He turned tail and took a deep inhale of wet grass and the heady scent of pine as he traversed the stone pavement.
There was something magical about each country's attempted preservation of its culture. But there was something even more special in the European and Asian ones. Japan was a ridiculously pretty country, in Harry's humble opinion. While Muggle Japan was technologically advanced than its British counterpart, underneath all the electricity and nuclear power a trace of Old Magic could be detected from beneath the cherry blossom canopies to the planted hydrangeas. It was a very different scenery from Little Whinging, Surrey and its rows and rows of identical houses in the tiny suburbia. Even here the well-preserved architecture bespoke of its owners' care and love of history. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine the time long ago when wizards and magical creatures roamed free on the Japanese lands without fear of Muggle persecution.

While a nice thought, he was not here to play tourist. Not wasting any more time loitering, Harry quickly whipped out his Invisibility Cloak, enlarged it, and obscured himself in the Deathly Hallow. Although the Muggles were aware of his visitation, they were under the impression that he was a sightseeing diplomat intrigued by Japan's rich culture. His appearance was to be hush-hush to avoid the media catching wind of his arrival. Harry snorted mentally. If only they knew. Unbeknownst to them, Head Auror Harry James Potter was flown here to investigate the unusual readings the Unspeakables had caught several months ago. The *Honekui no Ido*, Harry had registered among the confused murmurings of the Japanese Ministry when he'd sent his official papers requesting to study one of their treasured historical monuments. Though it was far out of the British Ministry's jurisdiction, his name alone had done wonders currying pardons for imposing on their sovereignty.

Underneath the cloth, he levelled his wand precariously upon his palm as he whispered a point-me spell for the elusive Bone Eater's Well. His Holly wand spun lazily before stilling, its tip pointing to the west.

Quickening his pace but keeping his footfalls ever so silent, Harry went in the direction his wand was insisting to be tracked like a hyperactive puppy. Cicadas were buzzing louder in his ears the deeper he got into sacred grounds. Mindlessly following and ignoring the foreboding that was churning in his gut, he mentally reviewed Shacklebolt's missive before he was given the International Portkey and told to shove off immediately.

It was incredible how even a mere rumor of a rogue Death Eater performing Dark Magic in a sacred location was enough to send the Ministry hollering for their savior of the wizarding world to clean up the remaining mess.

Harry grumbled under his breath. Blasted Death Eaters and their tenacity. Ever since he took down Voldemort, the number of Death Eaters remaining had dwindled down to a small number of fugitives that just refused to turn themselves in. Ever since his inauguration as Head Auror, his ramshackle department had connected the desecrations of various national monuments and mystic places to the desperate attempts of the Death Eaters reviving their Dark Lord.

Loathe as the international magical communities were to admit their involvement, it was originally the Brits' mess that was impugning on their territories and therefore it was the Brits' responsibility to contain the situation before it evolved into national concern. Cue Harry Potter and his ragtag team of Aurors to swoop in to save the day and kiss political arse. He and his team had been around Africa, the Middle East, China, DPRK, the States, and now the land of the rising sun.

This time however he was on a solo mission as a "free agent," considering he had advanced his prior knowledge of the nuances of the Japanese language and culture from his spontaneous exposures to Dudley's clandestine fascination with colorful, English-subbed anime whenever Vernon wasn't looking. Coincidentally his friends and team had busied themselves with prior engagements at this juncture when the announcement to move out was made, so by process of elimination and merit, he
was chosen to go.

The Japanese were honored to have his gracious presence on their soil, though it was agreed among the British staff that no mention of Harry's real purpose was to be revealed upon risk of endangering the situation. Harry James Potter and nosy, suspicious officials did not mix well together, as he and his team had learned throughout their worldwide jaunts.

Breathing in the rotted wood and grassy scent, Harry came to a stop before a small building, smaller than the other shrine-like buildings. His wand was practically vibrating in his hand like a smug bloodhound as he cast a dubious eye over the unkempt structure. This was the hidey hole of the sacred well? Looking around his surroundings, he nodded to himself and slid the wooden doors open.

The interior was dark and surprisingly larger than he had expected from its unassuming façade. Sliding the doors closed behind him, he cast a silent but weakened version of *lumos*, the muted light quickly bringing him up to date of his current surroundings. His nose wrinkled as he stepped into the shrine, the rank of damp wood and stale water repugnant the further he tiptoed inside. Keeping his eyes and ears vigil, he didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed that there were no Death Eater in sight.

"Ah, well, he could be hiding," Harry muttered to himself, sheathing his wand once more in his quick-draw holster after no one responded. His gut was telling him the fugitive he was looking for wasn't here. Straightening up, he cautiously made his way to the rickety fence erected around what seemed to be a ceremonial space, if the unsealed wooden well lying down in the middle had anything to do with it. His brows furrowed as he spotted birch and fern lying adjacent on the ground to the gaping maw as well as small footsteps that led into it. Birch and fern, both were used as conduits to ward off negativity and promote protection and purification. He got on his knees, picking up a sliver which was cracked in the middle, as if someone had stepped on it, and bringing it for a closer inspection. He looked at the fresh track marks and back at the sliver, then divested his attention back onto the well. His eyes squinted. And almost hidden behind the structure was what appeared to be a discarded wooden lid the perfect shape and size for sealing a certain *Honekui no Ido*. Curiouser and curiouser.

His instincts were buzzing angrily that something was up. And that something had to do with the Japanese national monument. He crept closer and closer until he was peering into the well. It was here that he got a strong whiff of floral perfume mixed with wet dog.

The combination smelt awful. He sneered, biting his lip. Taking shallow breaths, he pondered aloud, "But this doesn't make sense. Obviously someone jumped into…"

Brows climbing further and further up into his forehead, he cast another *lumos*, this time at full force. The magical light chased away the darkness but not to his surprise it failed to illuminate the deepest depths.

*Scratch. Scratch.*

The hair at the back of Harry's neck stood up. The sound was coming from…

*Scrritchrrrrrrrrrrrrr.*

"*Riddikulus!*" the jet of light shot down the well, before finally rebounding against the ground and coming back up in a big but muted flash of color. The sound paused. For good measure, he threw an *Expecto Patronum* after it.
The scratching, if his imagination could be believed, intensified after that spell. Now instead of tentatively scratching, it sounded like whatever the entity that was making the sound was now clawing at something to get to him. Mid-cast *stupefy*, his ears picked up on what had to be undiscernible, muffled words interluded between the violence wrought against whatever was containing the entity from attaining its freedom.

Harry's eyes widened. Lowering his wand, he shouted urgently, too excited to remember he was not in England, "Hello? Can you hear me? Hello?"

The well trembled as soon as he said those words, and Harry could feel the surge of magic being pressed from within the cavern depths like a great tsunami force crashing against a cliff. Exhilaration washed through him. Death Eater or not, whoever this was was magical and in dire need of assistance. Grasping the edge of the well, he swore, "Listen, you're trapped under a barrier. I'm going to get you out!" His eardrums roared with pounding blood as he raised his wand and he bellowed, "*Finite Incantatem!* *Accio!*"

What sounded like wood splitting broke through the barrier savagely and what launched up was a blur of white that was hurled viciously over his head from the forcefulness of the intent behind the incantation. Splinters rained down upon Harry's head and he ducked down as whatever landed behind him hit the ground in a loud crash that kicked up a cloud of dust when it landed.

Eyes tearing, Harry coughed and coughed as he cast *scourgify* after *scourgify*. "Are you alright?" he wheezed, tasting sawdust and wet dustbunnies at the back of his throat. "Sorry, I hadn't meant to put that much power behind—"

A chilling growl assaulted his ears, and as the dust cloud was waived away *Avada Kedavra* green met blazing molten gold.

"Oh!"

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Lord Sesshomaru of the West had been inspecting the borders of his territory when he sensed a foreign surge of yōki deep into the forest. Giving his human charge and Jaken a quelling glare, with a miffed expression only few could recognize he had flown to the destination via orb. Dropping down, he instantly materialized in front of what was a familiarly decrepit, manmade well. A thin eyebrow rose. This was the same well that he associated with the human miko and his hanyou brother. Leaves whispered in the distance and blades of grass crunched underneath his feet as he drew closer to the structure with much caution. Canting his head, silvery white locks pooled over his shoulders as he peered down at the lid of the sealed well.

The full moon illuminated his imposing, motionless figure as he quietly studied the source of the foreign spike. Whatever secret the well withheld was a potent enigma that bore further watching and yet...those golden orbs hardened. He could not ignore a threat to his lands. This yōki was nothing he had ever encountered before, and whoever was hiding within the bowels of the pathetic structure needed to be interrogated. In a composed tone that demanded immediate answer, he scratched at the lid with one long claw and commanded, "This Sesshomaru has no time for games. Present yourself."

The pulse of foreign yōki swelled up, but no verbal answer was forecoming. However that response brooked confirmation that the demon had some intelligence. With a frown, he tapped the lid in thought as he pondered how to format his next demand. Lost within his thoughts, his forefinger made a deep gouge in the wood, making an earsplitting screech that sent birds flying.

"...kulus!"
A blast of energy shot up underneath his claws and disrupted his thoughts as the lid shot up into his palm like a little geyser before rebounding back into a flat state.

Sesshomaru took an aborted step back, staring incredulously at what he instinctively knew was an attempted attack on his person.

The top rattled once more, this time with silvery white spiritual wisps escaping into the air. The ghostly tendrils writhed together to form a handsome stag. It shook its head in confusion.

Sesshomaru's eyes widened but before his mind could fully process the existence of the spiritual animal, he noticed its solid state was quickly dissipating into smoke.

"You are in my lands, under my jurisdiction. You shall not take leave before this Sesshomaru gives you permission to pardon yourself," Sesshomaru stated, reaching forward but touching nothing but air. His mokomoko-sama fluttered in the air behind him as furious yōki flailed around his person like an angry aura upon the realization his order was to be denied again. "Explain yourself. This Sesshomaru is not so lenient as to grant forgiveness against those who dare launch an assault on his person."

Eyeing its surroundings and Sesshomaru, the stag gave them both one long, appraising look before snorting in dismissal and disappearing from sight. There was an unidentifiable string of words that followed the apparition's departure, which sounded to the daiyōkai's ears as loud, mocking jeers that reminded him sharply of Inuyasha.

Cold fury washed down his body as he seethed, "You would dare?"

He unsheathed Bakusaiga and, with a faint sneer, slashed at the well, watching in satisfaction as the well shuddered and cracked, the beams sliding downward toward the diagonal cut. Now that the hole was uncovered, he took another step forward to grace the suicidal demon with a last look at his magnificent presence before he ended the life of the imprudent upstart. To his surprise what greeted his vision were a swirl of water and a sweltering miasma of yokai energy. With the obstacle destroyed, his sharpened hearing picked up: "Listen, you're trapped under a barrier. I'm going to get you out!"

There was another spike of that strange yōki that made his inner beast perk up with intrigue and disbelief.

Next thing he knew, the great daiyōkai of the west tumbled into the spiraling darkness, jerked at a frightening speed toward the bottomless nethermost of the great beyond. He tried grasping for anything to stop his descent but nothing, not even his usual modes of transportation and weaponry, could tether him back to land. Sooner than he had expected, he hit an invisible force that stretched under him like a tight coil before shattering under his weight, flinging him into a bright white light. His body collided harshly with a wooden beam and he collapsed onto his hands and knees as splinters of wood and dust smothered his sharp yōkai senses. His Bakusaiga skittered across the wooden floor and hit the wall with a muted clang.

Mind whirling, Sesshomaru staggered onto his feet. His hand automatically reached for the other two swords he knew still remained on him. Adjusting his stance, he moved into a defensive position. There was a vulgar sound of dry coughing mixed in with unfamiliar dialect, and as the dust storm abided, molten gold stared furiously into astonished forest green.
Harry's wand hand twitched in reflex upon realization he may be treading on dangerous grounds. Mirroring the creature's aggressive stance—knees bent and weaponry ready to be drawn—he stared uncertainly at the tall and slender humanoid in front of him. Quickly he took stock of the creature: pointed ears, slit pupils, a crescent moon on the forehead, and colored stripes on an androgynous face.

If the eerily ethereal appearance hadn't clued him in of its creature heritage, the magical aura that churned around it was the same unrestrained and wild signature he'd originally picked up upon in the well, cementing any doubts he would've had that his magic saved the wrong person. What also caught his attention was the creature's Chinese-and-Mainland-influenced medieval garb: underneath the spiked pauldron and armor, past the richly-colored yellow and blue sash tied at the waist, the silky white kimono worn underneath was embroidered with red cherry blossom flower crests at both the collar and sleeves.

The uneasiness in Harry's mind settled a bit. No matter what civilization people came from—whether be it the UK or Japan—the family crests were strong indications that they were of royal or noble birth. And if they were of reputed lineage, usually that meant they were tasked to conform to protocol even in manners of dueling customs. And if the creature followed a semblance of well-bred procedure, he would be able to communicate with the creature despite any language barriers.

He watched as those glorious golden pools were slowly contaminated with a tinge of pink.

Forcing tensed muscles into deceptive relaxation, Harry adopted a regal pose that would've made the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black proud.

The hostile growling coming from the creature stopped abruptly. Molten gold and pink remained riveted on his person as Harry internally called upon all the conditioning he'd gone through to suit a courteous diplomatic attendance.

Tucking his lit wand to his side—but not dropping his guard—and switching to formal Japanese, Harry said neutrally, "I am Lord Harry James Potter of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, and claimed descendant and heir to the Potter and Peverell noble titles," Bringing a fist to his chest, he bowed ceremoniously. "Although I do not yet have the privilege of your identity, it is still my honor to meet another highborn in distant lands. Forgive me for my earlier uncouthness. I do not intend any malignity or an attempt on your life."

When the being before him made his introductions and shared his good will, it was enough for the
burning sensation in his eyes to subside. Sesshomaru's hand unclenched from the hilt of Tōkijin.

The accent was nothing he personally had heard of, but warrior and Lord Hari had offered substantiation to his story. Looking over the bowed head, the daiyōkai's face unconsciously slipped into the same practiced mask whenever a foreign diplomat visited his lands for the honor of his attention. Regardless of his odd human appearance and rounded ears, the "ningen" was missing the customary human rank and instead smelled of pure demon magic.

Heedless of how internally pleased he was by the rightfully-deserved respect he was given, that didn't fully forgive the previous slight this green-eyed daiyōkai made against him.

Inquisitive of what sort of yōkai Hari Jēmuzu Pottā was, Sesshomaru demanded, "Omae wa dare?"

Hidden beneath Harry's bangs, his brows furrowed indigantly at the address forwarded at his person. What kind of prat would use the offensive nuances of the Japanese language to question another person? Though he could already tell by the bearing the creature presented himself that, despite the present impoliteness, he was right in his assumption that this highborn creature would have something like the dignified speech pattern expected of a lord. There was no mistaking that deep, manly brogue.

Green eyes rose challengingly to meet unfriendly gold. "Anata wa dare desu ka?" Harry asked instead, maintaining his polite address.

Those molten pools narrowed and a small frown twisted the creature's handsome face. With bored indifference, as if he expected Harry to be aware of him already and that this was just formality, the creature introduced himself as, "You are in the royal presence of Lord Sesshomaru of the Western Lands, son of the late daiyōkai Inu no Taishō." Almost immediately the aloof demeanor changed. "You are offering impertinence by not answering this Sesshomaru's question. Who are you?"

The daiyōkai took a menacing step forward. "State your purpose for trespassing on this Sesshomaru's lands."

A demon lord? Taking a deep, calming breath, Harry straightened up and forced himself not to respond to the perceived threat of Sesshomaru's advance. "Forgive me. I was not aware I needed your permission to be on these grounds."

Fighting a scowl, he clasped his hands behind his back and continued professionally, "From where I come from, Lord Sesshomaru, I am considered the police force of my people. I was sent here to investigate suspicious sightings of a fugitive hiding out in your lands and to prevent the possible desecration of a Japanese magical monument. I already have your council's approval to scout this location, and I have the necessary paperwork should you wish to verify my story."

Golden orbs narrowed. It had to be important to the green-eyed daiyōkai's subjects if someone of his caliber was covertly sent to another daiyōkai's land, which was a capital offense in itself. However, this certain daiyōkai had to have come from far overseas for he did not think he recognized the lineage of Harry's clans.

"This Sesshomaru was not made aware of your presence," the golden-eyed daiyōkai rebutted calmly, his gaze intent on the blank mask Harry had donned as soon as he made his approach. "Explain yourself. My vassals would have notified this Sesshomaru prior to your arrival." Had an investigation of claimed significance to be conducted on his lands, his retainer Jaken would be sufficient in relaying the communique before the lord's actual visitation date.
"Ah. I mean this with all due respect, but I believe your vassals to be incompetent fools if they've either forgotten to inform your lordship or was unable to be contacted. My agents have already apprised the Higurashi family, the owners of this plot of land, of my arrival but even they were unaware of your lordship," Harry told him with a tight voice.

Harry suppressed a shudder as the fair-haired daiyōkai simply "hnn-ed" and looked down at him with merciless slits. Summoning all the patience he had, he kept his gaze on the demon's breastplate and maintained his rigid but harmless posture. Royalty expected a different level of deference as compared to lords and ordinary folk. Hermione had coached him against the varying cultural snubs that, knowing him, could be given unintentionally with each foreigner or creature he met. Magical royalty however—and judging by the old-fashioned garb—especially one deeply inset in tradition, were particularly hard to please yet were easy to offend.

With a slight worry tinging his voice, he stated, "I do not wish to start off on the wrong foot. It is not my intention to cause this misunderstanding. I assure you after tonight I personally will seek to right the wrong that my department unit and Ministry did not intend to happen."

Ankle-length, silvery white hair fell fluidly over a shoulder as the demon canted his head as his consent for the offered tribute. "This Sesshomaru understands."

Relief blossomed in Harry's chest. With an uncertain smile, he tilted his head and peered over the fair-haired daiyōkai's shoulder. He posed, "As it pertains to my investigation, may I also be informed as to why you were held under a magical barrier in the Bone Eater's Well? I didn't have trouble dismantling the ward, but an ordinary Wardmaster would have trouble with it." His immediate guess was that this was what the Unspeakables picked up on: a powerful demon lord fighting against what had…imprisoned…him….

The awareness of his surroundings came roaring back to him in a chilling rush. They were on a well-known spiritual ground. There had been slivers of birch and fern that had obviously been destroyed. The only known way to get rid of demons was to slay or purify them. His muscles tensed. He might have accidentally released a fugitive from the demons' version of Azkaban.

Sesshomaru's beast purred in satisfaction at the submissive image the obviously proud daiyōkai Hari willingly put himself in appropriately for his situation. As reward, Sesshomaru allowed Hari his permission to finish his business on his lands—regardless of the Higurashi humans who claimed this land as theirs—by not killing him.

In favor of observing the unusual daiyōkai with a closer eye, he murmured, "Only fools would think to control this Sesshomaru."

To Hari's credit, the still-identified demon didn't even flinch as the dog demon was now close enough to encroach on both of their personal spaces. He took a subtle whiff of Hari's natural scent to identify the daiyōkai, seeing as the daiyōkai remained stalwart against his order to identify himself. Underneath all the other scents that smelled of human gruel and hanyous of diluted demonic blood, Hari smelled of youth and pure, unadulterated yōkai. Never had he been stumped at identifying another demon. Catching the widening of forest green eyes, Sesshomaru paused momentarily and reviewed what he just shared. There was nothing alarming in what was revealed. "Is there a problem?"

Sesshomaru watched as Hari licked his lower lip nervously. As if gathering his nerves, the demon masquerading as a human shifted on his feet uncomfortably like a pup and then tentatively asked him for clarification.
With a bored look, Sesshomaru repeated himself: "This Sesshomaru has not been bewitched."

"You were unaware you were under a barrier?" Lord Hari asked harshly, his brows dipping in disbelief and incomprehension. "Or were you exaggerating when you said you were not held under a spell?"

"Deceit is below this Sesshomaru," he said with the same unimpressed look. Lord Hari was attempting to ask him for something he did not understand. Sesshomaru did not have the patience for stalling. It also didn't escape his notice that after his elucidation, the foreign daiyōkai looked minutely more relieved than he previously had been. Dropping a casual hand on his father's fangs (he ignored the forest green orbs that followed the action), he directed curiously, "Speak your mind."

"I don't think...it can't...I'm not sure if it's possible actually..."

His hearing picked up following unintelligible mumbling with words that, when pierced together, did not make any semblance of sense to him. A mumble of outdated terminologies and their conversation were repeated, his royal clothing and armor were questioned, and his fangs were studied with incredulity. Lord Hari's clouded features stilled upon one utterance and the absurdity of that mentioned scenario almost made the demon lord's mask crack.

"Nonsense," Sesshomaru disclaimed, his voice deepening as he reconsidered the mental capability of the daiyōkai before him. "To travel in time and not be aware of it is an impossible feat."

The wizard was shaken by his recent revelation. He had performed powerful magic that brought a magical creature to the future. Releasing a demon who was a secret fugitive was one thing; another was to have orchestrated the time travel of an ancient demon lord whom, for all intents and purposes, might have had a significant impact under his rule. Sesshomaru's disappearance from his time, no matter how long he stayed here, was bound to have consequences of epic proportions. There was a reason why time-turners only went back a few hours. Travelling forward was unheard of.

Time-related magic on the whole was considered by the wizarding community to be unstable, and serious breaches in the laws of time could result in catastrophic events such as unbirths or the altercations of one's path to be taken in life.

Swallowing hard, Harry paled when he realized they must've wasted half an hour chatting diplomatically when he should've tried to undo what had been done. Problem was he didn't know how to send back the demon with a hundred percent certainty. Clearly their solution relied on sending the demon lord back in the well, but the magic incantation required for that...well... Harry's shoulders slumped. Where was Hermione when he needed her? The longest time a time traveler stayed behind and didn't mess up time and themselves was five hours. They were racing against the clock before he made a bigger mess of the clusterfuck he had already started.

Licking dry lips, Harry looked calculatingly at the demon lord. Maintaining his politeness but stressing the gravity of their position with a climbing sharpness in his tone, he enquired, "Lord Sesshomaru, I implore you to remind yourself of the era you were in and its daily customs and wear. I realize you may think you're transported to another place, but think of how different your present surroundings and the company you suddenly have are. Think of how I am dressed differently from what you're used to seeing."

A flash of uncertainty crossed the daiyōkai's countenance before the stoic mask came back up. There was a warning laced underneath the frigid words: "This Sesshomaru requires more substance to your absurd claim than your word alone."
Before Harry could blink, the daiyōkai was across the room and picking up an impressively long katana with a unique runic design on its hilt and backside of its blade.

Fear and adrenaline momentarily thrilled through Harry's body, but settled down when the demon lord simply deposited the drawn katana back with the two other swords sheathed at his waist. Craning his ears, he heard the demon order an authoritative, "Show me."

Releasing a whoosh of air, Harry ran through his thoughts, gathering the quickest method for Sesshomaru to validate his concerns. Finding one, Harry fixed Sesshomaru with a wary stare. He cautioned, "Not here. We're on temple grounds that clearly did not age with the modern world. I can show you either magically through Appari...through teleportation and bring you to the outskirts of the shrine property, or we'll have to stealthily make our way there without the Muggles...the humans noticing."

"Hn." The daiyōkai studied the sliding wooden doors with a craned head, as if debating whether to validate Harry's claim himself or to allow the Auror to show him the truthfulness behind his words. Understandably the lord was unlike the other royalty Harry had encountered in his travels. Sesshomaru's aura screamed of being a solitory, individualistic figure used to depending on only himself. Also, Harry was a magic caster. Had Harry been in Sesshomaru's position, he himself would've doubted the unrefuted truths even if they were shown to his own eyes, for he could have tampered with Sesshomaru's perception and casted an illusionary world to convince the demon of the supposed reliability of his word.

That also meant if he left the magic user behind, who knows if Harry could've casted a spell without him knowing. Short of making an Unbreakable Vow or a Wizard's Oath, there was only one thing to do. Sympathizing with the demon's plight, Harry extended his Holly stick, butt first, out slowly in Sesshomaru's direction so that the demon understood he bore no ill will.

Golden orbs swiveled down to stare at the proffered wand.

With a confident smile that belied what he was actually feeling, Harry suggested an alternative: "I don't do this for everyone, but this is a...special situation. I'm going to place my wand under your temporary protection while you go and see for yourself whether I'm being truthful or not. I only ask that you come back and return my wand," here he stressed, "in. One. Piece. So that we could figure out how to send you back."

That seemed to do it. In the blink of an eye, Sesshomaru made the snap decision himself and disappeared from Harry's sight, Harry's wand in tow.

Harry cursed under his breath. The demon had been too fast for him to stick a quick tracking charm on his fluffy boa. Feeling bereft of the easy channel to his magic, Harry pulled out a protean-charmed Galleon from his pocket and activated it on Hermione's end, hoping that when the witch got the message and realized he needed her brains, again, she would have answers for the pickle he was in. With nothing else left to do Harry sunk down to the floor and patiently waited for the demon's return.

Chapter End Notes

I'm aware lord=nobility, not royalty. Trust me, I'm going somewhere with this.
Impressions

On FF.net, I was asked two very interesting questions.

"Can Sesshomaru smell Inuyasha around Kagome's house?"
Nothing escapes this Sesshomaru.

"Will Harry go back with Sesshomaru?"
That'll be a major source of conflict later on in the story, guaranteed. Both are stubborn creatures. Trust needs to be established first. Then interest. Then competition.

Mm, mind, he may look pretty in the anime but a real life Sesshomaru would be terrifying. Expect a lot of cultural misunderstandings. Without further ado, I present to you the next installment of their progressing camaraderie. Enjoy!

In the darkness, a condensed ball of light flitted across tree branches at the speed of light, exploding past the shrine boundaries and into the far distance where Tokyo and other populated cities lay. For one moment the light slowed down over empty grasslands, picking up on a subdued swell of yokai, before losing interest and surging ahead. In a matter of seconds, as the the orb dived down to the vast Pacific Ocean it performed an abrupt U-turn and circled back to the small forest where it had originated from. Bobbing along, the orb hovered over a branch and Sesshomaru's humanoid form was immediately materialized from the shattered sphere, dropping down onto the solid surface beneath. For one silent moment the tall figure stared down at the ground far below contemplatively.

Underneath the familiar fragrances of a calm forestscape intermingled with the common human stink laid the same acrid, alien stench of foul oils and tampered metal that made his nose burn when he'd flown by the bustling human villages. Human hygiene had improved, but was traded for a chemical stink. All the smells he'd encountered weren't as strong of a presence here but he still had to forcibly suppress the strong desire to cover his nose like an uncivilized yōkai. Sesshomaru briefly peered over his shoulder. He was so close to the defined bounds of the shrine property, but he remained far enough up to remain from weak human sight.

With a stony expression, Sesshomaru simply pivoted on his heels. He leapt into the air, his long sleeves and hair billowing out behind him from the fluid action. A soft breeze ruffled his bangs, pepperling his skin with icy kisses as the toes of his boots softly touched down upon the bark of another branch.

Scant patches of moonlight shone through the canopy, bathing his statuesque figure in an otherworldly glow as he surveyed the distant shrine which one Lord Hari Jēmuzu Pottā was waiting for him inside. About to leap down, his body stilled when he felt a muted spike of yōki and another voice joined the lord's.

Beyond the doors, pointed ears picked up on the undercurrent of confusion and contained panic that stained the accented tenor of the other's voice. The foreigner was softly explaining his present dilemma to a female whose accent originated from the same land as the green-eyed demon.

From what he could gather, there was familiarity between the two. Hari was explaining to the female
that he cannot, in good conscious, leave behind what is his responsibility; that it was his fault for unintentionally spiriting the inuyōkai over to present times or perhaps to another world. The female suddenly launched into a belligerent rant that dumbfounded the Western daiyōkai when the foreigner merely took the insult to his own reputation and intelligence in stride instead of punishing her for her imprudence like Sesshomaru would've done.

Just as he was about to develop an unsavory opinion of the young lord's character and temperament, Sesshomaru was pleasantly surprised when Hari also seemed to have enough of her behavior. He spoke up sharply, like the rightful alpha of his pack, and the female instantly quieted.

Their voices eventually dwindled down in volume and were then silenced. Sesshomaru listened closely for any strain of further conversation, any indication that the female had left, but now all he heard was the scuffling of footwear against wooden planks. He waited for a few beats before he determined the daiyōkai was alone again and had not been plotting an ambush on this Sesshomaru.

Sesshomaru crouched down and he sat back on his haunches as he reassessed his current circumstances. With a refined slowness, Sesshomaru pulled a wooden stick from his right sleeve and brought the so-called sorcerer's staff up to his eyesight. Under his trained eye, he could tell the eleven-inch stick was well taken care of, considering the polished sheen of its smoothed down flank and the faint but well-worn grooves that bespoke of its owner's continued reliance.

When he'd snatched the staff from Lord Hari's hand, the glow emitted from the tip had disintegrated immediately upon the transfer of ownership. His curiosity had been piqued by the daiyōkai's unusual choice for a weapon, for the "wand" bore no distinction to the commonplace twigs found throughout every forest in his land aside from its slightly decorative surface and the hollow compartment which housed the essence of a powerful phoenix yōkai. He gave the stick a cursory swish, none too surprised when it failed to respond to him unlike it did to the other daiyōkai.

Sesshomaru tilted his head minutely. Perhaps Lord Hari's bloodline was gifted with an ability to transform ordinary objects into weapons of yokai might and power. His head fell to the other side. Then again had that been the case the daiyōkai would not have implored this Sesshomaru in maintaining its integrity and in ensuring their return. He flicked the wand once more. With a lingering glance and his curiosity satisfied, he tucked the stick back into the folds of his sleeves, the wood slotted securely against the juncture between his elbow and forearm.

It seemed he was in a most honorable company. The green-eyed daiyōkai had not relayed any falsehoods and had shown the proper decorum between two daiyōkais of their station. His outlandish claim was also not as absurd as Sesshomaru had originally thought. If it weren't for his recognition of the Goshinbuku his feet rested on, Sesshomaru might not have recognized the transformed plot of land that had been an immense meadow. He was still on Western Lands, but this wasn't the same Western Lands he was familiar with.

He palmed the tree's rough bark as he observed the ripped remains of the shimenawa scattered over the sacred tree's giant roots. Molten gold narrowed upon sight of the thick rope and ruined sutras. Someone had recently gone through extreme lengths to dispel the villagers' only repellant against demons and evil. A dismissive note escaped his throat and his hair swished as he turned his head away from the destroyed protections.

He was in the distant future. That detail still baffled the daiyōkai's mind. Never would he imagine he would be in the same position as his half-breed brother and his wench.

A deeper frown tugged at the corner of his mouth.

Although, if the great Inu no Taisho's predilection bred true, the human miko might soon be
Inuyasha's chosen bitch and, subsequently, Sesshomaru's sister-in-law. Ironically the shrine grounds stunk of the miko's human and chemical stench which tried its hardest to overwhelm the familiar smell of the hanyou. Sesshomaru redirected his annoyed attention back to the tree's moss-infested roots, his frown deepening upon remembrance of a certain human child that had refused to leave him during his rehabilitation from injury.

His shoulder bumped against the tree trunk as he leaned his bulk to the side. His face tilted up toward the moon in quiet thought. For one moment he allowed himself to consider the ramifications of his prolonged departure, to consider what might befall on his kingdom without his steady hand to guide them through the feudal era, and to consider what he would do if there was no way to send him back home. The memory of a bright, smiling face remained potent in the forefront of his thoughts. The daiyōkai breathed one name in a rare sigh so small it became a part of the wind and was carried away. Under the cover of darkness, the trees kept quiet of this one occasion.

Harry scrambled onto his feet the instant the shoji doors slid open and one fair-haired inuyōkai strode gracefully inside as if he owned the room. Heart pounding, the Head Auror schooled his expression back into a respectable poker face when the demon, having adopted the same bored look, stopped a safe distance away from the wizard. The midnight stroll seemed to have done therapeutic wonders on the demon for the wild atmosphere around the magical creature appeared less volatile as before. Golden slits flickered, taking in with diminutive interest the strange letters scribbled around the Bone Eater's Well and the white mixture caking Harry's gloved fingers.

Before he could open his mouth to explain, the taller creature inserted, "You are not planning to ensnare this Sesshomaru."

An incredulous expression crossed the Auror's face. Harry looked back at the ward he had been setting up per Hermione's instructions and back at the suspicious daiyōkai. With a forced smile, Harry explicated, "No, this is merely a secret compound my friend made that temporarily stops any chance of unwelcome magic, aside from those I allow, to tamper with the well while we research a way to get you back to your time. It is not a ward to trap you or anything, Lord Sesshomaru. I don't think having you jump down the well will do us any favors if we don't know what actually triggered your arrival in the first place."

Sesshomaru's chin tilted down. "Certain incantations were overheard. Surely they can be reversed."

The demon lord chose to believe in his words. That made his companionship slightly more bearable to the wizard, who was used to people balking at his theories and accusing him as a liar. With glowing red cheeks, the wizard took another pinch from the pouch and he sprinkled more of the powder to finish the runic text next to his feet. Eventually his embarrassment died down.

"It's the strangest thing, Lord Sesshomaru," Harry said quietly. "While you were gone, I've been thinking over what could've possibly happened. The four spells I used in succession on the well shouldn't have been enough to defy the fabric of space and time. Two were defensive spells to ward off evil. The third was a counter-spell that ends an already cast enchantment. The last one was a simple summoning charm. Unlike the light you saw emitting from my wand, they do not have a cancelation incantation."

"And the apparition of a stag is a part of that repertoire."

There was an odd inflection in the lord's voice when this was asked, but Harry chalked it up to the stress of being pried out of one's world and forwarded in time. Channeling his inner-Remus, Harry explained in an instructory fashion: "The Expecto Patronum spell conjures a non-sentient, anthropomorphized magical shield powered by your happiest memories. Since it's a high-level spell,
if the emotion provided is sufficient, it is then given a corporal form which embodies the caster's personality and magical core to drive off your enemies. Before you were pulled through, I was under the impression that you were a Boggart or a Dementor—dangerous magical creatures of this timeline."

The wizard suddenly stiffened, his features morphing into one of dismay. Thinking back on the earlier conversation he'd had, the Head Auror was reminded that Hermione had warned him that a demon lord wasn't to be taken lightly in spite of the demon's pretty appearance and otherwise calm demeanor. Magical creatures in high positions ruled their kind by fear and reputation, not kindness and mercy. Clenching his moleskin pouch tightly, he asked rather firmly, "Were you, by any chance, hit by any of those aforementioned spells?"

Judging by the look the demon was sending him, he looked ready to chew Harry's head off at the audacity of his presumption. He growled deeply, "This Sesshomaru walks the path of the greatest of warriors. Your witchcraft was unable to pursue what has already reached the pinnacle of killing perfection."

Harry held his tongue against what he really wanted to say. Hoping his voice was back in neutral territory, the younger lord returned back in traditional Japanese: "Why would you think I would've plotted against you? In wake of my other duties, I've already expressed that I do not seek your ire."

A striped arm reached up to casually brush long hair back over a kimonoed shoulder. "You have a nuisance that does not realize their place in your pack."

Bright *Avada Kedavra* eyes shot back up and focused on the demon's jaw. "Are we talking about Hermione? Wait, you overheard our conversation?" Those green eyes blinked and he shook his head in resignation. "Of course you couldn't help but eavesdrop in. Demon you may be, but I had forgotten a dog's sense of hearing and smell is much more sensitive than a human's." It'll be hard to keep anything a secret with Sesshomaru's enhanced hearing.

With another cautious glance, he continued, "I hope you don't mind. In spite of what you've heard, she's really one of the brightest persons I know. She could help us undo whatever I've broke and get you back to your time without an extended pause from whatever you had been doing before my magic kidnapped you. Unintentionally. We'll probably see her tomorrow afternoon at the earliest."

Until they discovered how to send Lord Sesshomaru back, that meant any decisions he would make would have to consider the demon's comfort first and foremost and that any information Harry planned to share wouldn't fundamentally influence the demon lord's current personality and mindset.

Golden pools flashed and he looked down at the shorter "human" with hidden irritation. Harry flinched at the disapproving glare heaped upon his person. "Your packmate is not needed by this Sesshomaru and needs to mind her business. It is your sole responsibility to correct the folly you've committed."

Biting back the instinctive need to lash back, Harry focused on the not-as-distracting task he had ahead of himself. Putting the finishing touches on the runic circle, he dusted his hands off and he answered grimly, "I do not fully understand the hierarchy or dynamics of an inuyōkai pack, especially one of such high standing as yourself, but trust me when I say I give you my full endorsement of my... packmate's skills. She's highly qualified. I would trust her with my life."

The royal dog demon didn't say anything to that. A comfortable silence took ahold of the two male authorities momentarily. The daiyōkai watched the wizard maintain a sideways position to keep Sesshomaru within his line of sight as the man swerved around the floor to add marks here and there. Neither let down their guard as the gears in their heads churned away, reevaluating the severity their
situation. Yet one waited with bated breath for the other to breach the stillness.

He got his wish. The wizard had to strain his ears when the demon lord suddenly pinned his back with an impatient stare. Sesshomaru's mouth twisted as if he'd swallowed a bitter pill. "I will not tell you what you need to do. It is not necessary for your service."

An eyebrow shot high up Harry's forehead at the demon's admission. Harry blinked, took another sidelong considering glance, and then shrugged. "Alright."

As if he hadn't heard Harry speak, the gravelly voice confessed rather unenthusiastically, "Nonetheless even I, Sesshomaru, in such an incredible situation find myself in need of aid from this Hari." The wizard's blasé rejoinder registered in his mind. Golden pools stilled and Sesshomaru inquired coolly, "Hari, explain yourself."

The familiarity used by the deadly creature to address him by his first name was slightly disconcerting. The wizard directed an odd look at him as he tightened the cord of his moleskin pouch. Words spilled through his mouth torpidly: "I mean, okay, I hear you. Look, it's just that you remind me of someone I used to know. Both of you aren't the sort of people who are used to accepting help from others. You two are like lone wolves. So the fact that you need me is not a sign of weakness on your part, your lordship."

Professor Snape's face flashed in his mind, and the line of his mouth thinned. Nonchalantly, he motioned for Sesshomaru to hand back his prized possession. "I need to activate the runes before we take our leave. So. My wand. If you'd please."

Sesshomaru merely inclined his head as he smoothly removed it from his sleeves. There was a faint exhale of breath from both parties when he passed it back to its owner. Harry's fingers curled around the grip. The Holly wand surged in warmth when skin contact against the handle was made, and he gently pried it from the yōkai's possession.

"There is no need to sojourn from your investigation for my sake alone," Sesshomaru interrupted the happy moment between a wizard and his wand, glancing over his spiked pauldron to the open shoji doors. Cool amber pools rested back on the small white face before him. "After you construct your wards, we can make camp in the adjoining forest tonight."

A dark brow furrowed distractedly. "Hold on, we're camping? Here."

"There are no other scents present in our surroundings," Sesshomaru informed him, observing in muted fascination as Hari tapped his wand in the air over what he'd drawn up. Each squiggly line and slash lit up, and there was once more of the same foreign dialect that had brought him here to the Modern Era. The intense light show softly dwindled down to a muted glow, and the green-eyed daiyōkai stepped back to inspect his handiwork.

Sesshomaru looked down at one of the characters beside his feet. With the barest of curiosity, he lifted his foot and toed in the edge of what appeared to be the miniature depiction of a snake demon in yōkai form.

"I wouldn't step any closer, if I were you." Hari had pocketed his wand and was confidently approaching his solemn figure. "I didn't have anything of you, so you weren't keyed into the wards."

Thin brows dipped in incomprehension. Recalling one of their earlier topics, he murmured curtly, "This Sesshomaru has not performed any of this Hari's magic."

"You are what we call a magical creature, so you have an inherent energy in you that can trigger the
protective runes," Hari explained calmly. He was close enough that, had Sesshomaru felt inclined, he could've gutted him with Bakusaiga. "Luckily we're far from the more loaded strokes, so the most you'll feel is a slight tingle."

Without the distraction of his preceding concerns, Lord Sesshomaru leisurely drank his fill of the mysterious Lord Hari Jēmužu Pottā. Like most daiyōkais Sesshomaru had encountered, Hari's exotic humanoid form was considerably attractive. Although not as tall as Sesshomaru was, the green-eyed demon had a presence about him that insinuated ancient power despite his younger age. Physically there was no mistaking his demonic heritage behind the brilliant coloration of those irises and the magenta thunderbolt marking partially hidden behind bangs on the side of Hari's forehead.

Sesshomaru raked his attention down the thin fabrics that made up the younger demon's insufficient armor. He did not know if it was merely confidence in his fighting prowess or an adaptive necessity to assimilate with the mortal population, but nonetheless the attire was nothing he'd seen before in his lands. Sesshomaru mentally crossed off all feline and canine clans from his mind. Seeing as Hari was devoid of a fur pelt and/or tail, there was little chance of them being within the same genetic species.

(Realizing that the green-eyed demon may never impart with the information of his origins willingly, Sesshomaru wisely decided to push that subject matter aside—to be brought up for a later time, if they ever came to that.)

"Your idea has merit," Hari conceded wearily, appearing a little distraught to be under his royal assessment. Sensing his new chaperon's uneasiness, Sesshomaru's yōki rattled in its cage, forcing the great inuyōkai to lower his lids half-mast.

Licking his lips, Hari resumed, "I have my suspicions about the readings and sightings, but I was sent here to make sure no one would deface a treasured monument to magic and to potentially bring in a Death Eater for prosecution. It couldn't hurt to stay the night. It's not like…my packmate would have any trouble locating our whereabouts."

The misnomer, Death Eater, raised Sesshomaru's curiosity. "This creature you are hunting consumes the eventual destiny of all creatures?"

The ensuing indescribable expression that crossed Hari's face made Sesshomaru pause. But as soon as it came it was replaced back with the same placid mask.

The young lord murmured impartially, "Not exactly. Where I come from it's the cute nickname Lord Voldemort, the title of their leader, created for his minions as propaganda in the Second Wizarding War. He feared death, so this was his way of turning his fear into his advantage. Many died by their hands. After he fell, his Death Eaters had disbanded into two parties: those who surrendered and those who fight back. I was sent to deal with the latter."

A silvery mane shifted as Sesshomaru indicated his small interest in the lord's personal conflict. Questioning what his instincts were telling him about the daiyōkai in front of him though, Sesshomaru restated not unkindly, "This lord fell."

Hari fell quiet, completely locking down all the emotions that had still shown through his mask. The younger daiyōkai was biting his bottom lip in obvious consternation as he considered the merit of divulging further information. He was intently eyeing Sesshomaru's breastplate.

Sesshomaru observed all this silently, waiting for the demon to make his admission. Either way he did not care one whit about what Hari wanted to share with him, but his yōki was agitated.

Finally those eyes hardened as he met Sesshomaru's speculative gaze. "I killed him."
The color behind those merciless slits glimmered and a small, satisfied, cruel smirk rose up on his solemn face. A true daiyōkai only grew into the mantle when he or she was able to keep their throne and lands safe. With pride hidden within his deep purr, Sesshomaru relayed, "A great leader must be able to crush his opposition. Make no mistake, Hari, this Sesshomaru is impressed by your kill."

Hari was not a soft, spoiled yōkai. He came into his inheritance with worth and honor. This made Sesshomaru inwardly very pleased to have come across this Hari, and not a hanyou or a lowly human.

With new warmth undetectable except to those who knew him, Sesshomaru praised, "You have the blood of a general in your veins. Be proud of your lineage. This willing Sesshomaru accepts your aid with pleasure."

Dark lashes flickered in Hari's luminous, green gaze. Hari inclined his head, his lips quirking up minutely as well. Clasping his hands behind his back, he advised, "If that's so, since we're making camp here, we have a choice between the forest and the shrine. I can pretty much guess which one you'd prefer, demon lord."

"Hn." With that the royal dog demon turned his back on Hari, his mokomoko-sama and hair fluttering behind him as he gracefully glided out the doors like a ghostly specter. With an indulgent smile, Hari trotted after him, maintaining a respectable distance between them. Sesshomaru paused at the steps, and molten gold peered dispassionately over his shoulder. A silvery white eyebrow rose, as if questioning why the young lord remained behind. "Come, Hari."

Ignoring the green-eyed daiyōkai's startled glance, he waited for his unknown command to register. Once the smaller demon comprehended and came to stand shoulder to shoulder with the lethal demon lord, both of them disappeared into the forest. Together. As temporary equals.
It was when they've reached some sort of bamboo clearing that Lord Sesshomaru declared the spot to be the best of their awful environment to set up camp. Harry had merely nodded and went along with Sesshomaru's judgment, refusing to externalize his mourning of his clean trousers.

He watched warily from his cross-legged perch on the ground as the demon lord paced their surroundings agitatedly, scenting for any potential dangers and food. The folded wizard tent in Harry's back pocket was burning a hole in his trousers, but the wizard didn't dare pull it out in fear that the demon lord would balk at the additional strangeness of the Modern Era. So it was with much resignation that the wizard set up fire the Muggle way, with a stick and dry kindling. When the demon disappeared into the trees—this time he made sure to stick a Trace on him—Harry cast a wandless containment charm on the embers, to stop the fire from spreading past the ring of flat stones he'd put around the impromptu fire pit.

When boredom had kicked in, he found himself pulling the New Marauder's Map from his pockets and enlarging the parchment to look at the moving dots that made up the names of the persons of their nearby territory. After the Second Wizarding War, the Golden Trio had discovered a way to expand the Homonculous Charm to record Plottable Locations outside of Hogwarts. Their only limitation was however big the parchment was, was the restriction of how much could be recorded onto the document that they charmed for duplicates to be made out of. The recorded grounds would also change depending on how far the user travelled or on the site wanted to be studied or on the person that was wanted to be located. Also Muggles and anything nonmagical were impossible to be tracked. It was another shortcoming they eventually decided not to pursue. He could only imagine the mess had they managed to include every single living organism into the spell.

Cheek tucked against a closed fist, Harry stared at the labelled dot that located Sesshomaru at what appeared to be Lake Biwa. He was far from the expert on demonology, but even what passed as supernatural fast travel seemed an impossibility for the demon to cross significant distance to reach the Shiga Prefecture from Tokyo. Perhaps demon lords have their own way of Apparition.

Resolved to ask the demon lord that when he got back, he checked the map for one more name. Seeing that she was where she said she was going to be, Harry tapped his wand against the parchment and whispered, "Mischief Managed."

A string of fish dropped near his lap, startling the wizard. Staring incomprehensively at the skewered flesh, he gingerly picked up the sinewy reed that connected them through their open mouths to tails.
between his thumb and forefinger. A rustle of fabric sounded across of him, and the demon lord settled down on the soil with dignified comportment. Unapologetic golden pools stared across the crackling fire in silence, almost as if he was expecting the wizard to eat or cook the fish for them.

Giving the reed and raw trout a small wave, Harry asked charily, "Did you just hunt dinner?"

There was a miniscule oscillation in the lord's jaw that could be mistaken as the stifling of mirth or exasperation, Harry couldn't really tell. Sesshomaru supplied helpfully, "The lakes in this time are polluted. This Sesshomaru found the cleanest freshwater and has returned with sufficient nourishment."

Harry didn't have the heart to tell him there was legislation against illegal fishing without payment or reservation in the lakes of Japan. With a longsuffering look, he simply closed his eyes and threw a modified Muggle-Repelling charm around their surroundings to protect their camp site and a Notice-Me-Not charm to repel little critters.

The silky kimono and sashinuki hakama shifted to accommodate restrained movement of the royal dog demon as he unlatched his three swords from his sash and placed them on the soil reverentially. Sesshomaru seemed relaxed as he imparted almost dutifully, "We demons do not feel the same hunger pangs as do mortals nor do we require tedious preparation because of our more resilient immunities, but with the humblest sustenance we should regain our strength for the morrow."

His mouth twitched. It was the odd way his last sentence was worded that didn't sit right with Harry, but he didn't know what it was about it that was unsettling. After all, the magical creature had a point. "It's kind of you to provide for the both of us," he replied hesitantly, still not used to someone else doing so for him. Green pools cracked open.

He was still reeling from the previous demonstration of walking side-by-side and dropping the offensive "you" which he had considered already gratifying enough considering his present company. He sat up on his haunches. "I thank you, Lord Sesshomaru. It wasn't...required of you."

"Nonsense. This Sesshomaru did not think to hunt livestock or lesser yōkai for us. Nonetheless this Sesshomaru has done the courtesy of reciprocating this Hari's gentility."

Well wasn't the demon lord the nicer version of Professor Snape and Malfoy all mixed into one bloodthirsty, pompous package. With bemused eyes, Harry nodded his acknowledgement as he set his map down and went about separating the catch into two piles: one for Sesshomaru and a smaller pile for himself. He placed a trout on a flat stone and deliberately withdrawing a dagger—nicked from the Black vaults legally—slowly, he dragged the dull side of the blade from the tail to the gills to slide off the scales with the clear practice of having done this several times.

"What are you doing?" the sharp baritone interrogated him.

With creased brows, Harry's lips curled as he looked up from filleting the fish. "Cleaning the trout. After that I'm going to gut the fish and cook our dinner. It's the least I can do for getting you in this mess."

The silver-haired daiyōkai seemed taken aback, judging by the slight widening of those slits, before he slowly smoothed his expression. "We are to eat them as is. Your exertion is both superfluous and unnecessary."

Harry's frowned in distaste, imagining all the innards and bacteria contaminating the fish Sesshomaru had brought them. He also wasn't in the mood for sashimi, especially if they were fetched by a magical creature that obviously ate his food rare and expected him to as well. Repressing a shudder,
he explained bleakly, "Where I come from, we usually eat cooked meats. I'm sorry if that's how you used to eat your food, but I prefer being safer than sorry with what I put into my mouth."

Golden orbs stared.

Harry was quick to add, "Nonetheless I shall leave your portion alone. We both have our preferences."

He didn't mention that it wasn't till after the Second Wizarding War that he couldn't tolerate undercooked proteins. His poor diet under the Dursleys had forced him to accept anything as long as it would put food in his belly even if his stomach threatened to revolt. Now that the wizard could provide for himself and had gone through what he had, he couldn't even put slightly oozing meat into his mouth without conjuring up images of bleached corpses strewn against the Hogwarts battlefield. Gnawing on his lower lip, he skewered his pile a little more forcibly than he could've and thumped the laden stick between two stones near the fire to roast.

He silently levitated Sesshomaru's pile over to the demon lord in the meantime.

When he was done with the preparation, his hands—now ungloved—returned to his lap. He only ate when the demon lord reached over and speared one with a sharp claw and delicately tore into it with a small flash of fang.

Sesshomaru didn't have anything to say more of another of Hari's odd human quirks. Peculiarities aside, the young lord did show his appreciation of the provisions Sesshomaru usually only extended to Rin when he felt generous. It was enough to appease his mind of the little setback.

Dinner was a quiet ordeal. It was customary between demonfolk because of the urgency behind each hunt, but after spending time with his traveling companions the demon lord wasn't sure if he preferred the silent company over the chatterboxes he had kept around.

He watched the other lord impartially as the remaining fish that weren't to be consumed by either of them were disposed of quickly through magical means. Fortunately Hari had once again proven to contain some sense in his head unlike a certain hanyou and the company Inuyasha kept. The smell of food usually attracted unwanted attention. While he did not doubt the two of them were enough to put down any unpleasant threats, he did not feel in the mood to, like a proper pack alpha and lord, strike down lesser yōkai or humans who did not know their place.

He threw the pin bones he'd picked out into the fire, watching as they sizzled in the heat.

Nibbling on the last unfulfilling strips of flesh on his claws, he glanced at the crinkled parchment which lay on the young lord's side. Before he made his appearance, he'd noticed Hari had been consulting the aged document before closing it with more of his foreign dialect. The restrained miasma emitting from the parchment held the faintest of trace to fox or thunder magic, detectable under the heavy saturation of yōki which Hari had casted over their intermediate area to frighten off scavengers and mortal curiosity. In a way the energy discharge was akin to an alpha's scent claim on his or her pack, but released on a grander scale than the claim Hari had surreptitiously thrown onto him before Sesshomaru had left to fetch their nourishment.

Had they been back at his time, Sesshomaru would've made his offence known. This was his Western Lands. He was the alpha of his own—mismatched—pack.

But seeing as he was at this lord's mercy in an unknown period he could, although resentfully, let this one slide. Rin must've made him soft. He couldn't begrudge the ease of benevolence extended to his
party, which seemed almost natural of Lord Hari. (Somehow he doubted the younger demon realized how well away his station was by overlaying his scent over the Lord of the West's, even if it was an untoward gesture to other yōkais that the feared eldest son of the royal dog demon clan was considered under this young lord's temporary protection.)

A set of clean claws agitatedly tracing his and his father's sheathed fangs, Sesshomaru wiped his other set on the slightly wet grass to reduce the pungent aftersmell. Once he deemed them sufficiently washed, he sat back to consider whether or not to revamp his opinion of his current companion for his human inclination. In one way, this daiyōkai had faintly reminded him of his father. Of Inuyasha, but quieter and more decorous.

After joining forces with his brother and companions to bring about the defeat of Naraku, Sesshomaru had some time to himself to reevaluate his prejudice against the humans his kind had preyed upon for centuries. It did not mean the demon lord would willingly follow his father's footsteps and mate one. He had no desire to lay with Rin, contrary to popular speculation of why he tolerated her company and kept her around.

He was well aware of the whispers in the yōkai community of perhaps the Inutaisho curse breeding true from the late general's loins. It did not have the same sting as it had for him when Inuyasha had been a mere pup, for now Sesshomaru knew better than to prove himself against the castle gossip. Even Jaken, the one most supportive of his distaste aside from Sesshomaru's mother, found himself endeared to the mortal charge Sesshomaru had unceremoniously initiated into their pack.

He could now grudgingly admit to himself some of the livestock weren't as pathetic as he'd originally made them out to be. Not after he'd seen first-hand of their tendency to survive every encounter and hardship like a colony of cockroaches. Gathering his fangs at the crook of his elbow, Sesshomaru arranged himself loosely on the grass—legs unfolded, claws tucked into sleeves, and body ready to spring into action in case of a surprise ambush. He declined Hari's offer to place a warming charm over him, already acclimated to the warmer temperature.

He noticed as the night wore on and the sun slowly appeared in the horizon, the motionless figure across from him also slept lightly, stirring whenever there was any loud disturbance before those forest green gems feigned peaceful rest.

In the early afternoon, with pursed lips he had rumbled what had been at the forefront of his concerns during the night which had kept him awake: "This Sesshomaru wishes to acquire knowledge of the differences between his and this Hari's time. Have the humans overtaken the yōkai tribes?"

Harry paused, looking up from the stonework. "Sorry, would you mind repeating that?" He was honestly the last person he should ask about the state of yōkai tribes. He made sure to tell Sesshomaru that.

The demon lord merely raised a brow. "You willingly remain ignorant of our state of affairs."

There was a definite underlying accusation in that deep brogue that Harry wasn't certain why or what he should be feeling ashamed of. With irritation coloring his tone, he returned stiffly, "We had more pressing concerns at the time than the deliberation of Japanese demon demographics, Lord Sesshomaru."

Mouth twisting sourly, he jabbed his wand at the fire pit, directing a stream of water to splash at the dying smoke. The last of the fire spluttered out upon contact. "I don't think you should know about the state of your kingdom," he cautioned, remembering what Hermione had told him about messing with time. He slid his hands into his trouser pockets, gripping the charmed Galleon. "Even if it is
your legacy, finding out about it might influence your future decisions when you return home."

"Humans were a blight to the yōkai population," Lord Sesshomaru informed him with what could only be a bloodthirsty expression written across his handsome mug. "We have maintained the balance by feeding upon the livestock. Our preys return the favor. Should our clans be overridden with vermin no demon lord can, with good conscious, allow the calamity to come upon demonfolk."

Translating the extravagant but long-winded speech into one suggestive of the genocide of humankind, Harry could already imagine the uproar were the Nations' Ministries of Magic to catch wind of Sesshomaru's intentions.

Hoping to dissuade the inuyōkai, as it was the responsible thing to do, he shared, "Bad or good, I still maintain that you should not pursue knowledge of the future. Hermione and I were in your position once, during our formal education at our magical institution. We used a time travelling artifact to stage a rescue attempt. At the time we didn't think of the possibility of creating paradoxes. Luckily it was apparently minor enough in the long scheme of things that it still fell within the theory that anything a traveler does merely fall along the lines of the self-fulfilling circumstances which had been enacted before the actual travelling."

"By your own admission, that means this Sesshomaru was brought to the future for a purpose. What other purpose is there but to be a witness to your current state of affairs and then to be sent back to alter the course of destiny," the demon lord deadpanned, able to follow along with the Hermione-speak.

"But you were brought here accidentally," Harry argued back once he picked his mouth up from the ground.

"We cannot truly know that, seeing as you did what you did knowing what you knew and still doing so without remorse," Sesshomaru rebutted, not leaving room up for debate.

The demon lord had to be applauded for his masterful demonstration of oral aptitude. It took a lot to make one Harry James Potter speechless.

He was at a dilemma. He was starting to see the serious political clout arising within the magical community were Sesshomaru to remain any longer in their timeline. On one hand he needed to send the demon lord back as soon as possible before he forced his human ethics onto a species that didn't need his future interference. On the other hand he didn't want to be the cause of a magical creature's vendetta reminiscent of a Death Eater campaign. Knowing his luck, people would find some way to blame him for the lord's actions. He was so bloody tired of constantly switching between being both the media darling and social pariah.

So it was with great effort pushing down his Gryffindorish impulsiveness that Harry slowly directed another diplomatic response: "It isn't my place to tell you how to rule your kingdom, your lordship. I am not fully cognizant of what had passed as acceptable in the Western Lands. If you truly believe it to be the best course of action for your subjects, by all means…I won't be able to stop you."

"Your permission is unnecessary."

Harry persisted patiently, "So I can only take small comfort in the knowledge if it was meant to be for you to attempt the extinction of mankind, at the very least it had come to pass for the magical community, as a whole, to have learned from history and come to the decision to remain undetected from non-magicalkind and to make an…ongoing treatise between several magical species that make up our creature community."
He shifted uncomfortably on his feet. "As I’ve come from overseas, I personally have not made any contact with the particular tribes you are probably speaking of. Ah, that means prior to your appearance, your council had not been contacted by my men. Forgive me for my overestimation. I haven’t met another demon—let alone another daiyōkai—where I’m from."

"Several individuals might have an idea."

"I know a few," Harry confessed, "but I'm not willing to impart those contacts to you, no offense meant. They're all a superstitious lot."

If it weren't for the stark curiosity in the magical creature's expression, he would've said more than what he had since he was dealing with a species without his moral scruples. Magical creatures operated under different standards that more often than not were violent and bestial in nature. The fake Galleon warmed in Harry's palm, and that was the only warning they got before one bushy-haired witch was delivered between magical creature and wizard with a loud thud.

"Harry!" Hermione greeted enthusiastically, throwing her arms around the Head Auror's broad shoulders. Two strong arms encircled her pregnant waist, holding her like one would with a delicate glass figurine.

"Hermione," the dulcet tone returned warmly. Sooner than she would've liked, her best mate withdrew himself from the comfort of her embrace and relocated himself inches away. He held onto her International Portkey, which all personnel high up in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement that had one were authorized to use. She noticed the tight expression he wore. He tapped her left hip with two fingers, motioning for her to turn around.

When brown orbs landed upon the mythical stranger, the witch let loose a loud gasp. When Harry had called for her assistance, he had not mentioned the otherworldly, intimidating presence the fair-haired male had to himself. Nor had he mentioned his bestial nature for Lord Sesshomaru's sclera had bled red, his irises had shrunken down into turquoise slits, and those magenta stripes on his cheeks had become jagged—clear indications of demonic rage described in the ancient scrolls she'd scoured from the Japanese Ministry's forbidden section of their library. A frozen Hermione Jean Weasley (née Granger) remained staring mutely at Sesshomaru like a startled rabbit, much to the latter's growing annoyance, until Harry had enough of the charged air and had elbowed her back into response.

Snapping to attention, the witch curtseyed before the magical creature, albeit awkwardly with the extra weight around her midsection, and made her introductions via Ron's hastily-casted translation spell: "Lord Sesshomaru, I'm Hermione Jean Weasley, your ally for the time you remain here. It was rude of me for not announcing my presence, forgive me. Harry called me because of my prior occupation in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures in our Ministry of Magic. I am told you are a… pureblooded Japanese demon. A dog demon, are you not?"

Lord Sesshomaru looked in Harry's direction. "She is of this Hari's Court."

Brown eyes tensed at the deep gravitas that made up the lord's voice, conflicting with the delicateness of the other's features. Harry had warned her of this Sesshomaru's tendency toward condescending speech that an uninformed Westerner would not be able to detect—she couldn't keep track of the different honorifics adopted in all the global linguistics nor all the pureblood customs Harry was expected to know—but Hermione had not paid heed to his words. After all royalty in their time were generally well-mannered in public.

She could however understand the demon's behavior and speech was antiquated, therefore the
translation spell conveyed the outdated terminologies as best as it could. It would probably be better for them to adjust their communication into something the demon lord would able to recognize if they could, since he was the temporary guest. "I'm his coworker," she supplied amicably with her head bowed, "and I believe you're operating under a misunderstanding. While Harry is a special case, we have a Minister of Magic. We are, essentially, a part of his court, not Har-ry's." She tried to emphasize the correct pronunciation of the wizard's name, to wean the demon lord of his heavily accented address of her best mate in the most subtle method possible.

"Remember I handle your paycheck, Hermione," Harry pestered in fond jest. "I would say you've been a part of my Court since we were school chums."

Hermione sniffed, recalling their deadly school adventures. "Be careful before you give Sesshomaru the wrong impression. I am not your personal secretary."

"Ah, no, I would never do that." Green eyes twinkled. "Besides I considered you my official advisor than a measly secretary."

"A clarification of her station is needed," Sesshomaru said, having composed himself during their brief, lighthearted banter. Tearing his eyes away from the wizard, he now raked his still-pinked gaze down the remaining length of her, lingering on any scars revealed outwardly, and determined for himself: "This Sesshomaru was told this Hari is a lord and general of his lands. Are you not a vassal of this lord, half-breed?"

Both Hermione and Harry stiffened at the title the demon lord had lauded the witch. Before Harry opened his mouth to come to her rescue, Hermione requested curtly, "By your criteria how have you determined that I am a half-breed, Sesshomaru? I realize we come from different eras, different countries, different ideas of blood purity. Where we're from, our half-bloods have the parentage of one magical parent. If that isn't the case, I regret to inform you that I am a Muggle-born or, in laymen's terms, a human with magical abilities."

Sesshomaru's lips parted, as if he had never considered it before. He conceded dubiously, "You vaguely smell of diluted hanyou clans, not miko's. If it weren't for the miasma that surrounds you, this Sesshomaru would've assumed you of ningen blood."

The charm must've been faulty, because it should've been able to convert the few traditional Japanese phrases into English. Still it took no leap of logic to have grasped what Sesshomaru was trying to say.

"What does a human smell like? How is it different from a demon's?" Hermione demanded instead, unsatisfied with the bare bones of his explanation. A tic had developed near the dog demon's brow, but she plowed forward determinedly, "Do all demons have your heightened sense of smell or does that sensitivity have to do with your particular genetic species? I was with my husband before arriving, so I might smell of his cologne or whatever else that can be detected. So is it my particular smell or do you smell the blood of others on me?"

She resisted the strong urge to sniff herself, to determine how she could come off as repulsive judging by the slightly put-off face the demon was making.

"Underneath all the other scents, your bloodline is less pure than this Hari's blood," Sesshomaru imparted with a small sneer. To her dismay it seemed her attempt at correcting his mispronunciation had been in vain. His gaze returned back to Harry, as if he could share his commiserations. "My sense of smell is at a level too intricate to be understood by anyone not a dog demon or a daiyōkai."

Brown eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Relax, Harry," she soothed the Head Auror, patting his arm
softly. "I've come a long way since Malfoy's spitting insults. I'm not offended by his assumption, actually. I can see why Sesshomaru would think so."

With the momentum of an accomplished academic, Hermione dived into the heart of the matter with fervent passion. Lacing her hands together over her belly like a protective gesture, she elucidated, "Sesshomaru, I think what you're picking up is the culmination of our genetic makeup, magical pedigree, and status. In that case, you are...correct in your assumptions. I am both human and witch with no titles, a mixed breed. In certain text, some believe us to originate from the mixing of demonic and miko blood, resulting in our Animagus forms and source of magic. It is not a popular theory in our western world, but the Japanese swear by it. My husband and Lord Harry came from two magical parents though, with titles and all that entails, including relation with several prominent...clans. By wizarding and Muggle criterions, I am a lower class than those two. I do not need his vassalage to secure my position as our standards of living have advanced from what you are used to, Lord Sesshomaru."

Dark brows disappeared behind white fringe.

As a show of solidarity, Harry shuffled closer and placed a heavy hand over her shoulder, an action which perceptive, slitted pupils captured with frightening intensity that made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

Giggling nervously, she jabbed her elbow imperceptibly into Harry's waist, only relaxing when the suspicion directed at them leveled off after her best mate backed up. The brilliant witch reflected on the plausibility of Harry having been imprinted onto Sesshomaru's mind instinctively, forging himself as the most trustworthy contact to have in an unknown timeline. A surge of pride grew in her. Harry had come a long way from the antisocial boy he once was into an upstanding, charismatic adult. She couldn't fault him for the demon lord's presumably sexist, nearly racist standoffishness to her presence.

She had been tempted to, but someone had to be mature. In privacy, she would make sure to lend a sympathetic ear when the wizard came to her about a certain someone's rudeness.

The fair-haired male glided forward and she stood her ground, not even deigning her attention at Harry's worried looks. When the tall creature stooped over, his long hair falling past his shoulders as he did so, to study her closely, she immediately blanched. She clumsily straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin—unused to conferring to pureblood scrutiny—for what she hoped passed as acceptable bearing for the warrior demon (she had seen his swords).

Finally sensing that he was nearing the end of Harry's patience, the demon lord cordially withdrew and gifted her with a nod. "She may provide her assistance to this Hari. Do not disappoint me."

She smiled widely, disregarding the insulting implication, and bobbed another curtsey. To her side, Harry loosened his grip on the wand she knew was hidden behind his back. With her hands folded underneath her bulging stomach—both green and golden pools followed the action—she proposed anxiously, "I realize you might feel comfortable in what used to be your empire, but there is nothing we can do here than gather information from the broken barrier casted over the well Harry had spoken of. Might you be alright accompanying us to our country? We can't leave you behind, not with a Death Eater prowling around and a Muggle family coming back soon. We'll be the ones in trouble if something untoward befalls you."

"Don't worry. We'll send you back in one piece," Harry promised, his frosty gaze simmering down into reserved pleasantness. He rubbed his forehead, the place where his scar is. Golden pools followed the motion. "But like Hermione said, we can't do anything here with alien resources. Hermione may be smart, but she does not need the extra impediment of border limitations. She has
already gathered enough research material she needs to help us figure out how to send you back to… feudal times. Of course, we have to pass you off as… an important ambassador under Witness Protection."

"The good thing is Asian magical communities are rather close-lipped about what is one of theirs, so a few misdirection will be enough to appease any brownnosing." She gnawed on her bottom lip, recalling the *Daily Prophet* and one pesky journalist. Rita Skeeter, be damned. "You'll have to lay low to avoid the media. We can't do anything about them. But it's better for us to be in Britain, where our words still hold sway rather than here under contemporary Japanese jurisdiction."

Both held their breaths as Sesshomaru reflected on their plan. Finally he acquiesced and made a show of communicating his gratitude for their hospitality. Which did not sound like he was thanking them at all. While Hermione felt somewhat pacified at finally being under the royalty's regard, she couldn't help but notice Sesshomaru had yet to remove his gaze from the oblivious Head Auror's expression, most likely using Harry's reactions as a platform from which to make the next logical leap. Hermione's face softened. The poor dear needed an anchor to ground himself from losing it.

"How old are you, Sesshomaru?" she couldn't help but ask, predicting the lord to be in his early twenties. She couldn't be sure. "I'm asking only to make sure you're over seventeen. We have wards around certain Ministrial Areas that bar entrance to anyone under our age of majority."

There was a flash of fang and—dare she say it?—his hint of a smile was more demoralizing than his previous apathy. The demon lord enlightened her, "As of the date before my arrival, this Sesshomaru was over five-hundred years of age."

Hermione felt the ground rushing to her head.
"Why did you spring that on him?" Harry hissed, crouching down next to Hermione as she examined his runic-based ward around the Bone Eater's Well. Because the royal dog demon was waiting for them outside, he'd made sure to cast a silent Muffliato Charm around their nearby surroundings.

Snape's creation had worked for them in the past. It shouldn't fail them now.

As the spell settled, the pregnant witch cast an annoyed look in his general vicinity before turning back to her former undertaking with an obnoxious swish of hair. Her shoulder bumped against his as she checked the last of the runes against the paper she'd drawn up. "You know that's nothing substantial. I just thought it'd settle his mind. Put yourself in his situation for a bit. Wouldn't you feel better knowing you might be among your own future kind?"

"He'll think we're part demonic now," he riposted heatedly, feeling terrible for the unintended deception.

When she'd introduced it into her diplomatic intervention like some careless subject she'd just happened to remember, Harry had felt his stomach drop. After his *ex officio* appointment, like Dumbledore had been appointed to after his defeat of Grindelwald, in the International Confederation of Wizards Harry had learned to read the intent behind seemingly harmless briefings.

"Because of your *kindness*, if we now tell him otherwise, he'll reckon we're mad."

"It's giving him something to think about," she stressed, not seeing anything wrong with what she'd disclosed. "Honestly Harry, I put forward a popular theory contemporary wizards of this continent believe in. I did not say it was the absolute, verified truth. Did you listen to what I'd said?"

Exhaling loudly, Harry dropped his head into his gloved hands. Many scenarios of how this could go wrong whizzed through his mind. "I hope you know what you're doing," he said instead, groaning into his palm.

Her agitated movements stilled. Staring down at the soil, Hermione experienced a moment of indecision caused by another wizard's doubt in herself. The moment passed and she shook her head to rid herself of her hesitance. "Even if he believed in it, telling him won't make our future go pear-shaped," she persuaded more for herself than for Harry's sake. "I'm not getting a huge kick on his expense. Most magical creatures think we're an advanced evolutionary branch of hairless primates. That hasn't stopped them from integrating into our society."

Affirming that Harry had drawn the ward precisely to her written instructions, she folded the note back into her parcel and she slowly stood up, holding onto Harry's arm like a cane to support her additional weight.

Leaning heavily against him, she tipped her chin upward and she peered into his bright *Avada Kedavra* green eyes. "You realize you can't be thinking of heading to Hogwarts and dropping him off at the Forbidden Forest at earliest convenience."

Harry smiled sheepishly. "He seems more attuned to being in the wilderness. If that hadn't worked out, I was thinking of bringing him to the Burrow or hiding him at Sirius's ancestral home."
"The Burrow can't house another person with another baby on the way. You know that, Harry." She scolded, already envisioning the horrified face the royal dog demon would make to be subjugated to homely lodgings. Undoubtedly his opinion of their table manners fell along the lines of much-to-be-desired. "If we're talking about his comfort, he'll have to go where you go."

"Hermione," he doled out in token protest.

"But what you said about him being attuned with nature is correct. His robes speak of luxury but inherently he is a magical creature and most of them are comfortable in their natural habitats," she said sullenly, recalling the creature populations she had met and their subsequent offence finding out she had championed for their relocations before the Wizengamot. It was a harsh lesson to be learned but she had come to accept magical creatures did not need her help and were fine where they were, thank you very much.

She was still smarting from the public backlash when she'd attempted to bring back S.P.E.W. The most she had been able to modernize were wizards' nicer treatment of their house-elves, which already had come to pass largely to having witnessed the elves' unusually bold contribution to the Battle of Hogwarts.

"The reasonable thing to do is to bring him to all three destinations and see which one appeals to him the most," she continued mostly to herself, oblivious to Harry's growing dismay. She was falling back to old habits. Unconsciously she went to cover the Mudblood carved into her arm by Bellatrix. "Poor Sesshomaru. He must be so frightened."

"He seems quite calm to me," Harry supplied diffidently, eyeing the back of the stoic-looking demon lord standing guard for them at the shoji doors. Hermione's concerns for a Death Eater at large remained unfounded so far.

After a pause Hermione passed him a pitying look. "You men and your machismo."

"You girls and your womanly instincts," he returned good-naturedly, taking her parcel. His shoulders slouched, he mentally appraised the details of their spontaneous plan—from how they would introduce him to their modern advancements to the damage control he was sure they would have to mediate. Several pressing alarms stood in the forefront of his thoughts.

"I promised my Japanese escort to meet him after my business was concluded," Harry mentioned offhandedly with a dip in his brows. Scraping his gaze from the top of her frizzy hair to the bulge in her stomach, he imparted, "Blame it on my male machismo but I don't feel safe leaving you alone with an archaic, pureblooded demon. Ron would have my balls if anything happened to his wife and child."

Brown doe-eyes widened, not having well thought-out his ambassadorial inconvenience. "We could hide under your Invisibility Cloak," she projected earnestly, having no problem huddling with a dangerous time-traveling magical creature.

Although seeing the Auror rebuking her with a look particularly effective on members of the Defense Association in their fifth year, she experienced another bout of uncertainty. Harry made sure to tell her exactly why he thought her newest plan to be mad.

"We could hide him under the cloak?" she suggested this time.

He gave her the same look, but more intense than the one before.

"We could hold onto the cloak," she defended herself, "so that we won't lose him. We can't cast him
with a Disillusionment Charm. We can't trust that he'll sit put if we can't keep track of where he is."

When Lord Hari and his packmate returned to the surface, Sesshomaru made sure to keep the pregnant witch within his immediate sight. Upon her abrupt entrance, it had only been Hari's protective claim detected upon the female hanyou's demonic aura which had stilled the demon lord's hand.

A secret society borne between yōkais and mikos that even he had not been aware of...Sesshomaru didn't know what to make of that unfeasibility. He was under no disillusionment for his company had imparted as thus in spite of the certain buzzing he overheard over the leaked tidbits of their smalltalk. What his present companions didn't know was that priests and demonfolk were natural nemeses, their spiritual and demonic powers automatically canceling each other out and often with fatal results.

He couldn't comprehend what evolutionary adaptation that would allow the mutation to result in an offspring.

But it explained the fluctuation of yōki he'd picked up that coated the otherwise human female.

He'd given her the cursory one-over. Bushy brown hair tied back in a plait and big brown doe-eyes...a small slip of a woman attired in a calf-length kimono that bled a dark rose red underneath what resembled a shorter hanten.... His attention had lingered on her throat where the scarf she wore was as equally floaty as her unusually one-layered sleeveless kimono. He had been half-inclined to write her off as an oddly-but-well-dressed common woman.

Unlike the green-eyed daiyōkai, she was missing notable demonic traits like marks of lineage or unusually-colored eyes. Like Hari though, her unknown bloodline smelled significantly cleaner than those plaguing humankind. If it hadn't been for that, it wouldn't have overruled his earlier suspicion of a demonic possession for she still retained traces of the mortal decaying rank.

Until it was confirmed otherwise, he was fine with accepting his future subjects' unfounded theory. Sorcery, in his mind, belonged to the priesthood and yōkai clans.

His cool gaze sought out the other daiyōkai in the distance, whom remained occupied with providing for his packmate's otherwise fragile condition. Pregnant omegas and betas were often coveted among the demonfolk. For one to be outside her mate's protection, Sesshomaru was perturbed that her pack alpha was left to deal with a responsibility that wasn't his and to be willingly accepting of the inconvenience.

It made him remember of the accursed mark that had been clawed onto his back at one point in the past. The eldest son hadn't been fully aware of the legendary Horai Island until two of his father's vassals pledged to him their intentions to defeat its Four War Gods at the behest of the late Inu no Taishō. It wasn't until he'd encountered the lowly phoenix demon and had made been made his thrall that Sesshomaru sought retribution.

He'd done what any self-respecting lord would have done when dealing with any perceived insolence.

For a pack alpha to provide for a pregnant packmate that wasn't his, it meant the female's mate left a lot to be desired. This Sesshomaru was looking forward to the disciplinary actions Lord Hari would take against his packmate's mate if the irritated expression on Hari's face was anything to go by.

"Sesshomaru, what transportation does your kind utilize back then?" Hari's inquisitive packmate requested of him.
The two younger demonfolk were now in his immediate vicinity, looking upon him with wide eyes. When the female had recovered from his earlier flippant answer, she revealed them to be both younger than Inuyasha. By more than two centuries!

He'd scented their youthfulness, but he never would've been able to conceive them to be around the age of Inuyasha's bitch. There was an aged quality to these two that bespoke of being veterans from a recent battle, with tells such as their hypervigilance, trouble falling asleep (from last night's observations), and dependency on each other.

He was more astonished that Hari had taken the mantle of a daiyōkai for someone so young especially when the female informed him of their kind's somewhat prolonged life expectancy which, for them, was two times slower than their mortal counterparts. In the future. (He'd been surprised that humans could live as long as eighty or ninety nowadays. Normally anyone that'd reached their forties or fifties were considered to be elderly among humankind.)

Compared to the average yōkai's lifespan, theirs was almost negligible.

He had the sneaking suspicion that Lord Hari hadn't publicized his daiyōkai virility yet or he hadn't been made aware of the benefits of his higher station. It was something Sesshomaru would have to test first before reaching a solid conclusion.

"This Sesshomaru has no need to speak to you," he responded chivalrously, wondering in the back of his mind the gall of a modern-day hanyou to request a lord to entertain her with his talents. In his day he'd merely keep a disdained silence while Jaken berated the offender for forgetting their station. Those who were proud of their perceived intelligence and self-preservation dared not to address him without his proper title.

Pulling forward away from him, the female engaged her pack alpha in another foreign dialect that sounded choppy and less powerful than the incantations backed with yōki. She was making what appeared to be consoling gestures at Hari, which puzzled Sesshomaru as he observed their one-sided conversation from the back.

"Lord Sesshomaru," Hari—Sesshomaru noticed his expression had soured—finally requested on his packmate's behalf upon reaching the shrine's entrance, "we've ran into complications that needs to be remedied. How comfortable are you with our modes of transport?"

The inuyōkai frowned, recalling the female's abrupt appearance. He'd felt the sharp influx of yōki which resonated from Hari's person in a split second before an overwhelming demonic energy brought the witch to them in a dizzying whirl. His frown deepened at the memory of the head of a golden statue Hari had snatched from his packmate, which seemed to be her employed method of travel.

"A-Un had been used as my traveling beast of burden for centuries," he imparted dutifully, withholding further mention of his possessions, "nothing like your brand of transport."

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The female took his reply as permission to launch into a lecture that delved into the complexities of their Portkeys, Floo Network, Apparition, flying broomsticks and carriages pulled by magical creatures capable of flight or long distance—and what he could expect from each travel. He took her briefing seriously, unlike Hari who traveled some distance to raise his wand arm in the air. By the time she was done, he had a flimsy garment thrown over his head with a pregnant hanyou huddled closely to his person.

The tip of Hari's wand exploded in a shower of red sparks. Hari was softly enlightening him that he needed to be hidden with Hari's packmate in case a Takeda-Mushin-san suspected anything of his
two unsanctioned audience. The green-eyed daiyōkai’s last parting words to them was for them to both be very quiet and to not—for God’s sake, please don’t—cause a diplomatic scene that’ll have the Japanese Ministry on their trail.

The air parted with a heavy burst of yōki. A metal monster of sleek black erupted out of nowhere, screeching to a halt at the steps below them. Hari was taking off below when another hanyou bolted from the ears of the rumbling beast.

Sesshomaru had readied himself to draw his Tōkijin when small hands grasped his wrist to stop his movement, and he was subjugated to the silent entreaty reflected in those brown pools that reminded him so much of one human that his grip slackened. Hari’s packmate was shaking her head, imploring him to curtail his battle-honed instincts from doing what was screaming at him to do.

Molten gold flickered back to take stock of the situation. It wasn’t until the green-eyed daiyōkai did nothing but converse pleasantly with the dark-haired hanyou for the next few minutes that Sesshomaru relaxed. Tōkijin slid back into its scabbard with a muted *schrnk*.

The female nudged him forward and he was amused to have her follow him with grace down the temple steps. He was not so amused to walk into the belly of the beast.

Extraordinarily enough, the male hanyou didn't seem to detect their additional presence in the back. Sesshomaru had been rather dubious of the duo’s plan to hope for the best by throwing the cloak smelling of the hide of an unnamed beast over him.

He was now rendered a believer in the magical properties of the cloak-hide. He and the female breathed lightly through their mouths, uncomfortable with their proximity and shared body heat. The innards of the metal monster stunk of sweat and tanned hide, which burned underneath his thinly-covered thighs.

In the rather tense ride, with Hari's dulcet accent effortlessly distracting the male that stunk suspiciously of taijiya origins, Sesshomaru could feel the female hanyou turn her head against his shoulder and he could feel the instant her damnable curiosity now concentrated on his markings.

This time she quietly asked him what the meaning behind his tribal markings stood for. Then she informed him of today’s common application of cosmetics and that if his markings weren't tattooed on or applied or cursed, he shouldn't be embarrassed to admit they were birthmarks. Because they were very beautiful. Oddly colored. But very impressive nonetheless. On him.

He noticed she didn't compliment the equally-striking lightning-bolt marking on her pack alpha’s forehead.

With Lord Hari’s constant warning glances met by molten gold in the mirror up above, it was at this point Sesshomaru silently put himself up to the female packmate's two major character flaws.

Sesshomaru felt very queasy when the blurring had stopped and he found himself emerging from the heatless emerald flames on shaky legs. Once the motion-sickness had passed, he scanned their immediate surroundings not so aptly named the Shrieking Shack. Wiping his palms free of the silver Floo Powder, he and the female waited for their last party to materialize from the hearth.

While they were waiting, he studied the small paw prints and the long drag marks that were ink dark against the fine grime beneath his boots. His lips curled at the effort he knew that would have to be made to remain free of the filth that seemed one with the abandoned property.
There were no doors or windows that allowed entry or natural light through its boarded-up constructions. And to the demon lord’s amazement, the walls were slowly moving. But beyond the peeling paint and upturned, moth-eaten furnishings, a confused miasma of many demonic energies were soaked deep into the rickety old floorboards.

After the female casted a spell to check for any interlopers, with his permission a translation spell was casted using Sesshomaru's person as the spell's anchor. By the time he felt Hari's yōki settle warmly around them when the lord rejoined their party, the female engaged Sesshomaru in a curt briefing.

According to the female hanyou, at Lord Hari's bequest the Headmistress of Hogwarts had allowed for a private Ministry-sanctioned fireplace to be restored on what had formerly been the command post of Lord Voldemort and the subsequent deathbed of one Professor Severus Snape. He didn't have to ask for further illumination. It could be implied what went down in the two-story abode by the subtle inflections in the hanyou's voice and Hari's involuntary reflexes.

While he did not know the intended direction of where they were going, the two honored their unspoken natural order: the two daiyōkais at front, Hari's packmate at their backs.

At one point there was a ghastly impression of where had once been a body—a distinct shape that wiped a significant portion of the floorboards clean. Fresh lilies were placed around the outline, clearly as ceremonial offerings honoring the deceased. The solemn energy around Hari had spiked, but it was the tension around those almond-shaped eyes that made Sesshomaru keep his silence. They passed that point without significantly slowing.

"Alright," Hari's packmate announced with false cheer, "either this tunnel will lead us to the edge of the castle grounds or the village of Hogsmeade, it's up to you. Either way it'll be your first introduction to wizardkind. While Harry parades you through the local haunts—sorry about it in advance—I can release a press statement at the Atrium that'll cement your cover story in the public's heads before your arrival gets blown out of proportion. The public loves a good scandal. Your being under Witness Protection with your creature heritage should be enough to put off the first wave of interrogations. Any preferences?"

"If we're going to sell the story," Hari brought up in a subdued voice, "it would make sense to have our Japanese ambassador visit Hogsmeade grounds en route to Hogwarts before we show up for our summons at the Ministry."

"We'll have to leave Diagon Alley last," the female said apologetically, indifferent to the demon lord's little clue of the titles of properties. She turned to Hari for his counsel. "It'll leave time for Shacklebolt to authorize the new credentials for him."

"I think we should keep his name and status. The most effective lies are often mixed with truth."

"True," she murmured, fiddling with her scarf. "The public will probably think they're fake anyhow if we tell them his image is purposefully designed to throw off anyone from recognizing him."

While seemingly approving of the plan without consulting the royal dog demon, Hari finally deigned to turn on his heels to direct a contrite look in the demon lord's wake. "We're sorry that you haven't had a say so far with our plotting, Lord Sesshomaru. It is not intended for any perceived slight against you. Among us three, only two of us have any notion of how wizarding Britain is run."

The female fetched her parcel back from Hari's mokeskin bag, opening its latch to check for the golden head stashed inside.

Rubbing the back of his neck, the younger daiyōkai was attempting to pass off his discomfiture as a
casual motion. With a smile that didn't reach his eyes, he imparted, "It sounds awfully bold of me but you'll just have to trust me when I say your best interests are being considered."

"We shall see," was all Sesshomaru had to say to that.

The weather was a dull shade of grey outside when Lord Hari parted ways with his packmate, having been extracted a promise to show up at the Atrium "fashionably late." Both daiyōkais swiftly marched further into the picturesque village of little thatched cottages and shops far sturdier than the compact huts and stands Sesshomaru were used to seeing. The well-dressed hanyous of varying ages—he discerned the bulk of the crowd were made up of adolescent pups in black montsuki haoris with colored fabrics and crests which distinguished them by clan—stopped their prior engagements and immediately leveled the approaching figure that was Lord Hari with awed, worshipful stares.

He'd seen the same devotion in the black-haired hanyou whom Hari had bid his goodbyes to. And in the hanyous he'd been interested in studying before he was ushered to the International Floo Network.

The spell over the villagers was broken with Sesshomaru's glare and the villagers reluctantly returned to their activities. The lords were the picture of decorated nobility, their stances militaristically precise. Both had adopted a neutral-enough, cordial mask as they wandered into the hullabaloo, with the sea of hanyous parting before them.

Each time someone bold enough made to approach them, Hari would stymie their advance with a cheerful: "Hello, official business here on this fine day. Please go back to what you were doing. Thanks."

Despite Hari's best efforts Sesshomaru could feel the villagers' eyes in the distance furtively focused on his markings and pointed ears, and then their attention would be peering at his and his father's fangs secured tightly by his waist. The nosy hanyous were murmuring conspiratorially to one another about the demon lord's exoticness and were questioning the reason behind his attendance next to their lord. Their mistrustful fixation on his person made Sesshomaru instinctively sidle closer to his escort, silently drawing strength from the lord's seemingly unconcerned attention to the heavy public scrutiny.

While Hari made a show of pointing out all the tourist stops—"that's Zonko's Joke Shop, that's Honeydukes on our right, oh I remember Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop"—he imparted personal tidbits that made Sesshomaru want to smirk badly. With an excited fervor that was faked, Hari indicated pretentiously to the fine coating of snow on every slanted rooftop, mentioning how Hogsmeade was in perpetual holiday season. A crafty reference to the differences between wizarding Britain's and wizarding Japan's climates was tossed in, and Sesshomaru could see the subtle inferences the more intelligent of their eavesdropping hanyous were coming to.

For the slower populace, Sesshomaru interjected his appreciativeness of this Hari's welcome into his world as per regulation.

There was a trail of dialogue he caught between two females which nervously compared this Sesshomaru's proud, dignified bearing with a Lord Malfoy's. The curious beast inside him raised its head, slightly wary at the prospect of finding another daiyōkai in the same court Hari belonged to. Didn't Hari inform him he was the only other daiyōkai in this territory? If he stayed here long enough to relax his guard, he was looking forward to testing his strength against the foreign daiyōkais of this time; to gauge if they posed any threat to the Western Lands or if they were worth a second glance.

Breathing in the crisp mountain air, intermingled with the acrid aftertaste of coal and smoke, the
demon lord could detect an undercurrent of murmurings which continued to sound like: "the Boy-Who-Won is coming toward us" and "Why is our Lord Savior back" and the ever common "What is that creature doing next to our Lord Potter" with little variation. The royal dog demon listened distractedly to Hari who was lightly advising him to curb any instinctual aggression to their cultural differences; that he should prepare himself for the stampede that was to come now that their lord was back in their domain.

It was too soon for Sesshomaru to develop a concrete opinion of the regard wizarding Britain had of Hari based on this one little village. But this Hari was obviously favored and must have done great deeds to have warranted the amount of respect to have reached what remained of Sesshomaru's Western Lands.

"Harry? Is that you?"

The senseless, accented question was brought up by a male that, to his ears, sounded insecure of where he stood in life. Both Sesshomaru and Hari turned their eyes to land on a round-faced, fair-haired wizard that was accompanied by his equally fair-haired Intended. They were both bundled up warmly in august fabrics in the same fashion of the villagers ahead. The two had been shopping before catching sight of their lord, indicated by the amount of produce peeking out over the bags they were carrying. There was a deep gash in the male's cheek that scarred cleanly. It was that and the contradictory deportment the male hanyou held that made Sesshomaru suspect him to be a retired fighter.

Hari's face broke out into a friendly grin. "Lord Longbottom Neville," he introduced enthusiastically, remembering the Japanese address in honor of his guest. When his attention was diverted to the pink-faced woman, he dropped into a more reticent geniality. He nodded as they made their approach. "And Lady Abbott Hannah. May I present Lord Sesshomaru, an ambassador from Japan I'm taking around to sightsee our wizarding Britain."

Despite the odd expressions they gave met upon their reception, the couple collected themselves. The female immediately dropped into a curtsey and the lord that was called Longbottom—no markings of lineage were noted—mimicked the same greeting Hari had completed a while back. "We welcome you to our society, Lord Sesshomaru," this new lord expressed amiably. He smelled of plant earth and dried blood. Smiling through crooked teeth, he admonished, "There's no need for that, Harry. I'm just a Herbology Professor now."

"This one is a lord," Sesshomaru spoke up slowly, mostly for Hari's ears alone. Whatever this "herbology" meant, for a hanyou to willingly discard his high station for an instructive profession—which was considered a more acceptable position for a hanyou to take in yōkai society—it brought back memories of his unrefined half-brother.

Hari frowned reproachfully at his slight to another aberrant highborn. "Yes, this one fought in the frontlines of the war I told you about." His forest green eyes bore into the side of Sesshomaru's face as he championed rather vociferously, "He was one of the leaders of the resistance army against Voldemort's regime, and he's one of the bravest men I've had the pleasure of knowing."

"Harry, that's enough," the hanyou lord objected with a bright red flush that spread down his neck. He wrapped a supportive arm around the female's shoulders, whom appeared discomforted by the mention of the Dark Lord. "I did what anyone would've done in my position."

"Not many would have the bollocks to oppose Voldemort to his face and then been able to break free of his torture to behead Nagini," Hari dissented, clapping a hand on Longbottom's shoulder. Nonetheless he stilled his tongue from distributing further compliments. With a grim look, he relayed to the female, "And this makes you a lucky witch to have caught Neville's eye. Same to you too,
Neville. Treat each other well, and I wish the two of you all the happiness in the world."

The couple beamed at Hari's blessing.

"If you're going to have him...sight-see wizarding Britain," the female piped up, avoiding Hari's gaze, "you have to bring him to Hogwarts." As if realizing the magical creature would have no idea what she was talking about, she added, "It's the finest boarding school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. It'll give him the proper idea of how our generations are taught."

"That is our next destination," Sesshomaru corroborated, examining the castle in the foggy distance. He, along with Hari, had sensed the intensified interest raised by mention of their newest subject.

"He's expressed his interest in seeing our Forbidden Forest," Hari fibbed, shrugging nonchalantly. "I was hoping to show him the outskirts of Hagrid's groundskeep and leave Hogwarts for another day."

"Why so?" Longbottom asked, shifting the bags in his arms with a small juggle. His breath came out into white puffs as he extended, "We're making our way back to school grounds. I have a class to prepare for tomorrow. We should walk together. Ginny's taken time off from the Holyhead Harpies to give a surprise weekend demonstration. She'll be thrilled to see you!"

Sesshomaru discerned Hari's good mood faltering upon Longbottom's allusion to this Ginny female. With an uncharacteristic nervousness, Hari stammered, "Is-is that so? I didn't know she was allowed to leave training for the League Cup."

"She's a special case," the female said, smiling, "it comes with the perk of having been your—"

"Hannah!" Longbottom admonished, saving face for his friend's private affairs. Peering sidelong at the demon lord, he hissed, "Not in front of Hari's company."

Dark brows disappeared beneath a white fringe as the female physically wilted from mortification.

"I reckon we won't be seeing her when we head back," Hari murmured almost regretfully, with a purposeful nod to Sesshomaru. "It's only for a short visit. After that, we have to Apparate to the Ministry's Atrium for Hermione's press conference. You should tune in for that."

With a practiced motion, he swung a golden double-albert affixed to his waistcoat up into his waiting palm and he flipped open the dented pocket watch. Sesshomaru studied the ticking contraption briefly with a curious air, before his concentration shifted.

"Isn't that a Sacred Twenty-Eight's watch?" Longbottom blurted, recognizing the particular make and model favored by one pureblooded family. Unlike normal watches, it had stars as the clock's hands. "Why do you have a Prewett's timepiece?"

Professor Longbottom's Intended nestled deeper into the embrace when the intimidating, slitted gaze loitered upon her head, as if silently demanding her to finish what she had started. Gathering courage from Neville's arms, Hannah kept quiet.

"Mrs Weasley gave it to me as my coming-of-age tradition," the Head Auror answered curtly.

His explanation made Hannah's guilt resurface like an old sore. It wasn't until she saw Professor Hagrid being forced to carry Harry's dead body like a grisly trophy that she felt devastated for how horrid she'd been to him in their school years. It had increased in strength after she had time to think to herself in the Victory Celebrations that the wizard, who had been under no obligation to do so, had saved her life—in spite of her horridness.
Upon that realization, she made it her goal to be forever nice to the savior to make up for the nastiness she had participated in her naivety. Harry Potter, the once hailed Boy-Who-Lied, needed someone in his life to love him, to care for him, to believe in him. For the Weasley matron to give up a treasured family possession meant that she approved of him. She saw past Fred's death who died for Harry, to have approved the relationship between her daughter and Harry; it was something Hannah doubted she in the Matron Weasley's position would've been able to forgive him for.

Hannah wholeheartedly believed the fiery redhead would be perfect for the war hero. If only Harry would hurry up and rekindle their relationship….

Snapping his pocket watch shut, Harry shared, "It's half-two. I doubt there'll be time to visit the Quidditch pitch. Alright, Neville. We'll accompany you. Lord Sesshomaru, please desist from frowning at Abbott. Hufflepuffs are decent folks."

Her heart warmed at his words. Because she carelessly ducked her head in Sesshomaru's way to hide her blushing, she was the only one to witness the creature's response when Harry went on to say, "We're only to growl at bigoted Houses targeting Slytherins for their lingering dark reputation. Come, Lord Sesshomaru. Let's introduce you to another Scotland Wonder."

Like a giant, menacing shadow, the ambassador set off for Hogwarts; his long, unnaturally-colored hair trailing after him like moonlight that would've made Parvati sigh.

Neville nudged her forward. With no one paying attention to her, she ruminated. There was something to the handsome magical creature that, in spite of his humanoid appearance, made him feel quite dangerous to have around.

Not only had he been taciturn, there was this disdainful air around him that permeated the atmosphere, like he considered everyone beneath him, save one wizard. It was reminiscent of the superiority the fanatical of the purebloods had shown before the Aftermath. Hannah did not know what Harry had done to win his respect, but this Lord Sesshomaru reminded her of the hippogriff Professor Hagrid brought for their curriculum—the hippogriff that had only bowed its head to Harry Potter.

The grass crunched under her feet as she walked. Hannah had always thought the herd of intensely proud creatures humored Professor Hagrid with their seemingly domesticated nature. If they had truly been tamed, Malfoy would not have been attacked by one when it had been offended.

She'd seen witches and wizards change their opinions of their beast, being, and spirit counterparts, having come a long way since her first-year; having grown more accepting of the magical creatures in their society, the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures had eased up on their regulations. After 1998 and Hermione's insistence, they formed a shaky concord with one another. But not one wizard was under the illusion that they weren't tolerating creatures with an instinctual inclination for violence. The more intelligent the creatures seemed to be, the more dissatisfied they were of their situation with their human overseers.

She, like most of the wizarding public, was waiting for the day the media published the eventual repercussion and the domino effect that would follow.

So it wasn't until later in the night when it was just her and Neville in their living quarters that Hannah voiced her feelings of Harry's newest colleague, and Neville laughed off her Hufflepuffish fears.

There was an anticipatory air around Hari that only Sesshomaru seemed to have picked up. The two
hanyous remained oblivious to their companion's growing discomfort. In an admirable effort to conceal it, Hari engaged Longbottom in polite conversation about the professor's station, and made attempts to do the same for the female. But aside from her admission she was now the landlady of the Leaky Cauldron, she remained too petrified by the demon lord to respond to Hari's questions.

Sesshomaru peered in the general direction of what Hari had deemed the Forbidden Forest. Their newest traveling companions were masked with Hari's protective claim, enough to distinguish them from most of the villagers but faint enough that they didn't qualify as his pack. The hanyous had professed the castle grounds to be an educational institution for their society; for the green-eyed daiyōkai to dye the castle looming overhead with his distinct, powerful yōki, Lord Hari must've considered it his second home.

Perhaps his contempt of the future had been premature. Molten gold took in the wide expanse of greenery around them.

To the future hanyous' credit, they've managed to maintain the natural splendor that had existed in the feudal era. The familiarity of this country's palace, its grasslands, its village, the sentient tree, and its primitive huts and lodges—which were only outshone by small architectural advancements—provided comfort for the five-hundred year old daiyōkai, who had resigned himself to expecting another version of the chemical and metal atrocities seen in the human cities.

To make up for his Intended's silence, Longbottom explained the structure of Hogwart's House system to Sesshomaru. To his understanding, there were four sub-clans: the Gryffindors (which Hari and his packmate and Longbottom were aligned with), the Hufflepuffs (which Longbottom's Intended was from), the Slytherins, and the Ravenclaws. The sub-clans belonged to two clans, those of the Order of the Phoenix clan (which the four belonged to) and those of the Death Eater clan, both of which stemmed from two overall tribes made up of either generally Light Wizards or Dark Wizards. These two tribes had fought each other over dissenting opinions over blood purity for decades, ultimately culminating with Hari's victory over the Dark Lord.

Specifics of their timeline were implied, but Sesshomaru was able to understand the gist of it despite Hari's constant subject switches. He was looking forward to meeting this Minister of Magic, who bridled Lord Hari himself under his supreme reign.

As Longbottom prattled on about his class syllabus with much fondness, Sesshomaru soon came to appreciate the warrior hanyou's proclivity for the simpler life, after his reasoning was delivered. It seemed this Longbottom, who had served under Hari, had a gift with plant life. The retired lieutenant general was hoping to put his gifts to good use and to educate the next generations—no matter what their magic allegiances were—of an overlooked art that had been put to use in the Second Wizarding War against the Death Eaters. Longbottom's loyalty to his "wizardkind" was...commendable, reminiscent of Inuyasha's allegiance pledged to a human village.

That was as far as he got, because it was then that Hari's name was shouted from the heavens—Hari's expression contorted into a grimace—and a hanyou with a shockingly-red mane streaming behind dived down on an eccentrically-designed flying contraption to meet them.

His memory jogged from all the times he'd been startled and requested to curb his murderous intent, Sesshomaru had been prepared this time for any unexpected arrivals. This slowly growing pinprick coalesced into a woman of petite stature. She was dressed modestly, which indicated to Sesshomaru her financial status. A brief glance over the state of her excited but nonviolent yōki reinforced his calm.

With one fell swoop, she latched onto Hari's arm. What immediately followed broke Sesshomaru out of his equanimity. Acidic poison simmered at the tips of his claws.
No, I'm pretty sure you're not thinking what I'm thinking. Heh. But finally we have nudged the plot along! Albeit we've only reached Hogsmeade…we'll see what he thinks of our second wave of HP characters and what he'll come think with prolonged exposure!

The general consensus from my FF.net readers is for a realistic fic with dark elements and, if possible, a happy ending. I know how far to take this now. Conversely, I've read many Voldemort/TMRxHP fics so my inclination for a certain style of Harry is indeed warped. I prefer a well-written Grey!Harry or Dark!Harry nowadays, because of what he has gone through and what he has seen. Harry's possessions mostly remain the same as in the books'. Same with Sesshomaru, but with one exception.

A few reviewers have also asked for clarification for introducing last chapter's theory: a full explanation will be provided when Harry asks Kohaku about Japanese demonlore, but generally speaking I had Inuyasha's 4th movie: Fire on the Mystic Island in mind. I rank that movie below Swords of an Honorable Rule, my favorite one of the Inuyasha franchise. Had wizarding Japan of then wanted to hide from prying eyes, the Japanese have no doubt they could with only the feudal era's limited technologies to disrupt the magical barriers erected which would have been MUCH more effective than the one on Hōrai jima to house secreted hanyou children. The barrier they would've used would be a variant of the barrier casted over Mount Hakurei. While some demons or Muggles could happen upon their disillusioned sanctuary and spread the word, through word of mouth reports of any sightings would become distorted over time.

By the by, Harry having a creature heritage is too convenient, too…easy for Sesshomaru. He kinda deserves the inconvenience. Heh. For their relationship to progress that outcome will be very heartbreaking for our Harry, be forewarned.
By no stretch of the imagination did she consider herself entitled. The youngest of the Weasley brood — the only female to have been born amongst six older brothers — there was a time when Ginevra Molly Weasley had searched for a meaning. She found it at the King's Cross in a boy named Harry Potter, in the blood-soaked boy who held her in his arms when she opened her eyes in the Chamber. It was every girl's dream to find that one someone special.

As she grew older and her rose-colored glasses rusted away, she tried to turn away from the boy with the famous green eyes. What could make her so special that the real-life hero that prevailed over the greatest Dark Lord to have existed could find happiness in her when there were others liable to fill her role? She tried to find the answer in Michael Corner, in Dean Thomas, but time and time again she found them lacking. There was a flame in her that burned bright, for the boy wizard who grew heartbreakingly jaded as the years went on.

When the hero who had always seemed so strong finally broke from his mentor's death and another's betrayal, she was surprised when he collapsed in her arms. His round spectacles were mushed against her collarbone as he sobbed as if he'd never let himself the emotional release before. She tried to place herself in his shoes. She couldn't begin to understand the amount of hurt and expectations he was feeling. There was nothing she could do or give Harry that would make his pain go away.

When she was a little girl, she like the rest of wizardkind had heard of stories where the heroic wizard's strength and bravery was bolstered by the witch or wizard he wanted to protect. Maybe, just maybe, she could become one of his reasons to fight. When Harry initiated a kiss, it was the happiest moment of her life. Come hell or high water, in that moment her selfish wishes and dreams were being fulfilled. She could pretend she was the girlfriend of the wounded hero that had captivated her so. She couldn't begrudge him of ending their relationship later, knowing deep down inside he was ending it for a stupid, noble reason. She confirmed it when he responded to her own passionate kiss, proving whatever he was doing was to keep her safe.

That meant he had to have loved her.

He, in higher spirits, left her and she could feel her earlier jubilation being taken with him. Locking away all that remained of the little girl who dreamt of her knight in shining armor, she emotionally prepared herself for the war that was to come. People were going to die. There was no place for the silly woman with a crush. But then she saw Harry's corpse. His body was so small, cradled in Hagrid's arms.

Rage had coursed through her and she wanted the Death Eaters to suffer the same agony she felt.

Life, after war, is not like what fairytales makes itself to be. Towering over the Dark Lord's corpse, the revived adult wizard, so strange in torn Muggle attire, looked so solemn and formidable as he gazed silently at the fallen wizard. There almost was a permeating aura around Harry that created an invisible, impenetrable fortress as he paid his final respects, barricading him from the congratulatory masses swarming toward him, her being one of them. She couldn't hear the words that passed through his lips through the throng of bodies but Harry looked…almost regretful.

In the Aftermath, they've never quite had the chance to reconcile. There had been funeral arrangements to tend to, schooling to finish up, exciting job interviews and press conferences…their
immediate priorities didn't align. She had two terms of education left. He left immediately to join an auror post upon public demand. The only time they managed to be in the same room was at Gringotts, on decree by their Acting Minister for any children of notable descent to undergo their Inheritance Rites which had been delayed from the war efforts.

She had been sitting down with her brothers when Harry marched out of the Head Goblin's office with an unreadable expression on his face. She had made to go after him, but her brothers held her back and told her to leave the poor sod alone. Charlie told her Harry was probably shocked to find most of wizarding Britain indebted to him; George insinuated maybe he'd gotten quite a few marriage contracts, or offers or bribes to join the Potter family to other lineages.

*The Daily Prophet* ran papers about his lineage the instant the family signet rings of Potter, Black, and an unknown nobility appeared on Harry's fingers. Cottoning on to her simmering jealousy, Ron had pulled her aside and sat her down, telling her there wasn't another heiress with designs to be the next Lady Potter.

Harry had found out he'd killed his distant cousin. That was all.

Ron and Hermione were quick to spread the truth, to nip the hype before it intensified. When she left to join the *Holyhead Harpies*, the craze had simmered down with Harry's quick ascension to the Head Auror position and their continued reliance on his "cleanup" missions; the public grew more accepting of their Savior's relation to the Peverells—a lineage long thought died off—and to the fallen Dark Lord whom Kingsley Shacklebolt revealed to the press to have been Tom Marvolo Riddle Jr.

The Dark Lord had been a half-blood of Gaunt and Slytherin descent.

In Wales she'd owled letters to Harry, hoping a written correspondence would be enough to rekindle their previous relationship. She'd gotten brief return letters back, usually weeks later, all inscribed with the same message, each with a different trinket of the country he was in. Nice as the sentiment was, it failed to satisfy her in the few years to come.

The stitched golden emblem on the witch's dark green robes shimmered in the sun as she tucked her feet under her, and she encouraged the Cleansweep Eleven to go even faster. Ginny had been soaring above the Hogwarts grounds, idly making rounds as the students were putting the equipment away when she caught sight of someone she'd never thought she'd see so soon. She had shouted his name, praying that it really was who she thought him to be. The dark head turned up. Her heart had skipped a beat, and then pounded even harder when she realized it was true. Harry was back.

From her vantage point she could see Neville, Hannah, and a beautiful but oddly-dressed foreigner standing next to the wizard. Her clothes were Asian and her hair was a very pretty light blonde that looked like spun silk from above. Another Cho Chang? Feeling a bit at unease, Ginny's first instincts were to welcome him back with all the enthusiasm she could muster, to convey how unexpectedly thrilled and elated she was to see Harry after so long, and to snatch him away from the poaching female. Scowling at herself, she stamped down the familiar but highly-irrational green-eyed monster that came to life ever since Tom Riddle Jr's diary cajoled her and fanned the embers of jealousy she hadn't known existed deep within her.

Rejuvenated and now feeling somewhat frisky, she set her sights on the wizard and urged her Cleansweep to fly faster. Reaching down, she grabbed his forearm and then slid her hand down to his in a vice grip. For that brief second, something inside of her melted.

He looked so tired.
Her grip on the broom tightened. She knew how to bring him out of his brooding mood.

Gently hovering for but a milosecond, she then kicked her feet against the grass and they took off into the skies with a whoosh. The wind roared in their eardrums, their robes flapped loudly from the ascent. Her worries faded away the higher they got. Laughing wildly almost without a care in the world, Ginny yelled, "C'mon, Harry! Lift yourself up and climb on behind me! Are you a Seeker or not?"

She felt his hand in hers slacken, and then squeezed in a crushing hold. Sure enough the wizard swung his leg over the broom handle and heaved himself up, using both her hand and the broom's bristles as leverage. His body was a warm furnace behind her despite the distance between them. Perturbed by his unresponsiveness, she turned her head and saw that he was looking down behind him. "Harry?" she asked, jerking the broom to a stop.

His arms came around her and he grasped the broom ahead of her hands, wresting control away from her. They'd lurched right when a blur of white and red shot forward to where she had been moments before, melting away a chunk of her hair, and at its side Ginny couldn't hold back the scream of terror when slitted gold—Nagini's eyes—refocused to glare right at them. A gloved hand covered her mouth, and she could feel Harry pressing against her back as the broom spun so that they faced the flying creature straight ahead.

A striped hand glowing Avada Kedavra green lunged toward her.

The broom was twisted again and this time Harry, in the front, grabbed ahold of the creature's wrist, stilling its attack from its intended target. Horrified brown focused on the cloud emitted from the glowing claws which sizzled and steamed ominously inches away from her face. The scent of ozone hung thick in the air, clashing with the noxious fumes which made her eye water. Upon closer inspection of the eerie figure, recognition sparked within Ginny's frenetic mind. It was the foreigner she'd seen down below. Responding to her silent will, the jet-black wand slid down from her holster and slammed into her palm.

Before she could swish it, the hand that had been covering her mouth shot down and stopped her from using it for their protection.

Ginny opened her mouth to protest but it was the quelling fierce look in the wizard's gaze that made her mouth slam shut. It was the same look she'd seen on him in the battlefield. Muffled shouts emerged beneath, and Ginny looked down to see Neville and Hannah running up to them below.

The rustle of clothing alerted her that Harry had returned his attention back to their attacker. Fear unfurled deep within her now that Harry's face was up close to the tattooed monstrosity. Undeterred by the green fumes wafting into their faces, much to her shock Harry bade, "Lord Sesshomaru, calm. It is not an attack. I have the situation under control. She is under my protection. Calm. Down."

Slanted gold shot back at her, raked her down from head to toe and, much to her annoyance, found their situation to be a mildly humorous joke if its little derogatory upturn of his mouth said anything about it. She involuntarily cringed back against Harry. It then dismissed her when its gaze refocused back onto the steely Head Auror. The tall creature finally resettled its attention down on their point of contact, where gloved hands met pale flesh and magenta stripes. The green glow dulled as slender claws flexed experimentally, rubbing the colorations against the leather but Harry did not let go.

The witch startled when a deep voice purred, "This Hari is immune to my poison."

Both lords appeared confused as Ginny gasped, gripping Harry's shoulder. She whispered urgently into the wizard's ear, "Of course, you were bitten by Slytherin's basilisk! Its venom is one of the most
fatal in the world. Surviving it, you could've developed immunity to most poisons."

Bright, brown orbs flashed to the opposite party. "And I think his corrosive poison is the same as the basilisk. You're breathing it in, idiot!"

Harry's eyes widened and he immediately released his hand from Sesshomaru, flying away a few inches back. The shouts increased in volume. The wizard inclined his head to the ground below, and the foreign lord gave his silent consent after a long and lengthy stare. The breeze picked up, flinging their hairs and loose clothing around the three figures as they followed the pull of gravity. With a tight smile, the wizard rejoined aloud, "I'm as surprised as you are. So this Sesshomaru can fly and poison enemies. I'm expecting for more revelations along the way from you."

"Hn. This is the unclaimed female Longbottom's Intended spoke of," Sesshomaru inserted unconcernedly, giving her a hard-pressed expression as they drifted down. A flicker of envy throbbed within her at how graceful he made it look.

Ginny sent Harry a confused look when the troubled wizard tapped his fingers against her hip distractedly, gathering his thoughts. Her terror waned. She bit her lower lip, holding back an appreciative groan. Harry had grown up nicely. Before he would've blurted out the first thing on his mind or stumbled for an explanation. Brown eyes lingered on his lithe muscles and broadened shoulders—a Quidditch player's build—pressed against her, and the messy mop he had grown out similar to their Triwizard Tournament days. To her pleasure, he had lost all traces of baby fat and had sharp, definitive features that accentuated the gap between the boy that he was and the man he is today. She was quite pleased that her head now reached inches above his clean-shaven jaw.

Harry's fingers stilled and he illuminated, "Lord Sesshomaru, this is Ginevra Molly Weasley, the youngest daughter of Weasley ex-nobility. Sorry about the strange first introductions. She means no harm by her 'unconventional' welcoming. She is…before the final battle, Ginevra and I…we had sincere intentions of courting. We broke it off before Voldemort took her as my weakness."

"Did you also have the sincere intentions of getting us back together?" she demanded unsteadily, dealing the question that had been plaguing her for years. She leaned back against his chest for comfort and she peered up at him, her nails digging into the wood. She refused to look at the lord of creature heritage across from her.

Green eyes tensed. But Harry didn't bother to respond to the statement like Ginny would've liked him to. Under Sesshomaru's rather intense, slitted gaze (when she peeked, his pupils were still dilated, much to her dismay), as they landed back at the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest Harry continued, "Ginn-Ginevra, this is Lord Sesshomaru of the Western Lands. I'd been showing the ambassador around wizarding Britain before our press conference at the Ministry. Contrary to what happened, he's been quite alright to everyone he has met, considering his circumstances."

The marks where Hari had touched tingled pleasantly in his wake.

For another yōkai to be resistant to his feared toxin, even if Hari hadn't suffered the physical contact, was remarkable and perhaps unheard of. But to Sesshomaru's wonder Hari's exposure to it seemed to have worked through the daiyōkai's system with no ill effects; no immediate sign of developing a fever; no sign of his immune system shutting down; no disorientation; no sign of organ failure.

He studied Hari's profile from the corner of his eye. Hari was treading on dangerous grounds, to be subtly enforcing his constant discipline on this Sesshomaru. From his superficial effort to liberate the captured lord from the female's clutches, he'd confirmed one thing—Hari's demonic potential had yet to be fully realized. The young lord had reacted instinctively to his assaults, just barely dodging his
offenses. It must have been a fluke when Hari caught his wrist, because in that moment he'd unleashed his full speed, a swiftness no lesser yōkai or human have been able to match.

His mouth twitched up humorlessly. The sleeves of his kimono felt blessedly cool against his heated skin.

His first reaction had been to tear his arm away and cut Hari down for his forwardness. Yet the yōki around the daiyōkai indicated only defensive measures have been taken. Though the sensitivity of his markings was a detriment to his experiment, the result had established the lord's innocence. The young lord didn't comprehend the significance behind a daiyōkai exchanging contact with another daiyōkai's markings.

His eyes narrowed as a whiff of female arousal and fear drifted to his awareness. Through her private explanation to Hari, Sesshomaru gathered enough intelligence to format the bare bones of a justification.

The toes of his boots landed on the grass lightly. He observed as Hari stepped down from the broom and turned around to help the hanyou down from the contraption, offering a courteous hand.

Staring incredulously at him, the redheaded whelp ignored the gesture and jumped down herself shakily.

By that time Longbottom and his Intended had caught up to them. The three hanyous remained in the dark, too caught up in their ensuing conversation about the female's hair—of all things—to notice the younger daiyōkai who had dropped his proffered hand to her perceived rejection.

For Hari to stand to be continually slighted from the youngest Weasley, while it escaped this Sesshomaru why he would, he must be very indulging of the child's unreciprocated desires for him, because of their preceding association and their age difference. For one miniscule moment, Sesshomaru pitied the other lord.

"This Hari is very accepting of his former Intended's conduct," Sesshomaru dissented quietly to Hari, trusting that his voice was back in control. He could not place himself in Hari's shoes. No self-respecting demon lord would want to marry a pup who wore her hair down and unornamented like a common woman, especially one who would give him mixed signals.

Also no yōkai worth his salt would've been able to deny the fallout that occurred between an alpha and his once-packmate. They did not smell of a mated couple nor were they Intended like Longbottom and his female. The miasma Hari had placed around her had prior evidence of being the same on his packmate—perhaps even stronger, judging by the flare of frayed yōki eager to rejoin Hari's—but Hari had made efforts to cull its potency so that now all that remained on her merited an inconsequential distinction higher than everyone else in the village.

His attention immersed in the other conversation—mostly subsisting of the redheaded spitfire asking what it took for the other female to have attracted Longbottom from a Luna—it took time for Sesshomaru's words to register. When they did Lord Hari blinked slowly and he tilted his chin upward. He considered his next few words carefully. "I guess I have to thank you for coming to my defense. Appreciative as I am, I didn't want to escalate into violence. Not if it isn't deserved or warranted. Or under mistaken assumption. A lot of my wizarding companions jump to wrong conclusions."

The emphasis was noted. Sesshomaru had discerned the wand the female whelp had drawn, and Hari's subsequent termination of her intended attack. While he held her down, Sesshomaru had taken that split-second opportunity to take her out. It wasn't until contact was made to his markings that the
demon lord was too stunned to launch his next offense.

As if expressing a belated interest in Sesshomaru's lineage, half-lidded orbs of forest green were now focused inquisitively upon the blue crescent marking on his forehead.

Sesshomaru felt his cheeks heat a little at the remembrance of his touch.

With a genuine grin Sesshomaru found himself quite charmed by, Hari also shared, "The Weasleys and I go way back. They've never been ones to conform to societal traditions, like it or not, Lord Sesshomaru. When offered to restore their titles, they refused. For some time they were considered to be a lesser family by several pureblood circles because of their acceptance of Muggle-borns and humans without magic. My parents thought the same about blood purities. They knew better."

The smile descended into a rueful ghost of what it had been. "We're related through our Black ancestries. Ron and Ginevra are my third cousins. Not that it matters, but I was surprised when I found out. Actually all purebloods are interrelated somehow, since we are small numbers."

Somehow Sesshomaru wasn't surprised if it was for this human reason that Hari dropped his interest. Molten gold shot to their advancing party. So this little bride-hopeful wanted to interbreed within her bloodline, setting her sights the highest it could go. Sesshomaru couldn't fault her logic. He'd known several yōkai that mated within the family—whether be it father or mother, sister or brother, or cousin—to keep a dying line pure. Fortunately for them, their demonic blood would cleanse their heirs of any genetic impurities that presented in incestual human couplings.

Reminded of the numerous females that were once paraded before him for his Coming of Age Ceremony, he said instead, "Communicate this Basilisk she spoke of."

Sesshomaru felt Hari's heavy gaze wander down sideways, resting on his maroon stripes. Subduing a small sigh at the young's penchant for inquisitiveness, he turned his jaw in his direction, allowing for a clearer analysis of the mark on his eyelid and the two on his cheek.

There was a suggestion of sated amusement as Hari divulged, "You probably had a different name for them in the Western Lands. But for us, the founder of Slytherin tamed what the wizarding community considers a King of Serpents, a giant reptile that can kill with a gaze and petrify with an indirect glance, whose fangs...well, you've heard her. Nasty piece of work if you don't speak...if you weren't Slytherin's Heir."

He rubbed his arm absently, and the demon lord recognized it as the origin of the bite mark. "It was my second year, when a memory of Voldemort released Slytherin's pet under orders to kill all that the Heir had deemed unworthy to be taught magic. Ron and I had intentions of subduing it, to cure the petrified students and to stop Voldemort's possession. Luck was on our side."

"Yet your hand was forced," Sesshomaru determined, peering at the sleeve covering Hari's left arm. As if sensing his interest, Hari moved the limb behind him as if subconscious of his old injury.

Possession, a daiyōkai's involvement, a hanyou's contribution...this Voldemort character was slowly being fleshed out in the demon lord's mind as the future's incarnation of Naraku. The parallels between their two conflicts were uncanny. With that kept in thought, he identified, "And this Voldemort had the ability to create incarnations of himself from his body and housed them in many vessels. You sought them."

Startled, suspicious green eyes jumped to meet his molten gold, and that challenge made the yōkai in Sesshomaru howl with predatory bloodlust. He dug his claws into his palms, curbing his instinctual
reaction. He took an involuntary, dominating step closer.

Hari stood his ground. Well-attuned to this Sesshomaru's distress, he placated smoothly, "Calm, Lord Sesshomaru. I do not mean to challenge your authority. I'm just stunned you knew about the Horcr —"

The younger lord collected himself. Lowering his voice circumspectly, Hari shared, "—Alright, I'm not going to ask you how you'd known about them. If I were you, I'd keep that to myself. When I said I'm going to help you, I keep my promises. For now, play along. It might be several years since the war, but certain people in my company are still suspicious of any association to Death Eaters."

Sesshomaru had managed to wrestle his hostility down when forest green settled upon the redheaded hanyou trudging toward him with purpose. "Her being one of them."

Hair still unrestored to its former length, the female hanyou moseyed up to Hari. The dog demon felt viciously satisfied with himself. Now she appeared as the commoner that she was, with her previously glorious red mane shorn short and lopsidedly. Hari took her proximity with a hint of exasperation, Sesshomaru had deemed, looking at his downturned mouth. To his bemusement the female also sensed her lord's black mood, for she came to a halt.

Shuffling insecurely, she directed a slightly fearful glare at the demon lord, as if blaming him for Hari's ire. The stronger-than-average yōki was volatile around her, seething with unrepressed displeasure and jealousy.

Sesshomaru repressed a smirk. The whelp seemed to have determined him as competition for Hari's attentions.

Hesitating only slightly, her mouth firmed into a thin line and she stamped forward to latch onto the younger lord's hands. With an intentional pout the female peered up at Lord Hari under her lashes, standing up on her tiptoes and arms curled around the lord's shoulders.

The demon lord recognized the set as the most preferred trick many of the simpering demonesses had utilized on this Sesshomaru. His eyes narrowed.

Under a softened accent, she posed shyly, "For the first time in forever, you're not covered in blood. It's nice to see you've finally gotten a break from saving the wizarding world. How long are you going to be here, Harry?"

The younger lord immediately plastered on an insincere smile, his hands kept in his pockets despite his desire to erect a physical barrier between them. To fill up the awkwardness between them, he rambled, "I'm still on duty actually. As much as I'd love to stay here, Ginevra, I've loitered too much. I have to get going with the ambassador. As of this moment. For an important press conference Hermione expects us to show up to."

Her small rosebud mouth frowned and as if to go against him, she demanded, undaunted, "Your press conference can wait a bit if you have time to trapse Hogwarts grounds with your ambassador."

"Ginny, you've had a long day," Longbottom the warrior hanyou blustered, placing his hands on her trembling shoulders. His prior cheerful disposition shifted into one of genuine compassion and sympathy. Longbottom missed the small, relieved nod Hari surreptitiously sent him. "I know it's been years since you've last seen each other, but I don't think Lord Sesshomaru needs to hear about this."
His Intended supplemented uselessly, grabbing her hand, "You two can always talk about this later. In private. C'mon, let's go to Madam Pomfrey or Professor Slughorn and whip up a hair tonic to regrow your hair."

"Neville, Hannah, nose down. This doesn't concern you." The child shrugged them off and she gripped Hari's lapels with tight fists.

The hanyou couple took a simultaneous step back, cowed by her sudden anger.

Knuckles whitening, she repeated, "You hadn't answered my first question. I just got back. Did you…." she bit her lips, gazing unsteadily at Hari with old expectations plain in her eyes, "…intend on getting us back together?"

The blank expression in Hari's eyes faltered, and then shattered. As if crumbling into himself, he murmured, "Ginny, Neville and Hannah are right. I don't want to talk about this yet. I don't think you're…we're ready for this."

"I'm not ready for what?" the young Weasley repeated frostily. Coming to an epiphany, her face went scarlet. "Is it because of our blood relation? We're third cousins! It doesn't mean anything in the wizarding world!"

As if realizing the scene she was making, her expression twisted and she backed down. Taking shallow breaths, she bowed her head against his chest and she said with no small amount of irritation, "Alright, I'm not going to jinx you for that. Out of necessity, you broke up with me. It's not like anything you tell me is any worse than that. I asked you a question, Harry. Please...don't string me along. Are we or are we not getting back together?"

"I strung you on?" Hari repeated disbelievingly. He sounded as if he'd been punched. His fists clenched, straining against his pockets. "We're not. Don't be daft. There's nothing to string you with if we already broke up!"

"Then why not?" she demanded, hackles rising. "The war's over. We don't have to worry about Vol-Voldemort after me!"

"This isn't about you! I don't have time for this! My priority is to keep a lookout for Lord Sesshomaru!"

"WHY IS THIS SUDDENLY ABOUT HIM?"

The situation was descending into madness. A tic developed near the dog demon's brow. Her behavior was rapidly reminding Sesshomaru of all the not-so-bright bird yōkai that became irate whenever he spurned their interest in him. He glanced at the two hanyous rendered helpless at their quarreling. If he hadn't conditioned himself out of that habit in his youth, he would've rolled his eyes at their uselessness. But it had been the hardened, enraged look burgeoning in those bright green pools that made Sesshomaru answer for Hari, "This Hari is not interested in you. Now cease this foolishness. He has no time for your idiocy or excessive attachment."

After all Hari had pledged his allegiance to this Sesshomaru. If Sesshomaru had his way, he'd dedicate all of his night and day to keeping this Sesshomaru satisfied. It had been good to hear Hari deemed him a priority to be placed above this woman-child. That being said, he ordered magnanimously, "Unhand your lord, whelp."

"My lord? I don't have a lord, you very rude, forward tosspot." Weasley blurted testily, much to his disbelief upon the child's disrespect. She spun on her heels—Sesshomaru was slightly pleased she
got the hint—and she crossed her arms, her back to them. Her shockingly-red mane shook.

He scented tears in the air. Sesshomaru sighed heavily within his mindscape when Hari immediately looked concerned. The young lord was easy prey to female and sometimes male theatrics.

"What happened between Harry and I are our personal matters," she challenged this Sesshomaru once more, undeterred by his warning growl. With red-rimmed eyes, she snarled, "We don't need you to air it out like dirty laundry. Lord. Sesshomaru."

If she hadn't been a child under Hari's protection, the demon lord would have made her crawl on the ground like the worm she was, and have her filthy mouth lick his and Hari's boots to plead for their forgiveness. The whelp was unable to take in the sad reality that her lord desired no courtship with her. But to her credit she made an admirable effort to quench her distasteful crying, rubbing at her eyes harshly.

Her red lips slashed down. "Y'know what, fine. Go. Use your ambassador boyfriend as your excuse, Harry. We'll have to talk about this later."

All the concern Hari had felt for her died upon those words. The future lord pinched the bridge of his nose. "Ginevra, you're being ridiculous."

Her shoulders trembled and suddenly her flying contraption slammed into her palm with a loud, fleshy smack. Mounting the large stick—Sesshomaru suspected it to be the 'broom' Hari's packmate had been talking about—she sailed off into the skies without another word. She circled ahead over them like a vulture.

Sesshomaru slid his concentration back to his supposed escort, who appeared rather weary of her childish antics. That was the last straw, in his mind. The lord who had done nothing but been courteous to him all of last night and this day didn't deserve any more of her insolence. This time, he did not react in violence. Instead to play with the impertinent whelp some more, as reprisal for her insulting insinuations, Sesshomaru shifted a little closer until his hand almost brushed Hari's.

Green pools flickered down to peer at the source of the increase in body heat. With a self-deprecating snort, Hari murmured, "That went well. Lord Sesshomaru, meet Ginevra Weasley, my ex-girlfriend and quite possibly the physical incarnation of Lily Potter, my mum. Sorry about dumping our emotional row on you. If you're lucky, unlike me you won't get to meet her again."

The smaller-framed demon turned to address the two remaining hanyous, charging them not to withhold their visitation from the children—Longbottom disclosed he couldn't deny his students news of the great Hari Potťă appearing just outside their Forbidden Forest—and to put in a good word with the Headmistress for a future tour of the castle.

The remaining female pleaded for Hari not to take Weasley's words to heart; she'd been under a lot of stress. There was also a mention of it being her time of the month, which confused Sesshomaru greatly.

Hari neatly side-stepped all further entreaties and inquiries, bidding the couple a polite goodbye and a promise to visit soon.

Sesshomaru was now in a situation where he could only stare at the lord's extended arm, as if he were the submissive. Giving him a hard look, he listened as Hari explained tetchily that a Side-Along Apparition can only be performed if the more able party teleports with the other party holding onto their arm. In order to avoid Splinching—explained to be an accidental separation of random body parts or clothing—since Sesshomaru was unable to Apparate, he must hold onto Hari as firmly as
possible. Now unless if they wanted to run back to the Shrieking Shack or rely on Sesshomaru to carry him on his back shouting directions, this Sesshomaru had to tolerate the gesture.

Lips curling, the five-hundred year old dog demon seized the younger demon by the elbow with a punishing grasp.

With hardly a flinch, Hari recapped his packmate's earlier caveat to him about what to expect in the same detached tone.

When he gave his consent to continue, within minutes their bodies twisted away and had it not been for the fabric underneath his claws, he would've thought Hari had been sucked away. His vision went dark. His chest and skull were being compressed into a small, hollow compartment.

Hari made sure to tell him, rather mercilessly, that he was impressed that this Sesshomaru didn't bend over and vomit like most first-timers.

His eyes squeezed shut, the tall figure clung to his pride and had merely dug his claws into Hari's arm to stop himself from falling over after the wizard teleported them before an broken-down red wood-and-glass box. Hari informed him that it was a telephone booth, a common sight in Muggle London.

One golden pool cracked open, and he treated the younger daiyōkai to another impressive glower. A brief scan of their surroundings indicated they've landed on a dirty stone road with shabby architecture and a wall scrawled with nonsensical, colorful squiggles. Another inhale told Sesshomaru they were back in human territory, but the stench of filth was worse here than in the future Western Lands.

"One would think," he spoke slowly, carefully against his nausea, "to be in an open-roofed entrance hall or a court inside a large space."

"Before Voldemort's coup, Ministry workers could've Apparated directly into the Atrium," Hari affirmed shortly, quickly ushering them into the enclosed box and shutting the door shut behind him with a quiet click. The dog demon's bulky apparel pushed the two uncomfortably close. "Shacklebolt hadn't gotten around signing the papers to get that fixed yet, so you'll have to put up with our close proximity. I'll try to make this last as short as possible, if it turns out you're claustrophobic. Remember, you have to play along."

Hari's dark curls were pressed against his nose as the smaller daiyōkai twisted to punch in the digits 6-2-4-4-2 (the heat in his eyes made the foreign characters writhe in his vision before the translation spell did its function). He subtly sniffed Hari's indefinitely more pleasing, natural fragrance to rid himself of the earlier-scented disgusting odor which had not helped his squirming insides. Sesshomaru shifted into a more comfortable position. Mokomoko-sama was allowed to uncoil and gently cushion the back of their heads, like soft furry pillows.

The tenseness in Hari's shoulders softened.

His rare act of generosity proved to be a wise action later when a bodiless female greeted them—the sudden voice made Sesshomaru's head jerk against the paneled door—and asked them for their names and for them to explain what the purpose behind their visit was.

"Lord Potter Black Peverell and Lord Sesshomaru. We're here to attend Hermione's press conference."

Two small silver shields were deposited, each inscribed with their names and objective. Under
Sesshomaru's watchful eye, Hari pinned one onto his lapel and swiftly affixed the other onto the bottom of Sesshomaru's collar. Peering down curiously at the badge, he wondered if he could keep the shiny bauble for Rin.

In the meantime the voice cheerily wished them a good day, before the telephone booth rumbled and with a moaning lurch it began its plunge below the surface.

The press buzzed with unrelenting queries as Hermione gripped her throbbing forehead to calm her massive headache down. She was not ready for this. The large reception hall had been filled to the brink with the invited media journalists. Hermione looked over her shoulder, scowling at the magical banner which had been spelled purple and depicted Kingsley Shacklebolt's beaming mug instead of Fudge's portrait in greyscale. To think the Acting Minister would discard her advice and allow that… that…Hermione couldn't come up with a nice word for her.

At least the *Quibbler* had been invited too, despite Shacklebolt's skepticism.

Before the golden fountain—which was commissioned to be crafted with perfect likeliness to a life-sized Harry heroically pointing his wand forward as if shooting a spell, with four of the original magic brethren guarding his back and the witch looking adoringly up at him and the phoenix on the wizard's shoulder—Hermione stood just outside the circular pool. The glistening streams of water chimed merrily behind her, belying her worsening mood. She wished she had a secretary or a speechwriter.

The last of the wizards and witches emerged from the left-hand row of gilded fireplaces, with rapid questions peppered out even before their arrival in gentle, green-lit swooshes.

She chose to pretend not to hear them, which made them more agitated.

Like ants, they swarmed closer to the middle of the hall, many taking stock of the golden symbols overhead, which had been temporarily spelled to act as a real bulletin in the peacock-blue ceiling above. The decorative runes twined together like smoke, spelling out PROVIDING INTERNATIONAL AID: HEAD AUROR HARRY POTTER DECLARES HIS OFFICIAL PROTECTION OF AN ASIAN AMBASSADOR, LISTEN FOR THE FULL STORY.

The noise level only increased upon the capital headlines, especially when it was used in association to Harry's name. Spelled quills started writing down their spellcasters' initial observations.

"Alright," Hermione lifted her face from her palm, casting a silent and wandless *Sonorus* charm to amplify her voice, "settle down people. I'll tell you why you were called here if you'd just listen and. Quiet. Down. A bit."

When no one heeded her, the witch's cheeks flushed and she snapped, "I SAID, EVERYONE, BE QUIET!"

It became so quiet that the only sound that could be heard was the rush of water behind her and the occasional cough. The wizards shuffled on their feet. Finally the murmuring picked up again and Hermione felt infuriated that she'd have to ask them again.

The anxiety that had been balled up in Hermione's chest dissipated when the red telephone booth she'd been waiting for descended from above, delivering the two figures into the masses below. The select Ministry officials that had been ordered to lie in the shadows marched out upon that signal and they simultaneously casted a spell over the fireplaces, formally halting any unsanctioned attendances. The hooded wizards moved to do the same to the telephone box after the two came out.
When the two lords stepped foot onto the polished, dark wood floor, instead of making a path for them to her like she'd expected them to the wizardfolk crowded around them like moths drawn to a light. Questions were shot rapid-fire and in mushrooming rancor, demanding why their Savior was back, how his trip had been in Japan, who this Sesshomaru was, if he was half wizard and half creature status or was he full magical creature, why they were together, what the full story was, if the Death Eater he'd been hunting was caught, and so on and so forth amidst the fawning they heaped upon the poor Head Auror.

Harry tried to allay the presses, shoving through the thick crowd, keeping a firm hold on the demon lord's bicep so as to not lose him to the starving hawks.

Several women cooed over the Sesshomaru's exotic looks and obviously lavish attire. One brave photographer jumped into their path and snapped a quick shot, intending to publish it for the front headlines of the *Daily Prophet*. A bright camera flash went off in the demon lord's face.

What happened after shouldn't have been a surprise for both her and Harry.

They watched with disbelieving eyes as the cloud of purple smoke was forced upward with a fluid swing of what had been a glowing whip the sickly green color as the most famous Unforgiveable. The large black camera fell to the floor with a booming clatter, effectively cleaved in two, its insides bubbling and sizzling and curling into itself before melting into a black puddle.

With the air cleared, Hermione recognized the frozen figure behind the bold move. She couldn't remember his name but he was the same potbellied cameraman she'd seen accompanying Rita Skeeter whenever they had to do a piece for the *Prophet*.

Hermione cursed improperly within her mind.

All interrogations and quill-writing fell silent. To Hermione's horror, she could see the conclusions some of the journalists were coming to, identified by their ambitious, calculating gleams on their pinched faces. They were already spinning a sensationalist story for their respective publishing houses. One particular beady set was anticipating how to embellish her next headlines.

When she saw slitted gold focus on the cameraman who was looking back at him trembling like a leaf and his sharp claws contracted, Hermione instinctively screamed, "Everyone, back off! He'll determine you as a threat to his safety!"

Heat erupted from the tip of her wand, hidden up her holster. Two vertical columns of comfortable seats popped out of nowhere, creating a large path for the two lords to escape to. Taking a deep breath to cool down her increased blood pressure, which wasn't good for the baby, she ordered, "Everyone, please. Sit down. This is making me very stressed. Have you no sympathy for my condition?"

The press and camera crew hastily split into their designated rows, each scrambling to get as far away as possible from the tall magical creature. Harry, thankfully, took advantage of their state of confusion and hauled the growling dog demon to their destination. He was still muttering words of comfort and conciliation when they pulled up to her. (Though she had to agree with Harry that what Sesshomaru did was something they both wanted to do for some time.)

Internally sighing in relief, the witch promptly went to diffuse the situation. She may not have notes like she would've liked to have had, but she could wing a short speech. The amplify charm still in effect, she drove in rather bluntly, with her frazzled voice reverberating in the cavernous room, "When you all decided to mob our esteemed Head Auror and his present company, you didn't give me the chance to explain the lord ambassador's dire situation. He is in Witness Protection, under our
jurisdiction, as an informant from a federal investigation. Before I go on any further, for his safety please put away all cameras and recording devices. You may keep your Self-Writing Quills and notebook.

Rather predictably protests were thrown into the air.

In a no-nonsense voice she told them to sit their arses down and that unless they want the Ministry to confiscate their belongings, they will adhere to their request if they gave one whit about international cooperation. "I regret to inform you, since this is a high-profile case, that the Ministry will have to put restrictions over written content before any article is published and over the moving images recorded from Pensieves or any magicked drawings. We do not want this to reach certain Asian attention. Lord Sesshomaru—the warrior prince the ambassador has elected to personify—is only here out of courtesy to prove his sincerity to the British wizarding population. We can only provide the same consideration by showing him we can keep his identity a secret and hide him within our society without anyone finding out or limiting his movements."

Brown doe eyes slid to linger upon the infamous wizard, sending him a silent message. Just as they'd rehearsed. "Our Savior has been chosen to protect the ambassador and with his infamy, we felt that this press conference will clear the air and assist us in containing public awareness. We don't want the public to break out in mass panic."

A slender, feminine figure arose from the din of whispering reporters, dressed in portentous yellow. It was the familiar gleam behind her jeweled spectacles and the radiance of her golden, elaborate curls that Hermione recognized the witch for who she was. Dread settled deep in her gut like an icpick.

The journalist's signature acidic green quill was poised over a hovering parchment, ready to jolt down Hermione's response. With a red-lipstick smile on her heavy-set jowls, Rita Skeeter warbled sweetly, "How very moving, dear, for our Harry's newest charity case." She coughed into her fist delicately. "Naturally we'd want to collaborate with international forces, specifically if we get to cooperate with the attractive refugee our Harry is safeguarding. Alas as much as we'd love to know why our priority is to sic the babysitting responsibility on our best Head Auror—oh, sorry—our Savior whose priority is to apprehend dangerous Death Eaters, I'm more concerned about the state of our freedom of press. What do you have to say about the restriction of our rights?"

With an icy stare directed at the quill, Hermione rebutted, "Funny you should say that, Miss Skeeter. Look at what happened before and during war. The press was horrid to the Savior and Dumbledore when they had been telling the truth all along. So that quill you're using, it's barred from this short interview. Please put it away before I'm forced to cut our proceedings here."

Rita clearly remembered the evidence Hermione lorded over her. Tittering nervously, red nails swiped the green quill from the air and was subsequently shoved into her crocodile-skin handbag.

"As I recall, if you all haven't completely slandered them," Hermione continued bitterly, crossing her arms, "we would've been more prepared for the war. Ergo, the Minister and I have no choice but to put forth a bill for media censorship to Wizengamot if you don't temporarily publish what we approve of you to reveal. We are serious at preserving the ambassador's safety."

Another reporter stood up and asked, "What about our safety? Seeing as Death Eaters still remain on the run, there is the potential of them coming back to our lands. What is your reasoning behind pulling Harry Potter from the line of duty and giving him orders to act as bodyguard to an Asian and not a British concern?"
Harry stepped up, and with the same spell applied to his throat, he commandeered their attention: "What Hermione means to say is that while we agree it is your job to inform the public, we want to make sure what is being said won't fall into enemy hands. There are plants in the Asian Ministries. We called you here because you're the best at your job and that's who we want to trust to disclose our story to. Under your fine...artistry, we seek to prove British craft are better than the slurs many international communities think we solely circulate. Like you, my employers consider me the best at my job and they trust me to guard one of their most important dignitaries."

Purposefully turning his head in Sesshomaru's silent but wary gaze, he shared wryly, "Fortunately Lord Sesshomaru has expressed his interest in our society. Rather than being cooped up in a foreign territory, I've been showing him around our community to help him integrate better into it. We'd just finished visiting Hogsmeade on our way to Hogwarts when we were called in. As for the Death Eater sighting in Japan, I've set up preventative wards around the source. If the alarms are tripped, my team and I will respond straightaway. In the meantime, my allegiance to wizarding Britain is still in effect."

"Alright, you've got the general idea of what you came for. They are on a tight schedule. Please forward all your questions to these gentlemen over here, if you have any," Hermione said, pointing to the Ministry officials from before. "We encourage that you do. What we'd revealed is so riddled with holes I'd be surprised if you could generate a well-written, balanced article. Once you have your answers, you are allowed to disband upon further notice. Thank you for coming and hearing us out."

A wave of protests started again. Several wizards got up on their feet, moving forward until the Ministry officials formed a human barricade, their cloaked royal purple forms pushing the writhing masses back. Their shouts were thunderous in volume.

Sensing the riot that was about to break out from the media circus, Harry raised his wand into the air and shot a stream of red sparks which exploded in the air with a deafening bang.

Several wizards ducked in reflex, expecting the worst.

When he got all their attention, he dropped his wand and swept his gaze over the crowd from right to left.

In the most disapproving tone he could muster, as if he were dealing with unruly children, he disclosed, "I don't want to give our guest the wrong idea of how we British wizards compose ourselves. I can say for certainty the Japanese wizarding press are a lot more respectful than we are. The ambassador and I have had a tiring trip, having crossed continents. Let's leave him with a good impression, shall we?"

After much grumbling and silent coercion urged by the wizards cloaked in purple, the wizarding media left, shuffling to their next intended destination. With sighs of relief, Harry and Hermione canceled the spell on their voices before they sounded hoarser.

If Harry didn't know any better, he would say this whole time Sesshomaru had been peeking at him before averting his gaze and pretending to be interested in something else, then repeating the process like a shy schoolboy. The attention was both adorable and worrisome. He turned his head.

To Harry's dismay, Rita had bribed her way past the folds of their one-line defense. He held back a grimace.

Harry thought she couldn't have sunk any lower than her insensitive publication of the Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore a mere four weeks after his funeral. He'd been wrong. Following the Battle of Hogwarts, she released a biography about Harry, stuffing the pages with one-quarter truth and the
rest of it rubbish. If that weren't enough, she churned out Snape: Scoundrel or Saint? And the content in it made all that had known the truth's bloods boil.

She now weaseled up to them, batting her eyelashes at him and the demon lord, much to Harry's disgust.

Holding up her empty hands, she mollified, "Now, dears, let's not let our history put a damper on this interview. Let bygones be bygones, I'll say! As a gesture of my goodwill, I've put away my camera and my Quick-Quote Quills!"

In the distance someone else was attempting to get past the Ministry guards, raising a small commotion when he wasn't allowed to. Harry frowned. That indignant burr rang alarm bells through his head. With a deceptively stationary hand placed supportively on the small of Hermione's back and his body angled to cover the pregnant witch from any unforeseen attack, Harry rejoined, "What is it that you want, Miss Skeeter?"

Her green orbs glimmered, honing in on his protective gesture. Knowing her she'd already thought of how to publicize another scandal involving the Boy-Who-Won by his harmless movement. She simpered, curtseying shortly to him, "Oh no, my question is for Little Miss Perfect here. My ravid supporters in the Daily Prophet are dying to know if the Ministry is sincere in enacting the media censorship."

The expecting witch smiled sweetly, her perfectly whitened teeth showing in a barely civil snarl. "We know better than to tickle a sleeping dragon. As a matter of fact I'm sure that's the Hogwarts' alma mater, if you bother to do your research. I promise you every minute you waste antagonizing me again and again, I'm a little motivated to give in to my immoral urges and make due on my threat to report a little black beetle to the authorities for being unregistered."

The glistening pink face, even her red lips, were suddenly bleached bone white.

His concentration returned to their current conversation, Harry struggled to quell the instinctive vicious gratification he felt at Hermione taking her down a notch. She was only making the situation worse. When flattery didn't give Rita her results, she defaulted to her true colors, colors they hadn't known existed in her arsenal before until Aurors had found her disheveled form hiding in the ghettos. To make up for lost time and to generate quick cash, the amount of libel and slander she'd written in a short period was admittedly impressive.

Red talons twisting the crocodile-skin handbag like a coil of rope, Rita murmured forebodingly, "That's right, underestimate me while you still can. One day that won't be enough to stop me from revealing the truth about you nitwits. You're bound to mess up. And I'm looking forward to that day when I'm able to expose you two for who you really are."

"Miss Skeeter," Harry sighed before blood could be spilt, "shall we continue this later? You won't be getting a private interview, I'm afraid. Not when I reckon your presence is steadily making Hermione mad."

Switching her annoyed gaze at their time-traveling companion, Rita notified Sesshomaru slowly, as if he wouldn't understand her, in a falsely saccharine voice, "Dear boy, surely they've told you of their Triwizard tomfooleries. We have such history."

The five-hundred year old demon lord, who had been frowning at her, seemed to tussle with his amusement when Rita addressed him as a lad. He watched as Hermione informed the witch his actual age, which he reinforced with a sardonic little smile that no one wanted to be at the end of.
Her glassy green pinpricks boggled openly at him like a bug's. Saving face, the witch raked her eye up and down the lord's tall figure, and the new hungry gleam in her eyes had Harry feeling unsettled. "Oh my, Lord Sesshomaru," she crooned almost flirtatiously, "forgive me. Sometimes I lose myself with our turbulent history and forget all those around. I'd be glad to send you copies of my articles. If you'd like. Or perhaps you'll consent to a...more private interview."

Sesshomaru's expression twisted into something ferocious. With ice running through his veins, sensing the immediate downturn of the royal dog demon's mood, Harry started furiously, "Alright, you will not be debasing—"

"Lord Harry, I'm so glad to have caught you!" a discernibly male, wobbly voice interrupted, physically purloining Harry's hands and spinning the wizard in a merry-go-round.

When the earth stilled, the tied-back shoulder-length white hair the texture of candyfloss drifted into Harry's vision. Harry held back a groan.

Their fingers still entwined, the lanky Xenophilius Lovegood bowed a great amount before Harry before letting go. He cheered, "Merry met! The nice man let me through to see you. Everyone's been up in a buzz babbling about you and your handsome new gentleman friend!"

Dizzingly Harry staggered a little until he found himself deposited back at the tensed demon lord's side, who'd taken an aborted step back before determining the wizard was not a disease and stood his ground. Stumbling away from the giant boa, Harry steadied himself and shook Mr Lovegood's hands. With a strained but courteous smile, Harry remembered the huge chunk of memory they'd Obliviated from him when he attempted to turn them in to the Death Eater authorities, he parroted robotically, "Mr Lovegood, it's nice to see you again."

"Nonsense, nonsense! No need for formality on my account! Especially not someone like you, my lord." the eccentric, slightly cross-eyed wizard exclaimed, flapping his hands at them. Pivoting on his heels, he performed a deep, respectful bow before Sesshomaru.

The demon lord looked slightly appeased with the display of subservience.

"And this lord! So honored to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you. Many great things."

He turned again and shook Hermione's hand. "And Hermione, my daughter talks so much about you. I swear it's all I hear beside Rolf and Harry. She's wanted me to warn you that pixies are ruining your relationship. Nasty little tossers, they are. Watch out for their sharp teeth. And now we have..."

Harry caught a glimpse of the same triangular eye fastened through a thin golden chain at Mr Lovegood's neck as he rotated wildly to address the last person. It flew out of Mr Lovegood's open coat, which was comprised of many different animal pelts. Mr Lovegood's sparkle died upon sight. In a semi-sane drawl, his prior excitement subdued, he said, "...Oh, it's only you, Rita. In my favorite colors no less. How's the head toadie of the Daily Prophet been coming along?"

Red lips trudged up derisively. She appeared as if she wanted to burn all the yellow garments in her dresser afterward. "Xeno, darling, still have your head in the clouds, I see. Don't tell me your silly magazine still has its followers?"

Mr Lovegood laughed, holding up his coat. "Clouds? Silly, only children believe in the Altaria Conspiracy. I'm not surprised you do. It explains so much, dear." Spinning around again, he opened his arms and proposed to the wizard, "Now, Lord Harry, Harry, Harry. Would you consider consigning to a private interview with someone from the Quibbler? I have a trained, talented staff of editors and writers that do so much better than our Daily Prophet counterparts."
As much as he was wary of being in the same room again with the traitor—the Memory Charm seemed to have affected more than what they'd intended—Harry couldn't resist sticking it to Rita Skeeter. With a large charming grin, he acquiesced, "I can't say no to the father of a good friend of mine now, as much as I fear bias. Mr Lovegood, you flatter me with your regard. Since I consider the Quibbler to be...reliable, you have your private interview."

"Oh no, no, no," Mr Lovegood waved his arms up and down in an X-formation, making Harry's brows crease together in puzzlement. "Not you. I meant you lovely lord and the lovely Lord Sesshomaru both."

"O-oh." Harry frowned, glancing at Sesshomaru and at his claws. It wasn't hard to imagine the demon lord's buttons being pushed by the Lovegoods' trademark eccentricities. "Now that I'm not too sure about."

"Ah, you wound this old man. We'll ask innocuous questions. Besides, we love magical creatures or don't you remember? We'd be delighted to have you, Lord Sesshomaru." He bowed once more. As if in afterthought, he added, "You too, Lord Harry. I've heard so much about your corporal Patronus from my Luna, but it's so odd that the youngest wizard to have casted a full body Patronus isn't able to manifest his Animagus form yet. She's expressed that when she changes into a moon rabbit, it wants to play with yours."

A tic developed near Harry's jaw. That admission of him unable to take an animal form yet was something he wanted to keep from Rita's and Sesshomaru's ears. And Mr Lovegood had aired it like a casual forecast of the weather.

The atmosphere around them shifted and buzzed for a bit, breaking the tense, cold air with a moderate suffusion of warmth.

Hermione had noticed Sesshomaru, who had been glaring daggers at Rita, now looked intrigued by the mention of Harry's Animagus form. He stirred on his feet impatiently, like a certain excitable young Metamorphmagus finding out something new and cool about his beloved godfather. Seeing the dog demon conspicuously dart looks between his escort and the two strangers that he looked like he didn't know what to make of and looking so lost, it had tugged on her heartstrings.

It wasn't difficult to project herself in his position. She had been like him once, feeling sick not knowing anything about the magical world she was stepping into.

Whatever magic Harry had wrought, the demon lord was charmed by his wizard. A small niggling thought wormed its way into her head. If Sesshomaru was fond of Harry, he would do his upmost to keep in line before Harry got upset. If they bonded, they would need to find out personal things about each other.

Making up her mind, she casted a Privacy Charm around the two of them so that a nosy slanderous reporter wouldn't catch wind of their conversation.

The slanted, slitted gaze instantaneously fixated itself upon her.

Calming her nerves, she leaned in and whispered, "At the time I didn't think to inform you about the nuances of wizarding politics and magic, Lord Sesshomaru. There are several advanced spells and abilities only powerful and determined wizards and witches can access."

Wetting her lips, she posed, "You've seen Harry's stag Patronus, right? I'd be surprised if you didn't. It's one of his signature defensive attacks and method of communication. Old woodcuts and scrolls
have depicted that since ancient times users of the spell has a long association with those fighting for a noble or lofty cause, with most elected to high offices because of that achievement."

The magical creature inclined his head microscopically. He divulged vaguely, "This Hari has explained to this Sesshomaru."

Her shoulders loosened in relief. "Oh, good," she breathed, cupping her hands below her stomach. Stalling for time, she murmured, "And I'm assuming he didn't tell you the significance behind being able to cast the charm and produce a corporal animal."

A dark eyebrow rose impatiently.

All the information was ready at her disposal. Channeling Miranda Goshawk, the celebrated author of the Standard Book of Spells collection Hermione had memorized, Hermione explained excitedly, "The Patronus Charm is difficult to cast, with many witches and wizards unable to cast or conjure an animal guardian made up of partially-tangible positive energy force that takes the unique shape of whom they share the deepest affinity. Hari's mentor Dumbledore had a phoenix Patronus, so magical creatures aren't uncommon for the energy to embody, but extinct creatures are a rarity."

"No one may know concretely what their animal shape will take, and it's been known for the magical guardian to be subjected to change if the caster goes through an emotional upheaval of some sort. Some wizards have also disguised their animal form, for whatever purposes. Generally the shape the energy takes indicates a witch's or wizard's Animagus form, which is a learned skill where we are able to transform into an animal at will."

She flinched when Sesshomaru inhaled sharply and he shifted the balls of his feet, as if taking an aggressive stance. He parroted in commanding disbelief, "These Animagi you speak of, your kind has an inherent potential to take an animalistic shape."

As if offering an olive branch, she disclosed, "Every Animagus has distinguishing markings or colorations behind their form. Mine's a brown otter. And my husband's a Jack Russell Terrier—err, it's a small dog—and Harry's godfather was a big black dog, while Harry's mum and dad were a doe and a stag, respectively."

His lips parted, the only indication of his surprise.

Undeterred, Hermione prattled on, "But Rita, the bane of our existence and a blight on wizarding truth, is an unregistered Animagus." Brown eyes shot sharply at him. "You recall me threatening to oust her beetle form. It's not hard to catch her, if you know what you're looking for. In fact, if you ever see a black beetle and it has markings on it that look like her spectacles, chances are that it's her eavesdropping on you. In our world, an unregistered Animagus is abusing their ability if not monitored by the Ministry. That woman has been taking advantage of her anonymity and has been spying on various people to publish her brand of truth."

"A Triwizard was mentioned."

"Oh, don't buy into her rubbish. She took advantage of all the hype surrounding Harry, who really can't avoid the public's nosiness and shifting attitudes, and used his notoriety to bolster sales. She prides herself in her poison-pen stories which are based on speculation, false information, and misreported interviews—sometimes obtained illegally—without any scruples. She's ruined many reputations, including mine and Harry's. And Dumbledore's, Harry's deceased and much loved mentor. To make her stop...I had to resort to blackmail. The penalty for failing to register with the Ministry is a sentence in Azkaban...our high security prison...dungeon guarded by Dark creatures."
She noticed Sesshomaru gave her an admiring stare when she divulged, "And we used that chance to have her write what we wanted, to tide public opinion over. And to get people's heads out of their dug holes and realize Voldemort's resurrection wasn't a lie, so that we could rally against his forces."

"This Hari has troubles accessing his true form." A pensive air coiled around the royal dog demon.

His brows furrowed, he seemed to have reached a conclusion Hermione hoped had nothing to do with the miko-yōkai theory she'd introduced. To combat that, she was quick to say, "It's not a hereditary skill, if that's what you think. Just because Harry's parents were deer doesn't mean Harry is."

His face fell.

"This Hari's Patronus," Sesshomaru spoke slowly, rolling the foreign word in his mouth, "is a stag. The sorcery should be an indication of your other appearance."

It took a while for Hari to comprehend his insinuation. Turning away from the two bickering journalists, Hari looked up, peering at him with slight irritation. "So that's what you two were talking about. I assume she gave you the full lecture complete with some of my background?"

Hari's packmate nodded hesitantly, rolling her lips together and looking properly chastised. "I don't think it's bad to answer his questions, Harry," she whined, eyesight cast submissively downward. "I think we should be a good sport about this. We're not in Japan anymore, so telling him won't hurt."

Under the combined stare of both daiyōkais, Hari's packmate's characteristic pluck waned like a torchlight extinguished by the wind. She nervously wrapped her hands under her stomach and waddled away awkwardly. Before she could go any further, she was soon drawn into the banter by a toxic barb. Incensed, she sided with the flamboyant, straggly male hanyou and the two hanyous launched into another stiff squabble, not unlike the occasions the elders in this Sesshomaru's council would descend into, against the female hanyou whose yōki had a tinge of insect energy.

He now understood why the yōki of Hari's packmate and the beetle hanyou felt slightly different from the villagers he'd met.

"Only certain wizardfolk are able to become Animagi," Hari's dulcet accent grudgingly divulged, drawing Sesshomaru's attention back to him.

Rubbing his throat, the younger daiyōkai was peering at the three hanyous with an air of resignation, not looking back at him. He had followed his packmate's counsel once more, which was another interesting characteristic of the lord to be noted. In a husky rasp, he continued, "We can only take the form of one animal, unlike a Patronus, and it is determined be the same inner-traits when the charm is used. Most folks decide to pass on developing this skill, because it's really not useful for us unless used for espionage or camouflage."

"That is not the case for you," Sesshomaru prompted.

"For me..." Hari sighed, running his fingers through his dark curls (Sesshomaru found he couldn't tear his eyes away from the same gloves that had touched him), "...I had a feeling that I would take after my parents. However something happened to me after Voldemort was killed. I would've guessed a great emotional upheaval if it weren't for my Patronus."

Sesshomaru tilted his head, mulling over his newest theory about the young demon lord. If it was confirmed, it would explain a lot of the inconsistencies he'd been privy to. "This Sesshomaru is listening...."
Licking his lower lip—one of Hari's nervous tells, Sesshomaru had discerned—Hari murmured, "It's just...I don't know if I'm imagining it but I feel...less like I did when I'd tried to save everyone's lives. After the battle, I tried to lose myself in my job. If my younger self saw who he would become today, he wouldn't be able to recognize me. I've done many things I'm not proud of. There's this...."

At a loss of an adequate descriptor, Hari gestured to himself and rolled his wrist in the air, as if suggesting a round silhouette. When no words came to him, with a heavy sigh Hari dropped his hand into the pockets of his form-fitting equivalent of a hakama. As if someone told him a mildly amusing joke, he revealed, "There's this empty uncertainness in me. That's all I can think to say. The stag manifestation doesn't...suit me any longer." He shrugged. "I'm not my father."

The minuscule theory was watered even more in the dog demon's mind upon that admission. Sesshomaru skimmed his gaze up and down the lord across from him with sated pleasure. The reason why he couldn't detect what yōkai the demon was simply because Hari himself did not know his heritage.

Two purple paper cranes soared in the air, escaping from one of the Ministry lifts Hari had told him about prior to their arrival. Molten gold followed the flimsy human craft—Inuyasha's bitch taught Rin how to make one with her future colorful papers—until they hovered over the two adult hanyous.

Pointed ears picked up on light footfalls that no one else seemed to have heard yet.

The squabbling stopped. With a confused frown, the fair-headed woman plucked the crane from the air with a loud crinkling noise and she neatly sliced it open with her red claws. The large man-child—Sesshomaru was left marveling how he ever came to sire a pup—simply looked at the creation in his hands with wonder. From the small miasma embedded in the parchments, which rose up like dual smoke sinuously in their individualistic little dances, they had to be official summons.

The further she got into the memo, the more her back stiffened, until it seemed like a rod had been inserted up her spine. She crumbled the paper into a tiny ball and stowed it into her odd basket made of reptile hide.

Pushing her glasses up to cover her anxiety, she differed, "And I think that's my cue to leave. Oh imagine all the delicious news I've been missing out while I've wasted my time here." She giggled acerbically into her bright red talons, levelling Hari with another simper. "Taa. May we meet under different circumstances in our next encounter? Bring your friend too. The more, the merrier. No, I didn't mean you, Xeno, baby. You can stay behind."

"But Rita, we must be going to the same place!" the male beamed. "I'll accompany you!"

The unattached female looked like she would rather eat an insect than allow herself to be escorted by him. She dared one more look at this Sesshomaru before she hurried away, her yellow dress restricting her movement and her high heels clicking away against the polished wood floor. The male chased after her like a sunny Rin on sweets.

"Hermione, Lord Potter Black Peverell," a thin, dry sounding male piped up behind them. The newest hanyou to show his face bowed respectfully at his waist to Hari. For someone of his station, it was recognizable the freckle-dusted redhead was trying to overcompensate for his common blood.

His posture was painfully straight, unlike the ease true nobility possessed, and his attire was the metallic green equivalent of Hari's peculiar clothing—which no other hanyou preferred that mode of dress. This hanyou's yōki brook no doubt as to his bloodline.
Yet Sesshomaru could tell this hanyou had some intelligence in his brain unlike the bride-hopeful he’d encountered earlier. His red hair was slicked back with a sort of odorless oil, showing off a wide forehead. And he wore a strange vision-enhancing contraption similar to the hanyou beetle Animagus’, but with little horns at the ends.

Lord Hari, whose worries were alleviated after the two had gone, took a sharp breath upon the redhead’s intermission. The false smiles he’d been bestowing like free candies all of today sprung up once more. "Lord Sesshomaru, may I introduce Mr Weasley Percy Ignatius."

After a long blink at Hari, the redheaded hanyou performed the same bow for the demon lord. He greeted, "Lord Sesshomaru, it is our pleasure to have you in our territory. I'm the Assistant Secretary to our Acting Minister of Magic. I'm here to bring you—"

"How in the world?" Hari's packmate gawped, performing a double-take. "Before I left for Japan, you were expressing your interest in broom regulations. What happened? You couldn't have performed that quickly of a jump from the Department of Magical Transportation to Shacklebolt's Assistant Secretary."

"—to Level 1." The hanyou made a pinched expression before his face cleared and he attempted the same pretentious disposition as before. He was rather like a prettier Jaken, if Sesshomaru squinted his eyes. They both had that self-important comportment and both mimicked their lord's dignified air. Pivoting on his heels to the two daiyōkais, the newest Weasley gestured to the back of the Atrium where a bored-looking receptionist was seated at a counter.

"The Acting Minister knows you've had an exhausting day, but he would like to have your company," he said instead, brooking no arguments. He bowed again and maintained his position.

With another sigh, Hari deigned the redhead with a nod. Placing a hand on the small of his packmate's back, he encouraged the female to move forward seeing as she was frozen with incredulity at the male hanyou's advancement.

After his escort consented to this Acting Minister's bequest, Sesshomaru merely followed them into the back and into the row of gilded lifts, with the redhead dogging their steps.

Chapter End Notes

I like to call this chapter: Establishing People on Sesshomaru's Shit List. Heh. So, much thanks to DevilDon'tCare and Kai19 on FF.net for inspiration on two sections in the chapter! Oh Harry, you're so shameless...ehehe. Hope you folks have read JK Rowling’s admission that Harry should've ended up with Hermione, and not Ron? By the by, certain actions enacted by certain characters here are only small previews of what is to come. They're still essentially strangers. In fact, there's a lot of foreshadowing here.

After giving some of my readers' feedback much thought, as well as HP canon and how well their election would entice or deter our proud Sesshomaru, I've finally decided on an animal I am very happy with. Plus some other surprises. Clues for Harry's final Animagus form will be scattered throughout as we accompany him on his journey toward his self-discovery. For now, let's just say it has its mythological origins in death.

Next up, Kingsley Shacklebolt! And Sesshomaru's resolution…. The plot starts getting
heavy.
Recently I've come across the reminder that by the end of the series Harry had grown as tall as James Potter (~6 ft), who had been described as tall even by Voldemort. However the actor who plays our boy wizard is 5'6". Ginny who had been described as short in the book is played by an actress who was 5'6" at the time. Considering the harsh living conditions and diet and the Japanese heritage it…sorta…kinda makes sense that Sesshomaru is…5'10"….

Ahaha, bleep it. I'm sticking by my previous chapters. So far everything is just wonderful and light in our protagonists' world. Heh. Enjoy!

Although Hari and his packmate knew the way to see the Acting Minister, they've indulgingly permitted the Assistant Secretary to take their lead. In the meantime, Sesshomaru had been keeping close attention of his change in scenery while selectively filtering in and out the enduring exchange between the two demonfolk and his escort. It seemed his current company was all in high favor with this Acting Minister. Two were kept as trusted counsels and this Sesshomaru's escort was paid high respects everywhere for his heavy involvement in their war.

He hid a dark smirk.

Their authority and public regard were quite convenient to this Western demon lord, once he officially secured the three as his allies.

He could now mentally retrace their steps through the corridors of the large official building, from the moment the golden grilles of the lift opened to the level they've arrived. Wizarding Britain's council, as a whole, posed no threat to this Sesshomaru. Most of the hanyou envoys he'd the chance to scope out didn't have the proper build and attire to indicate seasoned battle experience. This era's yōkai depended entirely on their fancy wand waving, using it for the most mundane tasks to settling physical skirmishes. As far as he could tell, they have grown lazy and complacent. With a single swing of Bakusaiga or a flick of his wrist, before they could draw their wooden sticks—their only weaponry—and announce their attacks he would have the entire squadron decimated.

They outnumbered him, but he had the agility and range.

As long as he got to them before they could cast their yōkai or spiritual magic, the advantage was his.

That glimmer of insight into their prowess was a small relief to this Sesshomaru. It hadn't been difficult to maintain an outwardly cool mien throughout their juncture, but anyone in his shoes would've been a trifle anxious having an unfamiliar culture and crowd suddenly foisted upon them.

The dog demon took in the openings in the walls which Hari's packmate had assured to him were windows enchanted by their Magical Maintenance Department to reflect whatever fit their fancy, and not the captured souls he'd assumed them to be.

He was told, in the aftermath of war, a Katie Bell had thundered to be in the same post as her lord
Hari. But she was so kind and gentle out of battle the Auror post didn't quite suit her. She was therefore transferred to Magical Maintenance, because of her aptitude in Transfiguration and slightly-above-average skill in Charms. As of now, under her influence, each window celebrated a different witch or wizard. Each were courageously squaring off against a masked Death Eater, before fading into a representation of them under a more peaceful, intimate setting.

Sesshomaru had noticed the lower the lift had taken them, the older the subjects of the animated windows were and the more miserable this Hari seemed but tried to hide, functioning on autopilot. Nearly three quarters of the way through the thick purple-carpeted hall, they walked straight down to the parlor and finally to a large set of shiny mahogany doors, with two plaques inscribed with this Kingsley Shacklebolt's name and his position. Just to the right of the doors sat a single desk overlaid with a short stack of parchments and on top of that a moulted flight feather whose tip was stained with drying ink. From the way the redhead hanyou preened when they passed by the desk, they had to be his.

On both sides laid a single gold-plated frame, depicting one of a tall, well-built aristocrat with long, luxurious black curls and the other a brunette male with premature lines marred onto a world-weary face. The striking pairs of grey and hazel both hardened in the throes of battle and twinkled down playfully at them. It was here that Hari stared quietly, aimlessly up ahead, unbeknownst to his assembly save this Sesshomaru. Occasionally the female would send her pack alpha worried glances, but her attention would be dragged back by the redhead's dry prattling of their administrative affairs.

The daiyōkai's interest was roused. But before he could act on his desires, the foreign equivalent of Jaken stepped forward.

The doors swung open after a practiced rap against the wood, and they were funneled into a grand, circular chamber of the same golden crown moldings and dark pillars when a warm, low and syrupy brogue welcomed them to come in. In the center of the drawing room laid a claw-footed desk and behind that were unenchanted glass panels that gave a wide, unceaseable view of all the levels spiraling above and the flutter of officials traversing each floor. The only indications of sorcery within the confines of the room were affixed to the walls, an oil-painted portrait of a heavily-scarred male with a grey, grizzled mane sleeping and a painting of a beige and golden monstrosity of a private study.

To a common yōkai, as a whole, the interior opulence was suffocating. It was not as impressive as Sesshomaru had been expecting, compared to his Western kingdom and the expectations set from the sights his escort had shown him around.

The two hanyous immediately dropped into deep bows whereas Hari lowered his head as a nod of respect.

Behind the desk sat a dark-skinned, broad-shouldered male clad in embroidered purples and blues; his ear was pierced with a hoop earring, its metallic smell pungent and therefore made of authentic gold. His choice of jewelry was similar to the accessories the demon lord had noticed some of the more vain bandits or royalty adorned themselves to show off their status or station. Sesshomaru found his gaze drawn to the skullcap on top of his sleek, dark head. Several foreign dignitaries from the Eastern Lands and above wore something similar to the cap this Shacklebolt had, for religious purposes.

The controlled miasma that wound around him would fool anyone but this Sesshomaru into believing the Acting Minister to be a calm, gentle politician, but his commanding stature and the subtle scent of dried blood—soaked into the hanyou's very being—whispered of his fighter origins. To have this Hari's cooperation and respect, he had to be capable, for a hanyou alpha.
"Percy, you may take your leave," Shacklebolt commanded with a hard-pressed stare. He remained seated, his hands kept out of sight underneath the desk. His inauspicious behavior raised warning bells in Sesshomaru's head. As if realizing the brusqueness of his dismissal, the Acting Minister included the verbal balm: "Thank you for bringing them all the way here, Perce. You've been a big help."

A flash of hurt shone in the redhead's features, but he collected himself and nodded dispiritingly at being treated as nothing less than a footman. Trudging away, dismissing Hari's packmate's confused but sympathetic look, he excused himself and he shut the door behind them with a small click.

Almost immediately after his departure a wand carved out of black walnut was trained across the desk at the three. Colorful sparks were fizzling at the tip of the staff. In a deceptively calm voice, Shacklebolt demanded, "How do I know you're really who you are? Prove your identities."

To Sesshomaru's wonder, his chaperon treated it as if it were an everyday occurrence to have a trusted comrade aiming his weapon at him, obviously with ill will. Hari's reaction was especially telling of the lack of severity of their situation, so it was that which made the royal dog demon keep his cool.

Hari's packmate shuffled on her feet restlessly, burrowing deeper into this Hari's side as the green-eyed demon provided in a low tone, "Your alias was Royal, from the Potterwatch broadcasts."

The lines at the corners of those obsidian eyes stretched taut, eventually smoothing out as he took that as confirmation for their identities. The walnut wand was withdrawn back into his right sleeves. Sliding his chair back with a muffled scrap against the marbled floor, this Shacklebolt moved forward around the desk to welcome the pair back officially, shaking their hands and apologizing for the added vigilance. His gait and silent movement whispered that of a covert operative, an assassin by trade.

Shacklebolt's dark gaze lingered on the green-eyed lord, inspecting his physical welfare until his satisfaction, before he personally welcomed this Hari back from his duty.

A pair of molten gold gleamed, able to discern the minister's favoritism.

When Shacklebolt came before this Sesshomaru, he had paused for a moment, mindful of his rank but unsure of how to proceed for someone bestowed upon his predicament. Eventually the dark-skinned male compromised and decided upon a curt bow. His manner of address kept polite but not fawning, he announced, "It is unfortunate that you were bought here under unforeseen circumstances, Lord Sesshomaru. Nevertheless, I make you welcome in our lands and my jurisdiction. Until the situation changes, we shall provide you sanctuary."

In other words, he was welcomed until he had been deemed a threat or liability to this Shacklebolt's subjects or wizarding Britain. Sesshomaru had little love for the social politics of his class. It had been far easier to roam his lands and cut down anyone who opposed him.

Yet it was commendable how deftly the diplomatic hand had been dealt to him, stirring memories of long ago. Since he had been a pup sitting in his father's lap, Sesshomaru had listened in to the flowery words prevalent among his father's Court, where underhanded verbal knives were launched and/or deflected vigorously much like that in the frontlines of a battlefield. After he ascended the throne, he had to sharpen his skills both physically and mentally and constantly prove himself; lest he be usurped by the never-ending yōkai of voracious greed and ambitions, and stripped of his birthright to the Western Lands.

"Hermione has updated me of your standing. I trust Harry was of satisfactory company."
The minister was fishing for information. Maintaining a placid veneer, Sesshomaru returned a courteous tilting of the head. "This Hari has been a most gracious companion," he allowed.

Obsidian orbs blinked. With an ambiguous smile, the dark-skinned male gestured to the two armchairs across his desk as he made his way back around to retake his seat fashioned out of dark, carved wood. "Come, sit down. I know it's late. I'm afraid I was busy with my ministerial duties I wasn't able to prepare for your arrival. One of you will have to conjure a seat."

Hari's packmate sank into the plush purple seating without further prompting, settling down with a small relieved groan. That left the awkward situation where the two alpha daiyōkais remained upright over the remaining armchair.

With a minute frown, Hari ventured, "If it's all the same to you, I prefer to stand. All the activity before has left me restless." He took a firm step back.

Sesshomaru peered at him, considering the flimsy ploy to make him take the seat while the green-eyed demon stood at attention. Concealing a small smirk at the spark of irritation in those forest green gems, he challenged, "This Sesshomaru too shall remain standing."

The female muttered something about posturing males under her breath and she transfigured the small table between the two seats into another armchair with a flick of her wand. With a small huff, she shared, "For when you two decide to regain your senses. Until then keep on being ridiculous."

The Acting Minister aimed a fond look in the pregnant witch's direction, used to her displays of insolence. "You've always been a wonderful counsel, Hermione. It's not required of you, considering your position, but I appreciate it nonetheless."

The female flushed at his compliment and scolding. Hugging her rounded stomach, she asked, "Have you found a good candidate to take your position, Kingsley?"

With a rueful smile, Shacklebolt shook his head. "With the exception of our Savior, the public is not too keen on having another Cornelius or Thicknesse take the reins as Minister."

Both hanyou and inuyōkai turned to stare at Lord Hari.

"My answer still remains the same," Hari said placidly. "It's still a resounding no."

Shacklebolt shrugged helplessly. "I expected as much, with your odd aversion to fame and recent bout of wanderlust. It's not all your fault. With no one else favored in the public polls, my reputation would've been enough to appeal to the masses. You've made me the default nominee."

Hari merely smiled apologetically but said nothing else.

Sesshomaru studied the younger daiyōkai with a fascinated air. So his escort had merely declined the ruling position. He hadn't been deposed, or was out of contention because of his age or lineage. While a hanyou lord was indeed rare in Sesshomaru's time, it should be nigh impossible for a half-breed, royalty or not, to have ascended a ruling position when a pureblooded daiyōkai of this Hari's power was there as well.

Hari's packmate mumbled, "If he'd settle down like any normal wizard has by now, he wouldn't have to resort to a nomadic lifestyle."

"Hermione," Hari warned, clearly having gone over this subject with her many times. "Not here."

Her wide-set mouth twisted unhappily. Lifting her chin up, she persisted, "People have been talking.
You have Ladies…and Lords throwing themselves at you, if not here then from several corners of the world. Yet you still haven't accepted anyone's hand. At this point the public doesn't know if something's wrong with you or if you've been having a secret tryst with someone inappropriate."

"As curious as the public is about Harry's bachelorhood, I think this isn't the appropriate topic to be discussing," Shacklebolt interrupted, looking rather embarrassed for continuing that vein of thought. The female, too, turned red. Rolling his shoulders, he leaned in and enquired, "Is it true you've contained the situation at the Japanese monument?"

Hari nodded stiffly, sharing a glance with his packmate. "Hermione's runes should hold until we figure out what to do with our guest. We're hoping it'll be a temporary stay and not a long one."

A dark brow lifted. "Indeed, that would be ideal. However, should I expect any…problems with our guest?" A trained eye took stock of this Sesshomaru, estimating his worth and abilities. Interest was paid especially on his fangs and claws and armor. Resting his chin on laced fingers, Shacklebolt testified, "This is just procedure, so I don't want you to think any less of me, but my priority is to consider the safety of our magical community. My gut is telling me you're a threat to my people."

"He is not a threat, Kingsley!" the female protested, shaking her head in dismay.

Sesshomaru's brows lifted. Her ready defense of him, a stranger, had come as a pleasant surprise to this Sesshomaru.

She championed rather passionately, "He's been quite a dream, considering his situation!"

"Yes, his…situation." Obsidian eyes narrowed. "That is what concerns me. Not only are we dealing with a culture clash, what was once accepted in the past is no longer tolerable in the future. Lord Sesshomaru, you obviously are not of human origins. In our time, whatever creature heritage you have, some of our civilians will not be as accommodating as Harry and Hermione have been."

He purposefully lined his gaze at the three swords attached to the demon lord's hip. "Not to mention you're carrying weapons in plain sight."

Sesshomaru stiffened, dropping a hand mechanically on top of the three hilts as if to guard them from being confiscated from his possession.

Sensing his distress, Hari leapt to Sesshomaru's protection, "Minister, he knows we carry wands on us. Anyone in his shoes would feel more comfortable knowing they have something familiar to defend themselves should anyone launch an attack."

There was more being left unsaid but after a cautious consideration of Hari's counsel, Shacklebolt caved to his entreaty. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he repeated, "In Hermione's reports, she did not mention his creature status. I know it's rude to ask what you are, but the sooner I am in the know the easier it'll be for me to create a cover story to sell to the public."

Hari's packmate opened her mouth to spill the information her Acting Minister was requesting of them but her pack alpha's intense stare had her quiet down. "It's not important," she mumbled mulishly, her eyes downturned as if ashamed to meet her superior's disappointed gaze. It was interesting to note her loyalty was to her lord and not this Shacklebolt. She slouched in her seat. "We might have to bring Luna in the know since she's a known Magizoologist or maybe Bill for his curse-breaking skills, but it's only us who are aware."

"It's not because we can't trust you," Hari was quick to assure, "but it might be better to keep this information contained to as little people as possible. It's, after all, an identifying marker and we don't
know if having more people cognizant of this would result in a temporal upset."

Shacklebolt heaved a sigh, resting his forehead on a palm. "Does your silence come at a price?"

Realization flooded his expression. Hari stated firmly, "We will keep quiet about this so long as it is convenient. As of this moment, the secrecy is obligatory."

A pang of displeasure hammered in the demon lord's chest. His mouth thinned into a white line. So Hari's allegiance to this Sesshomaru was not as definite as he'd anticipated it to be. That was… unsettling.

"I approve of your plan to involve the youngest Lovegood and the eldest of the Weasley children," Shacklebolt slowly relented. It was odd how easily the hanyou deferred to this young lord, as if Shacklebolt was merely acting as if he held total command but it was Hari who operated the strings. "But to coin a Muggle saying, albeit changed, more heads think better than two or three. I want to bring the Department of Mysteries into this."

He held up a hand to stem their ensuing protests. "Hear me out before you shoot it down. The Unspeakables are trained in the intricacies of time magic, having originally manufactured the Time-Turners you, Hermione, should be well aware of."

He cast a disapproving glance at her direction, loitering on her stomach. "You are only one witch. There's only so much workload you can take before you snap. They are good at keeping confidentiality. If we place a similar Vow on the other research committees to assist you in your quest to send Lord Sesshomaru back to his time as soon as possible, we might be able to prevent the temporal upset you two have been maintaining will happen. Our concern should be getting him back before this gets leaked, and I guarantee you the longer he stays here the easier it'll be for the public to pick up any discrepancies in our story."

The yōki around Hari was a turbulent, simmering jumble of restlessness as he listened to his superior's rational.

In a small part of his mind, Sesshomaru thought this Shacklebolt's explanation to be eloquent. There had to be a limit to how long their window of opportunity remained unhindered. The larger part of him was dissatisfied to be paraded around more strangers like an exotic pet. If his surmise was correct—no matter if there was another lord or royalty to be seen—only this Hari and this Sesshomaru were the only pureblooded daiyōkais in wizarding Britain. Everyone else was hanyou.

He thought back to the refutation Hari had provided earlier afternoon, when he'd commanded him to part with his knowledge of the yōkai tribes.

Looking at Hari's tensed visage, he pursed his lips as he considered how to provide a measure of consolation, as this wizard had done for this Sesshomaru many times before. It would be honorable to return his generosity, since Hari had initiated him into his pack for the time being. Shuttering his vision, Sesshomaru allowed his tightly-wound yōki to rise and gather around him without alerting the two hanyous. The feeling was like being suffused in a warm spring where ripples of water swum and lapped comfortingly against his skin. With the least amount he could muster up without giving anything away, he encouraged his yōki to delicately twine around Hari's aura.

The green eyes which reminded Sesshomaru so much of his homeland forests widened and snapped to this Sesshomaru. His gaze lingering at the contact point between his demonic energy and the Western Lord's, Hari gave him a long sidelong glance, as if to question his sudden boldness, to question why he would react this way when he had been so lenient and apathetic about Hari's treatment before.
Sesshomaru cocked a brow at the silliness of his supposition. While not like the temporary protective claim Hari had placed on this Sesshomaru, the attempt to show his support had been made.

After a brief pause, without a word Hari shrugged and turned away, allowing the breach of privacy. As if keeping Sesshomaru's best interest in mind, he went to deter Shacklebolt with polite, pointed verbal jabs. His pure demonic energy settled and rubbed lazily against Sesshomaru's as a small gesture of thanks.

His magenta-striped eyelids lowered half-mast.

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Born under one of the truly pureblood families labeled under the Sacred Twenty-Eight, Kingsley Shacklebolt had been raised under different expectations from half-bloods and Muggle-borns. Before Dumbledore's rise in popularity, it was common for purebloods to snub their noses at the filthy blood for their ignorance and association to the Muggles who had lynched, burned, and driven the wizarding families into hiding long ago.

Unlike his pureblood brethren Kingsley had secretly shared his family's principles, when they were still alive. Having heard their ancestral stories of human trafficking in the country the Shacklebolt family had originated from, he became a staunch believer in equality and fairness for all wizards and Muggles and magical creatures. No one deserved to be treated less than what they deserve, no matter the misdeeds acted upon by their ancestors. He judged others by their individual actions and abilities.

But if there was one thing he hated more than bigoted prejudice, it was corruption.

He had been told time and time again he was an exceptionally skilled duelist and his defensive magic was extolled by his fellow Aurors. Kingsley is the one you want watching your back, they would all claim. And it was true. He enjoyed proving his competence and cunning. It was perhaps of this small vanity that made him like Hermione Granger, the highly-intelligent Muggle-born with an attitude to boot. He was surprised when she got together with Ron, having placed bids that she would've ended up with her other mate of much closer interests.

Her mate Harry Potter reminded Kingsley of himself, with his quick ascension to his position and how he had taken to the post like a duck to water. The young Lord had more power in his little finger than most pureblood wizards alone.

Kingsley made it no secret that he respected the man. Not after having seen him accomplish what little wizards twice his age hadn't been able to pull off. But he was under no disillusion about the reality of their so-called Savior. Underneath his reputation and desirability, Harry was simply a very lucky boy with a penchant for adventure, with a strong magical core that remained untapped. What made him remarkable was his strength of character and adaptability to hostile situations despite any handicaps.

Childless and single, Kingsley took Harry under his wing after the Battle of Hogwarts. He couldn't put his finger on it but the wizard seemed to have changed. Sometimes when he looked across his desk, he would find himself startled to be reminded he was conversing with a lord three-times his junior. There was a maturity that hadn't been in the boy before.

Both Hermione and Harry had been instrumental in rooting out the corruption embedded deep in the Ministry, which shamed Kingsley somewhat to see how low their government had fallen. The colleagues he did not trust in the first place were demoted or slapped with an impending trial. The Malfoy Trials had been the biggest political headache of them all. Along with Percy, they aided Kingsley in reshuffling the ranks and introducing bills and treaties that improved human-creature relations and had gotten rid of the Dementors in Azkaban.
When he saw how disgruntled the prodigal wizard was kept in his cubicle and being pressured by their society to do something even greater, Kingsley offered to assign him the clean-up mission he personally would have taken himself if not for his loaded timetable. A team had been gathered—mostly comprised of members of Dumbledore's Army—and trained, and then were subsequently released into the world whenever rumors would pop up and the Unspeakables validated to the Acting Minister the location of the dark rituals.

The rare times he got to see Harry, back from his trips the wizard appeared to be more content than he was in wizarding Britain. That was where his suspicion formed about the young lord's wanderlust, and he found he could not blame the boy for desiring to be free of the societal pressures they placed on him since the day he was marked with the thunderbolt scar.

When Hermione's head had come screeching into his fireplace the night before about the stupidity of her best mate and the line of bad luck that always followed him, sirens were blaring in the Acting Minister's head. Worried about her pregnant state, he had to calm her down and tell her to explain from the beginning.

Slowly.

From Hermione's briefs, the time-traveler was made out to be an unlucky but powerful king uprooted from his kingdom by Harry's accidental magic. Before the press conference this evening, she'd warned him because of his looks and behavior she suspected him to be a feudal warlord from the Warring States period, an uncertain period she claimed to be of great social upheaval, political intrigue and constant militaristic conflicts in both the Japanese magical and Muggle worlds.

Kingsley saw what Hermione had meant the moment the royal magical creature appeared on his doorstep behind his three officials. He had to be honest to himself; he could see how one might appreciate the other's terrifying beauty, if their tastes ran a bit Oriental and primitive. The mood became precarious when the fae-like creature strode into his office. Easily towering over the witch herself, this Lord Sesshomaru's comportment and choice of attire lent a lethal, magnificent presence to him that screamed for people's deference and submission, despite appearing only a bit older than a recent Hogwarts graduate.

If the pureblood was gratified by his dueling abilities and cunning, his good judge of character was what he prided himself in. The controlled, dignified way Sesshomaru held himself whispered of the ability to be reasoned with and the way he moved was one of confidence. It was the latter, coupled with his royal clothing and indulgent acceptance, which was unsettling. Normally anyone in his situation would be a nervous or vengeful wreck. For one to hide his emotions so adeptly, he had to be very intelligent. It was the smart ones who often than not posed the biggest threats.

Acting upon his instincts, Shacklebolt had pressed the time traveling lord about his intentions, only for him to discover the foreign lord really wasn't much of a talker.

If Sesshomaru turned out to be a liability, Kingsley would have to put an end to that. Harry Potter was the Ministry's best law enforcer, the public's Savior, and hopefully Kingsley's successor. He was the ideal public figure that made magical Britain the political powerhouse it was today. Were his
image to be tainted by scandal...Kingsley realized were the time traveler to develop an interest in their Head Auror, it might be worse than having the magical creature permanently stuck in the future with no way to send him back.

Without more information, he was at a loss at what to do. While he believed it was not right to generalize someone by their species, there were stereotypes that held to the majority of creatures and beings. Vampires were thrill-seeking seducers. Goblins were highly intelligent, stingy hominids. Centaurs were territorial stargazers. Werewolves were aggressive to humans. Veelas were beautiful, moody harpies. And house-elves were immensely loyal and devoted to their masters. Looking at Sesshomaru's physical features, with the only recognizable attribute being his long pointed ears, the Acting Minister could only divine that he had to have branched from high elven lineage.

In the words of his dear, deceased Mad-Eye Moody, High Elves were snotty tree-huggers who considered everyone else beneath them. Kingsley stroked his knuckles thoughtfully, listening to Harry's petition to not bring in reinforcement. He could read beneath the ominous words that the wizard was telling him he didn't need the bodyguards or the spies to report back to their Minister, because he found it insulting little faith was placed in his abilities as the lord's minder. Sharp obsidian eyes trekked back to the fae-like lord, trying to read beyond his apathetic mask.

"Have you considered placing Glamours on him to alter his appearance?" he said finally, lifting his head up. He watched with an amused air as the wizard's tirade came to a spluttering halt upon his diversion. "Your plan to not change anything would've worked well had you introduced him as a Squib or human foreign dignitary from another continent. Are you using his real name as well?"

Avada Kedavra green lowered to the floor. Harry admitted, "It's a bit too late now. We know it's a big risk, but we're banking on nosy busybodies finding it impossible that we would be so foolish."

Kingsley blinked; then he found himself exclaiming incredulously, "You want them to overestimate your mental facilities?"

The wizard looked like he had socked him in the face. Before he could make a retort, Hermione championed, "Harry's a competent, highly-ranked and well-known Auror. He's the Savior. People think he's—Harry, don't get a swelled head—the second coming of Merlin. Would you think he'd be so stupid to keep Sesshomaru's identity, if you were the snooping party?"

Kingsley smiled shakily. Of course he wouldn't.

"Furthermore we made sure to say Lord Sesshomaru's playing a character to escape detection, in case they find him in ancient scrolls or historic what-have-you. Of course people might find it suspicious that he stands out in the crowd, but the same argument can be applied to someone in his supposed situation." Her chin lifted as she looked up at Harry. "The Forbidden Forest didn't work out in the end, didn't it?"

The wizard's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed under the scrutiny of three powerful envoys. Licking his lower lip, Harry murmured hoarsely, "I'm going to hide him at Grimmauld tonight and see what he makes of Hogwarts at a later date. After that, I'm not sure. After the show we put on earlier today, word will spread."

Considering it was Harry Potter they were talking about, the man every witch or wizards discussed over their daily tea and biscuits, Kingsley didn't doubt by tomorrow morning the gossip gates would flood their small magical community with the arrival of their post.

His hat dipped down his forehead as he said slowly, "If we're talking about comfort and security, an Unplottable location would be best." Nodding at Sesshomaru, he vouched, "If you're what you say
to be, although it's probably smaller than what you're used to, you might appreciate the decor. I've heard Harry's house elf restored it to its former glory."

At the reminder of Kreacher, the younger witch and wizard ducked their heads in embarrassment. Kingsley couldn't fault them for their reaction. In the Aftermath, concerning the Golden Trio the house-elf's personality did a complete one-eighty. If Lucius Malfoy's former house-elf worshipped Harry Potter, the Black's servant practically [venerated](#) him as a god.

"This Hari has a retainer," an accented baritone interposed, bringing Kingsley out of his musings.

Staring into slitted pools of gold, which brought back unwelcome memories of Voldemort's pet, he felt a chill crawl down his spine. A wave of discontent coursed through him, for he had assumed the fae-like lord had kept up a polite illusion of interest when he was actually tuning them out. Going over mentally what he felt safe to divulge, he stated austerely, "House-elves have long since been servants of certain pureblood households. After the last Lord Black passed away, Kreacher had entered the service of the Potter line through a transfer of ownership."

The time-traveler made a "hn" sounding grunt of acknowledgement, and the pureblood felt his mouth pull into a little smirk. "Though I'm sure you're used to having your fair share of servants, if you were partial to our Forbidden Forest perhaps the Burrow might also be to your liking."

"No."

"Absolutely not!"

The two's heated cries were music to the pureblood's ears.

He allowed himself to bask in the lighthearted moment, but after taking a deep breath his expression sobered. "Living arrangements aside, it's nice and all that we have a short-term plan but how shall we proceed after that?" Clasping his calloused hands together, he murmured, "We can't put you on house arrest indefinitely. I've seen great men break from such a treatment." He gave a purposeful side-look to the only other wizard in the room.

A tic developed in Harry's jaw, but other than that the wizard made no attempt to correct him. Exhaling a whoosh of breath, which made the Potter Black Peverell lord's fringe fly from his eyes, the wizard shared, "We'll improvise. For now, we can do nothing but investigate and see if anybody had been in a similar predicament."

"You have yet to stipulate what exactly you are expecting from this Sesshomaru," their fair-headed time traveler supplied helpfully.

Obsidian eyes settled upon the humanoid. Considering their options, the Acting Minister posed cautiously, "If you all believe it to be in our best interests to keep his species a secret, at least answer me this: are you a full-blooded magical creature?"

Dark brows lifted into a silvery-white fringe. He sneered, "This Sesshomaru was born of two respectable clans."

"Any siblings? Cousins? Parents?" He paused, and with deliberate slowness, he tacked on, "Or a [mate](#) we should be aware of?"

He didn't mean a "mate" as in a "friend." He meant it in a romantic, creature lingo. Clearly their guest understood it for what it was.

That polite, placid mask of his descended into something dark and brooding. Obviously Kingsley
had touched upon a sore spot for the lord, whether be it the death of a close family member or a bastard's birth. He'd asked to cover all bases—there was a chance of exile or abdication—but he'd already did the guesswork that the father was out of the picture, for how else could Sesshomaru to have taken up the mantle as lord and ruler of his primordial realm?

Sensing his guest's reserve, he pounced, "I'm not prying for my own curiosity. Old Magic, when invoked, works in mysterious, wondrous ways. I'm asking you this question of sensitive nature because if a bond exists between you and one another, that person may be your tether back to your time. Platonic companions don't count." Tilting his head, he revealed, "Blood Magic in particular predates our word-based spellcasting and is one of our most powerful and unknown."

In spite of his admission, the five-hundred year old lord remained close-lipped.

Dark eyes narrowed, and the cunning he had been known for reared in the Minister's head. Sinking his chin on his hands, Kingsley purposefully dropped, "Your minder has first-hand experience with the intricacies of Blood Magic."

The Head Auror inhaled sharply, the sound cutting through the stillness like Gryffindor's Sword. His fingers dug into the wooden backrest of the closest armchair but other than that, he made no other indication to get the Acting Minister to stop.

Apologizing profusely to his colleague deep within his mind, Kingsley persevered, "When Lady Potter sacrificed her life to protect her infant son, the magical properties of the unintentional Blood Magic ritual protected him from his parents' murderer and rebounded the Killing Curse back to him, destroying the Dark Lord. After that Blood Wards were erected around Harry's sanctuary, maintained until he came of age by his familial connection to his surviving relatives.

"The Dark Lord was unable to touch him because of it. The only way he nullified the protection was by taking Harry's blood to resurrect himself. So, you see, there is power in the ties of family. If you do not have children or a blood relation alive, the closest to that would be a romantic partner, and then a friend…or a warrior loyal to you. If all else fails, a household servant or guard. I do not believe you to be socially inept. For someone in your position, it is almost an impossibility for a good ruler."

The challenge to the lord's pride had been cast, and for someone as political-savvy Sesshomaru, he had to have understood he was backed into a corner.

The ex-Auror held his breath, well aware he was treading on thin ice. A challenge or besmirching of a royalty's blood and honor was on grounds of an execution or, in a lord's case, a duel.

With a penetrating glower, the long silvery locks tumbled over luxurious robes as Sesshomaru slanted his head and looked down at the Acting Minister with narrowed eyes.

The tense moment lasted but for one heart-pounding minute.

"This Sesshomaru," said the lord stiffly, "has a mother."

"Wonderful!" he beamed, smiling encouragingly. "Who else?"

Through gritted teeth, Sesshomaru added resentfully, "And a half-brother."

"O-oh. Er, that might...somewhat...complicate matters." Hesitating, he required gingerly, "There is no Lady or children? Not even an Intended?"

What he had presumed to be inked curves on the lord's face unexpectedly shook, expanding and
becoming slowly serrated against the paleness of his cheeks. Oriental fae magic? Kingsley caught sight, from the corner of his vision, of his two officials bracing themselves, as if they were preparing for an assault on their Acting Minister.

They were his signals that he had finally crossed the lord's patience.

To prevent unnecessary violence, making himself seem nonthreatening as he could Kingsley forced himself to bow his head in supplication. In his most reassuring voice possible, he said, "I apologize. I was too forward. I was worried your relationship to your parent or brother wouldn't be enough to provide us a chance."

When nothing happened, his black gaze flickered up vigilantly. His instincts warred against his logical mind. The latter eventually won out. "For now we'll proceed with the assumption either one will be enough."

For an instant it looked like they would need to stun the magical creature anyway, for his words surprisingly seemed to have no effect calming the foreigner down. Abruptly the creature jerked and became as rigid as a board, as if someone invisible had slapped him or did something equally daring.

The growl that had rattled in the feral creature's chest lessened in volume and the male closed his eyes as if to rein himself back from the actions he was about to have taken. The three contemporary magic users watched in captivation as the stripes waned, like the fluctuations in water, before they receded back lethargically to the strange magenta arches they once had been before.

All three magic casters felt an immense breadth of relief. Hermione submerged back down into the plush seating, having been in a half-crouched half-standing position. She was scouring her face with her hands. Lord Potter Black Peverell discreetly tucked his Holly wand back up his arm holster.

The adrenaline that had been pulsing through the Acting Minister made him both fatigued and hyper-aware of their conditions. His present company looked like they were ready to drop dead on their feet. He peered behind him through the large paneled windows, startled when he saw his Ministry officials starting to leave for their homes. That must mean the reporters had left.

It was late. They were all tired and stressed and high-strung and in great need of recuperation.

With a despairing sigh, he scooted his chair back and stood up to declare, "I have taken up a lot of your time. Thank you for putting up with my enquiries. As of now, I have no more questions for you."

He bade them to think about what he'd said about involving other parties. After the pregnant witch struggled to her feet after some assistance from Harry, the two sold him a brisk goodbye. When they turned, the Acting Minister spotted as they padded across the marble that the wizard slowed down right when he reached shoulder-to-shoulder with Sesshomaru.

Magenta-inked eyelids snapped open. The time-traveler, whom Kingsley now noticed soared a little less than half a foot taller than the Head Auror, fixated Harry with a look of a little disgruntlement and...a little worry?

Before Kingsley could make heads and tails of it, the stoic veneer Sesshomaru had on earlier replaced the lord's brief look of weakness. The sudden shift in confidence had so been quick that had he blinked, he never would've caught sight of it.

Just as the three were about to pass the office threshold, a thought occurred to Shacklebolt so he asked, "Before I forget...Harry, have you abandoned your personal research? What happened to your
progress on how to summon a giant *Patronus* like Andros the Invincible?"

Had he been paying attention, he would've perceived the demon lord snapping to attention, like a bolt of lightning struck him where he stood. Shacklebolt, who spent years of training reading criminals and devoting his attention solely on a target at a time, could only see the twinge of frustration buried in the spot between Harry's shoulder blades.

Without turning around, the Head Auror said lowly, "It's on my list of things to do. C'mon Lord Sesshomaru, Hermione. Good night, Minister."

Before Kingsley could demand him to stick around, the door shut behind them with a quiet click. Tired and haggard, he collapsed back into his seat, covering his hot forehead with his palm.

"I thought they'd never leave," a Scottish-laden growl suddenly erupted to his right.

Without opening his eyes, the Acting Minister mumbled to the mounted portrait, "Were you spying this whole time, Alastor?"

The electric blue magical eye rotated wildly in the mutilated, gnarled face. Moody stepped closer until his mouth seemed to obtrude from the canvas as he asserted shamelessly, "Constant vigilance, Kingsley! Point is you've let your affection for Potter cloud your judgment!"

"What makes you say that?"

"Aye, I reckon that's why you couldn't see the broil of Dark Magic coming from that magical beast."

"O-oh. That's why I'd been feeling quite uneasy." The short silence ensuing made Kingsley look up. The scarred mess of a face was deep in thought. He sat up. "What?"

"...Do you want me to fetch Dumbledore?"

"And now you're going overboard."

"Again, your observation is compromised!" the sentient painting swiftly rebutted.

Kingsley felt an incoming headache. For the imitation of his dear friend, who had been enchanted to mimic key phrases and characteristics of the subject, to rebuke him was, quite frankly, irritating. "I can tell he's bad news, yes, but it wouldn't be fair to judge until proper research is conducted."

"Proper research?" the portrait mocked. "Maybe when Potter ends up dead and half-eaten by the Dark Creature, you'll consider it proper research."

"I will not condemn an innocent man until I have proof," Kingsley avowed, standing up.

"Then what are you going to do? Wait until the killings begin?" The mismatched eyes stilled. "You reckon you'll be another Crouch Sr? Is this what it's about?"

Shrugging on his coat, Kingsley gathered all the paperwork and some of the more important knickknacks he'd disillusioned before his company walked in. "You don't have to hide your concern for Harry," he stated calmly, charming them small and stashing them into his pockets. He could hear the following splutter and denials bubbling from the portrait. Ignoring the loud remonstrations, he stood before the painting, with his hands clasped behind his back. He could not take in more conspiracies, not when his mind was still too full of the encounter with Sesshomaru.

"If the next words out of your mouth, dear friend, is about considering the greater good, I'm afraid I'll
have to move you to Percy's office. And I know how much you dislike that boy."

Easily diverted, Moody launched into a well-practiced diatribe about how wet-behind-the-ears the Weasley was and how even though he'd finally seen the light and listened to Moody's sage advice about looking tough, the horned attachments to his spectacles made him look sillier and wide-eyed than ever. Rolling his eyes, Kingsley moved sluggishly to the double doors, thinking about the errands he would have to make his newly-installed Assistant Secretary carry out.

That night, he tossed and turned in his sleep, dreaming about the forebodings that would plague him for the next few months.

"This Shacklebolt had mentioned a Squib."

Green-eyes tensed from the baritone that piped up after having witnessed the house shove its neighboring houses, number eleven and number thirteen, out of its way to make space in between. Having wished Hermione goodbye and a careful leave, he had *Apparated* his burden to the steps leading up to number twelve, Grimmauld Place after much cajoling that the trip would be well worth it for their rest.

Placing his hand over silver knocker in the twisted shape of a serpent, he waited for the battered door to recognize the ring under his gloves. After the flare of heat, the front door swing open to a long hallway, lit with a line of clean gas lamps and with the glossy chandelier dangling overhead.

Curious golden eyes studied their interior as Harry said tiredly, "Squibs are children born between two magical parents but have no magic themselves. Most families are ashamed of them. But like some Muggles, their lineage will undoubtedly sprout a Magic-born."

"Master is back!" a familiar bullfrog-deep croak called out giddily, overjoyed to serve his Lord Black after so long. Dressed in a sorry cassock with large colored patches bearing all three lordships Harry had inherited sewn into the greying coarse fabric, Kreacher had cleaned up as nicely as he could to represent his Master's high station.

From the distance, the Black's motto, *Toujours Pur*—that crest took up the majority of his attire—swum in the wizard's bleary vision.

The mad dash the house-elf made to greet Harry terminated when he caught sight of the royal dog demon standing behind him. The same heavy-bottomed frying pan used to beat up Mundungus Fletcher popped into existence in the house-elf's hands.

"Kreacher," Harry said tightly before the house-elf descended into his former name-calling habits and got it into his head to protect his wizard, "enough of that. Put that away. Your master is in no danger, alright? Lord Sesshomaru is to be treated as an honored guest as long as he stays here. He is not to be trifled with. Do you understand me?"

Rubbing his temples, he murmured, "I don't want to lose a valued household member should you accidentally antagonize him."

The pair of weak bloodshot eyes moistened, making them look more bulbous than before. Underneath the loose folded skin, an alarming shade of red rose to stain his whitish features. Vanishing the pan that had been larger than his head, the elf wailed, "Master is good Master. Master is kind to Kreacher and Mudbloo—Muggleborns and blood traitors and filthy beasts. Kreacher is proud to fought for Master in war!"

The Head Auror felt too embarrassed to turn around and see their guest's expression. Had he done
so, he would've caught the daiyōkai mumbling of how the house-elf who served under Harry was rather like his own kappa retainer too. There was a perturbed whisper of how Jakens were everywhere. Slanted eyes shifted to the row of grisly shrunken heads mounted to the wall on plaques.

Licking his lower lip, Harry declined Kreacher's teary entreaty to bring him and his guest dinner. Before the elf begun fussing over his health, Harry was quick to say, "Actually I'll have a treacle tart before I turn in for bed." After a pause, he amended, "After I fetch our guest his food. You eat raw meat, right?"

"This Sesshomaru does not need to eat," the demon lord rejected mechanically.

Harry's slow-churning mind couldn't process that. He finally looked back, peering over his shoulder. "You're not hungry. At all."

He realized belatedly that had been the wrong thing to say, when those wide golden pools suddenly narrowed. Feeling unease crawl into his gut, he directed, "Kreacher, you're allowed to go. Take a rest."

The house-elf bowed lowly to the wizard, bent over until the tip of his snout-like nose touched the floor. With some hesitance, he did the same for Sesshomaru, albeit jerkily. He popped away into the kitchens.

"Daiyōkais require little nourishment," Sesshomaru said gravely. The translation spell was wearing off, for the traditional Japanese crept into the dog demon's accented English. To Harry's dismay, his low voice now carried what sounded like an undercurrent of suspicion. "Our appetites are not like hanyous' or humans'. This Hari's is not the same?"

"That's great," Harry replied bleakly, his thoughts a jumble of confusion. "All the more power to you. I gave up eating your type of meat after I got bloody nightmares."

The suspicion melted into twin pools of perplexity. After a prolonged silence, the demon lord asked him for a full explanation of the wizard's actual status.

The family head of three noble magic lineages stared at Sesshomaru blankly. He asked for clarification.

Annoyed by his host's slowness, Sesshomaru explained himself slowly: "This Hari is a lord revered by his people. You have gotten rid of another lord threatening your lands, yet you operate under a hanyou ruler. Your sorcery stems from a different magic than your subjects."

"I-the Minister's a pureblood, unlike me. My dad's a pureblood but my mum's a Muggle-born witch." His brows knitted together. The unsteady feeling returned tenfold, for the demon lord had discerned the change in his core when no one else did. Desperate to steer him in another direction, he offered, "Different as you think I am, I believe I would fit the 'hanyou' bill more so than the rest, if I reckon our definitions are the same. In my society, I am called a half-blood."

The new look he got from the dog demon made him feel like utter shite. Feeling his blood boil in his veins, he said heatedly, "Merlin, are you purebloods all this pig-headed? It does not matter, in the end, what your blood amounts to. Does blood provide food on your table? Does your lineage guarantee the strength of your core? I've seen you purebloods sprout drivel about your so-called superiority since I entered this world. You know what I reckon? It's a crock load of bull."

Taking a deep breath, he slumped against the wall, massaging his throbbing forehead. He'd had this
thought ruminating in his mind for quite some time, but he never thought to express them aloud. At least, not yet. "New blood needs to be introduced to the genetic group. Cloistering it within a small community or inbreeding produces generations of Squibs or magic-borns with diluted magic. Voldemort was a half-blood and he was the most powerful Dark Lord said to have existed. Snape was a half-blood and he was a great Potions Master and a master of Mind Arts. Hermione's a Muggle-born and she's the most talented, smartest witch of our generation. My mum's magic was also superior to most of her pureblood peers. The half-brother you mentioned…I wager he was hell to deal with."

"Blood purity does not matter," he concluded in the end, his waning temper making him feel like he wanted to crawl under his sheets and never come back out. He met Sesshomaru's gaze squarely. "If my dad married my mum and didn't regret it to his last dying breath, I am proud of what I am. Nothing you say or believe will change that."

Left to his own devices by a very irate wizard, Sesshomaru found refuge in a cozy bedroom decorated in the lord's family colors: green and black. To his amusement, very much similar to the crescent moons that decorated his home in the sky as symbols of his family's status and prestige, serpentine shapes of wrought iron or delicate woodwork boasted of the House of Black's allegiance to the Slytherin clan in spite of what their family crest depicted.

While not as large as his private chambers, he could only assume it was not the lord's due to its meager size and lack of personal artifacts. It was also the only living arrangement that did not have foreign ornaments or décor which housed small, snarling creatures he had to put down. The lingering scent of an unknown creature teased his senses.

Velvet curtains shrouded the room in a darkness most humans would not be able to see in. Scrutinizing the elaborate carpet underneath his boots, he found himself drawn to the exotically-designed futon. Its wooden headboard was delicately carved, and its mattress was raised above a low platform. Smoothing a hand over the goose-feather futon, he watched disbelievingly as his claws sunk into the fabric. It was like touching a soft cloud. Fine wall hangings and ornate furniture completed the rich interior. For the lord's townhouse, this Hari had not kept a lot of servants.

Speaking of the lord, Sesshomaru toed off his boots and placed them at the foot of the bed. Also placing his three fangs in a secure spot, after a long considering look he fell down against the springy futon, his hair pooling around him like a liquid halo. When the world stopped spinning, his eyes lifted to the high vaulted ceiling overhead as he reviewed the younger lord's impassioned speech.

It had rattled Sesshomaru of the similarities between them, of Hari's father and the Inu no Taishō. The green-eyed male had not indicated he had been lying when he declared himself a half-breed.

In the privacy of his room, the daiyōkai scrunched his face in thought.

Whenever the young lord lied, his biggest tell would be that poker face Sesshomaru could see working on many individuals, but to him it had seemed unpolished. Given a few years to perfect it and his tact, Hari would be a game changer in the political scene, this he had no doubt. His undeniably high daiyōkai level of pure demonic energy though begged him to ask how it was possible.

He frowned. There was only one explanation. The green-eyed lord was not what he believed himself to be.

He rolled onto his back. Plucking the silver badge from his collar, Sesshomaru held up the bauble against the diminished light. When Hari overlaid his scent over Sesshomaru's through his continued
contact, innocent touches and sorcery, Sesshomaru was nearly overwhelmed time and time again by the escaping threads of the lord's constrained miasma.

Turning the badge over, he studied the needle inserted into the back. It was quite possible Hari had been adopted or fostered or had something done to him to make him as strong as Sesshomaru could detect underneath the young lord's deceptively harmless-looking veneer.

For him to have been kept in the dark about his heritage, another realm of possibility was that over time demons and hanyous had forgotten their demonic and spiritual origins, instead believing themselves to be a wholly unique race.

A small part of him was unsettled by the ignorance that was prevalent in wizarding Britain, overriding the rational part of his brain that wanted him to remain apathetic to their obliviousness. Their ignorance had served them well in the past. Surely nothing untoward would happen were they to continue remaining in the dark?

Somehow that didn't settle with the inuyōkai. Unlocking his claws, the badge dropped onto his chest with a soft plop.

For the feared eldest son and lord of the Western Lands, it would be shameful for him to be under the protection of a hanyou lord. After the future lord had done for him and whatever else he will do, Sesshomaru was practically obligated to teach this Hari of the ways of a true demon lord who was not afraid to show off his power and status and to seize control of the unclaimed opportunities that presented themselves in his wake.

It would be his silent gift to this green-eyed daiyōkai.

Molten eyes narrowed. For now, he'll indulge this Hari's mistaken need to maintain his thrice-daily human eating ritual, eventually to be weaning him of that appalling weakness. Drawing his demonic energy around him once more, he closed his eyes and felt for that twinge of magic he'd familiarized himself with over the past two days. Deep within his mindscape, he journeyed down the stairs and corridor and out to the front steps, feeling himself float to where this lost alpha sat staring into the moonless night up ahead. With an impenetrable smile, he settled down besides the young lord, pleased to simply bask in the alpha's demonic energy.

Unbeknownst to him a rumbling purr had seeped from his unconscious throat. The beast that was in him, for once, felt in peace.

Chapter End Notes

So, next chapter will have another clue as to Harry's Animagus form. And it's one of the foreshadowing/plot-heavy updates I'm most excited to bring to the table because of… well, I'm going to stop teasing you guys here! You'll see what I mean. Just hang tight and cross your fingers!
Laying the Foundations

Chapter Notes

"Who would be the dominant one in the relationship?"
Eh, the dominating alpha instincts are inherent in Sesshomaru's creature nature but by popular request Harry's not going to be a doormat. So, um, I stand by what Kingsley said prior chapter.

"Will Harry's childhood be revealed to Sesshomaru?"
Those on Sesshomaru's Shit List and Death List are going to be accumulating. At different intervals. The angst is obligatory, enough for character development but hopefully not too overbearingly melodramatic.

"Is the Forest of Death going to come into play?"
I only know of the Forbidden Forest and the Forest of Dean, and both are going to be central to the major conflict(s). You'll see soon!

"Will we see any POV from Jaken or Rin?"
Oh yeah. They're coming. I've already outlined it out, hehe. As for the rest, you'll just have to wait and see where I'm taking Green and Gold unfortunately! :) But as a hint I've finally found an acceptable Inuyasha-equivalent of what Harry would be classified as after being unofficially deemed a true MoD. Huehuehue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With the sun just rising in the horizon, being the only one awake the lord of three wizarding houses was clenching Sirius' immaculate bathroom vanity so hard his knuckles were white from the pressure. The encompassing self-hatred and guilt that plagued him since Voldemort's murder surged to the surface once more, and he bowed his head to avoid looking at his distorted features in the mirror fogged up from the steam of his hot shower. Water beads dripped down his forehead and dropped down from his wet hair into the sink as he stared absently at the tiny, silver stopper below.

Yesterday Harry had been beside himself. For some reason he could not stomach the demon lord intruding into his private affairs; and that surge of territorial bitterness had disconcerted him. For that reason sleep would not come. To work off the burgeoning temper, he'd Apparated from the steps outside to Gloucestershire, to the Forest of Dean where rumors of an infestation of Acromantula and other Dark Creatures threatened to oust their magical community to the Muggles who came for hikes or camping. That task had been written into his timetable of things to do, but now he had felt like undertaking the mind-numbing investigation to cool his head. He had followed the trail of magic and violent drag marks to several different locations deep into the woods, only to discover a trace of
sticky webbing or animal carcasses decomposing behind each different site. With each new path he took, the subsequent stroll down memory lane had made his frustration skyrocket to dangerous heights until his nose had picked up on a putrid, stomach-turning stench of decay and rot.

It was at the eerily familiar, trash-littered viaduct that he stumbled across a small army of Inferi and with reintroduced fury he'd hunted down every last visible animated carrion until he could feel magic exhaustion setting in that he called it quits. He'd sat down on a rotting log to catch his breath in the middle of the burning, abandoned Snatcher Camp, glaring down at the writhing Inferius pinned to the ground trying to unloose the stone slab from its sternum.

Shredded remains of a dark red fabric, closely resembling an armband, were gripped tightly in the wizard's gloved hands.

With the area unobstructed, it was clear to see the abandoned campsite showed evidence of human occupation, from the dirty, upturned pots and pans to the crude, simple lean-tos assembled out of stripped branches and strung up tarp. Magic saturated the air, but he couldn't place the source. Common sense indicated the magical creatures were behind it. His gut, though, said otherwise. He didn't have any proof that wizards had been behind the occupation—and maybe it really was his paranoia speaking—but something didn't sit right with Harry.

This campsite was far too untidy, too chaotic for Muggles to have been the culprits behind the mess, yet it was too clean, too orderly to suggest the aftershock of an Inferi attack. Unable to control their strength, the Inferi ripped their victims apart. They used their teeth to tear into flesh. They were ordered to attack or defend on a wizard's or witch's orders. The lack of reamed limbs and blood around the campsite was suspicious. There was a niggling sense of recognition at the back of his mind the longer he stared at the scrap of fabric, but the theory was so incredible he couldn't put much credibility behind it. At least, not yet. He'd rather not stir up bad memories and public hysteria without solid confirmation first.

He'd left behind the blackened grounds smelling of smoke and ashes and charred flesh after putting the Dark Creature out of its misery with a well-placed Incendio. Back at Grimmauld, in the drawing room he'd sent Sirius' black owl off with the armband and an official note instructing a team of Aurors to be dispatched first thing in the morning to finish his clean-up mission at the Forest of Dean and to record any suspicious magic. Maybe they'd come to the same conclusions as he did. Maybe not.

At this point, it was out of his hands.

Too exhausted to go up the stairs the wizard had dragged his feet to where he and Ron had once slept near Hermione to hide from the Death Eater-controlled Ministry. With large windows overlooking the street and quick access to the fireplace, the drawing room had been the next ideal space for surveillance.

Being as late as it was and the exhausted state—mentally and physically and magically—he was in, he really could not string together a coherent thought. So in the remaining hours to himself he'd attempted to meditate.

Sitting cross-legged on the sofa cushions, after he reached the state that felt similar to the cold emptiness he sometimes envisioned to be an extension of the Occlumency he'd successfully performed once, with his eyes closed he'd felt like mentally flailing in the darkness, unsure of what he should've felt or what he should've seen. His Holly wand gripped in his sweaty palms, he had tried desperately to think about anything under the sky, hoping one of them would trigger the discovery of his Animagus form.
He'd thought back to the Inferi army at the campsite, recalling his ruthlessness and single-minded, almost feral focus on the hunt.

He thought back to the daimyōkai sleeping in his comfortable bed; about his friends; about his colleagues; about the British magical community in general.

He'd thought about his life, his childhood, and his responsibilities.

He'd thought about how a single wizard like him would have no decent dating prospects aside from his third cousin and the witches who wanted him as nothing more than their prestigious sperm donor.

His mind, then, had refused to deviate from that particular train of thought. The wizards that went after him for courtship, however, had come as a surprise to the Head Auror. As a wizard who had been automatically attracted to the fairer sex and had little relationship experience, he felt quite perplexed and troubled—and somewhat flattered, if he was honest to himself—by his male suitors. It wasn't until he shadowed one of them for a day—somehow he doubted this was what Hermione meant when she said to think about broadening his horizons—that he realized they wanted him for the same underlying reason why Witch Weekly considered him one of the wizarding community's most desirable celebrity bachelors. It was a depressing thought.

Avada Kedavra green had shot wide open and his whole body had stilled. In that instant, perhaps, he'd imagined his senses sharpening; he'd convinced himself the splotches of color and murky, dusty scent in the drawing room were dizzyingly enriched. The moment shattered when he smelled himself and he realized, with much disgust, he needed to bathe. Thoroughly.

That sequence of events led him to where he was now. With a deep inhale of the balmy vapor in the air, Harry slowly lifted his head. Not an uncommon occurrence these days, he tried to see in the mirror what it was about him that could be so repellent that his only prospective suitors were the people who couldn't see past his lightning bolt scar. Sweat plastered his perpetually messy hair to his face which was thin and haggard from days without of sleep. His signature almond-eyes he got from his mum—his only attractive physical feature as far as he could tell, based on people's comments—without the Glamours, were weighted down by the dark bags underneath his eyes. He looked down his body, sliding a calloused hand across the raised edges of his battle scars and childhood nightmares until he stopped at the scarlet oval over his heart.

Harry snickered bitterly, pressing his heated forehead to the glass. If he weren't so confident that the witch wouldn't have sunk so low, he would've thought she fed him an Amortentia Potion or a weaker love potion. His time with her as her boyfriend had truly been magical. For once, he'd thought she'd been unlike the giggling witches who projected him as the hero or knight of their fantastical imaginations. But time away from her and the rare, stilted messages he'd gotten from her broke the illusion he had and proved to him that they had gotten way over their heads.

"Who would want a false marriage based on fairytales and illusions?" he susurrated to himself, recalling poor, besotted Merope Gaunt and her obsession with Tom Riddle Sr. His nails dug into the porcelain. He did not want a loveless union. He did not want any child of his to end up like Voldemort had, like Harry had.

His jaw tensed. Voldemort…Tom Riddle Jr…Harry's distant cousin. Dead. As far as he knew, Voldemort didn't have an Animagus form. For Harry Potter, he didn't really care if his animal form ended up being impractical in battle or espionage. If he was able to master the transformation, it made
him one step further from the man who killed his parents, from the man whose childhood and specific traits had startling parallels to his own.

His hands clenched into fists. It was a fear Harry had not expressed to anyone. He'd seen how easily it'd been for the magical community to jump to conclusions. For them to catch wind of this, he'd be asking to be branded the next Dark Lord and thrown into Azkaban. He'd tried telling Hermione, but she'd dismissed his concerns so swiftly he gained no closure from her refutation.

Sopping up the last moisture from his matted hair with the Black-crested towel, he slapped his cheeks to rid himself of his dark mood. "It's no time to think about this, Harry," he told his blurred reflection. The gears in his head clanged in a new direction.

A purpose and routine must be set for the demon lord, to make the transition into the future easier on him. Like the Minister had said, the wizard had had first-hand experience being sheltered, under the guise of protection when in actuality it was to keep an eye on him. If he went out now under this gloomy mindset, the five-hundred year old demon lord would think his minder to be barking mad.

That shift in opinion would be problematic. Having seen a little of what the daiyōkai was capable of, Harry didn't want to be the poor bloke assigned to detain him in a heavily-guarded cell or put him in a magically-induced stasis should Sesshomaru feel alone and backed into a corner.

Shimmying into clean pants and charcoal trousers which had magically appeared on the countertop when he had taken his shower, Harry reflected on how by some miracle or grace, a flimsy trust was established between them, knocked down only slightly by last night's outburst. His lips twisted.

Harry wasn't sure how to feel about babysitting someone who he felt on an instinctual level an independent, nomadic kinship with. Were he or Hermione be unable to make a breakthrough in the next few weeks, it wasn't difficult to foresee the Minister demanding him to take Sesshomaru on several of his longer operations to keep an eye on him. Being single and alone with time on his hands, he could see how he would be Sesshomaru's default sitter. If Harry had to put up with someone for extended periods of time, he'd rather be in the company of someone he tolerated, lack of personality notwithstanding. Their brief tenure could be a mutually-beneficial partnership, with both parties learning from the other.

He'd have to test Sesshomaru's abilities sometime, to gauge how much of a threat or asset he'd be in battle situations if it ever came to that. His skin crawled with anticipation.

Fully clothed, he turned the iron door handle and groggily lumbered out. The steam that had been in the bathroom whooshed out into the cold main corridor, and he shivered from the iciness permeating from the polished floorboards beneath his bare feet. In an upright position, sliding on his socks, he almost toppled over when Kreacher appeared with a pop.

"Master!" Kreacher greeted, "Mr Kingsley's told Kreacher to give Master Harry a fire message after Master was drawing his bath. He says 'thank you for the heads-up' and he's gotten you's a 'few leaves of absence. To make progress.' But Master must go back to his real job soon with or without the foul beast if Master wants his pension."

The house-elf looked so ridiculously happy to have relayed the Minister's missive Harry couldn't find it within himself to rebuke him for insulting their guest. "Thank you, Kreacher," he said finally. "I'll have to talk to him and Hermione later. Are there any more messages or post that arrived?"

"Kreacher burned the nasty mail," Kreacher answered dutifully with a wicked grin. "Master Harry did not see them. The good ones are left on the kitchens. If Master and guest wants a light breakfast."
Harry's lips trudged up into a smirk. Earlier into his lordship, he'd convinced Kreacher to burn all the marriage contracts and proposals and salacious posts before it got to him. It had allowed Lord Potter Black Peverell to maintain a threshold of innocence were the more respectable families behind some of the posts insistent to know why he hadn't responded. "Depends. What is our guest's status?"

Those great bulbous orbs blinked. "Awake. Like Master Harry was the whole night."

He winced. "That I was, Kreacher. I must look frightful, if you could tell. Do we have any phials of Invigoration Draught in the pantry? If not, a Vitamix Potion or Girding Potion could still do the trick. I don't want to fetch Lord Sesshomaru looking like this."

Kreacher bobbed his head eagerly, his large ear flaps smacking into his face. "Kreacher shall bring Master his potion to the dining table." Bowing lowly, he made to disappear when a thought occurred to him. With slight hesitance, he posed, "Shall Master's guest eat his breakfast rare?"

"That'd be nice," Harry confirmed, his brows furrowing. Seeing Kreacher wring his cassock in frustration, he realized that was not the house-elf had been asking. His eyes softened. "Oh! You mean…Kreacher, I'll be alright. Lord Sesshomaru said a demon's appetite is not like ours, but I'd seen him eat so I guess we could provide a little of everything for him, just in case. Bring fruit too after you set the table. I have a theory I want to test out."

"…Shall Kreacher bring Master's guest to him?"

The house-elf looked like he'd rather be handed clothes than ordered to fetch the magical creature, but he had offered out of duty. With a wry smile, Harry directed, "I appreciate your concern, Kreacher, but no thanks. I worry he's going to think you as a chew toy or as his sword practice. After you've done a good job restoring Grimmauld, I don't think the Noble House of Black can afford losing its most dedicated servant. Everything looks new and spotless every time I return." It made it easier to pretend it was an estate he'd earned from his own right and not inherited from his godfather's will. He looked closely at Kreacher's face. "Is there something else you wanted to tell me?"

Fat drops of tears were held captive at the corners of Kreacher's wide, shining eyes as he seemed to physically swell from the compliments paid, yet doubt and insecurity warred on the old house-elf's face. Picking at the frayed hem of his cassock, he opined, "Master has been most kind to everyone. But Master forgets Master's guest is a foul beast. Master needs to be forceful."

When Harry's mouth twisted down from what the house-elf thought to be for his inexcusable suggestion, Kreacher cried, "Forgive Kreacher! Kreacher forgets his place!" Before Harry could stop him, with a deeper bob at the waist the weepy house-elf vanished from sight.

The wizard carded a hand through his messy locks, staring in amazement at the spot the house-elf vacated. As the Lord Black, he certainly could order his household servant back and order him not to inflict self-punishment. But then, like Dobby, the house-elf would think of him as a messiah and feel even worse. Then the severity of the penance would escalate, and Harry definitely didn't want that. He covered his face, trying to will away the ball of guilt in his chest.

Smothering Kreacher with kindness had its advantages and its disadvantages. Certainly there was no chance to contest Kreacher's loyalty, not after Harry's rise in rank and what he'd done to raise the House of Black name back from the murky depths of disgrace. Not to mention he was, in Kreacher's eyes after the pitiful house-elf decided to make the best of his forced fealty, the next best living replacement of his dear mistress Walburga.

Muttering ill things into his gloves, he took up the stairs with light footfalls, careful not to wake the
sleeping portrait nearby, who still screamed insults at him but sometimes railed about how asinine a thick half-blood like him could think to compose himself as a proper Black lord when Sirius could not. Fortunately the wizard excelled in the Stealth and Tracking portion of the Auror Training, meaning he did not have the clumsy tendency of the late Nymphadora Tonks to trip over the troll leg umbrella stand—which functioned as Walburga's alarm—in the foyer.

Upon reaching the third landing, Harry used his intuition to seek out Sesshomaru, uncertain if his guest had stayed put or decided to explore his new environment. In the Minister's Office yesterday, Harry's Japanese companion had done something to him, something that made his magic feel... stranger that it already had been. In the end he had determined it wasn't anything serious, but his heightened awareness of the demon lord was discombobulating. If he concentrated, he could detect that alien brand of magic beckoning him in the direction of... Buckbeak's old room.

The temper that he'd dampened threatened to overload his rational mind once more. With an annoyed exhale, he dug his nails into his palms and thought about calming subjects. Sweeping his gaze to the exposed crack, Harry could make out past the door hanging marginally ajar that the bed in his master bedroom was unmade. The wizard repressed the urge to roll his eyes.

Although he knew the demon had sharp hearing—he was going to find the limits of that, to be sure—it was courteous to warn someone before barging in. Bringing his gloved fist to the door, he rapped the wood sharply, to alert Sesshomaru he only had a few seconds to make himself decent.

After an awkward beat, shivers ran down his back as the deep timbre on the other side invited him to come in.

There was something compelling observing the walking, breathing historical figure trying to relate and work out what he and contemporary wizards took for granted.

At the breakfast table, with the candle lit between them Harry was engrossed in secretly watching the royal dog demon finally give into his curiosity and sample what Kreacher had set out for them, after Harry had explained patiently they needed to know what would be acceptable fare in case they ever were in the situation where they had no choice but to dine on Muggle or wizard cuisine. The demon had previously looked at the spread with obvious disdain and voiced in traditional Japanese that Harry's generosity was a waste, repeating what he'd said the night before about a daiyōkai's appetite. The Head Auror had shrugged, informing him whether or not Sesshomaru chose to humor his concerns and provide him a frame of reference was entirely up to the demon lord, but they weren't in a hurry to leave when he had posts to sort through. He'd indicated to the small pile gathered at the head of the table.

Hiding behind the latest *Daily Prophet*, Harry found it ironic that the order the royal inuyōkai set out sampling the dishes was the same sequence Harry demonstrated eating to show his guest that they weren't poisoned. He'd discerned, when not eating raw meat, Lord Sesshomaru had a light palate and despised chocolates, preferring foods at their natural states with the exception of candied fruits and nuts and Harry's own favorite treacle tarts. He avoided the wackier foodstuff, abhorred spices, and refused to touch wizard fare.

Harry accredited it to Sesshomaru's demonic heritage and to his suspicion that Japanese diet of back then was often simple and bland. He supposed he should accept his theory about fruit being alright to the demon's appetite being partially confirmed. Just as he emptied the last drops of the draught into his gullet, a pain-glazed Kreacher popped in with a little slightly familiar owl with a flattened, hawk-like head balanced on top of his cranium and a colorful letter in its beak.

"Master," Kreacher said wobblingly, looking very miserable, "youse have a letter."
The dog demon divested his attention from the foreign dish he'd been scrutinizing and fixed both Harry and Kreacher with an eerie stare. Pretending not to notice, Harry folded the newspaper neatly into a tiny square and set it and the phial aside with the magazines and official letters he'd skimmed for relevant material and to catch up on what he'd missed from his latest intercontinental jaunt. The letter from Ginevra remained untouched. Coming around the table, he gently prised the owl's talons from Kreacher's flesh. As thanks, he closed the small puncture marks on Kreacher's flesh with a tap of his wand and dismissed him with a not-so-subtle hint for him to take the rest of the day off to recuperate.

Scanning the contents, Harry absently fed the owl—the Lovegood's messenger apparently, according to the letterhead—crumpled pieces of bacon. By the time he got to the bottom of the letter, from his peripheral vision he saw the demon lord's tall form had leaned in and was attempting to outstare the little owl on the wooden countertop. Fighting a smile, Harry illuminated, "I'm sure you remember the blond bloke we met yesterday at the Ministry. This is his family's personal owl. We wizards and witches use owls and birds capable of long distance flight as our message carriers. Mr Lovegood wants to meet us at Hagrid's hut for the interview I promised him; y'know near the forest we visited earlier."

Lifting his gaze from the owl, Sesshomaru divided a long, thoughtful look between the wizard and his wand before candidly stating, "The sorcery this Hari's packmate casted has ceased. It is needless to keep this Sesshomaru in the dark."

"Oh!" His eyes widened. He lifted the Holly wand, feeling a pang of understanding when the muscles underneath the kimono tensed. "Sorry about that. Hold still."

After it was done, with a contrite expression he added apologetically in English, "The translation spell can only cover so much and is a poor substitution for actual mastery of a language. But lest you manage to learn our language, I suggest you come to me or Hermione to reapply the spell daily. If you want, I can send you instructive aid." When the dog demon remained apathetic, Harry sighed and continued, "Mr Lovegood personally requested you to come, Lord Sesshomaru. If I end up speaking for you throughout, he'll think something is up. I'll try to make this as short as possible, if you can't stand him. But making him happy is paramount to having our access to his daughter remaining unhindered."

"Do as you will," Sesshomaru said passively in his equally accented English, redirecting his attention to the letter in Harry's hands. With a small frown, he posed, "This Hari's packmate...is in a fragile condition, but is tasked to research methods to send this Sesshomaru back to his Western Lands. Should she not receive assistance from her alpha and her mate?"

For a moment Harry's mind drew a blank, and then he remembered despite his well-bred demeanor Sesshomaru was a magical creature from feudal times. He couldn't smack his forehead.

"We shouldn't underestimate her research skills," he said slowly, tiptoeing around the hint of sexism detected from Sesshomaru's carefully formed words. "I know she's pregnant, but if she wants to help neither I nor Ron could stop her from doing what she does best. Considering I'm very high-profile, if I start asking questions people will start noticing. Hermione, on the other hand, she has a reputation that works in our favor. The Minister has good intentions, but Hermione is always one step above everyone else and for some odd reason she's very territorial about who to include in her investigations. She's already acquired few texts about Japanese demonology and culture she's also going to make copies of and send over to us. We're hoping to find a record of your existence."

And of his exploits, so they could use that to check their actions and flow of information.

While he had been updating him of their status, Sesshomaru had studied him with a keen, hawkish
discernment to indicate he'd been following along. Yet his expression remained disbelieving that a pregnant witch, let alone a woman, would be that capable. "This Hari is confident in his packmate's skills."

A genuine smile stretched across the wizard's mouth; in the back of his mind he knew, horrible as it sounds, it made him look disarming and trustworthy. Stroking the head of the owl nuzzling against his fingers, he agreed, "Very confident. I have placed my honor and wellbeing in her hands, and we both have come out alive and better from our established faith in our individual abilities."

"You are mistaken if you believe a similar accord exists within all parties."

The smile waned and the antipathy he felt for their forced living arrangements and all that entitled reared its ugly head. Staring atop of the owl's head, for one indecisive moment of silence, his awareness that he was harboring an ancient detached sovereign in his estate came crashing into him like a bucketful of ice. He felt a wash of dismay. Kreacher's words resurfaced in his mind and now seeing the purpose behind the house-elf's words, Harry could feel the change come over him as he lapsed to the mask Lord Potter Black Peverell donned as his public image. Never had he been so glad there was a physical obstacle between them.

In a deliberately controlled tone, he murmured, "I agree, personally we have long ways to go. Trust is not as easily given between two lords of their own wills and philosophies. We both live our separate lives yet you are forced to be dependent on me and I am forced to provide for you. Also you are a creature of myth, romanticized by Muggle and Asian cultures. Today's religious westerners and Muggle-borns fancy demons to spawn from hell. And unlike some other magical creatures, we haven't written legislation that'd grant you amenity from Light wizards. If word gets out, it's not hard to imagine you'd be hunted and persecuted as a Dark Creature under decree of the International Confederation of Wizards, unfortunately. That is a sad end for someone who has lived as long as you have."

Sesshomaru's silent, indulgent air registered in his brain and Harry was pleased other than that the demon lord showed no negative reaction to his perceived threat. That emboldened him to voice aloud: "Please don't misunderstand. Believe me or not, this is not an elaborate hoax to entrap or purify you. The magical community simply hasn't progressed very far in spite of our efforts."

Dropping his gaze, unaware baggage accompanied his next few words he also disclosed, "Unlike some people, I try to reserve judgment before I condemn someone. Unlike the Minister, I won't even try to make you conform into our societal mold of what is right and wrong."

"You are very presumptuous to think you could overpower this Sesshomaru primarily," the baritone drawled with a clear warning embedded within.

"Ah, sorry, I didn't mean to sound presumptuous," Harry backtracked, thinking quickly about how to salvage the situation. Sensing the rising tension, the small owl beneath his fingers shrunk into itself, trying to disappear from sight. Harry peered down at it with a pitying expression. "It's not that difficult to suss out your general personality and character."

Setting the small owl aside where it could decide to flee or not, he said calculatingly, "Again, I implore you to remember I bear you no ill will. To attack you after all the trouble we've gone though would be counterproductive. Having been in your company these past few days, it'd be remiss of me to forego you aid for something that isn't your fault."

Avada Kedavra green glimmered like hard emeralds, luminous in the dark. With the flap of wings taking off in their background, his voice lowered he warned, "But you are in my time, in a territory where I am familiar with the underlying mechanism of society. You don't have to like my colleagues
but you will listen to me. As long as you don't get in my way or do anything that force me to take
action, my estate will be made welcome to you. I shall assist you with all the power in my disposal.
And I will get you home. All I ask is your continued cooperation and patience and that you continue
to exercise restraint."

Twin pools of molten gold equally glowed under their dim lighting, meeting the challenge with
interest. Feathers drifted down from the air in between the two lords. As if proclaiming his side of a
verbal contract, the daiyōkai declared, "We possess similar beliefs. For now, this Sesshomaru
willingly accommodate your needs but make no mistake." Straightening up, he gazed into the Head
Auror's dark expression head-on. "It is this Hari who has a responsibility to this Sesshomaru. Only as
long as this Sesshomaru remains here, as long as this Hari resides in my favor, this pact will stand."

"Understandable." Harry smiled grimly. "I'll concede...were I in your situation, with nothing but
your grace and leniency to buoy myself I doubt you would expect any different of me."

Given discipline, this Hari could manipulate the most strong willed of yōkai, this Sesshomaru
determined. Staring at the junction between the wizard's shoulder blades, he mentally pieced together
all Hari revealed and the words not said aloud prior to Apparating outside Hogwarts grounds. They
all culminated in a decree for Sesshomaru to accept Hari's dominion without challenge, but then the
green-eyed daiyōkai acknowledged he understood how difficult it was for the royal inuyōkai who
had been an alpha of his own right. To dare voice the intimation the Lord of the Western Lands
wouldn't treat him with the honor and generosity this Hari had provided him both served as an
implied insult and proved his deft hand at exploitation. The wording was persuasive, if a bit
loquacious and roundabout, but it still served its purpose getting his message across.

He'd been staring at the castle with an unimpressed look and upon noticing his scrutiny, after fighting
an amused smile, Hari had told him they'll have to leave the full tour for later once he was sure this
Sesshomaru was not a threat to the children. He'd given the green-eyed daiyōkai a poisonous look
and Hari bravely returned a cynical expression, a reaction which rattled the primal part within this
Sesshomaru.

Were he to pretend to adhere to this Hari, his fictitious subservience would be enough to derail the
contemporary hanyous and humans from entertaining dangerous thoughts. His gaze resettled on the
stonemasonry of the two small huts adjoined together, glowering at the distant building as if he
blamed the poor construction for landing him in this demeaning state, for Hari's doubt in him.

"This Sesshomaru has a human charge that's stayed by this Sesshomaru's side," he divulged at one
point, incapable of overlooking the slight against his honor.

Hari's measured gait slowed. He asked nonchalantly, "Oh?"

He remained silent. While they grew closer to their destination, Sesshomaru was deliberating the pros
and cons of revealing more of his private life. This volatile situation was not unlike the political feud
that arose between two historic demon lords he'd read about from his sire's scrolls. But unlike the
historic feud, Sesshomaru was given an opportune fortune to discover the future, if he played his
cards right. His chance mostly hinged on his benefactor's mood and continued goodwill.

"What is your ward's name?" Hari spoke up again, this time with genuine curiosity raised.

Molten gold peered aside at the tolerant face that for once was gracing him with an emotion other
than apathy and misgivings. The reward of reconciliation and renewed respect would be beneficial
and outweighed the hefty price of having his perceived omnipotence being chipped away. This once,
he could swallow his pride to gain the upper hand of their psychological warfare. Deciding to take
the plunge, unaware a twinge of warmth crept into his tone, he finally answered, "Rin."

To acknowledge those that bound this Sesshomaru with ties of affection was equivalent to sharing his weakness with an opponent. Yet Hari was reared with human sentiment. After his deliberate confession, he could feel the demonic energies between them shift back into a semblance of the same grudging respect that had transpired between the two daimyōkais.

He honestly couldn't care if people found out about his pedigree, but it seemed to matter to this Hari. The prospective prejudice was a concern for his transitory pack alpha, and Sesshomaru would think him weak were he not reminded of similar concerns that plagued him when his sire took a human as his mate and impregnated her. With a restrained sniff, he peered around the grounds-keep, taking in the winter squashes growing in the little garden below the doorstep and the general lack of security around the hut. Drops of mildew followed alongside their delicate curves, appearing as transparent pearls scant seconds away from slithering down into the soil. Under the robust smell of wet earth, a collective strong rank of peasants and other game birds and beasts once making their homes here amassed under his nose, muddling all the other scents that might've made themselves known to the royal inuyōkai.

Quietly observing their surroundings, he did not miss when Hari knocked on the door, announcing their arrival to the half breed within. There was a scuffle of bare feet pattering against the floorboards and when the door swung open, from the proximity a blast of unidentified chemicals and enhanced smell of flowers struck him like a blow and dazed his olfactory senses.

"One step back, and two steps forward," a light and airy, childlike voice spoke up with a tint of negativity. "I suppose that's better than how we started off."

His eyes watering, he could barely make out a blur of waist-length, dirty blonde curls styled haphazardly with gaudy hair ornaments that nearly overwhelmed the small pale face it was shrouding. Blinking rapidly to clear his sight, his golden gaze focused on a wide-set of silvery eyes staring up at them absentmindedly, as if her mind was at a distance. He recognized the elaborateness of the Keicho kosode which was decorated with chrysanthemum and seven treasures textile embroidered with traces of applied gold leaf against the dyed reddish-orange silk to belong to someone of high financial station. The fact that it was damask silk—not satin or worse—and were weaved with hints of imperial colors garnered his interest. She wore an unorthodox necklace and earrings that contradicted her regal image. Sesshomaru looked to Harry impatiently for insight on what to do with their newest accompaniment.

"Luna?" Hari aired softly, disbelievingly, his polite mask slipping away like water. He too blinked repeatedly and he tried in vain to stop his nose from scrunching up. With a slightly strangled sigh, he asked, "Why do you smell like you took a dive in a bathful of flowers?"

"Today felt like a special day. I apologize if it's a bit strong. Rolf got it for me and. Well." She shrugged carelessly. "Lovegood Luna, milords. I was expecting your company."

The female smiled and immediately bobbed a curtsey, looping a foot behind her ankle delicately. Hari returned their introductions. Straightening up, she hopped aside and sought them to come in with a slightly dreamy cast in her invitation, which concerned Sesshomaru. Tilting her head, she shared, "Sorry Daddy couldn't come. I insisted."

She shut the door behind them ominously.

"You insisted?" There was an odd inflection in the green-eyed daimyōkai's dulcet accent, one that the hanyou also picked up.
The female shook her head and requested them to please make themselves comfortable, gesturing to the roundtable in the middle of the hut's one living quarter. She'd teetered dangerously and tripped once in the short distance it took to reach the table. Ham and pheasants were strung in yarn from the ceiling. In the corner was a massive futon with a patchwork quilt that looked too big to have belonged to the female. The windows were painted shut, much to the lords' twin dismay. Once they took their seats—Sesshomaru found it odd to be sitting ceremoniously on the furniture instead of kneeling, considering their humble environment—with her attention divested in the empty air between the two alphas, she pushed the six teacups—a set of three for each—with transparent liquid within to them and said, "Please, drink. I had Hagrid heat up our refreshments before he left to teach class. It'll help the shock you've both been in these past few days."

Hari frowned, hands automatically curling around a glazed ceramic. "We've been in shock?" he parroted. Similarly the inuyōkai shared his skepticism.

"Everyone deals with shock differently. The only way you can tell, I guess, is that they're not acting fully themselves." Her protuberant eyes clouded with thought. She shifted in her gigantic wooden seat, adjusting her long sleeves on the table to avoid getting the dampened tea leaves on the beautiful material. She smiled absently, sweetly. "If you weren't, Harry, you wouldn't have missed a lot of the doors now open to you. You've always liked linearity. Sadly a knack for risk and luck seem more to your calling."

Her mouth descended into a small pout, appearing like the picture of a princess disparaged by her lord. "And you wouldn't have forgotten to comment on my dress. I went through great troubles dressing up for you two."

"Er." Hari's eyes widened to the size of dinner plates. "It-it's very pretty!"

A light, tinkling bell-like giggle escaped from her, and she shook her head with suppressed mirth. "It's alright, Harry. I was kidding. You've never been good at these sorts of things." Lowering her voice, she shared conspiratorially, "Daddy and I suspect you've been bitten by a rare Mackled Malaclaw. You've been unlucky for a great number of your life."

"Err."

Dropping her gaze at their untouched cups, she raised a pale eyebrow. Upon seeing her disappointment, Hari took a small polite sip of the light, fragrant rice wine Sesshomaru had detected, that unlike hers, was inside theirs. The green-eyed daiyōkai immediately spluttered and coughed from the surprised swallow he'd taken.

"I beg pardon, Harry, for not telling you. I'd been to Japan before. They have a hilarious culture and programs. Hm, an enlightening trip actually. You've had Odgen's finest, so I thought you should be able to tolerate their sake's low alcoholic content." Beaming sunnily at him, she lowered her head demurely and peered at them through a thick screen of lashes. She requested, "Please, milords, I simply served you alcohol in hopes of helping you relax, not to get you drunk. There's no need to raise your guards. I'm a humble wizarding naturalist. I don't enjoy the silence very much."

"Get to your point," Sesshomaru spoke up, tired of dancing around the real issue. His brows knitting, he ignored Hari at his side who was issuing him with a startled but reproving look. Tasting the perfume in the back of his throat he said stiffly, "You know something we don't."

Taking a swallow of her tea, she looked at him with a strange perceptiveness beyond her physical years. Nursing her drink, she fidgeted in her seat and she murmured conversationally, "I've heard rumors Harry brought back a magical creature. Hearing that, I had to see the ambassador myself. I had to leave my fiancé behind in Ireland, alone, with my relatives." She shook her long mane,
muttering, "Poor Rolf."

"This Sesshomaru has heard you may have answers," he restated, disregarding the gratuitous information.

"Ohh," she said, in a slightly sing-song tone. Glancing up, she beamed. "You're quite good at being patronizing. It's rather hard to say no or go against you. No wonder you are formidable."

"People think that?" Hari demanded, depositing the cup on the roundtable with a muted thud. He not so-surreptitiously pushed it far away from him.

Sensing her guests' moods taking a detour, she said soothingly, "No, no. Not yet. A healthy dose of fear goes hand in hand with commanding respect, I find. It's the makings of any good leader actually. I've heard a lot while I've been away. You're still in good standing with the magical community though." Tilting her head, her lids lowered half-mast as she entreated, "This conversation is as cold and slow as your relationship. Harry, why don't you reintroduce me to Lord Sesshomaru? I don't think my reception from before did the atmosphere justice. We won't feel comfortable talking when you two are like this."

Brows lifted into his fringe, with a searching look Hari ultimately complied with her whim. Gesturing ostentatiously at the female hanyou, he spoke indulgently, "Lord Sesshomaru, this is Lovegood Luna, my friend from my formal educational years."

"Ravenclaw," she added.

"Right. She was from a different House." Hari peered curiously at her royal getup, clearly unaccustomed to the sight. "But she's trustworthy and brave and smart. All and all, she's brill. Luna's always been a one of a kind witch."

"Such kind words. Thank you, Harry. You are exceptional also."

Hari's elbows slid from underneath him, and he nearly face-vaulted into the tabletop. Forest green orbs snapped up. It was a curious reaction. Before Sesshomaru could come to a conclusion, the female suddenly laughed uproariously and drew both of their attention.

"Hee….it's nice to know things…haven't changed," she exclaimed, gasping for breath. Doubled over her tea, her delicate frame—dwarfed by the miles and miles of luxurious fabric—shook with hilarity.

Hari's doe-eyed look relaxed. "Yeah," he sighed breathlessly, straightening up in his seat. There was tenderness to his expression that wasn't there before. "It hasn't."

Under his throbbing migraine, Sesshomaru studied their interaction vigilantly. This Hari and this female—it was hard to form a concrete analysis with that damnable, headache-inducing perfume—intermingling had a distinct air of nostalgia and closeness that was not as prominent as the other hanyous they'd come across. The heiress of the man-child of yesterday had a similarly pure, childlike simplicity to her that he wouldn't be above venturing to say resembled Rin. He stared down into his untouched cup, peering at his reflection interplayed against the rippling surface.

He wasn't sure what game she was playing. Her demeanor and words were common and unrefined, yet this female was dressed to indicate a high station or favor with someone of a higher station. The rice wine she served them was also unusual. The daiyōkai wasn't sure if Hari or this Luna recognized sake production was rare and was therefore typically considered a measure of wealth and status. Earlier Lord Hari Jēmuzu Pottā provided a banquet for this Sesshomaru but the selection of food was so foreign and far from what he'd been used to he'd nearly retreated from his improvisation, from his
strategy to gather intelligence of how he'd wean Hari off of possibly the addictiveness and/or comfort of human food. He wasn't surprised sweetened treats were offered to him, despite their scarcity and fee most peasants weren't able to afford.

It also reminded him that he had yet to see a farmer or laborer working any field or crops, so the availability of their expensive fare was puzzling.

"Is there a problem?"

Sesshomaru shifted from his thoughts upon Hari's enquiry. Peering at his company, instead he observed aloud, "Unlike this Hari's packmate, she does not smell like yours."

"You're able to smell her over that perfume?" Hari reiterated skeptically, leaning back in his seat to make a point.

"As alpha, this Hari's protective claim would conquer all other scents no matter how strong they are," He tilted his head, slightly bewildered the young lord did not know. Then it occurred to him not all yōkai had a heightened sense of smell as an inuyōkai's. Repressing a frown, he explicated, "That is why this Sesshomaru could detect the beta was one of this Hari's pack, despite her being claimed by a mate. Yet this female does not have that distinction."

"I was never part of the Golden Trio," the female gasped, barely having composed herself. Her head lain atop of the wooden table, turning on a cheek she peered unwaveringly up at them. "But that's a nice thought, to belong to Harry that is. He is, after all, my best friend. I don't think I'd mind the station."

"Oh…Luna…" Hari's voice soured with guilt. His bright forest green orbs dulled in sadness, he murmured, "All you had to do was ask. I've always been fond of you. You're like the little sister I never had."

She smiled mysteriously, appearing unaffected by his words. Yet disappointment and frustration was laced deep within her yōki, with tendrils of her demonic energy managing to escape. Before Sesshomaru could make sense of it, the faint traces of energy that'd been licking their way up Sesshomaru's revealed skin were recollected back. A pair of molten gold orbs narrowed.

Changing the subject, the female pup asked in her slightly melodic, whispery voice: "That reminds me, I've had lovely tea with Andy recently. We've gotten quite close while you've been away. She makes nice biscuits. One of our subjects was about your godson, Teddy." Canting her head, she sat up in a strange way and beamed innocently, her cheeks flushed from earlier. "Because the baby's due soon, he'd been barred from staying over at the Burrow. He's missed you, Harry."

Hari bit his lower lip, looking away to his side. His fists clenched.

"I think you should consider fire-calling Andy."

"Why?" he asked softly.

Leaning over the table, the female reached for Hari, placing a gentle hand over his gloved knuckles. "Why?" she repeated, peering up into his shuttered gaze. "Surely you know the reason why I care."

The wizard looked down at their enjoined hands.

"Think of your godson. Think of Teddy. He hasn't seen his godfather in ages. You've been so busy with your Auror duties and being in different countries, you've never had the chance to pay him a visit."
The lord appeared properly chastised.

"I don't mean to be rude," she smiled and patted his clenched hand, "but don't you think that's a bit selfish of you?"

The edges of Sesshomaru's mouth threatened to twitch up. Beneath her childish demeanor, she was a hanyou who could unconsciously wind Hari around her little finger. He should feel affronted for this Hari but the equally childish part of him felt vindictive glee for the younger daiyōkai getting his comeuppance. It took great effort to curb his growl. He swallowed his finger-serving of rice wine, enjoying the nostalgic small burn in the back of his throat. He didn't miss the pleased look that crossed the female's face.

She switched her attention back to the subject at hand. Upon reading the lord's hesitancy, she frowned. She reached up and tapped his cheek. "Oh, Harry. None of that, you hear? There's nothing to be cautious of leaving me behind with Lord Sesshomaru." Taking Hari's startled gaze in stride, she continued, "I did fine in the war, didn't I? I can handle myself. Didn't you say you trusted me? So trust me when I say I'm curious about dog demons, especially one of Lord Sesshomaru's reputation and caliber."

Both Hari's and Sesshomaru's semi-casual miens instantly shuttered and they raised their guards up. Taking a calm sip of her cooling tea, she whispered genteelly, hiding her little, knowing smile, "Is it really that hard to believe? It's my job to believe in the existence of many creatures that few do simply because they have forgotten about them." She placed her cup down and tapped her blunt nails against the ceramic in thought. With pursed lips, she informed them merrily: "Don't be like the bigoted sheep, milords. We are not authentic gods. Rather we are shades of their munificence and charity. We have to accept changes, good or bad, because they are often for a greater purpose."

"Luna," Hari's mouth descended into a deep grimace, "focus. How is that relevant to how you've come across this information about Lord Sesshomaru?"

Her features were kept absently pleasant even as Hari clasped her hands between his as a physical play to get her to confess her supplemental knowledge. Humming in the back of her throat, she peered down distractedly at the cold sunbeam that fell over the well-worn grooves of the table. "You two hear, but you don't listen." She pouted, pulling her hands away and tucking them in her lap. "I said it's a part of my job as a Magizoologist to know all sorts of creatures, demons aside. I've come across a mated pair actually."

"Who?" Sesshomaru demanded, sitting up in his full height. His mind ran through all the mated couples he'd known or were registered by his wide information networks. His gaze dropped to her kosode. "They are the ones who gifted you your present dress."

"Quite astute, Lord Sesshomaru. Yes, they were very nice with their hospitality. Who they are, unfortunately, I can't tell you." She shook her head regretfully. "They like their privacy. They're actually quite well-hidden away."

"Well?" Hari stated. He straightened up in his seat. He said cautiously, "Do you know the full backstory of the ambassador?"

"I know he's not actually an ambassador," she stated calmly. "And I know he's not from this time. And that the Bone Eater's Well is a time travelling portal."

A blanket of silence descended upon the three. The roll of wind gusted around their cottage, whizzing and blowing against the stonework and rotten wooden beams, rattling the windows. Both green and gold stared wide-eyed at the pale silvery gaze.
The first to break the stillness, the female made a flippant sound and she flapped her hand in the air dismissively, an action reminiscent of her sire's. "Hermione made sure to update me before I came. Your secret's still safe, if that's what you doubt. Please, relax, milords. I wouldn't want you to get wrinkles. You have such pretty faces."

"What else has Hermione informed you?" Hari said numbly, disregarding her compliment.

"She thinks something's stopping the well from being utilized if it is what she thinks it is." She brought a hand to her cheek, genuinely curious by his cautionary tone. "Is it so surprising that I know this?"

His eyes narrowed. "I find it surprising she told you this much when she hasn't updated me of her findings yet."

"Ah." She nodded distractedly. Her pale gaze intent on the closed door behind them, she murmured, "I can help you both with the cultural aspects, but I can only do so much. You'll have to take my advice and run with it. Or at least the ones you choose to listen to. I still have to do preliminary research. Hmm, that being said.…"

The female reached into her sleeve and pulled out a small velvet pouch, dropping it in Hari's hands. "Here. Go talk to Andy, Harry. It'll be like ripping a Band-Aid off of the wound. It'll be better than prolonging the torture, don't you think? I promised Daddy I would interview Lord Sesshomaru. You being here makes him more tight-lipped, dattebyo."

The younger daiyōkai blinked owlishly, his fingers automatically curling around the pouch deposited. He surveyed the specks of glittery ash that spilled out over his leather gloves. He looked up slowly. "This is Floo powder."

"Yes, that's what it'd be," she agreed, also stating the obvious. "Sadly Hagrid's mantle here is broken. You'd have to go outside to the other quarter. Shoo. Lord Sesshomaru has nothing to fear from me. We'll be done with your cover story we'll be printing in the Quibbler. Having a different angle from our competitors will make ours stand out from the rubbish out there."

When Hari hesitated once more, remaining in his seat, her protuberant eyes widened and grew slightly misty. Her lips quivering, she said sadly, "You were blowing hot air after all. You don't trust me."

"No, no! It's not that!" The chair scooted back with a muffled screech. The pouch was clasped tightly in a white-knuckled grip. "I-I'll go fire-call them right now." Pivoting on his heels, he marched to the door. Just as he was about to cross the threshold, he hesitated. Not looking back, he asked, "Are you going to be alright?"

Sesshomaru wasn't sure if the question was directed to him or the female across from him. His lips parted, he'd been ready to dismiss Hari's concerns when the female sighed, "We'll be fine, Harry. Please. Leave. Stop delaying the inevitable."

With jerky movement, Hari did what he was told and walked out, leaving them alone. Sesshomaru hadn't realized his attention had been divested in the spot the green-eyed daiyōkai had vacated until the female exclaimed breathlessly, "Don't mind him. He's usually not this rude. He just doesn't know what to make of milord yet. That man...he's been a product of society so long he doesn't know what to do sometimes if there's no one to tell him."

Golden pools stilled and refocused on the female, who fixed him with a knowing smile and a dimmed twinkle in her eye like she knew the punch line to her deprecating black humor. Raising a
brow, he directed, "Explain."

She took another sip of her tea, smiling broadly.

"Why are you smiling?" he demanded, feeling a sudden pang of déjà vu. Frowning, he set the odd sensation away and continued, "I simply asked a question. I don't care. I'm just curious."

Her absent expression cleared and a tender look flitted across her eyes, which instantly made him wary. Taking a deep breath, she set aside the cup and brought her hands to the table, sliding them in her long sleeves. She entreated, "Lord Sesshomaru, I think of him as my older brother. You will make this girl very happy if she may hear your honest designs on her Lord Harry."

Her voice was soft, but there was a hint of steel in it. Sesshomaru knew very well that the female hadn't meant to offend him with her insinuation, but it was the earnest eyes turned on him that melted his firm resolution to keep silent. "Ri-" he paused, upset that he'd get her address wrong. With her name nonetheless. "Luna," he said stubbornly, making the conscious effort to differentiate the two girls in his mind. "Your prior demonstration showed your knowledge of this Sesshomaru's misfortune."

"A little. But not as much as you think I do, milord," Luna admitted, bowing her head in supplication. She had an odd expression she'd tried to hide. Swinging her feet restlessly, her hands fidgeting in her sleeves, she repeated, "May I know of this Sesshomaru's intentions? I worry about him sometimes."

Sesshomaru was bewildered by her concern. Hadn't he been treating this Hari well-deserved by his station? Evidently not, if she couldn't discern such. He said coolly, almost indulgently, "This Hari is in servitude of this Sesshomaru, as his tribute for allowing this mishap to befall divine royalty. In return of his hospitality, this Sesshomaru shall teach him the responsibilities of our ways."

A foot froze mid-kick as she contemplated his words. She tilted her head again like a bird. Her sleeves brought underneath her chin in a prayer-like formation, at last she asked, "Would this cover correcting Harry's disastrous courting attempts?"

"How freely you share intimate secrets with an outsider."

"No, I don't..." Underneath the heavy material, she slipped two fingers out and held them up against a covered wrist. "In his life, I think he's only seriously considered two females for courting. From what I heard, you've met one of them already. The other one, sadly, things had not worked out."

Her fingers receded back into her sleeves, she continued, "For someone of his station, it's odd that he remains unattached. With his reputation he won't be for long, not if our magical community has anything to say about it."

"You would force him into a political sham of an official mating," Sesshomaru concluded, his mind working at a hundred miles per minute at the gossip she'd been willing to share with him. He was not unfamiliar to the lower yōkais' predilection for gossip-mongering, having seen the use of it to broaden his information networks. This Hari was inoffensive to the eye, young, healthy, powerful, and of good bloodlines. Best of all, he had a semblance of intelligence inside that head of his and had tact. It didn't surprise him the lord was sought-after.

He had not yet seen how Hari would react in combat situations—though he'd gotten a glimpse from their initial confrontation—but he wouldn't put it past several daiyōkais, were Hari a pureblooded demoness in his time, to have snatched the gem up and offer her service in their respective kingdoms.
"Me?" Luna sat up with a jolt. "Oh no, never me. I hope he forgives us for discussing his private life behind his back, but I believe true love and monogamy is best-suited for him, unlike some fellows. You may sneer at my romantic notion, but I'm aware of Harry's predilections. With his history, he needs someone strong to support him. Someone who won't hold him back, who won't judge him, and will always challenge him to push himself. Unlike most people, I have his best interest at heart that even he cannot fathom."

"Hn. Your loyalty to him goes beyond your vassalage."

"I don't judge him for being different." She peeped down at her bare toes, cheeks reddening. "He does the same for me. He looks out for me. I try to do the same or at least provide a small measure of what he has done for all of us."

The inuyōkai surveyed her embarrassment with climbing eyebrows, his previously headache dulling from prolonged exposure to her scent. For Sesshomaru to intervene in a daiyōkai's intimate affairs—which definitely wasn't any of his business—it'd have to be a pressing concern that'd preside over his immediate plan to train Hari into a respectable daiyōkai in the time they had left together. His brows furrowed. He said slowly, "From what you're saying, this Hari has done much for his people. He has an obligation to them you think is beyond his station. You do not approve of what is expected of him."

"People should marry to be cherished," she shrugged. "No matter who you are. At least, that's what I think. Don't you think it'd be a sad existence otherwise? If you're going to be spending the rest of your life with that person, why foster it on deceit and conjured expectations? Love is power, power is survival." The female brought her silk sleeve to her mouth, muffling her next words: "For some time I thought Harry was fated to be with Ginny. Their inevitable destiny changed after battle."

"And you could tell?"

"They're not together, yet everyone else is or will be. Common sense would dictate either he's unlucky, slow in asking, or he's been waiting for someone. I think it's a larger power at play here."

"Your substantiation being…?"

"Old Magic works in mysterious ways. I dabble in a little Divination nowadays. I might not be as skilled as Parvati, but I've had long talks with Firenze about the future. He's very knowledgeable about the unknown."

"Who is this Firenze you speak of?"

Her lips lifted. "He's a centaur who studies astrology, um, stars and constellations and big planetary movements. He was a better Divination teacher than the one Hogwarts had before, in my opinion. The last year I had him, he admitted to me once after inviting me to his colony that he'd seen a change in the stars one stormy night; that 'no longer was the moon alone in its divinity. The moon and lightning had intertwined fates.'" She shrugged, rubbing a silk sleeve against her cheek in thought. "He also admitted he had something to drink before and it might've been the Firewhiskey talking."

"Fire…whiskey?"

"Imagine a spirit very much stronger than sake," she explained gaily. Tapping her toes together in a choreographed rhythm, she aird nonchalantly, "Do you have someone to protect, Lord Sesshomaru?"
All color drained from his face. It was as if a jolt of lightning struck him where he stood, sending tremors up his spine. He felt a chill, then a flush of hot suspicion that surprised even him. "Where did you hear that?" he managed to say stoically, remaining upright. He'd barely kept the feral edge from his voice.

"Hm?" She peered up. "I'm sure that you do, but not in the way your father expected."

His face tightened, and Luna watched with alarm as a golden fire raged in his eyes. Perhaps if she wasn't so near and he'd been in a better mood, he would not have reacted the way he did. One moment he was sitting, the next he was grabbing her by her wrist. The young witch winced as iron-sharp claws bit into her flesh. "How have you come across this information?" he asked softly, mindful of the lord outside. The eyes he turned on her were frighteningly lifeless, for all their heat.

"Bane has placed me under an oath of silence," she whimpered out, biting her lip to stop herself from crying out and alerting Hari outside. Luna dropped into a submissive form, angling her body so that her belly and her pale neck faced his direction. "I can't give anything important away without losing my magic. Please, milord, do not render me incapable of providing you aid. I seek to ally Hari with this Sesshomaru."

He took harsh breaths. Sesshomaru eventually released her, tearing his claws away from her, uncaring of the blood that seeped from her wounds. Immediately casting her sorcery to heal the punctures, Luna rubbed at the already bruising flesh. She watched, concerned, as the tall inuyōkai placed a steadying hand on the table, trying to curb his bared teeth and bringing his handsome face back to the hard, cold silhouette of before.

"I'm sorry I can't say much else," she said in a small voice, making him look up. "I can only push you in the right direction and hopefully give you guidance." She slouched in her seat, vision downcast. "Harry has the means of helping you in your path of conquest. Why him, I do not know, so please do not ask me that. He has no idea I am telling you this. Or any idea of what is in store. He's innocent in all this. So, please, do not ask him of that either."

"You are asking much of this Sesshomaru," he growled, burrowing his claws into the wood. "Without offering a token of faith to believe in your words."

She made another useless attempt at apologizing, but he was so busy rubbing his forehead, trying to will away the invigorated pain that he barely heard her. Eyes conflicted, she at last got to her feet and slowly presented herself before this Sesshomaru. Gauging his cooling temper, she leaned in, wafting more of that atrocious perfume into his face with her immediacy. Her voice hushed, she shared conspiratorially, "I asked my dad for a story once, after I saw him hiding something big from me. Once you have Harry's trust…"

Luna gently placed her hands over Sesshomaru's claws—if he weren't taken aback from the smell, he'd strike her for her forwardness—and she dropped a flimsy piece of golden jewelry onto his palm, curling his fingers shut over it. She withdrew back, taking her smell and her limbs away from immediate striking range.

"…I'd like you to ask him about the Three Deathly Hallows."

Sesshomaru's brows knitted as suspicion and curiosity reared their heads. He turned the shiny bauble over numb claws, studying the triangular eye the trinket depicted. To blanket his interest, he sneered, "You ask another favor of this Sesshomaru."

"It benefits you as well. For now, I would hide that pendant. Many people get the wrong impression from looking at it." Silvery grey orbs settled back on the trinket she'd gifted him. "I'd be asking much
for you to trust me. I can only…"

Breaking off, the female shifted on her feet. She clasped her hands together, looking up at him with impossibly wide eyes whose brightness showed her demonic heritage. "I do not hold your previous actions against you, milord. It was wrong of me to talk about such a sensitive nature. You are in shock. I should not have pried."

"This Sesshomaru is not so easily incapacitated," he disagreed, but he accepted the tribute, securing it under his collar. The delicate metalwork felt icy cold pressed against his skin, the sensation anchoring him, calming him. He shook his claws free from the holes he'd grated into the dark-stained wood.

"Milord, you've been thrown into a different era with no guaranteed way of getting back. Your kingdom may be in disarray. Your family may be frantic getting you back. You are in an unfamiliar land with neutral parties who could change their minds at the flip of a coin. Strangers track your every move and judge you by what you say or do. Our continued cooperation and aid hinges on what Harry ultimately thinks of you. And Harry is not in the right mood exactly." She snapped out of her depressing tirade, blinking at his hardened expression. "All that said you're taking the stress well. To have lasted this long without snapping, your patience is remarkable. I can understand your fluctuating moods."

She released a little sigh that sounded like the breath of a forlorn nightingale. "That plan of yours…I suppose…I approve. Take good care of my Lord Harry. He's lost sight of his path since his mentor died."

He honestly should not care. But the stubborn curiosity borne in all inuyōkai made itself present. Picking the small wooden chips from his claws, he restated as disinterestedly as he could: "This Hari was close to his mentor."

"Dumbledore was more than a Headmaster to him. He was Harry's guide, his magical guardian. He protected Harry, secreted him away, had him fight his battles, and molded him into the man Harry is today." An ugly red flush rose to her pale features. She bought her sleeves to her face and retreated behind them. "He was our unofficial Light Lord," she said, muffled, "ruling for what he believed to be of good intentions. After the Dark Lord's death, Harry had been forced to take up an alpha position. He was the perfect wizard to fix the vacuum of power, despite being trained since birth otherwise."

A startled noise escaped from his throat. Eyes widening, he pressed his claws against his throat, surprised to have such a sound escape from him.

Puzzled silvery gray orbs peeked behind the heavy august silk. "Oh no, please ease your mind from any thoughts of deception, milord. We've told you nothing but the truth. Harry's grown to cherish the prestige our society has readily lauded to him, since that established authority gives him the resources necessary to protect him and set him apart from everybody else. It is his unspoken due for having him fight our battles, for robbing him of his childhood. It is as much of a blessing as it is a curse."

"Indeed." His expression was schooled back into a placid, calculating mask. "Power and prestige can be a double-sided blade. In times of war, sacrifices must be made to gain the upper hand."

"Yes, you would speak from experience." She lowered her hands from her face, her demonic energy still a tightly-restrained, seething boil. "You seek to train Harry? Truly?"

"This Sesshomaru is indebted to this Hari. For his hospitality."
"Is that it?" The miasma around her stilled. Her brightly-colored irises reminded him of the moon reflected on the surface of calm silver lakes. Her voice trembling, she said, "You do not find him interesting? You do not feel compelled to figure him out? If Harry angers you, will you retaliate? If anything happens to him, a war will be waged. And your head will be hunted."

"Careful, girl," he cautioned, his golden pools flashing. "You are speaking above your station."

Luna reared back, as if slapped. Long curls slipped from her lacquered ornaments and winged down to curtain a side of her face. "Heed my words, milord, please. If you have good intentions, be patient. Nothing good will come out of punishing a disobedient creature who does not know, cannot possibly know…"

Gracefully bending over at the waist, her hands at her knees, she kowtowed before the royal dog demon lord. Her sight directed at the floorboards, her eyes burning steel, she said passionately, "Harry will never lose that fire within him. Please do not break his trust, his spirit, his heart! You cannot tame his spirit! Do not take away what makes him wonderfully Harry."

"You seem to be under the impression I will collect my dues from your lord in a dishonorable manner," he ascertained, peering down at her prostrated form with a bored look. Her head was low enough that if he wanted to he could slam his boot on the side of her skull, rendering her out of the count. His eyes narrowed. "Or that this Hari has done something reprehensible to this Sesshomaru."

"It's accidental and a fault from both parties. Equal blame must be shared. I can't tell you what it is. It goes against the conditions set. The fallout needs to happen. I know you are angry at Harry. I saw from the window when you were coming to Hagrid's hut—"

"This Sesshomaru was not angered." He felt like he'd struck gold. All was clear to him now. The rambling ceased. Cautiously, she peered up, her expression torn between disorientation and an unidentifiable emotion. She asked timidly, "You are not angry at Harry?"

He gave her a flat look. All the anticipation built up from her words and actions, which had raised his hackles, were based on one mistaken assumption. His muscles loosened. His discovery of the basis of her mad ramblings was rather anticlimactic.

"Thank Merlin," she breathed, closing her eyes. "For a moment I thought…you will not do anything dishonorable to Harry?"

"You have stated this Hari is the key to aiding this Sesshomaru find the path to supreme conquest," he drawled lazily, having half a mind to chuck the pendant at her head. Luna was a forgetful little girl. "It is as you say. Being in Hari's good graces, this Sesshomaru has access to Hari's information networks and generosity. It'd be foolish of this Sesshomaru to cast away his hospitality."

Until he gained a strong foothold in this world, the daiyōkai was at the tender mercy of Lord Hari Jēmuzu Pottā and other titles he possessed. With his current level of confidence, he'd rather not roam unfamiliar territories in an unfamiliar era without an idea of how to get back to his time.

"You will treat him alright? You swear?" There was an odd lilt in her voice, one that he could not place.

"What a nonsensical request," he scoffed. "Has this Sesshomaru not made himself heard?"

"Yes, milord has," she murmured, straightening up slowly, maneuvering around the length of fabric that constricted her movements. The sedate pace she moved in brought suspicion that she was stalling. She repeated, "You swear? On your honor."
She must be addle-brained. Closing his eyes, he grunted an affirmation.

"Ohh, goody."

Luna struck.

He nearly leapt out of his skin when a thread of powerful yōki suddenly connected him to Luna, briefly surrounding him in blazing heat. The source of the warmth flickered and localized at his claws. Molten gold whirling, he stared wide-eyed at the female, struck dumb by her sudden audacity.

She started to reach for him but changed her mind, halting it in midair. She knelt down and pushing a curl behind her ear, she ceremoniously kissed the top of his boot without a lick of shame or hesitance. Her ready acceptance of her submissive, lower position was a slightly soothing salve to his agitation. He had to strain his ears to hear her whisper, "May Magic be my Witness. I, Luna Lovegood, give my approval over the official sanction between Lord Sesshomaru of the Western Lands and Nippon and his not-yet future Lord Consort Harry James Potter Black Peverell. They'll have my eternal blessings forever long as they remain. So mote it be. So shall it be."

When Harry had come back, he was entreated to an odd scene. They couldn't have looked any different. Hopped atop of the table, with a faint, mischievous air Luna was sipping tea, swinging her legs and tilting her chin up at Sesshomaru's looming, motionless figure. The demon lord, on the other hand, looked like a freight train had run him over. Stopping at the threshold, the wizard asked them what happened, peering between the two with a worried look.

"Oh, nothing, Harry," Luna giggled, cupping her drink in her lap. The shine had returned to her eyes, which wasn't there when she greeted them before. "We were having a pleasant tea party and I found what I needed! My worries and questions have been satisfied. Lord Sesshomaru is most accommodating. Really, he's been a darling humoring me about my talk about planets and whatnot." Kicking her feet up, she added sweetly, "I like Lord Sesshomaru. I can see many great things coming from your alliance. I wish you both the best future."

The ball of anxiety that had buried itself in his chest from leaving her alone with an ancient demon dissipated from her words. Before he could enquire further, he noticed, from the corner of his peripheral vision, the daiyōkai coming back into himself like a stone statue coming to life. Slitted irises blinked once, then twice. And the tall frame shuddered.

"The Quibbler's going to print the interview tomorrow morning. Daddy's going to be thrilled. Oh, that reminds me. I have to pick up dad's pet from a dog kennel later today." She sighed, shaking her head. "I swear. Sometimes I wonder about him. It's like he's the overgrown child our guard dog adopted as its child. I suppose it's nice how some canines can easily accept or adopt children, even children-figures," she said wryly, making Harry's guilt resurface.

Delicately jumping down, she sidestepped around Sesshomaru and skipped over to the Head Auror, bundling the hem of her traditional Japanese garb in her hands to allow for more freedom of movement. She stopped before Harry and before he knew it, she'd deposited in his hands what smelled cloyingly sweet and sticky, its gooey shape wrapped in a large leaf. "Here. For Andy, Harry," Luna said. "It's polite to give gifts when you're visiting. You'd undoubtedly want to get Teddy something too."

She leaned on the tips of her toes and she pressed her lips against his cheek, giving him a fond, sisterly peck. "Be careful now, Harry, not to work yourself to death. The Nargles would have a field day if you keeled over at your age, with nary a monogamous partner yet to support you."
Her oddly-phrased caution drifted into his head and he could feel his lips reluctantly pulled up in a smile. It was comforting that she cared. "You doubt I can take care of myself?" he teased, flicking her cute button nose. "I've been doing that since I was a boy."

She said abruptly, "But you shouldn't have had to, Harry." His gloves stilled by his sides. "Men who think they have nothing to lose think nothing of their morality. Death is no more than turning over from time to eternity but you, Harry, are not ready for that sort of eternity." She hugged him before she left, dazing him with her awful perfume. She left parting words to Sesshomaru that if he had any questions, he should feel free to owl her and that she'd be a better source of information than Hermione.

Harry peered at the place she'd vacated, his hand having been clenched in a fist. Releasing his breath, he thought back with much affection the unspoken rivalry that'd sprouted between the polar opposites with nary a day since their introduction and Hermione's unintended slight against Luna's dad. Sometimes he wondered if they were Fate's gift to him, apologizing for making him the wizarding community's whipping boy. Without looking back, Harry said blithely, "May I ask this Sesshomaru why he has a pensive expression for?"

When his question was paid back with eerie silence, he turned around. The supernaturally bright golden slits were focused on his person with such intensity that it was a wonder he did not burst into flames. Barely restraining himself from taking a subconscious step back, he ducked his head and rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. It was difficult to get a good read on the royal inuyōkai. He could only generalize Sesshomaru's emotive state by the minute changes of magic around him, his words, and whenever Sesshomaru's mask slipped—which was a rarity in itself, he was beginning to discover.

"It occurred to me it's twice I've been able to somewhat read you," he started slowly, hoping whatever mood the dog demon had gotten into was a temporary setback. "It's kind of sad that I consider that progress. You're a tough nut to crack and still are. But I'm an Auror. And good Aurors can usually tell when things are off. I'm sorry if it's off-putting, but it's what I've been trained to do."

Rolling his shoulders in a casual shrug, Harry admitted as offhandedly as he could, "Besides I had a shitty childhood. I learned to read people's faces to get a general idea of what's not being said." As if realizing his attempt at comforting the demon lord was painfully inadequate, since Sesshomaru retained his quietness, Harry also admitted in a low rumble, "Even so I still find a lot to be improved. I'm probably not as experienced as you are, Lord Sesshomaru, at reading people."

Sesshomaru made no reply.

Harry shifted on his feet and bit his lip. It was like being sent to the Headmaster's Office all over again. "I never realized I had many private obligations to settle," he nattered on, a bit conscious of the annoyance that had crept into his tone. Composing himself, he smiled tentatively at Sesshomaru. "I'm sorry I have to drag you around with me, especially involving you in my personal affairs. I promise you after a quick stop with Andromeda and Teddy today I'm going to concentrate on you."

Sometimes Luna had this effect on people; clearly it extended to magical creatures, time traveling lords notwithstanding.

Twisting the shiny foil on the gifts he'd procured for their spontaneous social call, Harry desperately wanted to know what had occurred between Luna and Sesshomaru in the few minutes he'd left them. Behind him trailed the still-brooding demon lord, who occasionally shot Harry's back piercing looks that made the fine hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Sesshomaru hadn't seemed to care for their visit. He seemed more concerned trying to imagine Harry as a hunk of prime meat.
The entire afternoon they spent today, the magical creature had only said one sentence to him and that was asking the wizard if Luna's words were in anyway verifiable.

Confused, he'd informed him that Luna never lied to anyone, along with some other jumble of words he honestly couldn't recall telling him but they had cemented whatever thought Sesshomaru had churning in his mind. As curious as he was, from the quick profiling he'd mentally amassed about the demon lord Harry knew better than to pry. If the magical creature thought it relevant to strike up a conversation or return an answer, he would. Otherwise he stubbornly withheld his tongue and no amount of cajoling could make him budge.

His breath came out in small white puffs in the grey London weather. To stop the chill from reaching the tips of his fingers, Harry stuffed one of his hands in his heavy fleece coat. Before they left, they'd stopped by Honeydukes and later Grimmauld, for Harry to wrap the presents and fetch a scarf and a coat. It was no good to suffer the cold if he didn't dress practically. Kreacher had left a stack of letters on his study, postmarked and sent by Hermione in the afternoon they were gone. Harry kept them inside the lining of his pockets, unopened and begging to be read.

His eyes slid to Sesshomaru covertly. The dog demon seemed alright with the nippy weather, surprisingly, considering the thin fabric of the kimono he wore. Harry supposed the armor and fluffy boa on his shoulder were enough to insulate some of his body heat.

In his ears rung echoes of the soles of their feet, pattering against the cobblestoned route to the Tonks household which was more of a countryside cottage than anything. He could see plumes of smoke from their chimney, signaling there was life in the house. That awareness made him drag out their pace as long as he could without setting off Sesshomaru's suspicions. To fill the silent walk Harry had briefly updated Sesshomaru of Andromeda's and Teddy's identities, stressing the importance of maintaining his ambassador alias and the secrecy of their research.

Sooner then he liked they reached the end of the fence, and around the corner was the stone and mortar house. They climbed the porch and stood face to face with the wooden blue door, whose paint was chipped and peeling at some edges. Twin lanterns decorated the entry, its dim light providing to guests a cheery warmth that Harry himself didn't feel. Knocking on the door with a heavy hand, he tried to shove his burgeoning nerves behind a calm, blank façade. His fingers fidgeted against the foil as an ornate iron knocker—crafted to resemble a wolf's face—melted into existence. Its enchanted mouthpiece told them in a growly voice that their arrival is received by the Lady of the House and for them to patiently wait.

The Head Auror abruptly felt a suffusion of warmth behind him and when he peered over his shoulder, he was startled to see Sesshomaru looming over him like a fluffy but intimidating security blanket. His breath hitched. From close-up the supernaturally bright molten golden pools seemed bigger than they were, more expressive than he thought they could be. Sesshomaru's masculine musk and the smell of his fur burned under his nose. Harry thought back to two days prior when they first met, when he didn't know which gender applied to this Sesshomaru in the temple grounds. Yet the solid body behind him was undeniably male.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked quietly, clenching the parcels with a white-knuckled grip.

"This Hari's yōki is agitated," the demon lord stated just as serenely, finally loosening the stone that had lodged itself up his throat. The magical creature's breath felt hot against Harry's cheek and held a faint trace of the fragrant sake they'd drunk earlier. Harry's gaze involuntarily dropped to the small, neutral cupid-bow dip of Sesshomaru's mouth.

Feeling rather lightheaded, Harry took a small step away toward the door, putting more conscious space between them. A tide of red flowed from his neck up to his hairline, which Sesshomaru
studied with great intensity. "I-I appreciate your concern. But they are family." He ran his fingers through his hair. He admitted, "I don't know why I'm acting so nervous. You shouldn't feel nervous around family, right?"

Sesshomaru measured the lord with an indulgent air, his head canted downward as if he were a dog patiently waiting for his master to unload his worries. That minor action made the fluttering butterflies in his stomach settle down. With a heavy sigh, he scrubbed his face with his leather glove tiredly, feeling much older than he was. For a five hundred year-old magical creature to detect his nervousness, he must look like a sorry state.

Since Sesshomaru was freely offering to be the wizard's sounding board, Harry supposed it'd be a shame not to take the gift in its mouth. Leaning against the bricked wall, he confessed, "I hated one of Andromeda's sisters, whom she resembles a lot. I'm worried about what she'll think of me…I mean, I've tried to avoid her ever since the war."

"You are speaking nonsense."

The Head Auror chuckled bitterly. "Yeah, it sounds nonsensical when I hear it too. Honestly I don't know why I'm like this. It's pathetic. She isn't Bellatrix. I know that and yet….

He broke off, unable to voice his thoughts aloud to a stranger. Being an outsider, there was no way for Lord Sesshomaru to know what Harry was going through. Sesshomaru couldn't know the memories that swarmed in when he uttered that name, which left a sour taste in his mouth. He couldn't know Harry's insecurities about the war actions he'd committed against the members of the House of Black. Harry glared at the floorboards.

There was a reason why he chose to travel. Returning to magical Britain brought back many unpleasant thoughts that, if he were a little more like a lot of his associates, he'd attempt to drink his problems away. If he were a little more like them, he'd be spending his nights in sexual nirvana with a warm body in his bed. Instead, like the freak of nature that he was, he buried himself in his work. He dedicated all his attention and free-time into social reforms and studying wizarding politics. He took vindictive joy in the task of catching Death Eaters and calling a hunt on their heads.

Merlin, he was becoming more and more psychopathic every day.

His fists clenched and a dark cloud settled over his face. Lost in his thoughts, he almost didn't feel it when soft, downy fur brushed his numb fingers. Harry stared down at the white fur mutely.

In a silent show of male camaraderie Sesshomaru had gently curled the tail end of his sentient boa around Harry's hand, wrapped comfortingly and somewhat loosely around icy fingers. Unlike the times he'd come into contact with the pelt, Harry was not in a state of distraction. His black mood subsided. With a dizzy mind, he wondered how it'd feel to run his fingers through the material without the leather barrier acting as an impediment. He rolled a clump between his thumb and pointer finger, caressing the pelt. His lips curled into an unconscious, happy smile.

It truly felt as soft as it'd looked.

The well-greased door swung open, spilling light over them. The pelt slipped from his fingers and before he could mourn the loss, Harry's name was shouted and a pair of arms wrapped themselves around his legs. A small face nuzzled and rubbed his cheek against the wizard's trousers. Looking down at the blue-flashing-brown head, Harry felt a big burst of affection in his chest.

"You're here!" his godson exclaimed, pulling away and looking up at him with wide, shining eyes that held a trace of Remus in the coloring. The child metamorphmagus smelled like home and
comfort. Harry stroked Teddy's hair, which made him squeeze the wizard tighter, as if he could keep him here. He repeated in a small, disbelieving voice, "You're really here."

"Hello there, Teddy," Harry greeted gruffly, but his tone was kind. He wrapped an arm around the boy's shoulders. His eyes softened when the boy burrowed himself deeper against him. "I'm back."

Chapter End Notes

One step back, two steps forward! I hope you've already realized by now...if you are expecting Harry in this story to become another gentle submissive beauty or another damsel in distress unjustly backstabbed by wizarding society, er, you already have a good number of fics to select from! I've read them! Here I'm going to try to keep their "masculinity" and strong personalities consistent without making them too OP or either one of them a perfect Adonis. The relationship-building is very important to me so while the romance will not be that much of a slow-build, it hopefully will not be a fast over-the-heels sort of lust and affection. Also since we're going the realistic route I imagine Sesshomaru, as a sovereign, for him to develop an intimate interest in anyone, especially for a human shield brother whom for all intents and purposes cannot bear him an heir, the benefits must outweigh the drawbacks. Basically if he doesn't take Harry as Lady of the West (¬¬) it'd be pretty irresponsible of him. More on that later....

Next chapter, adorableness that'd make you sick. And Sesshomaru discovers another one of the lord's attractive traits. To be crude, shit has not hit the fan yet! Thank you for sticking with me. Certainly, let me know what you think! :)


The Ball Starts Rolling

Chapter Notes

(A/N)- Hi everyone! Thank you, sincerely, for all your patience and feedback! I took a large step back from what I’d written before for this chapter, so while this took a lot longer than I’d expected, I had to reward my readers with a higher-quality chapter than the draft I had before. :) I’m grateful people are on board with this premise, unbetaed as it is. My appreciation to X, TingeOfSadness, lex1621, ladyk18, Hannah, and Genuka here on Ao3. Writing this chapter was a struggle but reading your comments lit a fire under me. I think my smile was as wide as Mt. Fuji. Honestly, guys, your questions and comments are all joys to read and, as a writer, having this deeper understanding of my readers’ thoughts and speculation makes me want to hug you all. But, no, Harry will not be getting pregnant unfortunately. But there’ll be something to make up for that, promise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

His godfather smelt heavily of somebody unfamiliar and nowhere like what Teddy Lupin came to associate with the adult wizard he sometimes secretly thought of as his second father. His arms flung around his godfather’s woolen trousers, the young metamorphagus hid his frown from the wizard’s sight. His eyes stung and started to well up as he took another anxious whiff. To steady his slightly shaking hands, he clenched the back of his godfather’s coat as he attempted to restake his familial claim over his godfather, over the mishmash of scents that threatened to overpower Teddy’s. He nuzzled against Harry, rubbing his cheeks over the slightly scratchy wool.

A low growl echoed behind his godfather and Teddy’s heart skipped a beat. Biting his lip, he wished the pretty but scary werewolf would leave them alone. He didn’t like how close she stood next to his godfather. He also didn’t like that the funnily-dressed lady was overlaying her scent over his. Before he could take it back, a nearly inaudible whimper escaped from him, muffled against fabric. He squeezed his eyes shut.

The arm that was slung over his shoulder lifted to cup the back of his head and he felt fingers carding through his heavy curls—which were now colored a midnight black—reassuringly. A low, unintelligible whisper was being passed overhead and the scary, threatening noise was cut off.

“There, Sesshomaru’s not going to hurt you, poppet,” the wizard’s warm brogue washed over him like a soothing wave. A large hand dropped to the nape of Teddy’s neck, infusing a comforting heat into his skin despite the leather barrier. A big lump lodged itself in Teddy’s throat.

“'There’s nothing to be afraid of.” Stroking a thumb across the side of Teddy’s soft cheek, Harry
murmured, “It’s been awhile. I haven’t been a good godfather lately, I know.”

The young metamorphmagus shook his head, peering up at his idol shyly. The miserable look in his godfather’s face cleared up a bit when he voiced his happiness only that Harry was here. With him. At this moment. His brows dipped in confusion when the hand that had been stroking his cheek stopped.

A clicking of heels striking against the wooden floorboards behind him echoed in his ears and distracted as he was, he let loose an embarrassing squeak when he felt two strong arms lift him up into the air and a pleased laughter rung in the air. His nose buried against the crook of his godfather’s neck, Teddy inhaled the heady scent of oiled wood and tea and a comforting masculine musk buried underneath an Auror’s typical identifying smell of leather, sweat, and blood. He took another deep but subtle whiff, his lashes fluttering close as he sighed against Harry’s skin. There was an uncomfortable weight pressed against his tailbone and, when he shifted to relieve himself of the pressure, an annoying crinkling sound grated on his ears. Eyes now colored as brightly as Harry’s roved to peer down at the foil wraps whose smells brought to mind images of Honeydukes and of Aunt Luna’s horrible perfume.

Before he could examine them any closer, Harry jostled him in his arms. Lifting his head, the young metamorphmagus planned to raise his curious gaze to meet his godfather’s green hues. He gasped aloud when instead by gross miscalculation he managed to snag sight of the unfriendly golden pair behind them. The wolf inside him wanted to whine and curl up in a ball. He immediately dropped his gaze to the huge white fluff that was on her shoulder. The woman was scarier than Uncle Ron’s mum.

He swallowed against the pit of nervousness fluttering in his stomach. Pressing his lips against Harry’s ear, he shared in a tremulous whisper, “I think she’s furious with me, Harry.”

Harry was glad his back was to the disgruntled dog demon (ever since Teddy arrived, he had no idea what brought on the demon’s restless magical aura). That way Sesshomaru wouldn’t be able to see his wicked grin stretched the size of the River Thames. He corrected the mistaken child good-humoredly. Then, upon recalling today’s posts sent to any wizarding family with subscriptions, he mentioned confusedly, "Actually I'm surprised you haven't heard by now. He's the ambassador from Japan I've been showing around wizarding Britain."

His godson remained unresponsive. And from the chills he got running down his back, Sesshomaru, too, seemed to be engaged in the silent staring contest over his shoulder. The smile died on his lips.

The Head Auror didn't like the way the child was like a trembling leaf in his arms.

Deep down on an instinctual level, his godson was distressed by the magical creature's unfamiliar presence, a stranger intruding in what a child would consider their home—their safe sanctuary. With the way their society worked, there was no way his godson would remain ignorant to the prevalent prejudices wizardkind had against non-wizardfolk. Frowning in thought, Harry again shifted Teddy again in his arms, breaking whatever spell had befallen the pair.

Large, startled green eyes—slanted like his—leapt back to his. Harry felt something small shrivel up inside him. With his tousled dark curls and light eyes, Teddy now resembled him enough that people on the streets could mistake Teddy as his illegitimate son. Before he could ask what the matter was, the soft footfalls he’d been trying to ignore promptly ceased and the person that’d been approaching them was now politely waiting on her lord's acknowledgment.

Very reluctantly, almost like in a dream-like state he lifted his gaze to the somber-eyed widow—
whose aged dark beauty, no longer slaved to the mourning attire, resembled that of her elder sister's —and he felt a familiar dryness in his throat. He stood still for what seemed like an eternity before he finally found his voice. "Lady Andromeda," he could hear himself saying. "A pleasure."

Her attention lingered on the child tucked in his arms. A glimpse of a smile ghosted over her lips for a moment before extinguishing like a flame. Patting down her dress, she curtseyed to her Head of House and to the lord's guest. Her eyes were kept to the floor. Her voice soft like the rustling leaves in an autumn wind, she greeted, "Lord Black and guest, my highest regards. Welcome to my humble estate."

"Lord Sesshomaru and I didn't mean to impose on you so suddenly," Harry returned briskly, focusing his sight upon the apex of her tightly bound curls. Sesshomaru was close, too close now. The dog demon was several centimeters away from being inappropriate. Teddy was peering over Harry's shoulder again, no doubt having renewed their staring contest. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, he feigned a relatively pleasant demeanor, wrangling down the snakes in his stomach. "This isn't intended to be a formal call."

"Nonsense," she chided firmly. She finally looked up. The abrupt steeliness in her expression melted away into a maternal warmness upon seeing the weary state the wizard was in. Her shoulders drooped resignedly. "You aren't imposing on anyone, Harr—Lord Black." She held her arms out to take her grandson. "Please, come in. The draught outside must be dreadful."

Obediently both of the lords stepped in. When the door closed behind them, Harry moved his godson to one arm and he extended the presents out to her like peace tidings in the other. He smiled cordially. "I can't take credit for one of them, but it's courteous for two lords to share our appreciation to the hostess and household."

Small amounts of surprise and pleasure were written across her face. "I'm pleased by your thoughtfulness," she said, accepting the gifts instead. "Thank you, I'm sure Teddy and I will love them."

"Really? You got me a present?" a small voice asked breathlessly, as if they could scarcely believe their ears. "Wicked!"

Harry looked down at the vibrating ball of excitement trying to get down. The boy's face was rosy and flushed with curiosity. Harry's hold constricted. Sighing in false dejection, he set the wriggling child down and the adults watched bemusedly as Teddy flounced over to Andromeda who was also fixing him with a stern, disapproving frown.

"Edward Remus Ted Lupin, what do you say to the two nice lords?"

The metamorphmagus abruptly turned on his heels and he went back to embrace Harry. "Thank you, Harry," he whispered, with enough sincerity in his voice that the wizard couldn't help but ruffle his curls playfully. Squirming for a bit, Teddy hesitantly peeked over Harry's legs to peer up at the tall dog demon. His small fists clenched Harry's trousers tightly. To his family's surprise, he bowed deeply to Sesshomaru, which in turn made the lord slowly nod back with a queer expression in those luminous pools of gold. Teddy turned back to his grandmother to pin her with a beseeching look. "May I be excused until dinner?" he asked politely.

Andromeda's features were wiped clear of the hatred and insanity that plagued her eldest sister. Instead her face was full of adoration and the softness of love as she gazed down at the only joy and pride left in her life. If she had more wrinkles or stress lines than she did before losing her daughter and husband, Harry cared not to mention it. Teddy cheered when Andromeda gave him the affirmative and the boy ran over to plant a kiss on her cheek. With a big grin, he then left them with a
bounce in his steps and, in his arms, the presents that his grandmother bade him to leave in the
drawing room.

A few beats later when Andromeda seemed to have reached the same conclusion they came to—
with the boy being out of immediate earshot—because the awkwardness of before came rushing
back. Harry licked his lips nervously. Behind him he could hear soft breathing. He could also hear
the hiss of silken robes gliding across skin whenever the demon lord shifted.

"He's never done that before," Andromeda commented softly, breaking their silence. Her dark eyes
were focused above on the magical creature standing behind him. For a moment her expression was
nothing Harry had ever seen on her before. On her sisters, perhaps, but never on her. But it must
have been a trick of the light, for in a split second it was as if it'd never been there. There was
wistfulness in her tone as she mused aloud, "Almost as if he's placed you on the same pedestal as his
role model, your lordship."

The wizard felt the tip of his ears burn.

Her reserved mien turned calculating. "Please permit my forwardness, but I certainly hope we can
forsake formality within my own household." She slid her attention to Harry and she tilted her head.
She smiled gently. "Lord Black, please. I invite you to make yourselves at home for the night. Teddy
would be over the moon if you stayed."

"He's…," he trailed off, uncertain how to word his refusal properly. As if reading his intention, she
came forward—he took an aborted step backwards—and silenced him by laying a motherly hand on
his cheek. His shoulder blade was pressed against Sesshomaru's boa, which felt like a large fluffy
statue digging against him.

"Your bribe could never match the best gift you've already granted my grandson," Andromeda
persisted. He could scent the subtle perfume of wildflowers on her by how close she was. Gazing
into his eyes, she admitted, "You belong here too, y'know? My daughter wouldn't have barred her
son from seeing his beloved godfather. I-Harry, I respect Nymphadora's wishes. To him your
attention is worth more than all the gold in Gringotts. Now that you're finally here, he'd be
heartbroken if you suddenly up and disappeared before dinner was ready."

"About that." He averted his gaze. "I-I don't think the ambassador is used to our kind of food."

Andromeda leveled the Head Auror with an unimpressed, mildly offended look. "I married a
Muggle-born when my sisters married purebloods. I had a werewolf for a son-in-law." Raised from
birth to read the minutest actions at social functions, she saw how Harry gave a weak flinch. She also
saw how the ambassador's eyes flickered over to the wizard in one microsecond and almost
instinctively made a move closer to him, like what old and gentle Remus would do to comfort her
dear young Nymphadora; like what her protective and brave Ted would do to her when he'd been
alive. But the tall, pale man appeared a hair's breadth away from behaving like the Oriental savages
her mother relished telling her and her sisters in her childhood, from the way he was gripping one of
his swords' hilts and appearing as if he was physically holding himself back from striking her.

Faltering just a bit, she frowned and continued uneasily, "And because of his father's condition,
everyone knows my grandson has inclinations frowned upon in most social functions. Unlike most
of my bloodline, I'm not bigoted. How dare you group me with those no-good relatives of ours,
Harry?"

Harry kept quiet, but his face said everything there was to say.

Her anger wilting, she gave a small sigh. Having sufficiently browbeaten some sense into his brain,
she relaxed the tone of her voice back into the appropriate indoor volume: "I'd think I'd know how to cater to a foreign dignitary's palate, especially for a guest who has an obvious creature heritage and is an important colleague to the head of my House of birth. It'd be my honor to have you and the ambassador stay over for supper."

Lord Sesshomaru peered over Harry's shoulder. She didn't care for the magical creature's raised regard of her, but Harry distractedly made an unconscious sidestep to block Andromeda's view to the time traveler. Her lips thinned into a white line.

"Naturally as the Lord Black, you'd understand the importance of keeping up appearances. Surely, Harry, you'd assist me in weaning your godson of his boorish habits in time for his first official public appearance, what with the return to our old traditions as the Minister puts it. Being as late as it is I'm assuming you've got nothing on your timetable for further obligations for the rest of tonight. The Tonks' wards should also hold out long enough in case of a threat."

Harry smiled tautly.

The widow took his silence as a lack of refusal. "Would you be averse to dining on lightly cooked meats or do you have a specific diet?" she inquired aloud to Sesshomaru; both knew to whom the last question was really addressed to. Harry could feel Sesshomaru nod against the side of his head nonetheless and indicating his consent for the former.

Relief fluttered across her features. "Excellent. I'll have the house elves put extra plates out."

Folding her hands, she carried on, "I realize this is a sudden request but I don't like to make Edward feel left out." She mirrored Harry's wane smile. "I've been trying to ready Edward for integration into polite society where his less than…refined partialities won't freak out the general community. He's missed several balls and parties. His Hogwarts acceptance letter is our cutoff date. I hope you can handle it. He sees you in a positive light, my lord. Even if it's for one night, having your physical presence here would go miles for encouragement."

Harry slid his hand into his pocket, clenching Hermione's letter tightly. "One night," he agreed. The time traveler was his responsibility, as the Head Auror and the one to have gotten him into the mess. Just as Edward Remus Ted "Teddy" Lupin and Andromeda Tonks née Black were his, as the official lord of the House. The idea of this aloof, uppity feudal lord disapproving of the lifestyle of Harry's godson and the sole living family member he'd reinstated back into the Black Family Tapestry, or vice versa were both within the realm of possibility. He warned her, "I may have an owl later in the night. Or one that'll need to be sent."

"That's not an issue," she countered, batting away the last opportunity to retract her offer. She gestured to the hearth in the parlor. "If you need to make fire-calls, the Floo Network is accessible. The family owl is also on standby."

With a resigned look, he sighed indulgently, "If you insist. Thank you for your hospitality. If you'd please have someone show us to our sleeping arrangements, that'd be nice, Lady Andromeda."

It took her nary a minute to comprehend his hidden meaning. With a blank face, she called for Auro and the house-elf appeared with a quiet pop. The eyes of the tiny female house-elf widened comically upon landing on the two guests, only lighting up when she recognized the wizard who gave her her clothes. Liberated from servitude from an abusive Dark family, Auro entered the Tonks residence when the widow Tonks saw how much the house-elf adored the baby metamorphmagus and treated him carefully like a baby elfling. After that it was a transfer of paperwork, Harry's formal approval, and a liberal amount of reeducation.
"Lord and Mistress?" Auro asked politely in her high, squeaky voice.

"I need to have a word with the lord Black. In the meantime, have Lord Sesshomaru—the man behind Harry, dear—brought to one of our nicer guestrooms."

"Yes, Mistress." The house-elf bowed to Harry first out of social obligation, then to Andromeda, and once more to the feudal lord. Out of habit, she kept her hands to herself and away from sight. Years being drilled into her head that she was inferior and would only dirty the fine clothing of her superiors if she tugged on their trousers' hem stuck with her no matter how much Andromeda told her otherwise. Harry smiled down at the house-elf, who shyly gave him a smile back.

Sesshomaru shot Harry a sidelong glance.

"It'll only be for a few," Harry muttered, hoping he sounded convincingly confident and encouraging to the house-elf. He and Andromeda exchanged looks, and he raised a brow.

With a quiet "oh," the witch went to distract Auro with further instructions, sensing that the Black Lord wanted a private word with his colleague first. They meandered sufficiently away to give a superficial air of confidentiality around the men.

Despite their hostess's preoccupation, he still lowered his voice to whisper, "I've never told you this, but you'll have to know we typically eat our fare with…silver utensils that aren't shaped like…chopsticks. We also try not to lift our food with our hands. I know it sounds strange, but it should be simple to mimic what we do at the dinner table." After giving him sufficient warning, he frowned unhappily and he explained himself defensively against what he was sure the dog demon was itching to reprimand, "Also I'm well aware it's common in your time, were a man to refuse a woman forthrightly, she'd have no choice but to accept his decision. That's generally frowned upon today."

"Nonetheless, out of respect for tradition and family, as Head of House you were within your rights to decline," Sesshomaru rejoined. "You intentionally had not said a word, and the woman took advantage of it."

"I…if being here really does give Teddy the encouragement he needs, staying the night wouldn't hurt."

"For the pup." Seeing Harry's brows furrow, he clarified, "The one that addresses to 'Teddy' and 'Edward.' You care for the pup. You are impartial to the woman of distant relation." There was a knowing look leveled at him. "You are doing this to bridge yourself to your family, to make amends. To remain in the pup's favor."

A disturbed frown tugged the Auror's lips down. He shuffled on his feet. "You're displeased."

"This Sesshomaru cares not," he corrected, sounding as if the wizard should be grateful he was so forgiving and generous. Harry had to stop himself from reacting to the aggressive set of claws that clamped down behind him on his shoulder. Hot breath ghosted along the side of his jaw as Sesshomaru leaned in to whisper in his ear, "However, you shall not refer to this Sesshomaru as an inconvenience."

Harry did see his responsibility to the time traveler as a large nuisance, but Sesshomaru did not need to know that. Warmth was seeping from below Sesshomaru's palm and to his skin beneath the fabric. Coupled with Sesshomaru's close proximity, the combination had a nostalgic twist that Harry wasn't sure if he should shrug it off or be concerned that the dog demon was behaving eerily like Teddy in his younger days, when the child had no control over his animalistic impulses. He was brought out of his musings when he heard soft footfalls pad back to them.
Auro held her head up proudly under Harry's gaze, as if she had something to prove. "Auro will lead Lord Guest to his room now."

The hand that was on Harry's shoulder squeezed once, and then Sesshomaru was gliding over to the house-elf without a glance back. Harry felt like a heavy weight had been lifted from him. Rolling his shoulders, he mustered up the last of his dread and turned to have a talk with the woman that bore the face of the witch that murdered Sirius Black.

He was dressed so strangely.

It was difficult to shake off the remnants of the prejudices her upbringing tried to install in her. She studied the brooding magical creature sitting in her customary seat, at Harry's right—where the wizard sat at the head of the table—from the corner of her eye. It had disheartened her to say no to her grandson's obvious pleas to sit next to his godfather on his left, but she had to teach Teddy how to observe rank. Guests of honor who were male dignitaries of high-rank—not even considering the unusual position the men were in—held priority over her and any children. She had noted how the magical creature had looked approvingly over their good silverware, and though quiet he had so far behaved decorously enough of someone of his supposed station.

His cold stoniness reminded her of her mother, who had disowned her. It wasn't farfetched to say the foreign dignitary resembled the late Druella Rosier, with his long fair hair and condescending silence.

Ted had done a lot to lay away most of her preconceived notions, and marrying him had made Andromeda more open-minded than she was in her youth. There were some things she tried to forget, and there were some things that she couldn't let go of; manners being one of them. Being wary of suspicious, dangerous-looking individuals that could harm her and her family was a close second.

She laid a discreet hand over Teddy's knee underneath the tablecloth to stop his bouncing. Thankfully he stopped fidgeting and just sullenly pushed his peas around his untouched mashed potatoes. From the unappetizing way it looked, dyed pink from the steak's blood it sopped up, she was certain he wasn't going to eat his vegetable intake. She was at a loss of how to proceed. Ordinarily lively at the dinner table, the boy was still smarting from her refusal and had been pouting throughout dinner. She swept her gaze back to the preoccupied-looking head of the table.

Usually it was the host's privilege to eat first, which signaled to the other seated guests it was fine to eat. Since Harry was here, out of obligation he had mimed taking a small bite of the slightly oozing meat, to make Teddy feel unashamed of his bloody preference, but other than that and the few swallows of the steamed vegetables he'd taken whenever the boy looked in his direction and frowned, he had barely touched his plate. It made her heart ache that the wizard's appetite was still affected from his PTSD—his mate had to explain the Muggle terminology to her—and she wanted nothing more to do but to sweep him into her arms and tell him he was going to be alright. Hiding her grimace behind a bite of food, she thought about possible dinner conversations as she chewed.

"I've been hearing around the grapevine," she began slowly, grabbing everyone's attention, "that you'd gone overseas to capture Travers. Has the Death Eater been apprehended?" The topic was dangerously skirting the edge of political talk, which etiquette preached against doing, but this was what the Daily Prophet and media passed as garden gossip.
Before Harry could say a word, Teddy perked up and chattered away excitedly about what he thought about Harry's job. "It's amazing the Death Eaters are afraid of you! Uncle George showed me his wicked missing ear and he said he can never top you! You went through better, more adventures than him! Gran always says I shouldn't bo—boost?—bo—"

"Boast."

Teddy carefully repeated the word underneath his breath multiple times before saying, "—that I shouldn't boast about my godfather like that because no one wants to be my friend if they're jealous." His face scrunched up in distaste. "Who needs friends when I have you and Gran and Auro?"

"Is that what you've been telling the girls and Louis when I've been gone?" Despite the objectionable turn their conversation had taken, Harry did not sound upset by Teddy's glorification of his grim, austere childhood. If anything, he sounded like he was humoring the child. "I've heard your Aunt Fleur is sad you don't get along with the children."

"Dominique is a girl. And Louis…Louis is a bit dumb. He thinks Uncle Bill is cooler. Well, his dad is cool. But he's not remotely as cool as you. Louis is also a girl. He never wants to play what I want. He says what you did is impos…impo…is not real so I told him he was barking. He hates me." He nodded to himself, looking very satisfied.

"What about Victoire?" Harry prompted with a remarkably straight face.

Teddy had to think about it for a few seconds. He frowned down at his peas. "Victoire's alright. For a girl. Sometimes she smells funny but it's not like she stinks. Can a girl be a boy? It'd not be as embarrassing if I'm seen with her."

The wizard put in the appropriate amount of acting as he pondered the metamorphmagus' odd question. He said seriously, "Not unless she ingests a potion many, many times, poppet. But it's very painful to go through and it's a not permanent solution. I don't think she'd want to go through the trouble."

"If Victoire was a boy, I'd adopt him," Teddy declared passionately. "She's not afraid to get messy or roughhouse around. She also thinks you're cool, so she's cool." His features lit up. He mimicked giving someone a mean right hook. "She punched Parkinson in his pug face!"

Harry's fork clattered noisily down on his plate. Muffled behind his glove, he gave a tiny little sound that clearly indicated he was covering up an inappropriate laugh. Andromeda glowered at Harry, and she turned to interrogate Teddy about the incident.

"He said Harry was lame!" Teddy protested. "I had to break his nose. It's not like his mum didn't heal it for him anyway."

"You and Victoire can't go punching every boy who says something mean about your godfather," Andromeda scolded, wanting to bury her face in despair. "I thought I told you to rise above senseless violence. He's only saying that to get a rise out of you."

"We tried to ignore him. We did!" He insisted, his bright expression darkening. Stabbing his peas, he muttered angrily, "But he called Dad and Mum names. Then the git said Harry was a loser who couldn't save them in time." The tiny green dots being speared and mashed viciously gave her the impression he was picturing everyone in place who ever said anything bad about his parents. The fork made a tinny screech every time he missed and dragged the prongs across the silver plate underneath.
Andromeda's eyes softened. She didn't dare look to her right to see Harry's expression.

"You were not wrong to pursue vengeance for your family's honor," the ambassador's deep baritone broke into their conversation finally with the whistling sharpness of one of his blades. Her muscles locked automatically into tenseness. The honeyed pools were fixed on the metamorphmagus with grim contemplation. "You showed admirable restraint when you could have acted childishly to his insults; and you only took action to his insolence when he impugned upon their memory. Your parents would be proud."

Several of his words sailed over her grandson's head, but Teddy was a smart child. He could understand the gist of what was being told to him. Blinking owlishly at the tall man, Teddy's face pinked and she thought it was adorable how he immediately swung his face to the other side to avoid showing them his embarrassment.

"Harry would never let a girl hit the bully first," he said sulkily, drawing his knees up to his chin. His head was bowed as he mumbled, "He'd save the girl first like he did with Aunt Ginny. And then, like the Basilisk, he'd slay the enemy with his Sword of Gryffindor."

If she had not passed her sight along the ambassador inadvertently at the very same moment the metamorphmagus aired the climax of the story Ginevra loved to retell many, many times to her nieces and nephews, she would not have caught how he grew very, very still. He was trying to pass off his interest with his cold facade, but she saw how he'd sat up a little straighter. She saw how he leant forward in his seat and was regarding the child with an unnatural gleam in his brightly yellow eyes. The ambassador was deathly quiet when he repeated, "This Hari is in possession of a sword."

Not noticing the mounting tension in the room, Teddy carelessly disagreed. He swung his legs around and he regarded the men with childish excitement. "Aunt Ginny didn't say what happened after Uncle Neville borrowed it." His gaze was drawn to the trio of swords sheathed by the magical creature's chair. "Uncle Neville never got a good look at it. But I heard people say it's made and enchanted thousands of years ago by the King of Goblins!"

He'd stretched his arms out wide over his head in an arc to emphasize how ancient the sword of legend was. He added, "And because Harry stabbed a Basilisk with it, it's even more powerful. That's why they try to steal it from him. It's even written on Harry's chocolate card! Everyone knows it's coated with venom that could decom...decom...decompose anything it touches, like You-Know-Who's Horcruxes!"

Andromeda thought her heart was going to leap out of her chest. Unbiddenly her eyes shot to the equally shaken wizard and back to the magical creature that was strangely enthralled by the tale. Clutching her necklace, she gasped, "Edward—!"

Thrilled that he's found an audience to share his knowledge of his favorite subject, the metamorphmagus beamed and chuntered on gleefully, "The card said with each Horcrux destroyed, You-Know-Who couldn't absorb his souls back into his body! I know, wicked, right? But it makes sense, y'know. It was Godric Gryffindor's sword! He's one of the founders of Hogwarts! And he's the founder of Harry's house! I'm going to be a Gryffindor when I'm eleven. That way I'd be like Harry and Uncle Neville and Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione and the Weasley Clan...or maybe not the Weasley Clan. Only true Gryffindors can draw the blade! That's why it always disappears to—"

"Teddy, that's enough." The order was nothing louder but a whisper, but it sliced through Teddy's outburst like the blade itself. The metamorphmagus' enthusiasm wilted dramatically and he turned as white as a ghost.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Teddy stammered, looking terrified that he'd incurred the wizard's wrath.
Though his eyes were dry, his voice sounded thick with tears.

Andromeda paled. In all the years she spent raising Teddy, Harry had only gotten angry at him once—when the toddler had curiously pickpocketed the watch Harry carried on him at all times and had almost smashed it beyond repair. Harry didn't react like he used to in his adolescence. Instead of his magic smashing and blowing everything up like a destructive typhoon, he would react quietly and then disappear. She was there when Harry told his godson, who he treated like a prince, that he'd never been more disappointed in him. Teddy had been crushed. It took months of unbearable silence and ignored posts before the wizard's fury finally cooled and he could return to the Tonks residence. But Teddy never forgot how much of being the cause of his role model's disappointment hurt.

Clearly Teddy was replaying that memory in his head when he stumbled to his feet. He pleaded, "Don't leave! I-I didn't mean to—"

"I'm not angry," the wizard interrupted, dropping his chin on the hand he'd propped his elbow up on the table. The witch let loose the breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. She spared a glance at Teddy, who had turned his back on them and was fiercely rubbing his eyes, trying to not look weak in front of his idol. Sitting back down, she shot Harry a nasty glare. Had she been in Harry's position, she would've done something to make up for getting the boy worked up over nothing.

Catching her eye, Harry coolly regarded her with his eerily bright pools of green, which reminded her of the jet of light that is the Killing Curse. Turning her head away, she jerked her chin toward his godson. Those almond-shaped eyes flickered over and rested on the boy pensively.

After a beat, he sighed, "Poppet, come here." He motioned for the child to sit down on his lap with the other hand. Upon hearing that, Teddy immediately scrambled over and tucked himself against the wizard's side, curling against him. Her heart melted at the scene. He was like a cub asking for his father's forgiveness.

Harry peered over his head. "You're not crying, right?"

"I'm not," Teddy replied into the wizard's coat, his voice heartbreakingly small.

Harry rubbed Teddy's back comfortingy. "I know, I know. You've gotten tougher. I'm sorry if it sounded like I was cross. As long as it's the truth, you may say whatever you want about me as long as you treat it with the gravity it deserves. Alright, poppet? We say too much, we can give people the wrong ideas if we go off on a tangent. For example—"

He twisted his head to pin Sesshomaru with a hard-pressed stare. "—I'm not a swordsman, so don't look so excited."

Although his voice was muffled, Teddy objected loudly, "Aunt Ginny said you used the sword like a skilled warrior to save her—"

"Your Aunt Ginevra was unconscious for the most of it. I'm flattered she imagined me so skilled but I was a twelve year old Gryffindor in over his head." He picked up the butter knife and twirled it distractedly. "I'm not being humble. It was the first time I'd seen and wielded anything that resembled a weapon. At the time I was more concerned about my life and stopping Tom Riddle than I was about executing the proper sword stance."

No one in the room understood the significance of what he was saying more than Andromeda. Shame flooded her system. At that moment, she longed to be the child in the Auror's arms, so that she could hug him fiercely and give him the reassuring ease only an innocent child could give without judgment. She longed to kiss his cheeks and tell him how deeply sorry they were for making
a child fight their battles. She started, "Harry—"

"Again, I'm not angry." Harry paused, then amended, "Actually I'm angry at your aunt, for filling your head with nonsense. Don't listen to her. She tends to exaggerate things."

A small head lifted up. Teddy had the expression of a kicked puppy with his large, watery eyes. But he seemed to have calmed down despite the deep furrow developed in between the boy's brows. His attention kept landing back on the only other male in the room. Chewing on his lower lip, he asked the magical creature why he had three swords out and not a wand. "Did you come across them?" he asked determinedly, his hands balling into fists. He refused to sneak a peek up at Harry's narrowed eyes. "How do you get them? Sir."

"They are mine and this Sesshomaru's sire's fangs," the lord informed him in his cold, clipped tone. His slitted gaze was considering the affectionate picture the two boys made in front of him with a very queer expression. Nevertheless, he went to indulge the child, "Like the sire of my sire and my ancestors afore, this Sesshomaru has been on the path of supreme conquest. This Sesshomaru has crossed blades with many opponents and have found them wanting."

Harry clearly had an expression that said otherwise, but he wisely held his tongue in check. His expression morphed into dread.

"Have you fought with Harry?"

She too was starting to realize the direction of where his inquiries were leading….

"This Sesshomaru has not." A meaningful, longing look now crossed his fair features. He said almost wistfully, "It's been many moons since this Sesshomaru's been engaged in informal combat. This Sesshomaru would not be averse to practicing against a worthy or unfamiliar opponent to resharpen his skills."

"…You talk in third person, a lot. Sir."

"We have a clearing out back you can use, your lordship," Andromeda swiftly interjected, saving him from responding to the child's observation. She glanced at the two men. She didn't know about the dignitary, but the Gryffindor had been as sporting as the next wizard. Clasping her fingers delicately, she offered, "As long as you both promise not to do anything too reckless, I suppose I could finish setting up the charms by tonight. I don't see why tomorrow you boys couldn't have a friendly duel before leaving."

The boy perked up.

"My swordsmanship is more like thrust and hope for the best," the wizard unexpectedly disagreed, miming the action to accentuate his lack of training. Absently ruffling Teddy's curls, he smiled apologetically at the magical creature to his side. "Actually the idea has merit. I'm curious to see how you'd react against a magical opponent. It's a shame, but I'm afraid I can't match you in skills, Lord Sesshomaru. It's been years since I last touched a sword. I'd be a very poor opponent."

"It can be his sword against your wand," Teddy argued back. He leaned against Harry's chest and swung his legs distractedly. If he had a tail, it'd be wagging from how content he was. "'Sides, Aunt Ginny said he's got his dirty tricks to help him against magic."

"That's not what I'm hesitant about," Harry murmured, his hand stilling. Teddy was heartened that, despite the foot-dragging, Harry hadn't outwardly declined. The wizard frowned down at him. "I thought you haven't seen the Weasley Clan for a while now. Your aunt met him just yesterday."
"Aunt Ginny fire-called Gran, after she heard from Aunt Hermione who heard from Aunt Luna that you'd be here. Aunt Luna's very crossed with them, after she found out. They had a row and everything!" He told him, bumping his head against Harry's hand grumpily.

"'Sides, don't be a worrywart. Gran's family wards are better than the Malfoys!" Once Harry regained his scratching, Teddy peered up bashfully at his idol beneath lowered lashes. "Is it true you're giving it sometime before you ask Aunt Ginny to marry you?"

Harry gaped down at the boy.

"She talks about it a lot," he said defensively, crossing his arms. "She does this thing where she," he clasped his hands together and he imitated a very forlorn sigh, "sounds like this every time she hears someone talking about you. She sounds like Dominique when she sees the boy that she likes."

Scowling behind Teddy's hair, Harry nonetheless answered truthfully, albeit tensely: "The relationship between your aunt and me is inconclusive for the moment."

Teddy visibly deflated.

Noticing the child's disappointment, with a scoff Harry laid his chin on top of the child's head. "Don't make that face, poppet. It's not that I don't like her." Squeezing tighter, he mused aloud, "You're not the first person to ask me if I'd like to get married. It sounds odd under this context but I simply haven't found anyone, erm, worthy yet. It'd be great if I did, but I haven't had the time to find someone and settle down and relax, what with my Auror duties and obligations."

Harry peered lazily at Andromeda. "By the by, Travers is still at large. The investigation was for a rogue Death Eater, not anyone specific. So far the rumors have been unfounded. That's all I can say of the matter."

That was the end of that conversation.

Teddy's expression was clouded with brewing thoughts as Harry asked her if her grandson still slept in the same room. Harry whispered something softly into the boy's ear and the boy gave a tiny nod. The chair gave a tiny screech when he stood up. She gave the verbal affirmative, watching the pair fondly as the Head Auror announced he would take the child to bed. She watched as Harry had a short exchange with the ambassador, and she watched as a tiny amount of wonder crept into the foreigner's face when Harry wandered away. Andromeda recognized it. She would recognize it anywhere.

And she was indecisive of whether or not she approved of the turn of events.
wariness to her civility.

Conversely the old maid yearned to comfort her lord Hari. He smirked into his hand. He could see it in the way she’d make a move, like she wanted to embrace him or other such physical displays of affection, but she held herself back from overstepping Hari’s bounds. He had to hand it to her; she was astute of her lord’s state of emotions. Sesshomaru had picked up the tenseness of the muscles underneath Hari’s clothes when she made physical contact, appearing as if he were torn between wanting to flee and bracing himself for an attack. The hurt expression on her face had been priceless.

After that, the female hanyou remembered her place and she kept her hands to herself.

The young wolf hanyou, though, deemed Sesshomaru as competition for his pseudo-sire’s attention. Perceptive that the pup was to his own powerlessness, Teddy could only put up a cold front to the perceived threat. He only thawed when Sesshomaru saw the need to interject his opinion; in that moment, he saw a ghost of himself in the pup's shoes.

He scoffed derisively. The pup now tolerated the alpha who was intruding in what was a happy family reunion. He was more receptive to mokomoko-sama than he was to the daiyōkai attached to it.

Unraveling mokomoko-sama from his shoulder, he brought the tail-end of the white pelt under his nose. The scent was inconspicuous—undetectable even, had he not been a dog demon—but it smelled of leather and of the sweat that had soaked into the fur. It smelled faintly of Hari. Closing his eyes, Sesshomaru took a deep whiff and waited. And waited. And waited.

He dropped the pelt with a sneer. He berated himself to have been foolishly expecting anything. "To be competing with a child," he murmured condescendingly, glaring down at his lap. Luna's prophesized future for the great dog demon of the west had thrown him off-guard and at a loss on how to proceed. Because of his skepticism he’d tested Hari earlier, but he’d been unable to detect any off signs that would prove this was a—highly unusual and admittedly inventive—conspiracy.

He stroked mokomoko-sama moodily; ignoring the pleasant shivers erupting down his back as he gently combed his claws through the knots he’d gotten in his fur. Overtime the repetitiveness of the stroking cooled his self-disgust and cleared his mind.

Sesshomaru had to admit, he'd grown partial to the foreigner's company. Like the yōkai in his time, Sesshomaru had never set his sights on a pale-faced Westerner before. Of the humans that made up his kingdom, aside from a few physical differences, all in all, the population was commonly of one nationality. The yōkai clans, on the other hand, while they were a mixed bag in terms of their colors and physical characteristics due to their strong yōkai bloodlines, most were dark-haired and dark-eyed, or at least had a relation that was. He’d heard anecdotes of how large and hulking and hairy the people were beyond the isle’s borders, particularly in the south. There were rumors of pale-faced barbarians with the hair and furs of a startlingly fiery red, further down west—the land where he was in presently.

In terms of looks, Sesshomaru was still of the opinion that the mysterious green-eyed daiyōkai was not unpleasant to gaze at. Hari was among one of the more fortunate. His appearance was also not as loud like most of his people and, unless he was imagining it, there was something about the slant of those green eyes that reminded him of his and his countrymen's. Perhaps one of Hari's ancestors consort ed with a demon from Sesshomaru’s lands long ago. Nevertheless the thought that their bloods weren't all that different—however distantly or diluted—lent a small measure of relief. Yōkai were less prone to judge when the submissive was more than pleasant to look at.

There were two problems: they were both alphas and they hailed from different times.
With a growl, he sprung to his feet. The fur languidly slithered back up his shoulder as he paced around the small confines of his chamber agitatedly. It was not unusual for a male yōkai to take another male as his mate. It also was not unusual for a male daiyōkai to have ongoing same-sex relationships with their pages or the younger yōkai of their courts. As long as their mate was aesthetically-pleasing and not human, the general yōkai generally did not care of the trysts behind private doors because of how regularly it occurred.

As long as they were quiet about it—hyper-effeminate alphas were treated with scorn—a yōkai's sexual inclination did not determine his or her worth. He growled again, this time disdainfully at the memory of a certain redheaded phoenix yōkai.

It was more common to see emotional links established between members of the same sex take priority over those with the opposite sex, particularly developing out of relationships of fealty between warriors and their younger vassals due to the lack of female influence in the battlefield. The skinship between two warriors was considered acceptable, even under the Inu no Taisho's reign. The only regulation was consent had to be given by the younger or submissive party, and it would be the responsibility of the warrior acting in the role of alpha-mentor to train and educate his warrior-apprentice and mold him into a well-rounded warrior. While he and Hari were both alphas, with their convenient age gap no one should raise a brow if he took the role of the nenja and Hari the wakashū, should Hari give his consent.

However the responsibility of procreation had been drilled in Sesshomaru's head during his upbringing, for despite a daiyōkai's longevity they lived among a life of violence and shifting opinions. Being the only pureblooded son of the Inu no Taisho's, unlike the halfbreed Inuyasha, Sesshomaru did not have his brother's luxury to pursue hedonistic pleasures that did not benefit the throne. He eventually had to find a worthy bitch to lay with, like his sire initially did, and have her birth a litter of shiroi inuyōkai. If he cannot find another white dog demoness, then he'd look elsewhere until he had his heir or heiress. That was his priority.

Otherwise his ancestors and his sire would be rolling in their graves.

Although, on the off-chance Luna had been telling the truth, the only way for Sesshomaru to take another male daiyōkai with as official of a title as his consort, meant either the inuyōkai maintained his sovereignty to the present or Hari came back with him to the past. Sesshomaru came to a sudden still.

The long strides were a very different tread from his pack, with an unnatural grace that shouldn't belong to any warrior. Hari treaded with purpose, not as frail or as lost as the female relation seemed to think. The female that'd lost her mate walked gracefully but had a lame foot that betrayed her age. The pup attempted to stumble after Hari's lead but, like all excitable pups, he was clumsy and inexperienced.

The purposeful footsteps that were approaching his guest chamber could only be Hari's. There was a tightening in Sesshomaru's chest, like he was short of breath. Clenching his jaw, he grabbed the hilt of Bakusaiga in a white knuckled grip.

Another set of feet thundered after Hari, and the pup excitedly called out Hari's name and for him to stop. Indulging the child, the footsteps that'd been Hari's stopped, and after catching up there was the sound of the child throwing himself onto his designated alpha's back with a joyous cheer. Sesshomaru couldn't make out what the daiyōkai was saying, but the pup was loudly demanding for a story about his sire and dam after Hari was done speaking with Sesshomaru.

Sesshomaru's hand slipped from the hilt.
Shushed murmurings happened outside the door, and the pup scuttled away after the alpha gave him his word and an order for him to return to his chambers. There was a soft intake of breath, as if the young lord too was composing himself. Another exhale, and then there was a knock on his door.

One pause. Two pause. Three pause. Sesshomaru counted to five, and he invited the lord in. The white door swung open from the hinges, and Sesshomaru could feel his breath catch upon laying eyes on the dark-haired daiyōkai. It was the first time he'd seen the other daiyōkai underdressed, who had taken the liberty of stripping himself of his coat and rolling his sleeves up to his elbows when he went to put the pup to bed. In their private setting, there was something oddly intimate about the exposure of skin between the leather gloves and rolled up sleeves, with a forearm harnessed in a leather contraption.

Hari requested for this Sesshomaru to stay where he was, all the while peering into the hallway. He locked the door behind him with a click, and Sesshomaru watched as the stick that'd been slotted in the holster slid down into the magic-user's palm. Without a word, the wizard cast a stream of color that coalesced from the door to the vicinity of the room, coating the white walls with a dull glow. Like a snake retreating into its burrow, the wand quickly went back into its slot as the daiyōkai attached to it turned around to sweep a nostalgic glance over the meager possessions in the cozy but rather spartan room. "This brings back memories," Hari chuckled good-humoredly, traveling to the small writing desk across from the foot of the bed. He kept a wide berth in between them. Casually propping his hip against the edge of the table, he gestured for Sesshomaru to take a seat. "This shouldn't take long. But on the off-chance that it does, I want you to be comfortable."

Sesshomaru remained unmoved, recognizing the ruse for the intimidation tactic it was.

"Or you can stand," Hari murmured, "whatever makes you happy, I suppose." Staring at Sesshomaru's iron breastplate, he imparted, "I'd gotten word from Hermione. I've skimmed over some of her research, but we're making little headway where we are."

"You…wish to bring in reinforcement," Sesshomaru deduced.

Hari frowned unhappily. "It's unfortunate, but it looks like it'll have to be that way. You can't stay in this timestream. From what Hermione's reckoning, you are an important historical figure." He leaned back as he studiously surveyed the inuyōkai. "The things I've glossed over…I don't know if they were exaggerations or true depictions of your military exploits. They certainly paint a grand picture of your life. We have several paintings and pictures of hanging scrolls and woodcuts that…appear to be you. Or someone that resembles you, Hermione's not quite sure. They're really quite faded. Also ancient Eastern portraits tend to be flat and more stylized than what we're used to."

"It would be simple to determine if this Sesshomaru could have access to these portraits, Hari."

The frown on the dark-haired daiyōkai deepened, but he nonetheless considered Sesshomaru's point. He gesticulated by his side of the form of a person. "Another thing. In some of your portraits—we're assuming it's yours—there is another person. She shows up enough that we think it's relevant. Long dark hair, blue or green eyes...really nice clothing. Kind of like what you're wearing underneath the armor. Would you know anyone that'd fit that description?"

Inuyasha's bitch instantly flashed into his brain. Sesshomaru's brows furrowed. "Yes, there is one female. Although, she dresses as a wench. We do not have that intimate of a bond." And she was to be mated to Inuyasha, not to this Sesshomaru. Even though they were related by blood, unlike Sesshomaru, Inuyasha would be incapable of having the privilege of dressing his courted mate in their family's Royal House colors.
Hari's brows hiked up but other than that he made no comment on Sesshomaru's observations. "I'll see if I can get Hermione to mail us a photo—erm, it's like a moving painting, but smaller—of one of the wood-cut prints, where you're surrounded by a delegation of people. Hopefully you can recognize the setting or some of the people by their clothing or markings…." Hari hesitated, chewing on his lip in thought. Sesshomaru's eyes were drawn to the flesh caught between whitened teeth.

Hari released his lower lip and he exhaled into a hand brought to his face. "Blimey, this is really problematic," he confessed, mumbling into his glove. "This would be a lot less complicated if I could show you everything's Hermione's dug up, but that's a potential disaster in itself."

An earlier conversation wormed its way into his memories. Sesshomaru scoffed, "This concern of yours is moot. This Sesshomaru knows what he wants and what is expected of him. My future is already set."

"There is a difference between ambition and the curveballs life throws at us," Hari argued back. "We don't know if showing you something could cause you to think wrongly about what you're supposed to do!"

"Yet this Hari is willing to provide this Sesshomaru a caricature of what could be considered this Sesshomaru's future."

"The details are vague enough, that even if you see it, you can't recognize them by face. The subject of that wall screen is also neutral enough it doesn't point fingers at anyone or indicate how you'd treat them if you haven't come across them when you go back."

The dark-haired daiyōkai then heaved a mighty sigh, and he lifted his face from his palm. "Our biggest concern is accidentally making you form an opinion before it is justified. For example, the girl that I mentioned. I had to think it over dinner whether or not to tell you about her, because I remember what you said about being unmari—unmated." Hari shrugged helplessly. "I thought she could be your mum, to be honest. There's no way to distinguish the relationship by the paintings—or gender, for that matter—but usually a man and a woman depicted together under a certain context implies family."

"Your packmate is certain the subject is female," Sesshomaru said slowly, trying to wrap his head around taking another female when his supposed consort was standing right in front of him. If Luna's words were true, then the situation he found himself in uncannily resembled that of his Sire's.

"I-I have reasons to think so," Hari said reluctantly, drumming his fingers along the edge of the desk. "I'm not really sure I can tell you why…but this proves what I'm saying about what I share with you could affect your actions and lead you to make assumptions. You don't know if she could be your handmaiden, a relation, your general, a rival or a visiting emissary, or the Lady of the West. You could be chasing after all the Asian women with lightly-colored eyes for the rest of your life, expecting her to be something when in fact it could be that the painter took artistic liberties with the subjects he was depicting."

"Unlikely, but this Sesshomaru concedes to your position," Sesshomaru said, tilting his head in acknowledgement. He prompted curiously, "Speak of the reasons that makes you think so."

"…Sorry? About the subject's gender? I really don't—"

"This Sesshomaru is familiar with his culture than you are," Sesshomaru broke in, weary of the foreign daiyōkai hedging around the issue. "An informed decision can be reached should access be permitted. You've already established a significant person that this Sesshomaru does not recognize…." His eyes widening, he stared intently at Hari, thoughts of another theory formulating.
"Again, I don't think—" Hari broke off, looking aside and taking a deep breath to calm himself down. One breath, a second, and a third. After another beat, he returned the dog demon's stare with a shrewd, calculating look. Casually leaning back, he proffered, "How about a wager?"


Hari looked taken aback by his reaction but he quickly collected himself. "Yes, a wager on the victor of tomorrow's duel," he said firmly. "I've talked with Andromeda about casting a protective ward around the vicinity of the clearing, so that the spectators of the match won't be hit by a careless stunner flying past or splattered by your corrosive poison."

"This Hari desires a public match."

"It won't happen any other way, regrettably." A sign of contriteness crawled into his expression. "I was planning on evaluating your skillset at some point but it's difficult for me to entirely avoid the limelight. As much as I desire to gauge your skills and see how you'd fare against a wizard, there will be a child watching. Andromeda and I worked hard to give him a childhood free of war and violence. I won't ask you to go easy on me—that'd be disrespectful and I'd rather you didn't swaddle me—but because of our audience I want the victory conditions to be whoever draws first blood or a full-body immobilization of the opponent. It might make Andromeda suspicious if we take it beyond that."

"The last condition cannot be met," Sesshomaru disagreed in a distracted tone, still churning a thought in his mind. He made no mention of how excellently the younger lord strategically withheld the stipulation of disarming the opponent. Armed with three weapons versus one stick, it would have been a short spar between them. His voice was a deep rumble when he stated, "It favors your sorcery and is easily to your advantage."

"And seeing as the first condition favors you, I'd say both terms give us an evenly-matched fighting chance," Hari refuted, his eyes resting curiously on one particular blade from Sesshomaru's three sheathed fangs. The clouded expression cleared when he tore his gaze away from the Tenseiga. Crossing his arms, Hari leaned forward and confessed, "When I was preparing Teddy for bed, I kept thinking to myself I had to be daft to be seriously considering this. But I know very little of what you're capable of aside from what I've seen and the bits and pieces from what we've gathered. I'm only agreeing to this because there is, without a shadow of doubt in my mind, with my company, on the off chance that you find yourself at the glowing end of a wand, you'll at least be prepared and learn to identify which spells to avoid. I'm not the best shining example of our magical community, but whatever small challenge I can provide should give us a framework to act off of if we're separated…and to provide you a little experience against a hostile wizard or witch."

It was at the tip of his tongue to say he did not require a guiding hand by someone centuries younger, but the underlying significance of the sorcerer's words gave him pause. Naturally he had some immunity against the purifying energies of the monks and priestesses of his era, with aid of his pure demonic blood. But while he was confident of his physical skills, there was no guarantee of a natural resistance against foreign magic-casters. "Very well," he allowed, conceding to the terms. This was the ideal opportunity to assess his host's abilities and to shine a light on his predicament. Honeyed pools lingered on the eleven-inch stick strapped in its leather harness.

Green pools followed the daiyōkai's preoccupation and Hari's pensive frown trudged up into a wry smirk. "I'm quite fond of this wand actually, so I'd be dismayed if it got broken again tomorrow."

Stepping away from the writing desk, he approached Sesshomaru with an extended hand. Figuring out Sesshomaru's perplexed expression, he illuminated, "This is how we show our agreement on an
arrangement. I know this isn't how it's done in Japan and is very forward of me, but I have to insist. It's an important tradition to shake hands in the western world. If you win tomorrow, I'll allow you one request no matter what I think otherwise. If I win, I will ask you questions that you must respond truthfully to. And I intend on winning. Victory conditions are first-blood or full-body paralysis. Are the terms acceptable?"

Eyeing the leather glove, Sesshomaru felt amused that the dark-haired daiyōkai needed an incentive to justify their spar. He had to admit, it certainly appealed to his competitiveness. Though it hadn't crossed his mind, he had no intention of going easy on the young lord now. Not when he could establish his dominance and superiority over the other alpha. With a small incline of his head, watching the younger male close in he murmured, "This Sesshomaru approves."

He felt his throat tighten when a broad, handsome grin unfurled on Hari's face upon his voiced consent. He pointedly looked down at his large, outstretched hand.

The exchange was vulgarly forward, but in a foreign environment and with the company he had he felt in the mood to be generous just this once. Indulgently but composedly, Sesshomaru weaved his claws lightly around Hari's, marveling at the sensorial intimacy behind such a simple but forward contact. Even with the thin animal hide, he could feel the younger sorcerer's heat softly seeping into his own. The female's words surged back into his forethoughts, causing him to squeeze Hari's hand tighter and making the sorcerer give a slightly pained grimace.

Before he could tactfully withdraw his limb, his claws spasmed involuntarily when a familiar rush of warmth flooded in between their point of contact. He watched with raptured, widened eyes as fire—seemingly thin and delicate as a strand of silk—fluidly wound around their clasped hands. His stare snapped up to Hari's and he was taken aback by the matching stunned expression on the Auror's face.

"What is this sorcery," Sesshomaru demanded when the light died down. He kept his grip on Hari's hand, halting the sorcerer's half-hearted attempt at tugging it back.

"I—," Hari frowned deeply, "I've seen and performed this magical contract many before, and even with its other use, I've never seen it manifest itself like an Unbreakable Vow." Noticing Sesshomaru's alarm, he clarified, "What essentially occurred between us was a magical confirmation of an official transaction between both parties, in this case the wager and the terms we've both agreed to. A lot of wizards and witches use this form of contract as evidence of a deal being made, so that neither could back out from their promise without good reason. It's not as bad if a party breaks the conditions set. It's not like the Unbreakable Vow where the guilty party is punished with instant death."

"You've deceived this Sesshomaru into undergoing a dangerous, life-threatening ritual," he managed to say levelly, digging his nails into the butter-soft fabric.

"What? No, this wasn't intended to deceive you. I told you this was how we…solidify treaties here, Lord Sesshomaru." Hari swallowed, staring at their hands in wonder. "Honestly I don't know why this happened. It's just magic acknowledging the caster's pact with another agreeable magical party and binding the promise to them. This particular magical oath is innocuous, so I don't know why it showed itself the way it did. We're only supposed to feel a slight tingling and heat in our hands…."

Hari's face was ashen pale.

"Undo the ritual," Sesshomaru commanded with a small sneer, insulted that the younger daiyōkai would have forced this spellwork upon them. His eyes narrowed when Hari hesitated a moment too long. He conjectured, "…Unless this Hari cannot."
The sorcerer was deadly quiet, his previous deliberation morphing into an expression of horror. Seeing that expression, a powerfully primeval force within him compelled the daiyōkai to bridge the gap in between them. He felt an all-consuming need to soothe the male's distress. After realizing he was instinctually growling softly at the young lord as means of projecting comfort and security, he promptly cut the noise that had been rumbling in his throat. Gathering himself, Sesshomaru demanded gruffly, "You will tell this Sesshomaru what is troubling this Hari."

Hari's lips tightened into a thin white line.

Another involuntary growl escaped from him, and he pushed forward—with Hari retreating several paces for each step Sesshomaru took—until he was nearly crowding the furious but terrified alpha against the writing desk. "You will tell this Sesshomaru," he repeated, staring into hostile eyes, "what is troubling this Hari."

Although the dark-haired alpha's anger was passive in spite of the inuyōkai's territorial transgression into their personal boundaries, Hari appeared one step away from tearing out one of Sesshomaru's fangs and running him through with it. "Take a step back," the sorcerer seethed, forcing each word out between gritted teeth when their knees practically pushed against each other. Squaring his jaw, his spine arched back as he endeavored to put distance between him and the spikes on the dog demon's armor.

"Tell me," Sesshomaru snarled back, his eyes bleeding a dangerous red and his voice encroaching into a guttural quality. Their individual yōki energies were quietly swirling around them like turbulent storms, like a thick air of scalding demonic energy licking up their exposed skins. It was hard to breathe in the tenseness of their charged atmosphere. Neither of the leaders wanted to back down.

When it seemed like they were about to come to blows, with a ragged exhale of breath Hari squeezed out a vile expletive and his forehead collided down against Sesshomaru's collarbone. His breath fanning against the thin material, Hari's miasma of foreign but undeniably substantial demonic energy was rescinded back to the owner.

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With the sudden separation from the suffocating roil of power, like a splash of cold water Sesshomaru regained his senses. His mind felt sluggishly slow, like he'd been emerging from a dense fog as he blinked down bewilderedly at the bowed head. The burning from his eyes melted away.

"Hari?"

"Let—let me think for a moment, you git," Hari murmured quietly, his accent muffled against the silk. "Shite, sorry, sorry. I didn't mean that. That was rude. I just need to calm down. I was almost close to—" Hari stopped mid-sentence, banging his head repeatedly against Sesshomaru's collar. Before his head could hit for the fourth time, Sesshomaru slapped his hand up to Hari's forehead, halting it straight in the air.

"You will cease this bizarre behavior," he directed, his palm feeling hot against Hari's skin. Hari didn't reply, but he nonetheless obeyed his command. Molten gold pools dropped to the lightning bolt marking out underneath from the gaps between his claws, and he felt his own body heat up in mortification. He quickly took that hand away, disregarding the pinprick tingling in his claws.

"Sorry, temporary fit of insanity." Fortunately Hari's eyes were still shut. He collected himself in the time it took for Hari to gather his wits and open his eyes. Gauging their close distance acerbically, Hari told him, "However, you can stop attempting to break my hand. Any more pressure and I think my bones will snap."
Sesshomaru frowned. Fortunately Hari put a swift end to his dilemma by stating in a strained voice, "Calm, Lord Sesshomaru. This has gotten blown out of proportion." Tugging his hand away successfully from Sesshomaru's lax grasp, he continued as blankly as he could, "I do not seek to offend or trade blows with you at this moment. But I'm not about to undo the magical binding. It takes unnecessarily too long to unravel it. It's meant to be short-term anyway and it should go away by itself after we fulfill the terms of our agreement."

His scowl deepened and he stated coldly, "This Hari is again withholding knowledge from this Sesshomaru." He recalled, with sharp clarity, the sorcerer's paled face. His eyelids lowered half-mast. "Your continued insolence is both repellant and impertinent."

"Win the wager and you can ask me tomorrow," Hari returned in his usual aplomb.

Blinking and realizing the weight of his words, he tiredly scrubbed his hand over his face. "Actually, no. Sorry, I don't mean to be so dodgy with you." Scowling at his immaturity, he reaffirmed, "If the oath went awry, you'll be the first one to know. I could be jumping to conclusions. It could be nothing. I'll need to check with someone first. It's not intended as a slight against you. I just prefer not sharing my suspicions without confirmation."

He peered over his glove, contemplatively studying the inuyōkai. "Luna's right, the stress of our situation had been delayed and is now getting to us. Today's been very exhausting to us both, and with very little gained productivity. I think we'll both need to take a step back and take the remaining night to calm ourselves down. If I stay here a minute longer, I think I'll go mad. We cannot afford to allow this hostility between us to escalate." Taking another shuddering breath, he rolled his shoulders and requested for a respectable distance to be put between them.

Everything inside Sesshomaru screamed at him not to let the younger alpha go—not when so many questions were left unanswered—not when he had caged the male between him and the desk. Yet Hari had structured his request so prettily this time Sesshomaru did not have a convenient excuse to keep him there without severe repercussions. He stared down into the forest green pools, half-heartedly entertaining the idea of not heeding Hari's entreaty. He felt ill at ease relinquishing him, especially when he had a gut feeling that Hari's present passivity was a rare occasion.

He leaned in closer—he issued a small growl of warning when Hari's muscles stiffened and the lean frame tried to move away—subtly sniffing the sorcerer's scent. His chest rumbled with a sound of approval when all he could smell was his own overwhelmingly coating Hari all over, from the topmost of his unruly dark hair and down the length of his body. Hari had already faintly smelled of him from their initial interactions, but Sesshomaru had been gradually strengthening it throughout the night ever since Luna's prophecy. It was enough that lower yōkai—he decided to give the hanyous the benefit of the doubt—should pick up the daiyōkai's interest in their lord. And it was enough that if the female's words had been a falsehood, the scent claim would fade over time without the constant reapplication and the signature of his demonic energy.

Pleased with himself, he caught himself from purring in contentment. Having picked up on the smell of salt in the air from Hari's sweat, the sorcerer interpreted the sound as a potential threat. Smiling darkly against Hari's hair, he felt generous enough to leave the pup's faded, infantile scent claim over Hari in the background.

He made certain mokomoko-sama brushed against Hari's face and body when he turned on his heels, at last allowing the younger daiyōkai his space. There was a relieved sigh behind him and when he gave the sorcerer his permission to depart as he begun unloosening his fangs from his sash, Hari readily began striding to the door. When he heard the door handle turn, before the lord could leave Sesshomaru brought up, "This Hari mentioned another use of this questionable ritual."
He didn't have to turn around to imagine Hari's surprised expression. The lord had paused by the unopened door, his hand still on the iron-wrought lever. He gave Hari a moment to struggle with his warring indecision, knowing deep inside that the lord would eventually cave to his seemingly innocuous prompting.

"I," the accented dulcet tone spoke haltingly, speaking now in Sesshomaru's native tongue, making Sesshomaru turn his head in his direction. "I've only performed it once, for Hermione. It serves the same function as an official magical binding, albeit under a different context. It's also just a source of heat between the parties' fingers...not what happened prior. Which I'll look into. For certain...."

Hari trailed off, doubtful how to proceed.

He waited patiently for Hari to regain his confidence. He knew the younger daiyōkai was tired and desired distance away from him to tend to his pack's pup. Finally the wizard willingly decided to throw all caution to the wind as he disclosed in truthful detail, "It's not as grand as an official marriage bond but it's just as archaic. Traditionally it'd be the Head of House who performs the ceremony, but without access to magical guardians, an honorary stand-in considered as the next trustworthy party would be given the official authority to sanction and approve...of the other person that would traditionally enact the courtship of the individual."

Sesshomaru's lips parted as he felt even less grounded in reality. The breath in his throat skipped a beat.

Hari was smiling wistfully, looking down at his wand-arm in a heartbreakingly nostalgic recollection. "Essentially I was the one to give Hermione away, as a father would for a daughter or, I guess, a brother would for a beloved sister. Even though I was a dear friend, Ron was a nervous wreck. He didn't even ask her, but he went ahead and asked me for my permission to court her anyway." He chuckled fondly, pulling open the door. "Fortunately we knew I would be her default choice so they still were able to proceed. I had the pleasure of escorting Hermione down the aisle when it was all said and done."

The dully glowing barrier he'd casted shattered when he breached through the doorway. Before he took his leave, he peered over at Sesshomaru, holding the wooden structure open to maintain clarity of sight. "I hope that sated your curiosity. It's not like this side of the magical binding would apply to us." He looked back down and he said awkwardly, "That aside, I wanted to tell you that I'm grateful for your kind words during dinner. Teddy needed that. So...thanks."

The lord became distracted when the pup tentatively yipped for his pack alpha, his childish voice carrying despite the distance of their sleeping quarters. With an affectionate sigh, Hari bade Sesshomaru a goodnight. His hand slipped away from the door, and with his eyes set in the metamorphmagus' path he was unaware of the scorching gaze pinned against his back before the door shut with a quiet click.

Meanwhile in Sengoku Era, southwest of the Kantō region was a familiar sight both humans and the yōkai saw every day. Beyond the splendid green canopies, where the leaves glistened with fat dewdrops from yesterday’s fortuitous rainfall—which watered the fields that had suffered from a widespread dry season—an enormous mountain rose high above the forests of the Western Lands. Sometimes called the twin of Mount Hakurei, a once sacred mountain of absolute purity and divinity where very few demons dared to enter, Mount Fuji was known by villagers to have once sealed the Kon blade of the evil and corruptive Halberd of Heaven and Earth. It also bore witness to the surreptitious deliverance of the feathered garment of a celestial maiden by the human hands of one Akitoki Hōjō, a young lord making up one of the two-person party presently scaling the rocks to reach the crater above.
“I’m certain you’re imagining things, Father-in-law!” Akitoki croaked, heaving himself up despite his limbs feeling like wet noodles. Fire seared through his bloodstream. From their long physical exertion, crumbs of dirt and rocks were gathered underneath his once clean fingernails, much to the young lord’s dismay. By the time they’d reached the top, the sun was low in the sky. He fell face-forward onto the earth. Rolling onto his back and holding an arm over his face, he shot a nasty glare up at the stout, balding merchant. The admiration he once held for the elder’s extraordinary vigor—which had come as a surprise to the lord when they began their ascent—had long since faded. “The village head made it clear nothing is wrong with Mount Fuji!”

“You bring shame to the Hōjō regency with your whining, boy,” Isogai wheezed, wiping a kimono sleeve across his wrinkled forehead. Leaning heavily against his long wooden cane, he squinted down at the equally exhausted man lying by his feet. “I did not ask you to accompany me. Your ancestors, Hōjō Tokimasa-sama and Minamoto no Yoritomo-sama, would be rolling in their graves to hear such words from your mouth.”

“You’re never going to address me with the proper honorific, are you?” Akitoki mumbled into his sleeve. Several clumps of chestnut hair fell loose from his high ponytail and were plastered unattractively against his slick, sweaty face. He turned his head and spat out the dust that tickled the back of his throat.

“Only because our family cannot provide a sufficient dowry for your bridewealth.” The elderly man frowned down at the blurry image of the downtrodden brunette. He removed a leather flask from his robes. Taking a swig of the water inside, he gave a mighty, contented sigh and then took another considering look at the pitiful sight the obviously-sheltered young man made. On one hand Isogai was aware of his family’s standing in society compared to the young man’s.

Hōjō Akitoki may not be the eldest son, but he did come from a family of well-known politicians with a bloody and sometimes dictatorial past. And however disgraced the Hōjō warrior clan was, their reputation and history were enough to warrant respect among the villagers, despite having been deposed and stripped of their office a mere two centuries ago. He’d heard rumors of another Hōjō daimyo establishing a formidable power base somewhere in the Sagami Province, but when he asked his daughter’s Intended, the young lord claimed no relation to the Odawara Hōjō clan.

On the other hand compared to the Hōjōs in general, coming from a worker-caste Isogai felt severely inadequate. While not quite as penniless, his family’s only credit to fame was birthing a long line of traveling merchants and daughters reared to wed. After an awkward pause, Isogai thrust the flask under the young man’s nose. He shook the canteen invitingly. “I haven’t the labor or the livestock or wealth to return the boon you’ve given us. Drink.”

“There is no need for reparation if you cannot provide it,” the lord protested, sitting up. Grabbing the flask, he greedily downed the remaining cool liquid. Another moan escaped from him—this time in relief. “Kagome and Mother-in-law are in favor of the engagement! You were too when we first met.”

“Her name is ‘Suzaku,’ boy, and not this ‘Kagome,’ however desperately you wish her to be.” He ignored the pained grimace upon the utterance of his daughter’s real birth name. With a grunt, Isogai grasped his wooden cane and heaved himself up. He peered down the lip of the mountain, marveling at the distance they traveled to reach the top. It’d taken them from daybreak to nighttime, but with his old bones he was amazed they even made it in one day. He turned around and approached the bowl of the volcano.

“Kagome doesn’t mind!” Akitoki scrambled to his feet, clenching the flask. His brain whirred woozily both from the muggy fumes of the steaming crater nearby and from his father-in-law’s
puzzling constant rejections.

The material pledge was a common practice, where friendly relations would be consolidated between the two intermarrying families. It was a symbol of proof that he intended to treat Kagome and their children well, signifying her worth to him and the community, and that he was compensating her biological family for the loss of her company and labor. As far as he was concerned, Isogai should be ecstatic to merge his family with the Hōjō Clan’s. However less prestigious his family was from when his ancestors reigned over Japan, the boon Kagome’s family would receive from this unison benefits both parties.

Staring worriedly at the elder man’s back, for a fleeting moment he wondered if he should assist his Father-in-law in spite of the elderly man’s surprisingly recovered stamina. A mere few weeks ago Akitoki’s Intended had been at her father’s bed rest, tending to the ailing man. When the lord would come to their humble estate bearing gifts, he would steadily see the man worsen and worsen, accompanying his daughter in her travels despite his weakness and failing vision; sometimes even going by himself and coming back several worrying nights later, all because of one man’s stubborn pride. Then one day it all changed when Isogai bravely ventured into the forest by himself—as means of a shortcut, no matter the dangerous plague of yōkai that hunted inside the region—and came back a new man.

Swallowing the ball of nervousness in his throat, he said as delicately as he could, “Father-in-law, she answers to that name now. Kagome and I are in love. I intend to court and wed her.” He’d practiced so many times in privacy he no longer blushed or tripped over those words.

Isogai remained silent, steadfastly approaching his destination with much caution from the smoke and ash. Wiping his clammy palms against his hakama, Akitoki trailed after the shorter elder, keeping a vigilant eye on him. Bringing his sleeve to his nose and mouth, he entreated softly, “Father-in-law, you’ve got what you wanted. Please, let us make our way back. It was not a celestial maiden that you’d encountered in the woods. You’ve dreamt the entire experience.”

“I couldn’t have,” Isogai said, clenching his cane in his gnarled hands. There was a tone of desperation that leaked through his leathery veneer. “I’d never seen such beauty before. I’ve never heard such an ethereal voice! She must have been the celestial maiden from the legends. It must have been Princess Kaguya. She looked exactly how I’d envisioned her.”

“She cannot be,” Akitoki stated firmly, recalling quite vividly in disgust the deceased demoness that had consumed the beautiful celestial maiden and worn her flesh as her outwardly guise. But no matter how much he retold the story, people would indulgently make the appropriate noises or mock him for his supposedly wild imagination. The only truth that was accepted was the destruction of the legendary Celestial Robe, for it was known to have belonged to the Hōjō Clan for centuries and no Hōjō in their sane minds would discard such a valuable treasure that could bring back some of their former prestige and influence unless for good reason.

He had to take several calming breaths to control himself from snapping at his Intended’s father. Akitoki was a mild-mannered man by nature, but his father-in-law always found ways to push his buttons. He had to remember the old man held a strong sway over his daughter, and Akitoki had no desire to disgrace his Intended by wedding her behind her family’s back. He had to remember the poor man either suffered a hallucinogenic delusion in the forest from terror and starvation, or was a victim on a cruel trick. His oceanic-hued eyes lingered on the small object he knew Isogai kept tightly locked in his sweaty hand. Kagome had told him she’d seen her father taking a sip per day from that expensive glass flask of mysterious golden fluid ever since he came back, obsessively measuring the amount left in the bottle each night.
“It has to be Kaguya-hime,” Isogai murmured repeatedly to himself, looking frighteningly off-balanced the more he repeated those words. Akitoki felt goosebumps erupt along his skin as the elder whispered her name with an increasingly zealous fervor. “I have to repay Kaguya-hime for her kindness. I have to report back to Kaguya-hime about—”

“She is dead!” Akitoki erupted, gripping Isogai’s shoulders forcefully. He shook the man, trying to slap reason back into him. “I’ve followed your whims and you can see,” he gestured to the steaming crater, “there is nothing to see here than smoke and lava. It’s a giant waste of our time. Please, your daughter is worried sick about you. I’ve accompanied you all this way to make sure nothing happens to you.”

He gave one last shake and he stated firmly, “And I intend on honoring that promise, because your health matters more to my Intended than all the hansatsu in Edo I can give her.”

Isogai focused blurrily on the young man. With a despairing, searching look, he caved in to the earnest glow of Akitoki’s resolution. Under the heavy weight of dejection, upon closer inspection the sagging wrinkles on the elderly man’s features became more pronounced and his tanned skin seemed distressingly paper-thin. With slumped shoulders, he whispered in a dry rasp, “I was foolish to come all this way.”

The steeliness in Akitoki’s gaze melted upon hearing those words. It made the young lord remember how fragile his prospective father-in-law’s health was. With Isogai’s frustrating pigheadedness and increase in stamina, the young lord had always seen the man as someone larger than life, someone difficult to convince and take down. Every time they interacted was like an uphill battle for Kagome’s attention. This vulnerability was a side he’d never seen before, and he was taken aback by how human his headstrong father-in-law was. Sighing, he awkwardly patted his shoulder in a consoling gesture. With all the arrogance of youth, well-meaning but carelessly harsh, he said, “It’s alright, Father-in-law. We all have those days. I’m relieved you snapped out of your foolishness.”

Isogai managed a watery smile, offended as always but unable to find the strength in him to give his irritation a voice. The young, naïve lord was a whiny brat, pampered and spoiled and more emasculated than his daughter Suzaku, but he had good intentions. Wiping the sweat from his brows, he took one last longing glance over his shoulder, squeezing the glass flask tightly in his perspiring palms.

Akitoki’s grasp constricted, blunt nails digging painfully into Isogai’s skin. The man kept quiet about his discomfort, knowing the lord—having just recently grown out of the awkward phase of puberty—was unaware of his own strength. With his magical elixir—the princess generously provided him the means to extend his luck, to increase his chances of survival and extending his life a day at a time with each sip until he ran out—he knew at his age he was not long for this world. He yearned to stay alive until he was certain his wife and Suzaku could provide for themselves without him as their main source of income. Here was a young man of respectable, healthy, and virile stock enamored with his daughter, who could provide her the life Isogai always wanted for her. But wealthy and prestigious as Hōjō was, Isogai could not stomach the disrespect he showed his daughter by calling her another woman’s name.

The young lord murmured, “Please watch your step.” He nervously glanced at both the steaming crater languidly spewing flecks of burning ash and their dizzyingly lofty distance from the ground. His mouth firming, he relinquished his hold and he dropped down carefully to a lower elevation. He stretched his hand out. “Father-in-law, allow me to assist you down the mountain.”

Isogai had more confidence scaling the volcano himself than relying on the clumsy assistance of a man who at times could trip over his own feet. But…the thought was nice. And the young man was
sincere. It made the heart in his chest warm knowing that. He was about to grip Akitoki’s shoulder with the cane in one hand and the other was holding onto an edge of the mountain for stability, when a turbulent gale picked up, flapping their clothes and blinding their vision with its stinging gust.

The gale immobilized them where they stood. Clinging to the edge, he caught the trailing end of Akitoki yelling his name and then there was a warm weight covering his smaller frame, protecting him from the worst of the wind. Heat swaddled him like a blanket of heavy furs during a winter storm, smothering, thick, and hot as a blistering fire. With his cheeks mashed against the face of the wall and Akitoki’s chest, Isogai cracked one eye open, peering up into the young man’s surreal, blazing determinism. He swallowed against the pit of respect that surged from the man’s uncharacteristic courage. He wanted to say something, anything to confess he may have been in the wrong to have judged him but his mouth was too dry to respond and the words became lodged in his throat.

The indistinct whoosh of the wind storm turned into a deafening roar. It seemed to come from everywhere now, clamoring louder and louder and louder. He felt fear seize his throat, thinking of what they’d do if they lost their grip or if the content of the volcano was flung in their vicinity. It would be devastating if their footing crumbled underneath them. Falling from his height was certain death.

He could feel Akitoki shouting something in his ear, but the syllables were dismembered and diced up and drowned out with the prevalent rancor. Abruptly his source of warmth and protection was wrenched from him with a sickening rip of fabric. He croaked Akitoki’s name, straining his eyes to see what had happened. Long strands of hair filtered into his hazy sight and a pair of breathtaking teal pools caught his. A bellow of laughter dyed the air, shrill as the shrieking wind, and Isogai felt his heart lurch up into the base of his throat when the footing underneath him suddenly collapsed. Swinging his arms, he scrambled for purchase but he felt something smash against the side of his ribs, throwing him into the air and far from any chance of recovery. He felt a sharp pain in his arm and glass splattered into his face, blinding him with miniature shards and splashing a coppery iron taste into his sliced tongue.

The wind howled in his ears and among the screaming he thought he could hear what sounded like his name being shouted. Swallowing the blood-coated glass with great difficulty, he merely closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable impact. His small form plummeted down below, disappearing into the dense canopy much to the horror of one individual.

“ISOGAI-SAN! ISOGAI-SAN!”

A brittle laugh again sounded, and the remaining human felt whatever had been gripping him throw him up into the air. When gravity pulled him back down, his skull was crushed against the mountainous surface and he was out like a light. All the while, above the volcanic crater, obscured by the gray smoke and dying red embers spitted high into the skies, there was a pentacle that blazed a sickly pink against the darkening sky.

Chapter End Notes

(A/N)- Isogai actually isn’t an OC. He’s Suzaku “Kagome” Hōjō’s nameless dad from the anime. It just annoyed me to type “Akitoki’s Father-in-law” repeatedly. Hmm, next chapter definitely has an Inuyasha-esque feature to it. Interpret it as you will. :) But so much culture shock here. I’ve been immersing myself in the Floating World of the
samurais for this term’s exhibit design so I can say, during my months of research, discovering the cultural acceptance of homosexuality in pre-Meji Japan is quite stunning. I’m starting to make Sesshomaru a believer. –cackles- We’ll dive into Harry’s POV soon.
Some questions about the previous chapter by the readers on FF.net:

"Who are Akitoki Hojo and Isogai?"
Hopefully you guys remember Hojo from Kagome's school. In one episode he shows Kagome his ancestry tree and written in it was "Hōjō Kagome." Akitoki Hōjō is present! Hojo's ancestor that appears in episode 137 and the movie "Castle Beyond the Looking Glass." Suzaku is a girl accompanied by whom I'm assuming is her dad (I'd named him Isogai) at the end of episode 137, and Akitoki proposes to her out of the blue because of her passing similarity to Kagome. And since he'd been traumatized by a male demon similarly named Suzaku, he renames her after the miko he'd been crushing on but had gentlemanly bowed out after seeing she only had eyes for Inuyasha. I'm going to try to avoid interjecting any more OCs unless the plot demands it and there is no canonical personality left in rotation. I will try my best. But…modern day wizarding Japan…urgh. That OC was mandatory. So, expect characters you may not remember but I assure you they most likely are canon.

"What happened last chapter?"
Spoiler: I'm going to do my best to make it so that it isn't mandatory for you to have watched Inuyasha: the Anime or its movies, particularly the 'Castle Beyond the Looking Glass' and the Final Act season, but if you decide to give them a look you're probably going to become more emotionally invested in the characters I'm bringing in. Green and Gold seems to be a relatively large story, so I'm making it no secret about our two major antagonists (one for each timeline). I love writing about psychotic villains, and with how cookie cutter Princess Kaguya was in the film and with her ambiguous last scene, I saw a lot of creative freedom and potential in her as a villain for the Inuyasha!world. I've pretty much revealed HP!world's antagonists too or at least hinted at heavily.

"What's up with Harry's gloves? And what is Sesshomaru's incentive for trusting Luna?"
Oh. I'd planned individual A/Ns addressing these much later, but I'm enthused someone's picked them up this early on! It's still relatively hush hush, but think of what happened in Book 5. And think about Luna's perfume and her oddly dressed appearance. And the color orange. That's all I'm saying for now.

My appreciation to Genuka, 107602, Sara, Kyo121694 and Suyii, and to anyone that took the time to answer my curiosity. You'll find out in this chapter. I was very concerned I might've overreached and missed his target age completely, but thank goodness none of you were very far off. So, congrats to everyone who struck it dead in the bullseye!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"A respectable, wealthy family. Strict upbringing but otherwise a healthy, loving environment."

Harry's figure emerged from the emerald flames and stopped, momentarily caught off-guard by her
sudden declaration. "Sorry?" he asked, a foot still caught behind in the harmlessly burning hearth.

"Our new mate." Hermione glanced up from the large tome she’d buried herself in, her immaculate hair a mess from having run her fingers through it frustratedly. The glow of the oil lanterns hovering overhead from the fixture cast a warm, orange sheen over her narrow features. In the cluttered kitchen of the reconstructed Burrow, located at the back of the house, the witch was situated comfortably on the large, expensive-looking dining table that had been a gift from the Delacour family. The only person around, her solitary figure looked lonely among the other seven empty chairs—each also gifted from the charity of several sympathetic Ministry colleagues and therefore a mismatched assortment of furniture. She raised a brow. "He's not with you?"

"Asleep. Ron?"

"Over at his brother's, George."

Harry grunted, dragging his heel from the iron mantle. He'd looked uncomfortable from the edge of hostility detected in her tone. She watched as he scuffed his shoes down against the mat—intentionally placed by the Floo Fireplace for incoming guests—before informing him, "I'd casted a Privacy Charm around the area. Just in case of eavesdroppers. Molly and Arthur are visiting the grandkids. They may or may not come back tonight."

"I see." He was staring intensely at a random trinket of Arthur's on the fireplace shelf. "What about Ginevra?"

Her heart clenched, and she heard herself saying, "Ginny's been keeping an eye on me. Just in case, y'know, that. I've sent her away to buy some groceries. She won't be back for another hour or two."

His Adam's Apple bobbed unsteadily in this throat, but from the distance his face was kept extraordinarily expressionless. To the average anybody, no one would be able to tell he was rattled. Hermione, having practically grown up beside him for half of her life and been on the same roller coaster ride of emotions and grief, knew better. She struggled to sit up straighter in her seat.

Harry was instantly at her side, frenetic hands on her elbow and shoulder.

"I'm not an invalid, Harry," she protested, wrenching her arm away. She slapped his grabby hands. "Harry. Stop. You're being ridiculous. Like Ron."

Harry froze and a blush rose high on his cheekbones. To hide his embarrassment, he preoccupied himself with the books and documents on the long dining table, attempting to arrange some system of organization of the mess on Molly's lace dollies.

With an irritated huff, she migrated the blankets around her shoulders to pool around her middle. The people around her sometimes forgot she was a strong, formidable woman and only saw her stomach. She nudged him with a foot against a sock-covered ankle when she felt comfortable enough to look up at him from her sitting position. Snatching the document away from his gloves, she gave him a stern stare when he refused to stop. "Harry, focus. You have me for an hour. You said it was something important you had to tell me. It has to be dire for you to ask for a face-to-face meeting, alone, with me, near midnight, instead of fire-calling me or doing your job at surveillance. In fact, I remember Kingsley granting you a temporary leave from work. Why aren't you taking advantage of it?"

Harry's fingers fidgeted, before he clasped them together behind his back. The light from above illuminated his face, making the light scatterings of scruff on his jaw prominent. Noticing her stare, he turned his cheek and he rubbed his jaw uncomfortably. "Not dire," he disagreed, "but odd.
Definitely odd."

She waited. When he didn't follow up, she nudged him harder with her foot.

"Hypothetical situation."

"Right, hypothetical."

He ignored her heavy sarcasm and hitched a hip up on the edge of the table. His green eyes were looking down at her and piercing. "Hypothetically, let's say you were conducting an agreement between wizards. How would you finalize the deal?"

"Harry," she repeated tiredly. "Can't you just tell it to me straight?"

"No, because I'm not even sure if it's my infamous luck acting up or I'm making a big deal out of nothing. If it isn't, then I've wasted both of our time."

"And this isn't?"

She furtively stole a glance off of the clock hand that was pointed at the "time to sleep" copper teardrop steadily creeping toward the "you should really think of the risks" reminder written on the face of the restored timepiece. They had some time to themselves before the in-laws came in to check up on her. She'd found it frustrating that she had to hide her research from their eyes, only informing them it was confidential information concerning the ambassador. Every time she would hear them approach, she would have to shove all her research and notes into her charmed handbag. To hide it from her Auror husband, she'd spoon-fed him trite excuses about trust and it being out of his jurisdiction. That led him to forming baseless conjectures about her seemingly close relationship with Harry, and wasn't she infuriated and hurt that Ron would think that of her.

"And I'd be horribly, horribly embarrassed." The wizard sat back, now crossing his arms. Hermione was annoyed that he was in a defensive position. "Humor me. We've got one hour."

After a baffled silence, she eventually relented to his pleading stare. She sighed, "I'd get the wizard to perform the ritual. We'd shake hands to finalize the settled terms. You know that. Every business transaction is like that."

"Hypothetical situation two. One of you bollocks it up and you end up making an Unbreakable Vow."

"YOU MADE AN UNBREAKABLE VOW WITH SOMEONE?" she shouted, shooting up and sending the chair behind her tumbling. She sucked in a breath when she felt the baby kick against the lining of her stomach, as if sensing her mother's fright. Thankfully Harry hadn't noticed her wince, him preoccupied by setting back the chair. Her mind was racing. Her chest was heaving from the excursion and concerned panic. She demanded, "Who's the wizard you made the Vow with? Actually, what were the terms of the Vow you irresponsibly –"

"It was an unintentional accident," Harry interrupted, clamping down on her shoulder and exerting force until she sat back down. He dragged a quilt back up under her chin and bundled her with it. "Calm down, I'm not even sure if it was an accident. Or an Unbreakable Vow. But it looked like it. It had the same appearance."

Hermione was glaring up at him furiously, resembling a grumpy, ruffled-looking Crookshanks buried underneath the heavy comforter. He had the fight down the smile threatening to show up on his face. "Besides, we both know there's only one other explanation and I am certain it is not that."
"One other explanation?" she repeated, burrowing into the warmth and furrowing her brow. She was still breathing a little harshly. "What other explain—oh." She seemed shocked by the sheer suggestion of such an intimate prospect. The expecting witch sent him an unsure expression, wringing the comforter in her hands. "True, but with your luck, I'm not so certain. Are you certain?"

He chuckled warmly, accustomed to her customary tactlessness. "Funny. But who would've officially approved of the person's Courting Intentions toward me? Luna? She's not even my Head of House, or the trusted party I'd first think of to perform it for me. Andromeda? Teddy? I think that's all from today's suspect pool." He dropped his hand from her shoulder. "Besides…the affected party? Neither I nor he think of each other that way."

He had a distracted look on his face. He muttered to himself, "Nothing good would come out of it anyway."

"But other than that, I can't fathom…a spontaneous Vow doesn't spring out of nowhere!" Her eyes were tight around the edges, having caught the trail-end of his last sentence. "Who is this wizard anyway?"

"I don't want to say until the bet we've made passes," he muttered thoughtfully, still absentmindedly. Shaking his head, he assured, "I'll let you know more, if it lingers. I had Kreacher send me information of whatever else this could possibly be, but nothing adds up. If it was a fluke and the Agreement concludes as it should, we are to pretend it was just my magic acting up."

"Again. It's been out of control ever since you'd come across all three Deathly Hallows. If it weren't for your on-again-off-again stokes of luck, I don't know how you could simultaneously get into these messes and come out alive," Hermione remarked, scrutinizing his cooled expression. By this time her breathing pattern had normalized. "Do you think-?"

"No, it doesn't feel like that. I hope not. But there's no way we can know for certain."

"Harry…"

"Stop," he said, pinching her cheek. The sharp smell of animal hide wafted up her nose. "Stop fretting. I didn't come here to be interrogated. I'm a grown wizard. I can handle anything that comes my way. Trust me, okay? It's not good for the expectant mother to be so stressed."

"I know," she sighed, her words coming out distorted before she batted away his hand. "I just can't help but worry about you, Harry. You're…you're my best mate. You're…." She ducked her head, her hair slipping down her shoulders and covering her face like a curtain. She whispered in a tiny voice, "...You were the first genuine friend I've ever had. Concern is always in the forefront of my thoughts when I'm thinking about you."

She heard Harry's breath hitch, and stillness fell upon them. Unsettled, nestling her face deeper into the comforter until only her eyes and nose were exposed, her gaze swiveled up to peer at her boss. He was staring down at her with the oddest expression. She swallowed, and said, muffled, "That…that was embarrassing, wasn't it?"

"No." He cleared his throat. "Just unexpected." Laying his eyes upon the documents on the table, he gestured to the pile, mindful of the eccentric organization in spite of the untidiness. His view perused over the visible titles, seemingly bewildered by the wide range of subjects. "These are the approved copies the Japanese Ministry sent you?"

"Uh." Her cheeks pinked. "I couldn't ask them for their research and documentation on the demon demographics solely. It would raise red flags." She reached out from underneath the homemade
comforter—sewn by her mother-in-law Molly and magically embroidered with a pattern of moving, adorably miniature lions reading books—and nudged the tome she'd been reading over to Harry until it'd knocked against his thigh. Slipping a finger where she'd left off, he turned the book over and stared at the official Japanese Ministry seal on the front cover.

"This isn't a copy. Whose wheels did you have to grease to get your hands on this?" he gawked. His thumb traced the golden indentations reverently.

"They're not one of the most difficult Ministries to get to agree. They're rather polite, incredibly helpful and eager to please should you treat them decently. Although, I had to throw your name and the Ministry's around a little," she confessed. "...Maybe a tad bit excessively, for the ones they'd willingly lent us from their more, erm, private collection."

His head snapped up, his grip growing slack.

"They were government property!" She protested, spreading her arms around the pile of texts and crouching over them like a mother dragon hoarding her treasures. "In foreign borders! I had to have good authority to gain access to them! Careful with that! We're only borrowing some of them!"

"You..." Harry broke off, pinching the bridge of his nose. The tome straightened in his grasp. "What excuse did you give them?"

"Nothing incriminating. Just...playing up their egos and adhering to their already-established system of respect. The usual diplomacy."


"Let it be. Simply...let it be."

"Hermione."

"They were already under the impression the British Ministry was impressed by their culture and history. I only had to feed them the illusion our 'Most Honorable Diplomat and Lord Potter Black Peverell' was interested in learning more of their lore." She peeked up, excitement coursing through her veins. Her face was flushed. "Did you know we had 400 years of shared history? Of course, it were the Muggle explorers that'd encountered the Orientals initially under the Muggle Tokugawa shogun—that's literally only a century after the era we should be focused on—but even with the imperialism, World War II, the Muggles' Adolf Hitler and our Grindelwald's campaign, with our surface similarities we—"

"Hermione."

"Long story short, we have an engrossing, joint history," she finished lamely. "I'd never given it much thought before but it's a brilliant read. You should give it a try sometimes. It might help with our guest since we are, y'know, interacting with an ancient Japanese sovereign and warlord misplaced out of time."

"Is this a history book?" Harry demanded, flipping through the well-preserved pages, showing only some wear and tear from when before a Preservation Spell was cast. He skimmed a few lines from the page Hermione had left off, raising a brow from the content. "This is basically poetry."

"They're all poetry!" She scoffed, her academic brain used to dealing with hard truths and printed facts. She looked ready to flip the table. "They're-they're...nothing better than frivolous purple prose! They just assume that you know the euphemisms and the rhetoric, when we're actually not familiar!"
Harry hesitated. "Hermione, you're the one who keeps reminding me whenever we have to mingle with someone from a different culture. Or someone whose mindset is stuck in another time. They have their own traditions and protocol that we do differently and can be hard to understand." He set the tome back, open this time, on the table. "If anyone can work out the meaning behind riddles and look past their surface prettiness, it's you. You're doing your best. I'm surprised they even have printed word back then."

"On fragile scrolls of paper or cloth and woodblock printed books, mind you, with somewhat faded characters sustained by the miraculous longevity of a very, very strong charm." She looked slightly appeased by the compliment though. Her tensed shoulders slumped down and she started going through the copied documents sullenly. Pulling out a thin booklet, bound by twine, she set it in Harry's expectant hands. A crossed expression filled up her fine features. "Here, this is what I didn't want to put down in the letter."

"Don't take this the wrong way," Harry said, not opening it yet. He was peering at her face. "But you look exhausted. Should I come back at a later date?"

"No. No, just....." Hermione scrubbed her hands over her face, feeling the sensitive and puffy underside of her sockets. She peeked. "I'm fine. Really. Don't leave me waiting!"

After a deliberate pause, he cracked the brochure open, reading the title page. He blinked down at the surprising English text, before his brain reminded him that of course the witch would've had it translated. He read aloud in growing disbelief, "A Feudal Fairytale: the Life of the Great Dog Demon."

"Don't, don't give me that look. Just...think of it as the Japanese equivalent of our Tales of Beedle the Bard. The one Dumbledore willed to me, not the fanciful adaptation read to children nowadays."

Harry made a little noise of acknowledgement, turning the pages until he reached the first of the many short stories, including one of how dog demons were said to have originated from. He read through the translated passage briefly, before peering back up. "His name means 'Killing Perfection?'"

"Some pieces translate his name into the 'Destruction of Life.' Apparently we're housing one of the deadliest, powerful species of demons ever recorded," she recounted dryly. "What's even more terrifying is that he's been described as the Warring States period's Dark Lord."

His face was immediately blanched of all color.

"Oh no, unlike V-Voldemort or Grindelwald, his policies mellow out. The author stops criticizing him a little more than a third into it. The rest of the collection has accounts of his legendary adventures and battle exploits. Then he or she starts praising his newfound compassion and benevolence for both his ilk and even humankind. Two-thirds into the collection you have there, there is even a tiny piece about whom he fancied. At least, I think so. The tone abruptly changes."

"I'm not really concerned about whom he'd want to shag," Harry said, gorgeous as he found Sesshomaru sometimes, in a fantastically strange light. He kept this thought to himself, from his mate's unsettled demeanor.

"You actually should be. Not the shagging, but the moral of the tale. The author spent too much time discussing spring and whatnot, but...here." She snatched the booklet back, leafing through it until she found the passage she'd mentioned. She shoved it back into his gloved hands. "I'll let you form your own opinion."
There was a brief moment of quiet as he did as he was told. She watched his eyes move left to right with each line, his initial irritation and boredom melting away when he read past the bulk of the flowery rhetoric. A troubled dip showed in between his brows the closer he got to the story's end. "Hermione," he said finally. "This sounds eerily familiar. Tell me I'm imagining it."

She recounted softly, "The experience is beyond compare. I've heard of such things in the past, but in front of my very eyes the ceremony was performed. In a pique of foresight, our most Honorable Ruler had embraced his birthright and had entrapped death underneath his green bridle.' At least, I think that's what's written. I'm paraphrasing a bit. However it sounds awfully like the Tale of the Three Brothers, doesn't it?"

He still looked uncertain. Gnawing on his lower lip, he turned the page, searching for any more mentions of the 'ceremony' and 'death.' He was disappointed when the next tale began anew, relating the infamous Japanese legend of a celestial maiden as the introduction.

"You can stop reading that now," she said flippantly. "It's basically lip service after that particular short. He married the demon he'd fancied, and then triumphed over death. I'm not sure if the author was being a poet, or he or she was being literal. I have two more pieces to show you. Well, actually, the first one can be found throughout many readings, but it's no less relevant."

With a satisfied sound of triumph, she found what she was looking for and held up the photograph of what appeared to be a caricature of a fierce-looking Sesshomaru in the foreground, wielding a blade and emerging from a portal painted in heavy-handed brushstrokes of purples and blacks. Arms and various monstrosities appeared to be reaching from the black mass after him. Harry had to squint to make out further details. Underneath Sesshomaru's raised leg, what appeared to be a rotting female Inferius had her hands raised to him, one of her outstretched arms drawn with fresh human flesh. In the background, there was a dark wraith drawn with gaping holes where the eyes and mouth should be, veiled in what appeared to be green cloth and overlooking Sesshomaru's shoulder on the right.

Harry felt chills run down his spine. He croaked hoarsely, "Death bridled with green?"

"The drawing's full name is Lord Sesshomaru Returns from the Netherworld with a Deathly Spectre to Oversee a Resurrection. I don't recommend staring at the figure in the back for too long. Once I realized what I was seeing, I couldn't sleep a wink." She shuddered. "Frightful drawings of specters aside, this particular, erm, 'picture of the floating world' is the only one that relates to the fairytale you've just read."

"Are you telling me death is not a concept and is instead a Dementor that can be summoned by Sesshomaru?"

Hermione's face convulsed briefly from the heavy tinge of cynicism detected in his voice. "When you put it that lightly, no. That'd mean the Grim Reaper exists and we know that's a Muggle flight of fancy. I just thought it was fascinating there is a correlation between two unrelated sources. But that's not what I wanted to focus on with this. Look at the sword he's holding." When he strained to see, she pressed, "You've been monitoring him all this time. Does the sword look at all familiar?"

"Hermione," he said impatiently, "Just because I'd wielded the Sword of Gryffindor doesn't mean I'm suddenly an expert on sword craftsmanship. They look all the same to me. I'm certain whatever you're trying to prove is going to be true regardless of what I think."

"Sorry? I never mentioned Gryffindor's Sword. Why are you even…? Never mind. I won't ask. Has he ever mentioned the, ah—" She expelled an annoyed sigh. "—I can't say its original Japanese name with the spell in effect. Alright, a little, brief context. Swords owned by dog demons are forged by sword-smiths but are crafted from fangs. I don't know how it works but I assume it's their version
of Transfiguration or Alchemy. Has he ever talked about a...a 'Heavenly Rebirth Fang'?

"Not that I can recall." His eyes narrowed, and he cautiously tossed out a guess. "I suppose next you're telling me he's a necromancer that can bring back the dead." A shocked silence followed his reply, and he gawked down at her for not instantly refuting his theory. He denied breathlessly, "No, that's—"

"Impossible like the Resurrection Stone? Like the impossible existence of ghosts and Inferi?" Her face was occluded by her hair and the comforter. "In none of the texts and drawings do they mention he knows necromancy, but there were also repeat references of this 'netherworld.' I can only assume, from the name alone and this artist's rendition, that it's where the dead go."

She frowned, spinning over in her seat to the wizard's direction as if seeking confirmation. "I would say hell, but I refuse to believe we all go to hell after our deaths. That's not where you said you went to, right?"

"My soul was in limbo, a state of being in between this one and the next," he recalled distractedly. She observed as he dug through the small mountain, prying out more photographs of paintings and multiple ukiyo-e. He grimaced down at them. "Its appearance is different for each person who visits it apparently. If it wasn't a figment of my oxygen-starved brain. Hermione, are you sure these could be trusted? You said these were poetic exaggerations."

"Mentioned once, I could explain it away with that. Twice, from different sources, and it would be a stretch to call it a coincidence. More than that and it starts becoming a real possibility." She sent him a scrutinizing stare. "You didn't feel anything odd about him? Nothing strange. Nothing familiar?"

A peculiar emotion swept through his features, before it smoothed out into a placid mask. "What are you insinuating?" he asked flatly. His tone framed the question like he was inquiring whether or not he had heard right, and not out of genuine curiosity.

"Nothing," she hurried to assure, cheeks searing from mortification. She'd wanted to ask if there was any truth to the supposed title after one acquired all three Deathly Hallows. The Auror had been tight-lipped to her and Ron about what he'd done with the artifacts, and it was only recently he'd divulged his experiences in the so-called Limbo. Her husband had been understandably skeptical of the spiritual recount, but Hermione had stood fast beside Harry's assertion.

Desperate for a topic change, she filched a copy of a certain scroll from the upturned pile. The Polaroid film was no bigger than her hand, but unlike the ukiyo-e she'd shown Harry, the lighting quality of this one was crisper, clearer. Wilting under Harry's sharp glance, she clarified, "The third thing I'd wanted to show you. It's about his entire family tree scroll. Do you remember what I said about his upbringing, when you'd Floo-ed into the Burrow?"

His sternness turned reflective. "...So, you're saying, he grew up spoiled."

Hermione frowned in response, disapproval written clearly across her features. "Spoiled as in what we'd expect coming from a child from nobility, yes," she said slowly. "But, Harry, you of all people should know. It's not...all...that great. He's not a carbon copy of Malfoy, when he was a brat that didn't know any better."

"Malfoy was a brat," he agreed.

"Harry James Potter. Black. Peverell—"

"But, losing a parent," he sighed, running his hand through his hair and looking away, "I suppose a
son would have to grow up eventually. They're not all cut from the same cloth."

Hermione's fierce expression melted into something milder. She grew quiet. "Any child would, after such a loss." Closing her eyes, she shook off their shared moment of brooding silence and cleared the lump from her throat. "This scroll was exhibited in the halls before the Minister's Office, behind a glass case. His younger brother is a national hero. They wouldn't let me take a photo of it. I would be dishonoring his achievements." She couldn't help the lingering bitterness that escaped her voice.

"You sneaky, devious witch," he answered, reluctantly fond and admiring.

Her mouth twitched up. "I had to follow other sources to make sure, but Sesshomaru was an only child. For awhile. Then he became the oldest among the two sons."

She reached over to paw through remaining, magicked-documents she'd spelled to be translated for their eyes only. Finding the one she'd been looking for, she wordlessly took down the spell that'd prevented them from sounding out the phonetics of the Japanese language. She gestured for him to look over her shoulder as she tried to recall what she'd read from the archives compiled into an old but compact book.

"The eldest son of the Great Dog General, the greatly feared and revered Inu no Taishō, the daiyōkai Sesshomaru no Taishō ruled the Western Lands of Japan, quickly growing and consolidating power for his empire during the Muggle Sengoku Jidai conflicts. How is my pronunciation?"

"Passable." He was scanning the Japanese characters and comparing them to the photograph in his hand. "It's not as horribly mangled as when I first started learning."

"You pick up quickly only on the oddest of things," she remarked casually, leaning back against him. She adjusted the comforter around her. "Did he reveal anything else about himself in my absence?"

"Oh, loads. We bonded like two chummy schoolmates."

With an indignant huff, she elbowed him in the gut for the heavy hand of sarcasm. He made a surprised grunt by her ear. "No, really, what did you glean from your interactions with him?"

He sounded winded as he shared, "Compared to you, not much. He keeps his secrets close to his chest. But…," he sighed, "he's kind. In his own pureblood way. He even had a nice word for Teddy. …That very unlady-like snort of yours sounded like you don't believe me."

"I'm simply trying to reconcile that image you've put in my head with the same person I'd been reading about these past few days."

Hermione blinked down at the book, and a forlorn frown broke out. She'd also gotten into a bitter row with Luna over the Fire-call the late afternoon when the Magizoologist accused her of siding with Ginny when she'd inquired Hermione after Harry's whereabouts. Hermione had never quite figured out what had stirred the bad blood between the two women, recalling happier times. Hermione also didn't get to hear from Luna what she'd said to persuade Harry to meet his godson again. Hermione had been trying for months to encourage him to reach out to the metamorphmagus and subsequently Andromeda—the very person he'd been avoiding—but her efforts kept ending up in vain.

She burrowed her face against the comforter. "From the way you spoke his name, I assume everything went well."

"Better than what I could hope for. He's still a sweet kid, after all this time." He tapped her cheek
with the photograph. "I'm uncertain what you want me to glean from this. We already know of his immediate family."

"Simply that he'd been forthright with us. Shocking."

"No, that's good. It says a lot about his character." Rubbing his jaw, he recollected absently, "A half-brother and a mother, still surviving. Now we know for certain his dad is deceased."

"If I'm not getting the timeline wrong, Sesshomaru is the first-born. He would be the first in line of contention, after his dad's passing. I'm not clear on the mixed titles—whether he's nobility or royalty—but the tone of the translations generally equates him as the official Crown Prince of a considerable number of territories. His inherited title as 'Lord of the Western Lands' has been remarkably undisputed, ever since his mum stepped down. There might've been a challenge had the youngest son not left the family very quickly. Understandably, since he was a bastard."

"A bastard in the metaphorical sense or...?"

"Literal," she said grimly. "The father had an adulterous affair with the daughter of a Muggle nobleman when Sesshomaru was, erm," she searched through the pile again, this time picking up an official-looking scroll depicting three giant white dogs with red sclerae and teal irises, with one of the painted canines wrapped loosely around what appeared to be an Asian princess, from the elaborateness of her makeup and headdress alone, "'three hundred years old.'"

"O-oh. That's..."

"He was at the psychological age of an eleven or twelve year old when his dad had the extramarital affair."

There was an uncomfortable hiccup in the conversation after her debriefing. Heavy clothing rustled behind her. Then two large hands dropped on her shoulders, making her jump. He began massaging her shoulders as if in apology, making her melt into a puddle under his ministrations. The leather creaked against the cashmere material of her dress as he confessed, "Alright, I was following along just fine until you've lost me. Come again?"

"As you know, several magical creatures age differently from us," she said. "We age differently from Muggles, so it'd make sense if Sesshomaru could as well."

"He told us he was over five-hundred years old. I don't doubt otherwise."

"Neither do I. But that means he's psychologically at the age of nineteen. Or, culturally, that's the way the demon society sees him. Normal, non-magical dogs age differently from humans. Dog demons are the same, albeit much, much slower. While he's half a millennium years-old physically, we're already mentally and psychologically older than him." She felt the sharp intake of air behind her, before it whooshed back out, tickling her cheek. Her face reddened, she leaned closer to the book to put space between them.

"Blimey," he exhaled, leaning his forehead on top of her shoulder. It took him a couple more minutes to collect himself. "Alright, we're dealing with a self-entitled sovereign just out of his adolescence. Not only that, he's emotionally damaged from his arse of a dad, and has a stunted moral compass due to the inherent bloody nature running rampant in his era."

"In a war-torn era, most people would find profit and solace in killing," she said bluntly, almost matter-of-factly. "I feel sorry for him. While I don't approve exactly, mind, I'm not surprised he had to intimidate or put several dissenters down. Not to mention that he's a high-profile magical creature
—already of ill-repute with superstitious Muggles. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd have to face hoards of forced purifications and some of the laughable tripe I keep reading about in some of these accounts of Japanese demon-kind."

"You told me he is a warlord. I'm not surprised."

"No, Harry. He lives up to his namesake. He's slaughtered hundreds out of boredom and entertainment. Most became warranted only after a span of several centuries. Which, for our guest right now, is actually quite a recent change when you'd pulled him from the well if I'm getting the timeline right."

At Harry's involuntary suck of breath, she cleared the nervous lump in her throat. Her hands were trembling as she said, "One more thing. We weren't aware at the time but those three swords of his? Harry, whatever you do, make sure no one touches them. Not even you. They seem to function as Horcruxes. If they're not a high-level demon like Sesshomaru or someone of a powerful light magic ilk like Dumbledore, they're going to be possessed. They'll be nothing more than a bloodthirsty, mindless monster. They'll be like Quirrell, only worse. Literally a 'vessel of evil,' as I'm led to believe."

She could hear his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat as he swallowed jerkily. He asked, "Do we know anything else? Abilities? Strengths and weaknesses? What to not say to his face to avoid making him angry?"

"He's of Dark lineage. That should tell you something already. As for what to say, you're doing fine so far. Don't say anything you wouldn't about yourself. Treat him like any nobility or royalty we've dealt with before. Erm, don't ask about his half-brother. And absolutely don't talk ill of his family. He's ancient Japanese royalty, magical creature heritage notwithstanding. He's not like us. Be a little more reserved and respectful toward him."

She now hesitated.

"There is more?"

"Ah, and I wouldn't say he's just out of his adolescence. The age of majority in the feudal times was, I think, fourteen or fifteen years of age. Generally speaking. I've read some accounts that were a lot worse."

"Good Merlin," Harry breathed against her neck. "That's several years apart from ours….wait. How did you do the calculations?"

Her expression pinched. "I didn't. It's convoluted. I had to consult various sources to make this estimation….Luna helped."

"She pitched in?"

He sounded surprised the Ravenclaw would contribute to their research. Or that Hermione would even be willing to ask the blonde for her assistance. Annoyance flooded her system, battling away the surge of sadness the came from bringing her name up.

"Of course she did," she grumbled, hands balling into fists. "Before we stopped talking. There were a lot of records contradicting each other, so I had to have it set straight. I'm not even surprised she's aware of the yōkai culture and traditions. The woman knows everything about magical creatures. Nonexistent or extinct, it doesn't matter. Ah, I forgot to tell you, you can borrow anything on the table without a Ministry crest on it. I've already made duplicates for the Department of Mysteries to
rummage through. I'm holding you accountable whether or not you decide to show Sesshomaru his future. I don't recommend it, but if you think it's for the best…..

"This disagreement of yours…Andromeda told me it was…over me?" She could hear the frown in his voice without having to turn around.

"Don't get a swelled head, Harry," she replied crossly, pinching his hand sharply in retaliation. Trust him to get stuck on the topic no one wanted him to focus on. "You make things sound so complicated when it doesn't have to be. Yes, Luna and I got into a row. No, it wasn't over you. Luna's just being bitter that I told Ginny where you were."

"Really, Hermione? Et tu?" His hands left her shoulders.

She scowled. "Before you quote more Shakespeare at me, Ginny gave me her word that she wouldn't bother you. Not when you're on an important assignment that could get you or Sesshomaru killed. Really! You're behaving like Luna! You're both behaving as if I'd sold you out to the enemy!"

"It's not that I'm ungrateful for your words, dire and embellished they may be," Harry muttered, "but Ginevra and I aren't on good speaking terms. Do you know what she'd accused Sesshomaru of?"

"What?" she huffed, crossing her arms over her stomach.

"Of being my rebound boyfriend. It was right after I told her we weren't getting back together. She retaliated." His voice had lowered into a deep and angry murmur. He was struggling to keep his temper in check. "She accused me, in front of a distinguished audience of peers that I respect or want to be respected by, that I was 'stringing her along'! She could've damaged my image, my reputation for…for what? A few seconds of vindication? Hermione, I keep thinking, what if I'd been among different peers—the ones that'd matter? It wouldn't matter what she would've said, if they're going to be said blindly with thoughts of retaliation. My word, my authority would be rendered unreliable."

"Oh," she said quietly, her arms loosening. Her stomach churned uneasily. "She didn't tell me that."

"I'm certain she didn't," he hissed. That made her feel all the more horrible.

"Hermione." She looked up and she saw him back at her side, leaning against the table. He was rubbing his forehead tiredly. "Don't be like that," he sighed. "It's not your fault. I should've seen it coming. I wasn't prepared."

"You weren't prepared?" she prompted.

"To see her, face to face. To see that incredible hope on her face and knowing you're going to be that bastard who's going to tear down that girl's hopes and dreams." He chuckled weakly; to her ears, brokenly and lost. "I'm certain she'd already decided the guest list for our wedding nuptials."

"Harry," she breathed, standing up and placing a hand on top of his. His gaze slid down to their conjoined hands. She said sympathetically, "You have to understand, from her side, there was nothing to invalidate her beliefs that she wasn't going to be your wife. There wasn't any outright refusal."

"She should've gotten the hint when I didn't come back asking her if we'd get back together." His hand slipped away. "I should've known she'd deliberately misread the letters I'd sent back. She always did have a stellar imagination. It's my fault I was a coward."

"Harry, you're not a coward," Hermione dissented, taking his shoulders. "You….you just care. A lot. About hurting her feelings. The fact that you own up to it says a lot about your character."
He watched her carefully, closely. "And this time? Did she tell you she's going to stop pursuing me?"

Her shoulders slumped. She admitted, "No, no it doesn't seem likely. I'm so sorry, Harry."

"Don't be." She felt him collapse against her nonetheless, and she pulled a face from the added weight. Stroking his shoulder, she heard him mumble against the side of her dress, "It's not your fault. She simply needs time. Weasleys are stubborn pissants."

Hermione couldn't help the laughter that escaped her mouth. "Stubborn to a fault," she agreed warily, once it died down. She suddenly froze, once it'd registered she was making contact again. Touching him and sharing body heat, it made old insecurities rise—including newer ones brought by Luna's accusations. She hesitated, rolling her lips in thought.

"What is it?" Harry shifted against her. "You're never this quiet for long. What's eating at you?"

"I….I…," she shook her head. "Never mind. I should just let it rest."

"You can tell me anything. Whether I'll like it or not, I'll listen."

"I don't want….." Her fingers tightened on the material of his coat, bunching the fabric underneath her nails. She whispered despairingly, "Harry, am I a pest to you?"

"Sorry?" Harry exclaimed, his green eyes rolling up to meet her brown hues in flabbergasted shock. Schooling his expression back into a neutral mask, he asked carefully, "Where did this come from? It's not something Ron said to you, is it?"

"Part of it," she confessed, not meeting his gaze. She studiously focused her attention on a very interesting photograph that had Sesshomaru's fair features drawn in exaggerated, cartoonish proportions. "It's come to my attention we're disturbingly close. Like…boyfriends and girlfriends."

She giggled helplessly. "Ron keeps insinuating that he's the third wheel; that he's playing second fiddle when you're the one acting in place of my husband."

She regretted opening up the moment the wizard shifted from her hands, as if sensing the source of everyone's misunderstanding. Yet it was like the floodgates had opened. She couldn't shut her mouth. "We're always hugging, making physical contact with each other. It's harmless but…it's improper,' people tell me. I tell them it's not what they think, but they always take it out of context."

Frustrated tears welled up in her vision, and she rubbed at them angrily. "Th-that's not even the worst."

"What is it?" Harry inquired softly.

She sniffed, bringing a fist to her face and hiding behind it. "You'll hate me," she said baldly. "I shouldn't be feeling this way. Not toward you. Not when I have Ron. But sometimes…I look at him and I look at how I am with you, and sometimes I wonder…what if?" Her face burned with the intensity of a thousand suns. "I get into the stupidest of squabbles with Ron, and I think to myself, 'I wouldn't be having this with Harry.' Ron sometimes forgets to be a decent sort of man or show any manners, and I think, 'Harry would be much more polite and considerate.' A-and sometimes, when it's just the two of us, I-I remember back to when we were in the tent. And if something had happened between us."

She didn't look up but she could feel the cold void of their new separation that felt meters away. "That dance of ours," his dulcet tone was grim and hushed, but it sounded like a pounding roar in her eardrums, "it-it wasn't romantic."
"I know!" she snapped, frustrated with herself. She repeated, but softer, "I know that. I don't know why I'm still hung over that. It was a spur of the moment. But that moment...I couldn't recreate it with Ron. Not the intensity or the magic. And I...I don't know where I'm going wrong with him!"

Harry was silent after that, collecting his thoughts. She could hear his schemes tinkering in his brain, slotting and filing this newest conundrum away like another one of his political debacles. Hermione let him, desiring to do the same for herself. She wanted to curl up in a ball, bury herself in her blankets, and forget she'd ever decided to unleash her problems on him. Their conversation had been going thoroughly well, but then she'd let her demons rear their ugly heads and bollocks it up.

She stood up, walking away to detach herself from the awkwardness.

"Hermione."

She turned around, and she felt the air in her lungs whoosh out completely as Harry enveloped her in a hard, tight embrace. All the tension slipped out of her and she melted. Her head was situated awkwardly against Harry's, her oxygen practically being replaced by the natural scent of his unruly hair. Stunned, she felt her arms automatically reach up to entwine around him loosely—baby bump, be damned—and she felt even more shocked when Harry then pressed his lips affectionately above her brow.

His normally level voice was a husky undertone as he rumbled, "I'm happy you think of me as your first mate. You're the best witch...I could ever think to have as a sister. Ron is lucky to have you."

He pulled away, beaming down at her. Warm as his expression was, his words sounded like a hollow platitude. "You're going to be such a great mum."

Hermione felt her eyes begin to well up. She laughed, punching his shoulder and burying a fist against her hot, stinging eyes. It stopped her from launching onto him. "Shut up," she said weakly. "You keep telling me that."

"It doesn't make it any less true."

His arms dropped from her waist and he took a step back, taking away all the warmth with him. She wrapped her arms around herself securely, shivering. A brave smile plastered itself wobbly across her face.

In the same tone, he continued gravely, "I'm sorry things aren't working with Ron. Just tell me the word, and I'll hex the git the next time I see him in my office. He lets his idiotic absurdity get the better of him sometimes."

Hermione sniffed, and wordlessly she nodded her head. It served her right for letting her big mouth run. Shame flooded through her. "Harry, listen. I didn't mean..."

A hand reached over to tuck a stray curl behind her ear, and this time his mouth brushed along the end of her cheek. "It's alright. I understand." He whispered hoarsely into her ear. Without seeing his expression, Hermione could hear the guilt in his voice and she could feel how lost he was. She was terrified by this new distance. "I know you wouldn't give up your marriage, and your baby, your future, for even me. Like you told me, emotions get the better of us sometimes. It's not a foreign concept. It makes us say things we normally wouldn't say."

"I know. I know. But, I was talking about your temper. I just...I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to unload this on you. I'd promised myself."

Hesitation briefly flitted across the Auror's features, before his jaw squared and determination
flooded back into his expression. "Hermione, stop it. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. I'm glad you told me." He navigated her limp figure toward the direction of the enormous fireplace and he settled her down into one of the twin velvet-upholstered armchairs. He set her aching feet up on an ottoman, and he summoned the quilts that had been on the table into his hand. He piled them over her until she was cozy and warm.

"Harry," her voice cracked, "you're enabling me."

"Hermione," he said simply, disapprovingly.

"I shouldn't be bothering you with my personal problems. Not when you have so much on your plate already," she said, sniffling and burying her face against the quilts. Her eyes must look red-rimmed and horrible to him. "I'm so sorry. I don't want this to ruin our friendship—"

"Nothing is ruined," he said firmly, dragging the fabric from her face. "We're still friends. You're just... you're just pregnant. It's the stress. You can't help it."

He was giving her a way out. Grateful as she was that he was even giving her one, it didn't excuse her from her recklessness. "No." Her jaw clenched. "It's not the pregnancy making me say it. I've felt this way for a long time. I shouldn't be feeling this way, not when I've got a loving husband and a family that loves me." Her voice broke. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

He dropped down on one knee, taking her hand from underneath the quilts and clasping it out in between his gloves. Harry's *Avada Kedavra* green eyes held her brown hues in a severe, solemn stare. "Do you still feel this way about me?"

"No!" she blurted. She repeated softly, "No. But I—"

"But nothing. This line of conversation is over." He sighed, patting her hand. "I know you, Hermione. You wouldn't have told me unless it was really bothering you. If you had wanted to pursue your feelings for me, I would hear you out. Within a heartbeat. We'd have more words to discuss about this. But we've established it was something you felt back then. You're making a big deal out of nothing."

"But—"

"I'm the only other bloke who's been treating you decently, I assume. You've never told Ron about this?"

She bit her lower lip. "No." Seeing his expression freeze, she realized her folly and she hurried to reassure, "I meant, no, he doesn't know."

"Good. That's... good." His breath expelled out, his eyelids slipping shut from relief. His forehead had creased from the dark thoughts no doubt running through his brain. "Alright. Let's keep this between us. We know Ron will be a jealous prat if he catches wind of this. Good intentions or no."

Opening his eyes, he went to meet her gaze again. He said somberly, "Understand, I think of you as a dear sister. I love you, as a brother would, even if we were born to different families. It would break my heart if I come between you and Ron. You two have something I want desperately to have for myself. You two are a good match. I know the marriage's been rocky lately, but I sincerely hope you two work out your problems. It'll get better. It just takes time. Just... give him time. And if it doesn't work out, know that I'm here for you. And him."

"Thank you, Harry," she whispered wetly. Hermione hid her nose under the top comforter and she silently swallowed back the mucus threatening to drip out. Harry stroked her hand once more, before
pulling away. Hermione let her hand drop down limply into her lap. The rustle of clothing she heard signaled to her that he'd gotten up to his feet, towering over her seated form. Her tongue felt like lead in her mouth. She managed, "I hope so too. That it works out. For the better."

Blinking rapidly, in an attempt to save face, she said feebly, "And I have no desire to being shoehorned into your crowd of sad, adoring fans. I have no dreams of you giving me 'a salacious smile, vivid eyes smoldering with lust' and all that rot."

The fire from the hearth was casting the wizard's shadow long against the spick-and-span floor. She kept her vision downcast as the wizard bent down to kiss the crown of her head.

He murmured against her hair, "I know. You're not Ginevra."

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Andromeda didn't question Harry when he knocked on her door hours before daybreak, and requested her help in terrascaping the clearing out back. She didn't question the tight expression he wore when they—bundled up nicely and having the luxury of a Warming Cham placed on them—transfigured the landscape into boulders and trees to match the woods that was more charming than intimidating. Curved blades of grass, wet with mildew and early condensation, crunched underneath their shoes.

She'd been watching him from the corner of her vision as the spell work flew from their mouths in low chants beneath their breaths. A thought took hold in her mind, observing the younger lord of her reinstated House, and kept resurfacing even as they walked back to the property wards and he'd thanked her.

The wizard summoned Auro and directed the house-elf to wake the ambassador, to take the next half-hour acclimating himself to the temperature outside and to take his sustenance before the anticipated fight. Andromeda was pleased to note Auro tossing questions back, like a psychologically-healthy house-elf, before disappearing to deliver his instructions and a plate of raw steak to the ambassador's doorstep. Next, both he and Andromeda had to herd little Teddy out of his bedroom, who'd been pretending to be sleeping in his bed when he'd been spying on the two adults performing the lightshow outside his large bay window.

In the family room overlooking the woodlands out back, Teddy was now wearing a miniature version of what could've passed as a simpler, darker replica of Harry's Muggle suit—a coo had escaped her when she saw the two boys together—and was chatting his godfather's ear off about how they both smelled like damp soil and the tall white trees of the forest his gran refused to let him wander into alone.

Crouched down, Andromeda was fussing over the crooked lapels of Teddy's dress-shirt when Harry bent down and took his small hand into his larger, leather-clad ones. Close-up to her vision, Andromeda could see the sharp angles of the three family rings straining beneath the seemingly-thin material.

Solemnly meeting his godson's inquisitive stare, he said, "This is very precious to me. I'm trusting you to keep this safe." His gloved hands retreated and in place was the pocket watch that'd caused the rift between godfather and godson years before. "I don't want to risk damaging it in the fight."

Eyes as wide as saucers, Teddy nodded, reverently clasping the enchanted timepiece in his small fingers. He swallowed and promised as somberly as he could sound, "I-I'll protect it as best as I can."

Harry smiled.
To her, it fell short of reaching his eyes. Her heart sunk. Whatever progress gained yesterday was lost.

He stood up, brushing his lips against Teddy's brow. The metamorphmagus' breath hitched. Pretending he didn't notice, Harry said, "Stay next to your Gran."

Before he strode past the door, Andromeda grabbed Harry by the crook of his arm. She asked, "What happened last night?"

"Nothing happened," he replied, eyeing her arm on his. His gaze met hers squarely. "At least, nothing along the lines of what you're thinking of."

Her lips thinned. With a resigned expel of air from her lungs, she strode forward and enveloped him in a hug. She didn't react when she felt him tense up. She whispered, "You're treating this mock-duel seriously."

Harry had opened his mouth, but closed it wordlessly. He nodded against the side of her face.

"Be safe," she said, drawing back. Her fingers still tingled from wrapping around his solid frame. Unlike most of his colleagues, he was without healthy meal habits. With a critical frown, she stopped him from moving away, cold fingers encircled around his thin wrist. She accused, "You didn't eat."

Caught in the act, he smiled sheepishly. It was a far more genuine expression than the ones before.

She didn't have the strength or the energy to maintain a show of anger at him. With an aggravated sigh, she summoned the seedless grapes from the fruit centerpiece on the wooden island. She popped a large one from the stalk and pushed it past his lips.

He chewed instinctively, teeth crunching down on the crisp burst of sweetness in his mouth.

Teddy was staring up at their interaction with a wide-eyed expression. His hair was as bright as the clear blue skies outside.

She said flatly, "I estimate five to ten minutes before your opponent shows up. You can take the time to feed yourself." Counting the purplish-black grapes in her hand, she tore off a respectable amount and deposited them in his. She slid her wand back into the arm-brace. "They're washed. You could finish at least these, please. It won't do you any favors if you fight on an empty stomach, however friendly it is."

"Thank you, Andromeda," he said, before dropping them rapidly into his mouth and chewing without really taking the time to taste them.

The admonishment had been at the tip of her tongue, but she saw his creased brows and determined appearance. This was an Auror with his mind focused on the battle ahead. So she merely tsked, "Men."

Eventually he'd reached the end of the cluster and it was just the stalks left over in his palm. He dropped it in a nearby rubbish bin and wiped his glove on his trousers, oblivious to Andromeda's pinched face and the impressionable child in their midst. She muttered to Teddy, "Don't do what he just did."

Innocent, doe-eyed green peered up trustingly at her.

When she glanced back, she noticed Harry was riveted by whatever had caught his attention outside. Her nerves tingling, she followed his gaze out the topmost, open Dutch door.
Dressed the same as yesterday, the ambassador was standing atop a grassy knoll, peering into the far woodlands with a quizzical look and back at the scenery she and Harry had conjured up. His three swords and long, sharp nails appeared deadly, even in the distance. With the backdrop and moody climate, his tall form and terrifying foreignness served to highlight how otherworldly he seemed, how out of place he was in magical Britain. With his attire and the way he comported himself, he appeared like a warrior frozen in time.

The downward slashes of his magenta stripes appeared to her like knife wounds taken to the skin, sliced open and raw, and the blue crescent moon on his forehead was just as much of a brand to the forehead as Harry's remnant thunderbolt-scar. Even the color on his eyelids—however artfully done—seemed like bloody imprints. She wouldn't categorize the ambassador as what was traditionally viewed as handsome. In spite of his voice, he looked too strange for that. Nor was he merely lovely to look at. He was simply an assortment of magical creature attractiveness their brains struggled to place definition to, before deciding on "handsome" or "beautiful" depending on what physical cues were determined to be attractive for the individual.

Andromeda felt Teddy bump against the back of her thighs, his little fingers curling around her hand and twisting the material of her casual robes. When she made to look at him, Harry strode past them, his shoulder brushing against hers briefly before he was out the doorstep and making his way to Sesshomaru who had immediately refocused his attention upon the Head Auror approaching him from faraway.

Holding her grandson's hand, she took a deep breath and stepped out. She and Teddy crossed the short gap it took to reach the picket-fence she and Harry had transfigured from the larger stones lying around the property. They were warded, cast to ensure stray spells didn't hit them and to ensure the spectators wouldn't think of breaching the fence-line unless Andromeda took it down.

With their hearts in their throats, though they could only see the back of his head both Tonks observed Harry stop several meters away from where Sesshomaru stood. They exchanged quick words, before an indulgent look flitted across Sesshomaru's composed features and he leapt down. In the span it took for Andromeda to form a concise thought, he was already in the wizard's proximity.

Sesshomaru's expression suddenly froze. A deep frown was tugging down his mouth.

Andromeda heard Teddy struggling beside her, and when she turned to look, her jaw dropped. "Edward Remus Ted Lupin," she ordered, looping her arms under his. "You're coming down this instant."

"But, Gran!" he protested, forcing his feet under a rung, resisting and trying to stay where he was. "I can't hear them clearly! I can't see with all the trees blocking!"

"We're a safe distance away," she clarified, fruitlessly attempting to tug him away from the precarious perch on the topmost rung. She doubted the validity of his claims. Remus Lupin's blood ran in Teddy's veins. While not a werewolf, he'd exhibited several of the professor's supernatural traits. "We're not to distract them. Please, Edward, come down."

"But—" His head twisted in the men's direction.

"Not so high then," she compromised with a sigh. "My poor heart's already worried for your godfather and these blood-sports men seem to favor. If I have to worry you're going to fall and break something, I think it might as well stop."

Wriggling out of her arms, he clambered down, until the top of his head barely peeped out over the top rung. Thankfully he looked no worse for wear. Just when she thought he was going to be sulky
until the inevitable moment colorful spells clashed against swords, he brightened up and exclaimed, "Look, Gran! They're starting!"

She'd turned around just when Harry was marching away from Sesshomaru. After a considerable distance had been paced, he'd spun around and bowed respectfully to the ambassador who had maintained a slightly mirthful expression at their dueling customs. Yet that display of emotion quickly cleared, and she saw the magical creature move into an aggressive stance.

When the wizard straightened up, his Holly wand was already in his hand and scarlet sparks of light were fizzling at the tip. He shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

The jet of light flew across the distance, and it took a while for Andromeda to register Sesshomaru had moved from his spot and what she was seeing were afterimages of the ambassador in the split-second it took for the disarming spell to land.

Harry hastily sprinted back, away from the ghostly figure speeding toward him.

"Protego! Impedimenta! Accio swords!" He cast the spells in rapid succession. A transparent blue shield formed around him as the second stream of light merely nicked the tree Sesshomaru's torso had been at prior to his white-clad form zipping away, tearing a portion from the peeling trunk in a turquoise blast.

Andromeda couldn't believe her eyes. The unforeseen destruction waged from a common but powerful immobilization hex shot all coherency from her thoughts.

Nonetheless when the third spell was mentioned, even Sesshomaru recoiled, his slitted honeyed eyes widening as the two sheathed swords sashed at his waist and the third one in his hand shook violently. Gritting his teeth, he attempted to regain control of his weapons, seizing them and holding them down as if he could wrestle control back from sheer willpower before two of them soared away from him.

A triumphant grin was on Harry's face. It quickly transformed into that of terror, as if he'd just realized something retrospectively about the blades rushing toward him, and when Andromeda looked back she was startled to see Sesshomaru had used the charged momentum of the third blade to drive him closer to his target.

The two blades arced past Harry with a whistling air before slamming into the ground behind him, crumbs of dirt flown into the air from the forcefulness of the embedment.

Sesshomaru crashed into Harry's shield, his sword pointed in a downward slash over Harry's head.

"Protego!" A second shield erupted from Harry's wand and reinforced the one already buckling under the weight of the sword. Like fragile glass, the first magical barrier broke with a loud, terrible sound.

Sesshomaru's blade was already beginning to eat through the second when an earsplitting crack sounded.

The second shield was torn down, and Sesshomaru's boots landed back on the grass with a resounding thump. His sword was imbedded in the earth, the Head Auror nowhere in sight.

Her racing heartbeat settled. Andromeda released the breath that'd been wound tightly in her chest.

Stepping forward, Sesshomaru hefted the two swords from the ground and re-sheathed them back in their scabbards. He pried the last one from where the wizard had last been. He was eyeing the patch
of dirt with a contemplative air, before his nostrils flared and he twisted his head in a violent jerk that Andromeda was astonished not to hear the whiplash.

He was staring ahead, where the wizard emerged from a thicket of tall shrubbery. Twigs and clumps of leaves were stuck to his once-meticulous suit and in his hair.

"Wow," Harry exclaimed, sagging against the trunk of a nearby tree heavily. His breathing pattern was rendered askew in short pants but his whole face was lit up.

Andromeda strained her ears. Like Teddy, she leaned over the fence to hear more.

"When the shield broke, for a moment there I thought I was going to be cut in half!" he praised, beaming. "You don't hold back."

Sesshomaru inclined his head, flicking the blade in his hand to cast away the wet soil clinging to the shiny metal. The aftereffects of the charm were slowly dissipating into the air, the sprinklings of light illuminating the ambassador with an unearthly blue glow from underneath his feet. He stated, "This is not all you're capable of."

"No," Harry confessed, "But my objective is to immobilize you. I was hoping it'd be quick and sweet." His expression cleared up. He said in jest, "We should've wagered instead on who'd get disarmed first. We would've already seen the results."

"Insolence! This Sesshomaru's fangs did not pass your hands," the ambassador parried back with a small, condescending smirk. That open display of emotion shook her, reminding her of the late and cruel Druella.

Thankfully their voices were still audible enough to make out. Andromeda didn't dare cast a charm to enhance her hearing, fearful her grandson would inquire that she do the same for him. Harry had already established with Andromeda that he would be using Auror-level spells to test the ambassador. He had also added, after a pensive air, that he might be bringing in certain spells he'd encountered in his career, never mind that they were Dark or Light spells that could be innovatively diabolical and have dangerous effects.

Andromeda didn't approve of her grandson being in viewing vicinity of the spell work, but Harry had assured her they were now being taught in Hogwarts' curriculum. And if Teddy had firsthand exposure to the spells at an early age, he might be able to defend himself better.

"Oh. Yeah, they didn't." A peculiar emotion flitted across Harry's face. "In hindsight, I realized it wasn't the best of my ideas."

"This Hari knows of my fangs?"

"I'm aware of one," he admitted, peering at one of them at Sesshomaru's waist.

Andromeda wasn't sure which one he'd been referring to, but Sesshomaru did, having shifted as if to hide the sheathed blade from his sight.

"Calm down. I'm not going to take it from you. Far be it for me to infringe upon your rightful property ownership, Lord Sesshomaru. They're your family heirlooms."

The ambassador's form relaxed. It was the subtle unwinding of his muscles and loosened grip on the hilt that signaled his calmness to her. "This Hari is mistaken," he drawled, making up for his momentary weakness by this outward display of boredom. "Not all were inherited from Chichi-Ue."
He hefted the one in his hand, his white sleeve—dyed and embroidered with red cherry blossom crests at the end—sliding down a pale arm as he held the katana for shallow inspection under the sunlight. The black, rune-like lines gleamed against the beige hilt, and Andromeda ran her eyes along the threatening length of steel below the cross-guard that also gleamed with the same runes in the places where it crackled with green energy.

He stated austerely, "The Bakusaiga is this Sesshomaru's proof of transcendence from the grudge once bared against Chichi-Ue's will. This was crafted from my own body, manifested solely from my power and yōki."

A puzzled expression pulled the wizard's face, mirrored only by her own and the one Teddy had from the ambassador's strange turn of phrase.

With how literally Sesshomaru had spoken his words, to any passerby it would sound like he'd been implicating that steel blade was composed of his pound of flesh.

Harry chuckled nervously, drawing their attentions. His own expression was as placid as ever yet the movement underneath his eyelids was restless. In the end, he constructed a diplomatic response, albeit considerate, "With the world we live in, that's not an impossible feat. Your enlightened attainment is admirable."

"This Sesshomaru is pleased by this Hari's regard," the ambassador said, his tone sincere. However, he'd re-sheathed the sword he'd named "Bakusaiga" back against his sash of richly-dyed yellow and indigo.

Instead he withdrew a double-edged sword that was broader at the tip and tapering in width up to the base. It'd skittered from the dark scabbard with a rusty, lethal skrch. A red thread fluttered from the tip of the golden pommel as he held the new blade for Harry to scrutinize. He said, "In my excitement, this Sesshomaru had mistakenly withdrawn the wrong blade. This Hari should be honored; Tōkijin has only been recently restored and has not yet tasted blood. A fang which did not have the power to defeat Mōryōmaru shall be enough to defeat you at the level this Hari is on now."

Harry's eyes snapped up, a ferocious light now illuminating their depths. "Those are fighting words, Lord Sesshomaru."

"What is he saying to Harry, Gran?" Teddy whispered to Andromeda, his voice quiet so as to not ruin the moment, but she shushed him, telling him it was between his godfather and the ambassador. She fingered the wand underneath her sleeve, twiddling it back and fro apprehensively in the brace-workings. Her own mind was working furiously to comprehend the riddles in front of her.

The ambassador's bright, slitted gaze glowed like a brand of scorching fire in the night. "This Hari is tasked with evading my strikes. Try not to fail and die."

The chill of fear and exhilaration in Harry's chest had bowled him over, forcing him to gasp for air in abruptly convulsing lungs. His cheeks felt flushed, and he couldn't help the maniacal grin topping his face. He'd hit his head more times in the last few minutes than he'd admit.

A blast of magical energy obliterated a path to where Harry had taken cover previously, shredding the rocks and trees in its wake from the intense heat. When the smoke cleared, the sizzling air felt saturated with the sharp, electric smell of magic, from both ends of the spectrum. Specks of dirt and burned wood rained down upon his head.

"This Hari can stop running away from this Sesshomaru," Sesshomaru's taunt was nearly a sinuous
croon, if Harry stretched his imagination. "It's futile. We both know it'll be over shortly."

A hysterical rattle threatened to burst from his chest, but he kept it at bay. "I didn't know you had a twisted sense of humor!" he exclaimed, bolting from his hiding spot and shooting a blind Jelly-Legs Jinx in the vicinity of that deep voice. He'd known the spell's fate before it left his lips.

He swiftly Apparated to a different spot miraculously left untouched by the carnage wrecked by the two individuals. To his astonishment, even the more potent Light Magic he'd tested on Sesshomaru were either merely slapped away by the dog demon or—like the weaker spells easy to master for the average magical child—had spluttered to a sad death upon coming close to the armor. At this point, they only served as distractions than any practical tactic in the battlefield. Chest heaving, he wiped away the sweat from his brow.

A whip the toxic color of acid green slammed into the trunk inches above Harry's head, melting through the fibers and sending the tree toppling down behind with a resounding groan. Glowing golden orbs peered into Harry's Avada Kedavra green. Sesshomaru chided, "You're distracted. A warrior does not rest during battle."

Harry frowned, and intense focus shuttered over his visage. "I know. Get back." Startled golden eyes slammed down between their chests, where a wand was trained at him. A blazing fire was forming at the end of it, its heat smoldering their faces from its intensity. Harry's eyebrows creased. "Now!"

Sesshomaru leapt back when the Fiendfyre Curse erupted, a roaring torrent of fire reaching for the daiyōkai. Harry felt a lick of satisfaction when a few flickering embers caught a trail-end of Sesshomaru's sash, greedily eating their way up. He made a small noise of disappointment when Sesshomaru merely cut the fabric off with a glowing green hand and he flung the offending piece away.

The scrap of finery that'd been caught was quickly engulfed by the Dark curse and reduced to ashes.

"Harry! What do you think you're doing?"

Sweat was pouring down the Head Auror's face in bucketfuls, and he clasped two of his gloved hands over his trembling wand. Trying to block out Andromeda's shrill cries—which he'd almost instinctively made as to redirect the spell when it sounded like her mad shrieks—he flicked his wand diagonally up, and a herd of incompletely-formed beasts soared from the inferno. "Control, control, control," he whispered like a mantra. The first of the animals to gain a distinct shape resembled that of a stag, and then a doe; then the flames coalesced into both shapes.

"Go! Go! Go!" He chanted loudly, hurtling the pair down Sesshomaru's wake.

"YOU'RE GOING TO BURN DOWN THE ENTIRE FOREST!"

The first fiery apparition smashed into Tōkijin headfirst, trying to melt the blade before being torn into pieces from the steel swinging up its conjured neck, beheading it. The remaining beast had mutated, bubbling into a large, serpentine creature—its image made Harry's heart stop for one moment—and it was reforming anew into another breathtaking, flying monster. Talons stretched out, with ferocious breath, intent on carnage and murder; it swooped down from behind to consume Sesshomaru.

With a guttural snarl, Sesshomaru twisted around and slashed through that apparition, destroying the ribcage of the phoenix. With a dying cry, it evaporated into nothing. The fire roared, as if in commiseration. It'd consumed Sesshomaru's figure until Harry could see nothing but a wall of flames.
Thrusting his arm forward and concentrating, he bellowed, "Expecto Patronum!"

Wraithlike wisps exploded from his wand and Harry’s eyes expanded. Leaving behind a fine mist, the stag, bigger than Harry had ever seen it before, charged into the Fiendfyre. It left behind a stagecoach-sized cavity in the wall. The hole was quickly knitting after itself, but Harry now knew where Sesshomaru was.

"Partis Temporum." The fire left aside parted where he’d directed, leaving a safe passage in the towering sea of flames.

"Harry! You have to cancel the spell!"

"I know, wait!" he shouted back, desperately trying to see if Sesshomaru was alright.

Blazing molten gold met his across the expanse, burning as fiercely as the Fiendfyre, before a thunderous baritone shouted in the air, "Sōryūha!"

With crackles and hisses of conjured lightning, strokes of blue-and-white energies twisted into a maelstrom of wind and devastation that sent Sesshomaru’s hair and loose attire flying. Chunks of earth were ripped from the ground; the tornado that’d been summoned coalesced into a serpentine shape larger yet thinner than the starved Basilisk Harry had seen in his Second Year, grander than the form his Fiendfyre had started to take.

Writhing behind the sovereign’s tall form, what appeared to be a ghostly outline of an enormous serpent with a dragon’s head coiled its body in an infinite-eight loop. There were details on its forehead, like scales plated over each other like a crest. For a moment, he thought Sesshomaru had casted his version of an Expecto Patronum. Sesshomaru slashed the pulsating blade down in his direction.

With a deafening crack of thunder, the drake launched forward in the path Harry had unthinkingly provided for Sesshomaru’s counterattack.

Charging toward the wizard with its gaping, hungry maw, it cleaved through the physical obstacles; decimating through the trees and boulders, scraping and gouging out a crater, obliterating everything in its slithery wake.

Every instinct in Harry’s body screamed at him to move. Pumping his legs, he dashed away as swiftly as he could.

Harry’s vision went white when he hurtled himself to the scorched grounds, narrowly avoiding the onslaught by a hair’s breadth. His lungs filled with the acrid, suffocating stench of magic and soot. The back of his neck was burning. His muscles felt sore. He could still feel the heat of the magical discharge from where it’d ripped through the tip of his shoe.

He was blearily staring at the pebbles rattling a dance on the soil, before his brain realized belatedly the path the conjured drake was still charging toward. With fear turning his blood mind-shockingly cold, he scrambled onto his hands and knees. He strained himself for one more Apparition. He had to get there before it got to Andromeda and Teddy.

When he felt the familiar pull, he closed his eyes against the stomach-turning inertia of the teleportation. He had already begun muttering the incantations for the most powerful shield charm he’d heard and seen with his own eyes, cast by Professor Flitwick at the Battle of Hogwarts. By the time his feet dropped back on the ground, he’d opened his eyes and was facing down the great drake formed from thunder and lightning.
Throwing his wand-arm up at the drake's mouth which was double the size of the Tonk's house, he shouted, "Protégo horribilis!"

A jet of orange shot from his wand; and pierced through its jaw and head when it bore down upon them. When the apparition struck, past the rushing noise he could hear the barrier straining from the collision. Tiny holes appeared under where the most pressure was exerted. Harry gnashed his teeth, bolstering the enchantment with both of his hands. The solid weight of the fence dug into his spine, supporting him as the Holly wand got closer and closer to his face. Orange sparks grazed the side of his cheeks.

The ragged patches slowly mended themselves, until it resembled the taut bend of a bow being pulled back before finally pushing past the head, instantly vaporizing the specter and shooting into the skies. Hot air and crackles of energy surrounded him, swathing him in a stifling atmosphere.

"It worked?" he said numbly, collapsing against the fence, chest heaving. He panted. "I can't believe it bloody worked."

"Harry," a female voice repeated urgently into his ear. A cool hand guided his face. Andromeda's eyes were taut and wide-eyed. She said, "He's still there."

Jerking his head back, he said shortly, "I know." Regaining his balance, he watched warily for Sesshomaru's figure. He tried to regulate his breathing in short, controlled gasps. Once the flames waned, tendrils of embers trembling harmlessly in the soil before being eventually lost to the wind, he could make out the daiyōkai's figure.

Sesshomaru was standing still in a small patch of space left untouched from the blackened trees and red boulders. Tōkijin hung limp in his once-previously white-knuckled grip. Unlike Harry, who had streaks of dirt on his face and in his hair, Sesshomaru didn't even have a scratch. Not even soot. Even his long, silvery hair remained impeccable.

Harry didn't even want to acknowledge the state his attire was in, much less have his mind boggle over how the only a thin film of sweat had broken out over the dog demon when Harry felt like he'd run a marathon. Sesshomaru's head was cocked, his attention divested at the arc of light spilling over the Tonk's property threshold—woodlands and clearing. It'd dyed the blue skies a rustic auburn.

"This Hari is capable of casting a barrier of absolute purification," he stated confusedly, brows drawn. He looked down at his hand and flexed. When nothing happened, an occluded expression shuttered over his facial features. Blinking rapidly, he shook his head as if to chase away a buzzing in his thoughts. He peered over at Harry. After scanning the wizard from head to toe, he amended, "No, not purification. You are not a miko. Nor are you a monk. That is clear."

"What did Harry do to Lord Sess-Sessho-Sesshomaru?"

"Nothing, dear," she whispered back, her hands wringing each other. The political implications were beginning to set into her mind.

"Why did the Fiend-Fiendfyre suddenly stop?"

"Teddy."

"But he didn't cast the counter-spell! Is it because of this Protego?"

"Not now, Teddy." Her voice was strained.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked, alarmed.
After a long, considering glance, Sesshomaru had replaced Tōkijin back in its scabbard. The spluttering remnants of the sinister, slick roll of Dark Magic that'd been sliding up Harry's exposed skin, different from the sensation of wizarding Dark Magic he'd acclimated to in his career, was instantly retracted. Harry repressed a shiver. With the Shield Charm still in effect, the magical aura that surrounded the ethereal figure felt muted, like someone had taken a blanket to the wizard's senses and muffled them.

Suddenly, sustaining the charm didn't seem to be in their best interests anymore.

"My fangs and poison are no longer useful to this Sesshomaru," he said leisurely, billowy sleeves trailing. The fluffy boa rippled on his shoulder. "This Sesshomaru has no time for burdens, and have decided to cut my losses short. There are other ways to take down an opponent."

Harry felt his stomach plummet. There were more abilities Sesshomaru had in his arsenal. "Oh no, you don't want to be doing that," he said quickly. "You can still take the enchantment down. It's weak under extreme duress. You don't have to put away your magical sword—erm—fang!"

"Harry!" Andromeda said, sounding shocked.

"Harry!" Teddy exclaimed. "Why are you telling him that? You don't give your weakness away to the enemy!"

He gestured helplessly at the higher-level Shield Charm, which bathed them all in a subtle light. "Just, just whack at it. A lot. I've seen it work."

Sesshomaru had stopped advancing toward him. Harry felt like a bug Sesshomaru had discovered underneath his boots and had determined it of a rare genome.

He tilted his head, sliding his attention back and fro from metamorphmagus to wizard. "This is not the first time anyone has told this Sesshomaru to remove my fangs from their scabbards," he said quietly. "However this Hari does not seem to make this appeal out of overconfidence or eagerness."

Now he felt upgraded to a magical creature thought to be extinct. Kicking himself for his embarrassing display, Harry breathed deeply into the palm brought to his face. He sounded like the Gryffindor teenager in his youth and not the mature wizard he was, especially to a 500-year old demon who was supposedly considered his societal-equivalent of a 19-year old.

Abruptly, from the corner of his vision, Sesshomaru whirled his head to the woodlands behind him while Harry felt Teddy climb up on his back and exclaim into his ears, "Pigwidgeon!"

Clammy hands gripped the sides of his hair and manipulated his face up toward the skies. For a moment, he saw nothing. Then the dot that he'd assumed to be a speck of ash grew bigger and bigger. When he too heard the flapping of wings, he'd automatically outstretched his arm for the Weasley family owl to perch on.

The tiny grey owl hopped onto his hand, hooking his talons and supporting its minuscule weight—Harry was extraordinarily glad the owl had grown past the size of a fluffy snitch—on Harry's pointer finger and thumb. In its beak was an official letter addressed to 'Head Auror PBP, Tonks House, England.'

Teddy cooed into Harry's ear and made to reach for Pig.

His arm and shoulder felt the full exertion of supporting both the weights of an owl and his godson. His spine stooped. With an exhausted grunt, he lightly tugged the letter free from Pig's beak. Breaking the wax seal in the back, he lifted two yellowed parchments—also stamped with the
obnoxiously large "M" sigil of the Ministry's—from the envelope. He quickly scanned the short contents. By the time he'd finished, his fatigue had blown into full-fledged aggravation.

Patting Pig, Teddy wriggled back down until he was piggybacking his godfather, but his feet were planted firmly on the top rung. He peeked over Harry's shoulder and read aloud, "The Wizengamot would be delighted to have the attendance and the au-austere presence of Head Auror Potter Black Peverell for the impending trial of Dolores Umbridge. The defendant has been excommunicated and stripped of her position as Senior Undersecretary to the Minister and as Head of the Muggle-Born Registration Commission. The trial will take place in Courtroom 2 on..." He stopped short of citing the date and the many charges laid against the witch for each of her different positions.

"Very good, Teddy," Harry commended, strained. He hoped the metamorphmagus couldn't detect the ill-will he wished desperately on the aforementioned witch. "Your pronunciation and reading have improved."

Teddy flushed. He read aloud the other missive. "Dear Head Auror Potter Black Peverell and Honorable Guest, you are cordially invited to attend...it's unsigned. Is this also from the Wizengamot? What do they want with you?" His breath ghosted Harry's cheek. "Are you in trouble again?"

"No," he said, surly. "Someone wants to invite me and the ambassador for tea and biscuits." He could feel Sesshomaru's intimidating presence nearby, his attention returning on the wizard, having been piqued by the mention of his alias.

His heart raced from the demon's proximity, remembering the great magical discharge sent at him. He took the time to compose himself and catch his breath. He busied himself with the letters, trying to mask his agitation. He reread them. Then the parchments crinkled in the air as they were folded and sealed back in the envelope.

His nerves had finally settled to a tolerant level. At last, he felt like he could talk again without hyperventilating. Taking a deep breath, holding it, and then releasing it in a big exhale, he said, "Andromeda, please guide Teddy back into the house. Teddy, give me back my watch."

Teddy's expression instantly crumbled. "But why? What have I done?" His tone was despairing, and his hands dropped over the bulge in his coat pocket. "The fight's not over! I've kept it safe!"

Breathing in Sesshomaru's scent mingled with the smell of smoke and charred earth, Harry did little in reaction to his godson's words. His expression hardened. "I'm going to ask you to do something important for me. I want you to keep quiet on what you heard and saw today."

A stunned silence fell over the pair standing behind him.

"Don't say it now. Let it sink in your head. No matter how much you long to tell your colleagues or anybody else, you can't tell anyone." He felt like the muscles in his shoulders were chiseled out of stone. That was how tensed he felt. "Truth be told, your godfather's terrified the wrong people are going to find out who your godfather's been trying to keep under wraps. I know you won't give it away intentionally, but they could try to trick you. Are you sure you want to shoulder the burden?"

He heard a female gasp, the quick intake of air giving her away. This time, it was her who asked, "Are you in trouble?"

"You're not," he answered briskly to her unspoken concern. He swallowed thickly and turned his head away. "I have to postpone this fight. Someone official desires my—desires our attendance."
Lord Sesshomaru's and mine."

"What is the significance of this Wizengamot to this Hari?" Sesshomaru demanded. He seemed irked that their wager had to be suspended before the winner could be settled.

"Significant people in the Ministry we don't want to offend," he replied, "or give them cause to worry."

"Those were Dark curses you used in the battle," Andromeda said softly, concern written in her brow. "Even if they were for demonstration with the intent to teach Lord Sesshomaru and your godson, you're not exempt from the implications of having used them."

"Those were Dark?" Teddy sounded astonished, nearly scandalized. "And curses?" Harry waited a beat, envisioning Teddy's following wide-eyed look. He now sounded confused, slightly reverential, as he whispered, "You were teaching me?"

"The Fiendfyre was the second Dark curse I've had thrown at me with the intent to kill," Harry explained, familiar in a teacher guise. He remembered only bits and pieces of Vincent Crabbe's betrayal in the Room of Requirements.

With the sound of Malfoy's piteous scream echoing in his memory, he said, "I was alright with shedding a little foresight into some of the more common, advanced curses Dark-affiliated wizards wouldn't hesitate to use. By-the-by, the wizard who aimed that curse at me, your aunt Hermione, and your uncle Ron was a student that I'd attended classes with and known for a long time. He ended up engulfed by his own curse and killed from his lack of control and a lack of education."

His eyes bore into Teddy's. He knew he sounded absolutely dreadful to the child. But however much he wanted to shield his godson from the terrible realities of his childhood and maintain that brilliant image his godson had of him, his horribleness had a purpose. Stoking Pig's plumes with the tip of a finger, he said softly, "I don't wish that death on you. Not you. Don't cast a spell unless you've studied it and know extensively about it."

Teddy swallowed, both of his hands in his pockets. "Alright."

"I don't want you to try cool new spells just from the novelty."

"Alright."

"The moral of the story is—"

"ALRIGHT, I WON'T!"

"—the moral of the story is," he repeated patiently, "exercise constant vigilance. This goes for you, Lord Sesshomaru and you too, Teddy. If a hostile wizard or witch has their wand pointed at you, react before the spell hits. Chances are you can't stop it or that it's an Unforgiveable. Worst case scenario, it's the Killing Curse. Unlike the spells I used, it's not blockable. Death would be instantaneous."

After a stressed roll of muscles in his shoulders, he slashed his wand up. The orange radiance of the charm flexed, before a large chasm opened in the epicenter of the dome, jagged yellow edges gnawing down the remaining pieces of what had once been an intricate spell work.

The invasive, warm impression of foreign Dark Magic returned, licking over the back of Harry's neck and caressing his cheeks and forehead before rushing back into Sesshomaru. Harry's spine straightened.
Teddy and Andromeda didn't seem to notice the magical aura, though Teddy was wriggling his nose and blinking rapidly with the return of the latent ability of his heightened senses.

"My watch, please," he requested, crooking his fingers. He attempted a reassuring smile and a lighter tone. "If we're to be leaving soon, I'd like to have it back before I depart. You did an absolutely fantastic job protecting it. I'm proud."

Teddy flushed. Drawing the pocket watch from his pocket, he gingerly handed it over.

Harry clipped it back in its original chain and tucked it back after a glance at the time. "Why don't you take Pig back inside and give him an owl treat for coming all this way?" he suggested. "He must be exhausted from his flight."

Eyes lighting up, Teddy agreed cheerfully. Like a circle of hawks, the adults around the metamorphmagus watched as the child made his descent.

When Teddy and Pig disappeared into the house, Harry re-holstered the Holly wand back up his arm-brace. He angled his body so that he was addressing both the demon lord and the widow. He met their sober gazes. He stressed softly, communicating the urgency of their unknown state of affairs for his audience: "Whoever's asking for me is most likely using the invitation for tea as an excuse to demand a full, unofficial report. I was expecting this. Not so soon, but eventually. At least they'd accepted wherever I go, I'm going to be accompanied."

"The Ministry doesn't have the time or the luxury to engage in such frivolities," Andromeda said, frowning. Her voice was as equally quiet, so that the child wouldn't pick up their resumed conversation. "This all sounds strange."

"It's expected," he dissented, shaking his head. "The Minister's words and Hermione's press conference can only satisfy so many. Besides the Death Eater raids and the trials, there hasn't been new controversy to satisfy the public."

A distracted sound fluttered from her lips. "The *Daily Prophet* said you were to be taken off assignment for this new task of yours. If Minister Shacklebolt gave you the authority, people shouldn't be questioning it. Not when this is a 'continental show of faith' the Asian Ministries has demonstrated for the British Division."

"It's been a high honor," he said, his smile tight and razor-sharp.

She turned to Sesshomaru who'd been surveying them solemnly. "Lord Sesshomaru, I express my condolences for your plight and any inconveniences you may encounter. I'm afraid you'll have to be patient with us. Our Ministry still endures from the aftereffects of our civil war. Proceedings and communications are expected to be backlogged from immediate priorities. Still, Lord Black is our best man to have at your service. With his experiences, your security is in the best of hands."

Long, silky hair pooled over his shoulders as the demon lord shifted. He suddenly had an entertained air about him. "So this Sesshomaru's been told."

"I'm appreciative for your vouch of my credibility," Harry coughed into his fist, face ruddy.

Andromeda nodded understandably. Her lips rolled in thought before stating, "It pains me to say this, but I would watch what I was being served. Seeing the wizard tense up, she said, "I know these are your colleagues, Lord Black, but Lord Sesshomaru..."

She gazed purposefully at the fair-haired figure. "...It is unpleasant to say but every administration has its flaws. We're not sure how some people will react to your..."
"There are some officials who are, unfortunately, closed-minded," Harry said blandly, rescuing her from the need to struggle for a polite way to phrase the bigotry of their society.

"Not exactly a tolerant crowd," she agreed with a sigh. "Please do not hold all of us accountable for the narrow-minded few you'll undoubtedly encounter, Lord Sesshomaru. We don't share the same beliefs."

Aware of the heavy tone their conversation had headed, she tried to say cheerfully, "I believe you two have an engagement to uphold. Perhaps you should consider a quick rinse before your departure. Even with the excuse of a demonstrative fight, it's better to err on the side of caution and make yourselves appear more presentable."

Alarmed, Harry inspected his clothes. "You're right," he groused, patting a cloud of soot from his charred suit. He lifted the coat away from him in disgust. "They're going to ask why I smell like smoke."

"There were no communal bathing facilities observed in the path taken to this townhouse," a sinfully deep, accented brogue grounded the levity. Sesshomaru sounded absolutely mystified. "Nor were there any hot springs or available water source to carry back the buckets. Surely there would not be a private steam bath in this small, isolated estate."

Harry's thoughts short circulated. Andromeda blinked.

"Lord Black."

Freshly washed and changed, he'd been gazing at the restored clearing when he heard the doors swing open. Looking at him from the side, Andromeda turned direction and she paced the short distance to reach him. With both hands still kept behind her back, she said in a low whisper, "From the nature of the fight I'd just witnessed, the ambassador is a high-risk individual of the Dark variety, am I not correct?"

He cleared his expression from expressing any emotion, but that reaction seemed to answer her query. Her spine straightened up. "I see. I won't question the confidentiality of your assignment. Nor will I ask that you jeopardize his and your safety by satisfying my curiosity." Her dark eyes softened. "I won't do that to you, Harry."

His crossed arms dropped, hanging loosely by his sides. He thanked her formally.

She whispered urgently, "The press won't be as understanding as I am. Be careful with the spells you use. Those phrases…with a little research, any language can be deciphered and interpreted the wrong way."

"That's why I had you reinforce the property wards; why I'm trusting you to leave it alone." He searched her eyes for any hint of deception. "Can you give me your word that you won't look up or repeat what was said in the fight?"

Her mouth opened in automatic platitude, but closed as a thoughtful expression flitted across her familiar features. "I can do you one better." Wandering backwards a few steps, she proclaimed, "I swear on Nymphadora's and Ted's honor and the love I hold for them, that I give my word—"

His eyes widened, he hurried to say, "You don't have to go that far—!"
"—to the appointed lord of my patrilineal House, Lord Black, that I will uphold the secrecy and promise that neither I nor Edward Remus Ted Lupin will repeat the words that had passed today in this territory."

His mouth slammed shut. That was as absolute of an oath she could've made to him without magic. He couldn't question the love the widow had of her deceased daughter and husband, not with her steely, dark gaze determinedly meeting his.

"Thank you," he said simply, bowing his head. "I appreciate it. I know it must've been hard for you."

"Not as difficult as it must've been for you to demonstrate how to operate modern bathing technology," she said, although in good humor. She suddenly frowned. "I'd never once thought I'd one day house a guest that staunch of a traditionalist."

"It certainly puts things into perspective," he said, strained. She made no comment on his unusual reply, although the collar of his neck felt unbearably tight and restrictive.

"What are you going to do if you're in an environment unable to cast the Dark Arts?" Andromeda inquired. Her frown deepened. "The ambassador—"

"Which is why I told Lord Sesshomaru the basic way to counteract it without having to rely on me," he said. His eyes rolled up to the clear blue skies. "He's of a notoriously Dark lineage. Most of his abilities will be inhibited should someone cast anything of the sort that I'd demonstrated."

"I see." She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "I've heard from Molly you had Veritaserum administered to you once. By Umbridge."

Harry's brows hiked up and he stared back at her, flabbergasted by what he was hearing.

Her eyes were faraway, caught in a memory. "I believe I was a seventh year when Umbridge was Sorted. We were both in Slytherin, you see. I don't recall exchanging pleasantries." Her smile was luminous. "But enough of my boring past. Point is, you're an adult wizard, Harry. You and I know certain members of the Ministry would give into that temptation."

His mouth had been opened, ready to clear up the misunderstanding, but it'd closed with an audible click of teeth. He sighed. Instead he speculated aloud, "I hope whoever sent the invite isn't someone who bears an ill grudge."

With a contemplative look, she asked, "Have you figured out Occlumency yet, Harry?"

"No…not yet."

"Give me your hand, Harry."

He lifted his palm, watching her carefully as her hands finally withdrew from behind her and she deposited something lightweight, curling his fingers over it before her hands withdrew. Spreading his fingers out slightly, he stared down at the two tiny capsules. A clear, colorless liquid sloshed inside when his hand moved.

"The Blacks of a long time ago used to hide an antidote in their teeth," she explained with a straight expression. "It released a potion when they bite down on it. The capsule dissolved easily."

"Perjury and solicitation are criminal offenses, Miss Tonks."

"Thank you for your caution, Head Auror."
"You surprise me every day," he said. After a considerable moment, he dropped them into his pocket.

"I have no idea of whom you're speaking of," she returned smoothly. With a cunning smile, she refocused on the broom he'd leant against the bricked wall. She blinked. "I thought your Firebolt was lost."

He peered over his shoulder, feeling a sheepish wave overcoming him. "Teddy told me yesterday he'd love it if he could see the Firebolt that'd been used in—ah, he called it the 'Battle of the Seven Potters.' I figured... why not."

"But this is the newest model—a Firebolt Supreme."

"He doesn't know that."

She stared at him. "You spoil him."

His shoulders flinched, yet he maintained a light demeanor. His smile widened when they heard what sounded like an elephant lumbering toward them—he was surprised the rafters weren't shaking—and his arms opened automatically for the small body that threw himself at him. "What kept you?"

"Lord Sesshomaru wouldn't leave," Teddy whispered, wrapping his arms around Harry's neck. He grumbled, "He's really scary." His head raised and he gave Harry a look of urgency, brows furrowed. "He's coming now. Don't laugh."

"Your disrespect is tasteless and unseemly. There was nothing humorous about what this Sesshomaru said. The sorcery your alpha's demonstrated over the bathwater is deserving of praise."

"Oh my god," Harry whispered to Teddy, who empathized back with a small noise of agreement.

His appearance was as intimidating and flawless as ever, although slightly wetter. The sunlight illuminated his fair, faintly damp hair from above as the demon lord emerged from the house with a marginally irate expression. He treaded over to them.

Harry's brows flew beyond his hairline when his eyes landed upon the restored length of the finery wrapped around Sesshomaru's hips. "Not a burn mark in sight," he observed, setting Teddy back on his feet. "I clearly remember you cutting it off when the Fiendfyre got to it." He nudged the spot between Teddy's shoulder blades.

Teddy stumbled forward. He stopped short of crashing into Sesshomaru's groin. Shuffling his feet, his vision downcast, he said morosely, "I'm sorry, Sir. I didn't mean to offend you."

His glare lessened somewhat. Reaching forward, the daiyōkai nodded, his fingers barely skimming Teddy's shoulder before retreating back into his long sleeves. He brushed past Teddy to take his customary place near the Head Auror.

Teddy was staring up at the back of Sesshomaru's head, gobsmacked, as if he'd instead been knighted by the Queen.

"This Sesshomaru was able to regenerate it," the daiyōkai responded, watching coolly as Harry cast a Drying Charm on his clothes and hair. His gaze, too, landed on the Firebolt.

"Ah, Teddy, I'd promised you." Harry grabbed the ebony broomstick and he knelt down, presenting the Firebolt to him on both hands like a sword. He smiled encouragingly. "Not all the brooms used
that night looked like this, but this is the fastest broom on the market.”

Teddy's hands hovered over the broom, just short of touching. "Wicked," he marveled softly, his eyes tracing the length and craftsmanship. His eyes flicked up. Harry noted they were his green again. "I'm going to be a Quidditch captain when I grow up."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you play."

"I'll be as famous as you."

"I hope you have excellent luck with that," he said challengingly.

Teddy grinned toothily down at him. Reaching for him, he hugged Harry's shoulders and squeezed, unmindful of the broom and the awkward placement of Harry's hands in between their chests. The boy took a deep whiff of his hair before he pulled back. His eyes were shining. "Are you taking Lord Sesshomaru on the Firebolt?"

"Erm."

"Teddy," Andromeda admonished. Yet her eyes were laughing. "I think you mean to ask, 'are you taking Lord Sesshomaru along on a ride with you on the Firebolt?'"

Teddy's brows dipped. "Why would there be a difference—?"

"I hadn't planned for it," Harry blurted hastily.

"So you are taking him!" his godson beamed sunnily at him. "You're always saying how much you hate the mobs in Diagon Alley. Now you won't be lost! You can show him wizarding Britain without getting mobbed."

Harry stared at him. He'd been outmaneuvered by a child. "You make a fine argument," he muttered, standing up. "I don't think I'm ready to stomach any Apparition after this morning."

Teddy's eyes widened and he looked at Harry's midsection. "It hurts?"

"I think my pride's been wounded," he remarked dryly. When Teddy's brows scrunched, Harry shook his head and told him there was nothing to worry about. Stepping a little further away, he straddled the Firebolt and instead of a booming takeoff, he gently soared up a manageable height from the grass.

He aimed an encouraging smile at Sesshomaru's stoic face. "Well, you've heard Teddy. We wouldn't want to get mobbed now."

Sesshomaru trained a mistrusting eye at the contraption. He didn't move a step.

"Hermione's talked your ear off about the transportation we use," Harry coaxed in the soft persuasive tone he typically used on Hermione when she was being stubborn. He flew a lazy loop around Teddy, who had giggled at his antics. He stopped when he came full circle. "Besides, you've already seen another person using it, Lord Sesshomaru. You've seen it support two people. It's not any different."

"It's fast too!" Teddy chimed in.

"Right, fast," he affirmed. "But we'd be flying at a pace you're comfortable with."

"And Harry's an accomplished flier," Teddy boasted, his cheeks red. He was happy to bolster his
godfather's image. "He's the youngest Seeker to join a Hogwarts' Quidditch team. The Gryffindors always trounced the other team if he was playing!"

"Quidditch is a wizarding competitive sport," Harry explained to Sesshomaru, seeing his confusion. The color of Harry's cheeks reflected his godson's. "But that's not important. Point is—"

"This Sesshomaru does not require—" Sesshomaru scowled.

"For now we're trying to keep incognito!" Harry interjected, his eyes boring into Sesshomaru's, despite the warning growl sent at him. Maintaining direct eye-contact, he saw the moment comprehension dawned in those golden pools. He said firmly, "You've had exposure to our Floo Network, Portkeys, and Apparition. Unless you're afraid of heights—which I would understand, Lord Sesshomaru—traveling on a broomstick with an experienced rider at the reins is not that awful. You wouldn't be feeling any residual nausea induced by magical travel."

"You are touched in the head if you truly believe this Sesshomaru to be fearful of altitude."

"I know you're not. After what I saw. Which is why I'm so surprised by this reluctance of yours." Raising an eyebrow, Harry smirked challengingly. Hovering beside the demon lord, keeping one hand on the grip Harry motioned for Sesshomaru to take a seat behind him. "It'll be uncomfortable, but you'll have to ride behind me. Your long hair will fly into my face, otherwise, from the wind. You're also quite tall, so my vision would be blocked either way unless I ride in the front."

Harry aimed a critical eye at the curved horns on Sesshomaru's armor. He wasn't completely sure if they were fangs or whittled out of metal, but just one of them was as big as a bezoar. He reasoned, "There'll have to be some distance between us. Unless if you'll allow me to put a Cushioning Charm on your armor for the flight there."

"Lord Black," Andromeda murmured. She'd retaken Teddy's hand. "Perhaps you should reconsider. There are other alternatives."

His mood dimming, Harry redirected his attention toward her. He remarked, "Actually now that Teddy's mentioned it, I'm in agreement. I'd rather we didn't have the wizarding population see us coming and then go screaming like chickens with their heads cut off."

"Wow, gross, Harry!" Teddy snickered.

Sesshomaru looked amused by the imagery. Andromeda's was more of a scandalized shock.

"Avoiding the traffic to the Ministry is going to be difficult," he continued, grimacing. "With flying, with the Firebolt's charms I could manage to remain hidden from the Muggles' sight. The Floo is the only viable alternative, if we're not Apparating. The Floo Network should be open, I reckon. If not, I'll have to take Diagon Alley and Apparate, if we're not flying."

The broom gave a jerk under him. The heavy clatter of weapons filled his eardrums. Then it was the soft whisper of silk. All ruminations perished in his throat as the solid weight behind him finally finished readjusting and then settled quietly.

A blinding grin gripped Harry.

Hearing the click-clack of nails tapping each other, Harry's attention snapped to Andromeda and he caught her mouthing his Black title wordlessly. Forehead creased, he eventually interpreted the movement of her eyes to peer over his shoulder, and when he did he wasn't certain if his resultant expression had shuttered in time to mask his mirthful bewilderment.
Sesshomaru was perched aside on the broomstick like a genteel woman atop an equestrian, daintily crossing his mile-long legs at the ankles. He sat near the junction between handle and the metals bands of the goblin-made ironwork, having accurately determined the area near the reinforced hazel bristles as the optimal location to support his weight and the heavy gear he wore. His expression seemed rather surprised that straddling the broom wasn't as uncomfortable as he was led to believe, unaware of the Cushioning Charm weaved into the riding equipment.

Harry decided to be kind. "I realize you're used to flying," he managed to say levelly, "it's rather impressive, the speed you used, but the standard bracing position is still more suitable for a two-person ride."

"You can do that?" a boyish voice breathed, and molten gold swiveled down to meet starry green flecked with a thin ring of gold around the irises. Fingers lax in Andromeda's grip, Teddy was beaming up at Sesshomaru brightly. "You know how to fly?"

Before Sesshomaru could reply, in his distraction Harry maneuvered the sovereign's hands, one to the wizard's shoulder and one loosely to his side.

It forced Sesshomaru to move with the rearrangement, scooting forward and throwing one leg over the Firebolt to brace Harry in between his spread legs, lest he become stuck in an awkward position with his muscles twisted and strained frontward to reach the wizard seated purposely at the topmost-center of the broom. Somehow the inuyōkai managed to make the readjustment seem elegant and natural.

"For support." Harry tapped the hand at his waist. "For steering." He tapped the one on his shoulder. He aimed a harmless smile back. "I don't expect it, but I've been attacked midflight every now and then. I wouldn't mind the extra eyes and ears."

Sesshomaru was staring at him. His attention flickered down to the placements of his hands before snapping back to Harry's face. His heavily-lidded countenance warred between guardedness and tolerant indulgence. Finally his chin dipped—the nod barely discernible to Harry's eyes, had he not felt the feather-light brush of those silvery, silky strands against him.

Grateful as he was that the demon lord hadn't interpreted the action to be taking liberties with his royal person or out of his station, it'd made Harry uncomfortably aware of the attractive person he now had behind him, pressing his knees up against the side of Harry's hips. Mouth firming, Harry turned his attention back to his relatives. He bade them a polite thanks and farewell.

Andromeda stepped forward to the hovering pair. She stood on her toes to press a kiss up against Harry's cheek. "I'm sorry for my words earlier. At least you're trying," she whispered, her breath ghosting along his jaw as she stepped down and a safe distance back.

Feeling eyes boring intensely into the back of his head, his grip constricted on the broom. Despite the nails digging into his flesh, he simply smiled his assurances.

Andromeda stepped forward to the hovering pair. She stood on her toes to press a kiss up against Harry's cheek. "I'm sorry for my words earlier. At least you're trying," she whispered, her breath ghosting along his jaw as she stepped down and a safe distance back.

Feeling eyes boring intensely into the back of his head, his grip constricted on the broom. Despite the nails digging into his flesh, he simply smiled his assurances.

The Firebolt circling around, he ruffled Teddy's curls one last time. He committed the sight of his scrawny godson holding Andromeda's hand unquestioningly, both of them looking up to him into his memory before tearing his gaze away. Drifting further away, he adjusted his stance, urging the broom up.

They propelled into the skies with a booming blast of air. Streaks of grass and dirt were ripped up from the soil, moving as to trail behind them before falling back into the earth.
No, Hermione is NOT crushing on Harry! Stop panicking! Remember I value development over smexy times. (There will be erotic content, I'll guarantee you that—two in fact have already been planned out by the minutiae—but the adult content will have to wait.) I've been typing some inspired,orable whump for our protagonists in my cell phone, I keep smiling and feeling horribly exasperated because they're not there yet. Next chapter: a heavy dose of plot. All in Sesshomaru's glorious POV. And a surprise appearance!

Cheers and have a great new year!
Baby Steps

Chapter Notes

So, a breakdown of all the sites I have for this story so far:

1) FF.net's version: the first to be updated, and contains milder content uninterrupted from artwork.

2) This version: explicit, NSFW written content and some art accompaniment (illustrated banners). I also reply quickly and transparently. So if you want to know my progress with updates…just peer at any replied comments. Warning, spoilers.

3) Art Masterpost: visual eye-candy during the waits when this author tries to juggle RL college and writer's block. It's intended as an organized catalogue of quick illustrations and misc., but I wouldn't expect much. Updated only for inspiration. I might have previews or spoilers for future chapters, but I've been keeping a tight lid on the urge so far.

4) Story Playlist: several music tracks I've transferred over to an online playlist that I use to inspire myself whenever I'm writing a chapter. You're welcome to listen to my personal mix, although it may have spoilers.

5) Follow me on Tumblr: since I've been getting some PMs from people desiring spoilers, I'll post hints and atmospheric clues of the mood I'm feeling for the current installment being written from time to time. Feel free to follow alongside me on my journey and contribute if you'd like. (So it won't entirely spoil your reader experience per se, but you should get a feel for any upcoming chapters.) Will be NSFW at some point.

My sincere adoration to jayswing96, Suyii, nemhain2009, and Pompom4u (also to Asarita and picabone99, for their comments on the Art Masterpost)! Thank you for taking the time to let me know what you think! You've been giving me the strength to push forward. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hari was incredibly audacious. Staring at the back of his head, Sesshomaru's countenance warred between a mask of nonchalance and a smirk that threatened to grow bigger from the flush of color that crept up the back of the sorcerer's exposed neck.

It was when the atmosphere around them started thinning that Hari brought them to a slower velocity. The polished black wood was dipped, and gloved hands directed them into a decent altitude above the sprawling countryside. Birds cawed and shrieked, ducking out of their trajectory.

A gentle, cold breeze whooshed through their hair and clothing—the flapping sound of fabric and the muted clanking of swords echoed loud in their ears as a comfortable silence descended upon them. From up above, they flew across the large tracts of land—divvied up among tilled crop fields, estates and villages, and forests that were scattered randomly among the green plains. The afternoon sun hid behind the clouds, dying the blue skies a dull yellow. Ant-sized humans and animals roamed
the lands, seemingly unaware of the pair soaring above them.

All this Sesshomaru studied with a fine eye, comparing the differences between this magical Great Britain and his Western Lands. His eyes darted around, constantly alert for danger. Their empires couldn't be more different. Time seemed to have eroded the great forests into stretches of civilization's modern advancements. The landscape seemed cultivated and artificial, missing that natural sprawl that woodlands grew into when they were left untouched.

Down below there were smoothened paths that ate through the fields like a grey web, routing to clusters of dark roofed architecture which boasted of white masonry and rustically-colored stonework Sesshomaru had never seen the likes of before. He was impressed by the townsmen's clean and advanced joinery system, himself being unable to detect how their interlocking framework held the self-sustaining construction up. Skilled craftsmen were expensive to commission to make—by hand—buildings. For a mere civilian to own such precise and perfect craftsmanship—and to have it mass produced—implied that the economy this empire retained was both prosperous and astronomical.

As if sensing his interest, with his eyes still trained forward Hari elucidated loudly, "England is bordered by Scotland and Wales, home to wizardkind and Muggles. The street system and the cars you see below are technological advancements made by Muggles. Teddy and Andromeda live in a secluded part of the country, where farmers have a less likely chance of stumbling onto them unlike in the city. They actually live not far from Wiltshire, from Malfoy's Manor."

Two fingers pointed down. "I'm not exactly a welcomed guest, so I can't fly us any closer. But if you look south, you'd see a gated estate with a wide gravel driveway and tall hedges on both sides like a maze. If you see albino peacocks on the grounds and a bloody expensive fountain, that's the right one."

Sesshomaru's brows rose. Their full weights were balanced on deceptively insubstantial transportation. Yet, it seemed little concentration needed to be kept on their conveyance.

He craned his neck, grasping Hari's shoulder and hip firmly as he leaned over to get a better line of sight. Just as if he'd touched hot flat stones, his claws were tingling from the endured contact and the adrenaline moments before. He was surprised Hari couldn't feel the heat emanating from his fingertips.

When he caught what appeared to be white pinpricks, he surveyed the settlement on it. The seven towers constructed into a stable entity was suitably large enough for a lord befitting Hari's station much more than his favored but modest townhouse he'd offered this Sesshomaru as a temporary asylum.

"Lord Malfoy's a work colleague of mine. Last I heard he was in France or somewhere out of the country to get his fiancée an engagement ring. I don't think you two would like each other. He's not...he's of a high position in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, but he was placed in the Being Division for a reason. As much as we respect each other, our history isn't what you'd call friendly. His dad was also responsible for many creature persecutions, before he lost his position because of his involvement with Voldemort. Reformed or not, any interaction with Malfoy might be a problem."

Hari shifted his grip and they veered down sideways until Sesshomaru could smell the wet grass and human inhabitation from where they were. The wind against his face was cathartic. Birds screeched and cawed around the pair, contributing to the unnatural noise pollution that made his ears ache.

"Without knowing what you are, they still can tell you have a creature inheritance. His department has a ranking system for magical creatures. I'd imagine you'd be automatically classified as XXXXX."
That particular branch of our Ministry is going to try to research your background. I apologize in advance for any insensitive prying. Hermione and I, and the few Unspeakables we're bringing in, are going to try and impede their progress."

Sesshomaru returned his gaze to the back of Hari's head. The repercussions of that were disquieting. Feeling his attention drift again to the cheek that'd made contact with the old maid's lips—he'd been tempted to scold her for the indecent, public display of affection—he slid back into an upright position on the broom. Instead he prefaced his interest by directing, "Describe this scale you measure this Sesshomaru by."

"A scale of X to XXXXX is given to all known magical creatures—beasts, beings, and spirits—by their level of risk associated. X is what we consider, um, boring." Embarrassment had dyed his decorous tenor. "There's no nice way of putting it. XX are harmless, able to be domesticated creatures. XXX are only handled by competent wizards. XXXX refer to endangered creatures or dangerous ones that only a skilled wizard with specialist knowledge should handle."

There was only one step up from that classification. His claws dug into Hari's shoulder. "Your subjects have ordered full-blooded yōkai to be killed-on-sight."

It had been entirely rhetorical on his part, but Hari sought fit to answer, "Unfortunately there is a stigma against Dark creatures. I wouldn't put it past a few extremists."

There was a minute roaring in the distance below, and when they both turned their heads to the source Sesshomaru could make out what appeared to be a featherless, gigantic white avian with an impressive wingspan flying up toward them. It seemed to be carrying two cylinders underneath each wing—like the bamboo containers bottling poisonous gases one undead human had the gall of pointing in his direction, unaware of his natural immunity against most poisons—and instead seemed to be armored of an unidentifiable material that reminded Sesshomaru of the smooth finishes of porcelain and ceramic. There were a row of dots that lined the body on either side and when he peered closer, shock numbed his system when he saw what appeared to be tiny faces pressed against the dark spots from the inside.

He felt the sorcerer's muscles underneath his claws tense and he caught wind what sounded like, "Relax… it's a Muggle airplane… sorry" before the broom swerved diagonally. Similarly the airplane branded with text that read Virgin Atlantic on its body and red tail deviated from their path, disappearing into the clouds until the hostile hissing could barely be heard.

"What breed of birds is that creature?" he demanded eventually when he could hear his own thoughts again. "This Sesshomaru has never seen such a mutation before in my lands."

There was a definite air of annoyance in Hari's tone when he responded, "I told you, it's a Muggle airplane. London's a popular tourist trap, and a popular destination. I wouldn't be too concerned about its existence. It's transportation that crosses vast distances in record time." He looked back over his shoulder. "The only dangers it posed to us are if we crashed headfirst into it or got sucked into its jet engines. The worst is if we're sighted by a young Muggleborn or Squib in the aircraft. This brings me to my next point…."

"… Compared to before, we have a tentative cooperation between wizardkind and magical creatures. You might still be persecuted, mind, but because of our rashness, some species have or are becoming endangered. We're currently considering drafting an official amendment to the resolution regarding their treatment. The goal is to cull any illegal trafficking and exterminations, hunting, and unnecessary relocations. It's still, unfortunately, in the works so there have been a few transgressions that've escaped our mandate. Not to mention Dark creatures have automatically been deemed as dangerous and sometimes kill-on-sight for such a long time, it's become ingrained. Some of my
colleagues have likened it to facing an uphill battle."

A frown descended Sesshomaru's mouth. His nerves were still rattled from the unexpected appearance of the futuristic conveyance, so much so that Hari's elucidations sounded ominous.

Sesshomaru darted his eyes to Hari's broad shoulders. He repeated, "We are?"

"Yeah, we," Hari related, sounding far away. "It was a big deal that Dumbledore was murdered. Someone had to fill his seat in the International Confederation of Wizards. Overwhelming as it can be sometimes, you learn a lot."

His lips parted slightly in surprise, hearing that. To wield that much power and to hold sway across borders, and over every existing creature that they had no real right of sovereignty to, was indecipherable. And for kingdoms to band together into an organized protectorate inspired both amazement and apprehension. The concept of a great struggle or a series of conflicts to unite many empires in order to oppose a threat made the sensation of spiders crawl down his spine.

He stole another glance at the side of Hari's face.

All humor and lightheartedness from earlier—the sorcerer appeared younger when the contented, gentle smiles emerged from relaxing his guard around the pup—were gone. His expression was rather solemn. "Because you're going to be associated with me, in the off-chance that you get asked this, just remember it was the ICW that enacted our international Statute of Secrecy. It states that it's in our best interests to conceal our magical existence—regardless of nationality or species—from Muggles. Even if it means establishing a secret society or isolating ourselves in a relatively safe sanctuary. It'd be a disaster if they realized there is another world out there. There are very few free land available in the 21st-century, so we've little choice but to hide in plain sight."

Again, it was that word. His attention condensed solely on that title. Sounding the two syllables in his mind, he thought back to every time they slipped into their conversations. Hari had established a clear distinction between him and who Sesshomaru hazarded to guess was this country's designation for humans unable to wield sorcery. Similarly, it sounded as derogatory as whenever "ningen" wormed its way into verbal exchanges back in his motherland.

"Humans," he stated incredulously, unwilling to roll the foreign word in his mouth, "in my time, roamed freely among us. They are powerless against us."

"I can imagine." Hari smiled grimly. He glanced back. "But it's not like that in the future. Every national Wizengamot takes any threat to our secrecy seriously. Muggles might not be able to do what we consider as natural as breathing, but they make up for their limitations with their innovations and resourcefulness. Similarly to forced demon purifications, we've experienced a dark period of witch-hunts and the like. The Salem Witch Trials, burning innocent women at a pyre or at a wooden stake, or even tying a suspected witch down so that she'd drown...these events, among others, acted as the catalyst for our isolation. Muggles nowadays think we're myths. Only some suspect that we exist.

"It'd gotten to the point where people's fear turned into resentment. The select Muggles that we do choose to bring into our secret are generally of high-positions in their respective governments. They help us conceal our existence. We may have the magic, a longer mortality and such, but they have the numbers and the technology. You'll probably hear another address whispered in some Ministry circles regarding our Muggleborns. You'll know when you hear it. It's a sensitive landmine, so I wouldn't advise stirring trouble by repeating the racial slur."

"We are being summoned by this 'Wizengamot,'" Sesshomaru commented, putting aside the softhearted regard for humans and instead recalling Teddy's recitation. A frown slipped into his face
as he remembered their concerns for their alpha when the division's name was raised. "What is this Hari's past regarding the division?"

Hari shifted, his sidelong gaze dropping forward. "Until Minister Shacklebolt took over, our Ministry was...corrupt. It was led under the collective leadership of a weak-willed man and his supporters. His term was ending soon. With the reelectings nearing, the Minister Fudge was under heavy public scrutiny. He was desperate for popularity and support from whom he considered powerful allies. Do you remember the name Teddy said aloud from the first letter? Regarding a trial?"

"This Um-bridge woman is locked up on accounts of conspiracy," Sesshomaru recounted quietly, splitting the alien-sounding name into syllables. He'd already inferred an unspoken history from yōki churning unstably around Hari.

"My cousin's a Muggle. I was fifteen years old when I was charged with breaking the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, and the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy for defending my cousin. He still has nightmares about it, what he went through. It's not a pleasant experience. Especially for an ordinary Muggle."

He imparted his alarmingly criminal past like he was recounting the state of the weather. His voice had gotten quieter, low enough that Sesshomaru had to strain his ears to hear him over the din of prevailing winds.

"It was like killing two birds with one stone. I was unlawfully expelled from my education and slapped with an excuse of a 'Disciplinary Hearing.' Fudge thought to ruin my credibility by changing what was a simple hearing, dealt by a single investigator, instead into a full criminal trial. In front of the Wizengamot. Without my knowledge or permission."

He was looking down at the lands below them. His jaw was clenched as he disclosed, "You have to understand, at the time, there was a political seesaw. My eyewitness account wasn't of a popular opinion."

"Why wouldn't your vassals believe in this Hari's validity?"

"There were a series of coincidences and conspiracies that shined a negative light on my character, in a time of festivities, so the Ministry had to cast their lot against what they thought was once a profitable household name. They'd rather do that than to prepare against a Dark Lord. Being the age that I was, with the risk of public hysteria they tried to explain away that I was an impressionable boy who'd hallucinated his resurrection because of recent trauma exposure."

"Shifting public opinion is the tradeoff many icons of high positions endure," Sesshomaru stated dryly. He canted his head. "What does this have to do with this Hari's involvement with Umbridge?"

"Umbridge was among the fifty that decided my case. We didn't have good first impressions. I was too angry to notice how suspicious it'd been to be charged on a simple case of underage magic used for self-defense against two Azkaban prison guards that had stumbled across my neighborhood, in a coincidentally Muggle environment, while they're controlled by Ministry officials. When I found out it was Umbridge that'd sent the Dementors, she still had the gall to say to my face that it was—"

Hari broke off, breathing deeply through his nose.

Once Hari collected himself, he apologized for going off on a tangent. (It had been Sesshomaru's relief that Hari wasn't seeking to be consoled or to gain this Sesshomaru's sympathy.)

Then he said, "I was acquitted, so it doesn't matter. They realized they had no case. What matters is
that, at best, you can be taken into custody if you threaten what is already a fragile legislation through illegal fraternization or magical accidents. The only leniencies the Wizengamot and ICW give involve cross-racial marriages or adoptions. Even then, affected parties have to seek permission from certain authorities to bring the uninitiated into our secret. Most of the time it's the law enforcement branch of each Ministry that has to tamper with the memory of Muggles. Meaning, in the UK, it's generally my department that's sent to clean up any accidents or breaches in secrecy."

"Yet in face of the strife, this Hari controls much bureaucratic influence and public opinion today," Sesshomaru said approvingly, his thumb rubbing circles over a rigid shoulder. It was nonetheless a simple consoling gesture, yet effective when he felt the muscles underneath his claw unwind under the ministrations.

There was a strangely agitated feeling in the back of his mind with the implications that Hari had been wrongfully accused and detained by an authority he devoted his servitude to at present—not to mention it being the same capricious judicial branch that summoned them—but it wasn't enough to warrant genuine alarm. If anything Sesshomaru felt rather blasé.

He murmured, "With the many offices that this Hari holds—and, above all, on an international status—should your word not be held higher in esteem?"

"Regarding that," Hari conceded, "as a last resort, I may be able to pull a few strings in the Ministry if need be, but my hands are tied in the ICW. We listen to the speeches and debates carefully. Each session is monitored and recorded and distributed. I'd rather not rouse attention and have this investigated by international authorities. We're trying to keep this incident as low key, with as little dishonesty as possible. I'd rather you exercise caution than force me or my Aurors to respond to any accidental sightings."

"It is commendable that you're prudent in your decisions, regardless of being in a position to determine the fate of all those that exist," Sesshomaru surmised almost mechanically, trying to wrap his thoughts around the power this one general held. He took his professional counsel to heart, although no small amount of euphoria coursed through him. He imitated, "For this Hari to be under surveillance would be detrimental and inconvenient. And tarnishing your reputation would be unwise."

He evaluated the alpha before him. Were Hari a mere foreign stranger, Sesshomaru would've—at best—acknowledged the lord's extraordinary bureaucratic weight in the world. And perhaps have been pressured to forge an alliance, under the insistence of Haha-Ue or Jaken. But like a sweet poison that's gradually corrupting his mind, Luna's words arose in his thoughts.

In five hundred years, he would be sharing this daiyōkai's widespread sphere of influence in Great Britain and across other empires he hadn't even met overseas. In five hundred years, the power Hari manipulated would be Sesshomaru's gain.

His eyes flickered down to the arm that holstered the eleven-inch staff. The sacred barrier had actually negated him from drawing upon yōki-centric attacks. Barring definite purification, it'd achieved what Mount Hakurei's destroyed spiritual miasma could've only hoped to have accomplished.

Having been targeted by various energy discharges—the ones with the irritating sting of purity had little to no effect on him while the ones that were more demonically aligned with what he was familiar with and the ones in between were authentic threats if he hadn't made certain to avoid their trajectory—he could acutely sense the moment Tōkijin's evil miasma had been ruthlessly suppressed—along with his other fangs. The sword that had been carved from the fangs of Naraku's third incarnation, Goshinki, became no special from the swords the humans crafted. When he'd flexed his
claws, expecting for the familiar, green acidic poison to seep through his skin, fear had gripped him with icy fingers when his *Dokkasō* ability and his whip had also been sealed from him. His inuyōkai form had similarly been suppressed.

Alarm had coursed through him, like a thousand suffocating, thorny pinpricks holding a vice grip around his windpipe, before he felt a whisper of his yōki within him. Then Hari had also divulged it wasn't absolute. The relief that washed over him melted his fears like snow to fire.

What was left unaffected from the foreign lord's witchcraft was Sesshomaru's physique. He'd decided that it had been simpler to wear Hari out with mokomoko-sama serving as an extension of his body and hand-to-hand combat—to finally draw first blood on a surprisingly wily opponent—when he caught something from the corner of his eye the instant the pup redirected the lord's attention skyward.

For a moment he'd thought he'd seen a pair of large canine forms—pale underneath the canopy shadows—in the woodlands. Then like a mirage, they disappeared the moment he blinked. An uneasy déjà vu swept through him. He'd stared across the distance, frowning in thought, before ultimately deciding that it wasn't worth his attention. Not when he was facing a remarkable opponent that'd disarmed him—a feat very few could boast of—both initially and physiologically.

When he returned to the sorcerer's side, watching the lean figure—who no longer smelled heavily of his packmate, and instead was bathed in the smell of physical excursion and of this Sesshomaru—he was viciously satisfied by the strength of the foreign daiyōkai—as eccentric of a fighting style as it was—which had exceeded his purposefully lowered expectations.

It would've been such a disappointment if Hari were easily killed.

He didn't know if Hari's kindness extended to all children, but seeing him with his godson chipped away at Sesshomaru's reservations. As adequate of a caregiver as Hari was—visions of Rin meeting the foreign alpha and seeing the two instantly connect made his chest tighten—Luna's portentous proclamation of his future notwithstanding, he refused to take a weak general as his Mate, daiyōkai or not.

Their environment had been steeped heavily in their respective demonic energies. And like a familiar but tantalizing caress he couldn't put his finger on, Hari's yōki teased him throughout the fight. His limbs had felt weighted down by an invisible force. It had only been the hellfire which spewed from the sorcerer's staff which snapped him back into alertness.

It wasn't the novelty of going against a foreigner that drew Sesshomaru like a beacon. There was something to his benefactor that made his inner beast intoxicated and yearn for something he did not understand.

Although he'd been aiming to incapacitate Hari, when he'd released *Sōryūha* he was pleased by the honor displayed when the lord defended his pack, effectively, from a powerful enemy attack, instead of cowering like many warriors have done when faced with a fearsome assault. That show of courage garnered his respect. Once the discharge dissipated, just by seeing his fierce expression, it brought Sesshomaru much exhilaration that Hari was treating him as a real threat on his lands. He felt respected as a predator, as a daiyōkai.

He had been interested to test his own fang against Hari, to see if there was any spark of recognition. Similar to the power of the Gryffindor's Sword Hari's godson claimed last night, at even a glancing cut an acidic toxin would spread throughout the affected area like an illness, disintegrating and decomposing any organic material that'd come into contact with the blade. It was amusing—albeit flattering—that in five hundred years, a daiyōkai from a distant empire would wield a sword that
boasted the same ability as his and would have it revered by hanyous.

It was an important custom in yōkai tradition for the alpha to represent their dominance and virility to the courted party through an enticing demonstration of physical strength, to show what a boon his or her abilities would be should they officially Mate. It was to show that they could protect them and provide for their Intended. From their mêlée, when he proudly displayed Bakusaiga to his opponent and boasted of his personal achievements and battle prowess, it was to tentatively establish himself as a worthy suitor for Hari to perhaps contemplate, regardless of their unorthodox social stations. He’d been testing the waters with a direct proposal of his intent and the start of a scent claim.

Miraculously his lapse in judgment managed to have impressed the alpha by his showmanship and seriousness instead.

Although a liquid warmth unfurled in his chest upon memory of Hari’s remark—who although had been understandably bewildered and troubled, he hadn’t directly rejected Sesshomaru's intentions—when Hari finally expressed a personal interest into Sesshomaru's history, Sesshomaru was torn between pleasure and unease. When he declared his motives were pure and uninfluenced by his sire—therefore being made on his own merits—he could feel Tenseiga reacting to Hari’s yōki, ever since it had been ripped from Sesshomaru's hands.

His sire's sword was presently pulsating in its scabbard, like the familiar, erratic heartbeat whenever the fang determined someone worthy of being resurrected. It sent silent vibrations through Sesshomaru's body.

So caught up in his internal turmoil he'd only just realized, belatedly, that Hari had been speaking to him.

"—Kreacher excavated several books from my private libraries that might have to do with what happened last night, but they don't seem to point to anything…promising," Hari was saying, either unaware or ignoring the return of the scrutinizing he was placed under. His gaze was fixated by their approach into the outskirts of civilization. "I'll try to see if we can finish where we left off, after our trip to the Ministry. I don't want to take any chances and have there be any residual binding agreement between us."

It took a while for Sesshomaru to make sense of the sudden topic switch. Staring long and hard at the back of Hari's head, his gaze slithered down to his claws on Hari's shoulder. When Hari had divulged the ritual's other intended use, it took all of last night for Sesshomaru's outrage and trepidation to wane. Hari's surprise had been genuine; Sesshomaru could not place the blame on the shoulders of an innocent person.

Everything was moving too fast. It was like invisible forces were conspiring to push them together. Whether it was external circumstances or divine intervention that brought him here, while Sesshomaru was gradually coming to terms with his fate, Hari's response seemed to be seeped in defiance.

Exhaling slowly, Sesshomaru asked what had been at the forefront of his thoughts, "What is this Hari's make of our state of affairs?"

"The Ministry, potentially bad. Last night?" Hari fell quiet. He seemed to be grinding his teeth behind closed lips in thought.

"The other procedure of your ritual," Sesshomaru said delicately, as if approaching a wounded small animal, "is there any chance it is not that?"
Hari's gaze snapped back, and he was staring daggers into Sesshomaru's eyes. Sesshomaru's breath caught. Seemingly unconcerned of the challenge he was posing, Hari interrogated, "Did Luna do anything to you yesterday? Or have you made hand contact with anyone else in the time you've been here, aside from me?"

Her image briefly flashed in his mind. His instincts were telling him, were he to divulge her part in this, because of his high sense of integrity Hari would immediately apologize for his associate, hunt her down, and have her break whatever tenuous link that had been established between them if he couldn't do so himself.

Slitted golden eyes studied Hari's severe expression.

It would've been no feat for him to slay any hindrances to his plans. Yet if he stood to gain a great boon from intimately allying with this general, no matter the years or the distance that separated them it would be foolish of this Sesshomaru to discard such an influential and powerful prize. Not to mention staying in the alpha's favor was his ideal prospect of getting back home.

With a carefully shuttered expression, he posited, "Very few are allowed to decide this Sesshomaru's fate. Most are killed for their insolence. If it is the other ritual, where one approves of a suitor's courting intentions, would the effects of the agreement be binding after the conditions of our wager have been met?"

Hari's piercing focus dwindled into a milder, ponderous one. With an uncertain deliberateness, he said, "Hypothetically, let's say it's that and not my magic acting up. It's a binding contract, but nothing will happen if we don't act on it. The connection will always be there but it'd be nothing than an annoying decoration whenever we have to broker a deal. It's a symbol to others that the pair is off-limits. The only way to break it permanently would be having the caster officially withdrawing his or her authorization."

"And what should happen when the recipients act on it?"

Sesshomaru's query was met with a long and searching stare, as if Hari couldn't believe he was entertaining the ludicrous notion. With narrowed eyes, Hari posed stiltedly, "Why are you asking me this?"

"Hypothetically speaking," he pressed, masking his insecurity under his usual layer of coldness, "if this Hari had undergone the ritual with a desired female, what would be your clan's official customs regarding Mating? This Sesshomaru does not wish to be uninformed should a desperate conspirator manipulate this Sesshomaru unknowingly into your empire's unorthodox traditions."

Hari's brows lifted into his fringe. Clenching and unclenching the broom, Hari yielded grudgingly, "You shouldn't have to worry about that. It has to be consensual between both the Courter and the Courted. In a traditional Courting, after the suitor establishes his interest and intentions to his Intended's trusted party, he would begin the Courtship. Dates—erm, our modern equivalent of unchaperoned romantic excursions—would happen. Gifts would be exchanged. Eventually a marriage would take place. Then it's a happily ever after with a baby on the way."

Although an unbidden sense of glee leapt in his chest at Hari's unintentional admission, Sesshomaru sneered. His explanation sounded like the softer hearted fantasies of a human romantic. Concentrating on the sour tone in Hari's speech, he hedged, "This Hari disapproves."

Hari blinked. He said uncertainly, "Sorry? I don't think I'm cottoning on…?"

Disregarding another of the sorcerer's strange turn of phrase, he restated, "This Hari does not
approve of his society's Mating customs."

"This Hari does not approve of a lot of things about his wizarding community's outdated laws," Hari threw back sarcastically, a fraction close of sounding belligerent. When he noticed how Sesshomaru was taken aback, he quickly made a noise of frustration. Ramming a hand through his hair, he said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you. It's a sensitive topic."

"This Sesshomaru cannot comprehend why," he retorted, his brows lifting. He couldn't help the edge of enmity that stole into his voice.

He felt Hari shift under his hands. He'd maneuvered so that his right hand was steering the broomstick and his left hand was down in the respectable space kept between them. The position looked inconvenient but before he could draw attention to it, Hari requested, "You're over five hundred years old and a sovereign of a vast amount of territories, Lord Sesshomaru. Our customs may be different, but you cannot mean to tell me you've never been pressured to marry and to place an heir on your throne."

Sesshomaru's eyes widened. He leaned back reflexively, his claws loosening.

A wry look descended upon Hari's features. "I thought so. I may not be royalty but our circumstances are similar."

"This Hari also has to produce an heir," Sesshomaru echoed.

Hari breathed a sigh through his nose. His gaze dropped sidelong, peering into the distance. He said somberly, "I'm the last surviving descendant of the Potter bloodline. The Peverell name had been extinct in the male line until I petitioned to have it brought back and added to mine. As for the Black title...I may be their official Head of House, but unlike the Potter or Peverell surnames there will be other people to carry on that blood."

Sesshomaru tilted his head, peering at Hari in puzzlement. "This Hari is a young, unattached, influential aristocrat. It's not that this Hari isn't in demand. Yet this Hari has not Mated. You cannot produce an heir without a female to birth your litter."

"...Sure. You can put it that way." He raked his hand through his hair again, further mussing up the natural mess that had also been windswept. Sesshomaru's eyes lifted up. That mane of his seemed to defy all natural laws of order, sticking up in jagged tufts in all directions, and no amount of combing seemed to be able exert its dominance.

Hari continued, "If all I wanted was a child, I would've just married Ginevra. Or adopted an orphan. I'd like to think I'm being reasonable in asking for someone to look beyond my reputation and want me not as some prestigious sperm donor or like some trophy husband they'd acquired to brag to their colleagues."

"You are a romantic?" Sesshomaru proclaimed skeptically. His baritone was laced with deep disapproval. An idealistic daiyōkai with his head in the clouds was never a good sign.

Hari winced. "I wouldn't say I'm a romantic. I'm too down to earth for that hogwash."

His gloved hand lowered from his head. "But at the same time I don't think it's fair to lower my standards and settle for what I could get. I'm going to be spending the rest of my life with someone. Everything I own is going to be shared with her. That's the idea. If a child is born from a loveless union, I'm dooming him or her to a toxic environment. It'd be like a repeat of what Voldemort's parents had gone through. I don't want my son or daughter to be a cultist-turned dictator. Tom Riddle
Sr was also an arse, understandable as his situation was. He left the mum when she was pregnant, because he didn't love her. He left Voldemort when he was still a developing child. Who knows how he could've turned out if he had a caring parent.

"Have you not considered males?"

Hari's expression froze. If not for his blinking, Sesshomaru would've thought he'd been turned into stone. A frosty caution crept back into his tone as Hari inquired, "What are you insinuating?"

His eyes peering into Hari's reserved gaze, he observed, "Merely that this Hari has established he is seeking companionship. Yet this Hari has also established to this Sesshomaru that he is seeking to preserve his lineage. Either you suffer a conflict of interest or your…society of sorcerers is able to produce offspring through other methods." He leaned closer. "This Sesshomaru does not believe this Hari to be that fickle of an alpha. It can only mean it is the latter."

Hari's lips parted in shock. His jaw floundered a bit before he gave a helpless laugh. Sesshomaru frowned. He'd meant no humor in his speculation.

Covering the bottom part of his face, Hari grinned crookedly between his fingers. "You're frightfully perceptive, alright." His expression clouded in thought as he looked away. "We do have the means of 'producing offspring through other methods.' A popular process is blood adoption, but it's not… exactly…legal. Most purebloods go this route. Or if you're the last descendent, childless and uninvolved."

Stroking his jaw, he aired absently, "I also seem to recall…reading in the papers, we have someone working on a potion that'd allow for universal conception. Regardless of gender or species. So there's that."

All the oxygen that had been in Sesshomaru's lungs had been punched out by Hari's admission.

Glancing back, upon noticing Sesshomaru's wide-eyed look, Hari scoffed aloud. Waving a hand as if to dispel an annoying puff of smoke, he went to dismiss his amazement: "Don't give me that. It's still in prototype, last I heard. Until it can successfully produce a fetus in same-sex couples or an infertile person, it's not going to be patented by the Potions Association. Even with all the pureblood endorsement."

"Why wouldn't such a miraculous ware be peddled in your markets?" Sesshomaru stated breathlessly, imagining its trade making its way across vast empires. Sesshomaru's eyes were heated as he surveyed the sorcerer under a brand new perspective.

"Miraculous?" Hari gave him an odd expression. "The project's built on good intentions, I'll give you that—since we've suffered heavy casualties from our civil war—but our society is stagnant. Very few of us have enough resources to sustain a population boom. The ingredients to make it are also going to be in high demand and of high quality. Ministries have to set it at a steep price and decide on its selective use. Not to mention we have to create a screening process on who can buy it so that we can cut down on the people that can abuse it. There is also a chance that it can be sold in a black market. This already reeks of bureaucracy. And heavy monitoring. I don't think any magical community—especially in third world countries—can be ready for the tradeoffs that come with it."

Interjecting into Hari's sidetracked political reproach, he pressed heavily, "This Hari is unattached."

Hari's frustration came to a short halt. His new expression was unreadable, aimed at Sesshomaru's features. He said slowly, "Yeah, I am. You're taking this…talk of same-sex conception remarkably well."
Sesshomaru's brows gathered. With a small bit of uncertainty, he said, "While the revelation of males conceiving is unprecedented, sodomy is not uncommon."

"Sodom...homosexuality. In the feudal ages. You don't have religion governing...your government turned a blind eye to it? It wasn't considered heretical?"

Startled by the self-interruptive spurts of incredulity injected in the sorcerer's question, he canted his head. Silvery hair spilled over a shoulder as he said, "It's not widespread, but it is observed. There is no religious opposition. Monks are often isolated from females in monastic communities and turn to their acolytes, in an age-structured practice of pederasty."

When Hari's stunned silence was maintained, he murmured confusedly, "Is it a rarity in the future or in this country? A form of nanshoku occurs also among warrior ranks. It's strictly role-defined and not at all dishonorable. Lasting loyalty and an unshakable devotion are the end results."

"Merlin's ba...are you...?" Hari cut himself off, shaking his head as if physically dispelling a thought. "I'm sorry; it's still a controversial topic for some nations today." His mind sounded boggled as he repeated, "It was culturally accepted in Japan? In feudal Japan? In the 1500s?"

"Why would someone's private affairs ultimately matter to the empire?" he posed, staring intently at the side of Hari's jaw. "The rite adheres to every law and regulation that follows any contract. The older affiliate would impart honor, etiquette, and a warrior's experience to his student, as his responsibility as a good role model. It's a mutually beneficial infrastructure."

"Erm, I don't think our definitions of homosexuality match. I was more thinking along the lines of...one's sexual orientation."

"Nanshoku is not just acting on promiscuous desires," Sesshomaru said icily, digging his claws into Hari's waist. He made no mention that close intimacy was often a deciding factor to the strengthening of a nenja's and wakashū's camaraderie. "It is a tradition practiced by this Sesshomaru's ancestors, and it will not be likened to a trade peddled in whorehouses or by commoners. A shudō rapport is aimed toward honor-driven obligations, and for building credence to the warrior and to the one that should feel honored to even be chosen for his attention and to be given the privilege of undergoing the rite."

"Okay. Calm. Down. I'm not insulting...I'm not saying that it's a bad thing. It's just not what I expected. Contemporary Japan has no laws against homosexual activity, to my knowledge. It wasn't the same for us. Until recently, it was considered a crime of gross indecency in the UK. In the Middle Ages, we had a lot of religious strife. It'd progressed from people getting stoned or burned or being accused of witchcraft and being branded a heretic to the Victorian's penalty of life imprisonment or years of hard labor. Well, exempting Northern Ireland, that is. The Muggles only allow for civil partnerships, not an actual legislation for same-sex marriages...."

Hari trailed off, as if realizing what he had been rambling. He chuckled at his youthful display. "Merlin's beard, I don't think I'd ever gone into this much historical discussion outside of political proceedings. I've been railing at you this whole ride. So sorry if I've been boring you. Thank you for opening my eyes, Sesshomaru. I just learned something new."

"Your appreciation is unwarranted," he answered reflexively, loosening his grasp. He made no comment of Hari's slip of the tongue by addressing him casually. As an intimate companion would. Disregarding the sudden surge of warmth that'd reached his toes, he queried, "This Hari is receptive to the likelihood?"

Without meeting Sesshomaru's gaze, Hari said, albeit surly, "It wasn't an avenue I was aware I could
pursue until Hermione suggested it to me."

Sesshomaru merely made a sound of acknowledgement. Hari only admitted his ambivalence to the idea, and not that he was personally receptive to sodomy or being impregnated. He pressed, "If this tonic can be manufactured, would this Hari be willing to resort to using it?"

His inquiry was met with a shrewd, mistrustful glance. With a withering last glimpse, Hari turned on his shoulder and became an irritatingly unforthcoming mute to all further inquiries. A trace of heat crept up Sesshomaru's pointed ears the longer their stubborn silence crawled on by.

Moments later, after more significant distance was crossed, he realized their travel was slowed. His nose wrinkled when he became aware of the salty scent of sea water and overbearing stench of smog and chemicals. He peered beyond Hari's shoulder.

His curiosity melted into shock when he saw, in the distance, a monstrous mass of unnatural architectures and attractions aspiring to scrape the skies, like giant monuments or tributes erected to satisfy the ego of the empire's ruling class or religious clergymen. They were made up of twisting metals, and exquisitely designed glasswork that Sesshomaru had only seen when merchants and traders—from Central Asia and beyond—visited his territories to sell their wares from the road to the next city. Unlike the countryside, this prefecture Hari was bringing them to seem to have been built on top of a large body of water. Only a few scatterings of trees and green interrupted the all-grey zone, with the exception of one green volume surrounded by miles and miles of civilization.

There was a dull, smog-like miasma settled over the dizzyingly enormous town and Sesshomaru instantly buried his nose against Hari's hair, breathing shallowly through his mouth. He relocated an arm around Hari's waist, replacing the little but respectable distance that had been between them and nearly leaning his full weight against Hari.

Sesshomaru felt a flicker of embarrassment when the sorcerer's muscles turned rigid underneath his hands. Yet a growl was torn from his throat when the dark-haired daiyōkai tried to tactfully shy away. He dug his claws into the sorcerer's shoulder and abdomen, not enough to draw blood but enough that Hari would be able to feel the sharp pinpricks despite the layers of fabrics that separated them. Warmth seeped into his skin. Not just in his hands, but all around him.

Outside of battle, there were very few circumstances when he was willingly pressed against another body. Clearly his body remembered the distinction, feeling relaxed and shivery all over, expecting a certain outcome.

Instead of leaping from his touch the alpha instantly froze in place. Leather creaked against wood as Hari clenched and unclenched his fingers. Exhaling loudly through his nose, in a strained voice—as if it were taking all his willpower to remain restrained—he dared, "I implore you to put some distance between us, Lord Sesshomaru. Those…curved horns on your armor were not made for friendly close contact."

Sesshomaru closed his eyes, trying to control himself. He inhaled deeply, replacing the air in his lungs with the aromatic bitterness of tea and of oiled wood—submerged only from the claims from Hari's pack—and of a trace of his own signature scent that declared the foreign alpha to be under this Sesshomaru's concord. Hot air was exhaled against Hari's skin when he scooted backward accommodatingly, yet he refused to relinquish his hold as he instead nosed Hari's exposed neck. The alpha's scent was stronger there, mingled with sweat and neutral-smelling oils of the bath taken prior to their excursion.

"Are you sniffing me?" Hari hissed, turning his head to peer over his shoulder. His cheekbone grazed along Sesshomaru's bowed forehead. "You are. Why are you sniffing me? I can't smell that
deli—what could possibly be agitating—?

When he caught Sesshomaru's tensed facial features, his expression stilled. Then it thawed.

In a much softer tone, he remarked, "You've been living in feudal Japan all this time. Your sense of smell is really that sensitive?"

"Can't this Hari detect the ningen stench of pollution?" he demanded against the back of Hari's stiff shirt-collar. His forehead felt hot from that unintentional contact of skin against skin. "It's sharp and heavy and metallic. Or has your sense of smell been damaged by this foul rank?"

"Our technologies…countries have become industrial long since. I guess I'm used to it," Hari offered, frowning ahead. "My sincerest apologies. I hadn't known it'd be an inconvenience. Muggle London must seem strange and off-putting when you've been exposed to nothing but green lands and wilderness. You hadn't reacted this badly the first time I brought you to the Ministry entrance…oh."

A bewildered tone crept into his voice. "Back in the telephone booth. Last night, when you crowded me in the guestroom. You've been using me to cover the smell."

There was a brief moment of silence. When he looked up, Hari's sidelong gaze was penetrating and evaluating. When Sesshomaru glowered at him, Hari's expression became flustered. He stammered, "I-I'm honored that you think I'm much preferable to...whatever you're picking up. No worries. I'm glad it's helping. As long as it has a calming effect."

Air was huffed against Hari's neck as Sesshomaru scoffed a bit from the frivolous display of apprehension. He had a feeling that Hari's original line of speech had been more bellicose, before his tactful sensibilities kicked in. Dragging Hari closer, he took deeper breaths of the male's conglomeration of scents as Hari navigated them deeper through the city, steering clear of tall architecture and obstructions.

After a while, Hari released what sounded like another resigned exhale. His shoulders sagged, he directed, "Your hand around me. Can you please reach into my pocket and pull out what's inside? Before I got sidetracked, I was going to show you something. I'm a bit afraid that the contents will fly out. Now that we're in this position."

A "hnn" exhalation of breath escaped from Sesshomaru and he lowered his eyes to Hari's waist. Locating the destination, he slipped the tips of his claws into the fabric, curling around what felt like smooth scraps of parchment and what felt like a tiny cylindered object, before pulling his hand out from the source of heat. He stared down at two moving depictions of an ukiyo-e and a wall screen—both contained in the shapes of a square no bigger than his palm—and a pill with clear liquid sloshing inside.

"It's not medicine," Hari said, when Sesshomaru remained reticent. "It's an antidote for our Veritaserum. I don't want to accuse anyone but, just in case, if you see me spilling my secrets to whomever we're meeting, I want you to break the capsule between your teeth and pantomime drinking the contaminated tea. I'm uncertain whether either will affect you, but the potion's effects are quite identifiable. You'll know if I'm being drugged out of my mind. If you are able to do it subtly, please also try to break mine into whatever beverage I'm drinking. I won't be in control of my actions once the potion takes effect. Or at least try to find us a way to escape without making our retreat seem too suspicious. Its effects should fade after an hour."

"The poison is indiscernible."

"Even with your sense of smell, it's unlikely you'd pick up on it. It can be mixed with any drink, and it's almost indistinguishable from water. It's odorless." He scanned their surroundings, sharply
veering them away from what would've been a head-on collision. "Three drops is usually enough to force the drinker to answer any questions put to them truthfully, though there are some methods of natural resistance."

"Through regular ingestion," he concluded, recalling how Inuyasha had built his immunity against his toxin's effects—barring melted flesh.

"I'd meant our Occlumency. I suppose mithridatism is possible, but it's rare."

"Occlu…" 

"Oc-clu-men-cy," Hari reaffirmed. "Some of us are able to master what we call the Mind Arts. I remember telling you about this, somewhat. But Mind Arts has two categories: Legilimency and Occlumency. You don't have to know the difference between the two, but if you feel like something is off, like you're unnecessarily remembering things or experiencing a sharp pain in your head, avert your gaze immediately. Or call for me if the pain persists."

"Your people can read this Sesshomaru's mind?" he snarled, his breath gusting across Harry's nape.

"If you'd like to think it is, yes," he confirmed, his voice sounding heavy with an unnamed emotion. "But—how do I say this?—it's a legally restricted practice. Invading someone's privacy and navigating through their thoughts is like…is like a witch or a wizard conducting an act of rape."

"A migraine is this Sesshomaru's only precursor to your witchcraft!"

"I won't do it to you. I promise. You can take solace in that I'm a dreadfully obvious Legilimens. And a terrible Occlumens. Whenever I perform Legilimency, it's like I'm lobotomizing my target. The mark would be able to sense me coming a mile away, far from what a decent Legilimens can do. Our most advanced Legilimens perform it nonverbally and wandlessly—and painlessly—but less-talented practitioners have to chant 'Legilimens' for it to work. So, at least you have that."

A fingertip was being tapped restlessly against the broomstick. "Its legal use was intended to detect if someone was lying during trials or interrogations. But if they're as good as Voldemort was, it can be used aggressively. With your Witness Protection designation, it gives you some protection. Very few will break the law and interfere in what they believe to be a federal investigation. If someone tries to access your mind, bring it to my immediate attention or to one of my Aurors. Your assailant can be taken into custody and tried."

"It is an illegal war tactic?"

More tapping continued, before Hari piped up, "Voldemort was considered our most skilled Legilimens up to date, so I'd say your chance of exposure is relatively low. You won't suffer the worst outcome. It's easy to break the mental connection. Especially if you're not restrained. No matter how skilled a Legilimens is, eye-contact must be maintained in order for it to work. Just…just hide the capsule in a safe, nondescript place. Someone went through a lot of trouble to give us that."

Sesshomaru studied the capsule in his hand—which had effortlessly become one of his most valuable assets in this time—before sliding it into the layers of his kimono, tucking it near where he hid his other acquisitions.

"Hermione unearthed a lot of research. I know I said I was going to bring you a different ukiyo-e so that we can be sure that it's, well, you, but I'm confident our investigation's heading in the right direction. Do you recognize the characters written on it?"

Studying the two unnaturally smooth and glossy pieces of paper in his hand, he concentrated on the
one Hari was alluding to. His mouth twitched from the simplified caricature of his features the artist attempted to translate in woodprint form. Whoever the artist was, he had done a relatively accurate job glorifying its subject, although he wasn't quite certain what to make of the spirit painted behind him.

Sliding his gaze from the tinier version of himself, he squinted down on the small brushstrokes. His brows instantly lifted. "This Sesshomaru does not know a deathly spectre."

"I thought so," he heard Hari mutter. After a few more grumbling, he asked, "This is just a verification, but your…Tenseiga…it can resurrect the dead?"

Sesshomaru stared at the back of Hari's head. This was the first verbal confirmation from the sorcerer about his personal interest in the fang. In a steadily clipped tone, he asked, "This Hari doubts the ability of Chichi-Ue's fang?"

"What? No, I meant nothing by…wait, it's accurate!"

"Your skepticism is unfounded."

Hari lifted them high enough so that they wouldn't fly into any buildings in his distraction. He was silent for another minute, gathering his thoughts, before posing, "And what of this 'Netherworld'?"

His stare morphed into that of disbelief. He said dubiously, "Is your memory affected from the winds? The Netherworld is where all the dead go when they've passed. The afterlife is not that difficult to comprehend."

Hari's voice was tight. "You are not a necromancer. Yet is it true you can raise a hundred people from the dead with one swing of that sword?"

"It can only restore life to the recently dead," he admitted grudgingly, his face and the tips of his ears feeling strangely warm as he remembered its shortcomings. He withheld information that his sire left him with a cast-off of Inuyasha's inherited fang and that he'd gifted its only offensive ability against living beings to his half-breed brother.

His mouth felt dry as a green gaze wavered back at him, peering over a shoulder. Expressing gravity in his tone, Hari interrogated, "And is this ability of yours a common occurrence in your time? Who else could do what you could?"

A surprising sense of pride surged within him. A wide smirk spread across Sesshomaru's face, making Hari's eyes widen. Tightening his arm around the wiry figure, Sesshomaru purred into Hari's ear, "Ironic as its selective usages are, it is only this Sesshomaru who is granted this power. Very few can claim to do what this Sesshomaru have done."

The sorcerer's shoulders instinctively shot forward—Sesshomaru realized belatedly that his armor had once again pierced Hari's back—and ignoring the urge to roll his eyes at his own oversight, he allowed the claws that had been on Hari's shoulder to drop. He permitted the distance.

In the upper-torso area only.

Thankfully the kusazuri protected his lower region from any unfortunate drawbacks of trapping an alpha near such an intimate space. His hand was spread across what he could feel was a tightly corded stomach sheltered underneath fabrics. His thighs were locked around Hari's, digging his knees against a pair of covered legs.

Amusing as it was to witness a grown man's futility, he was beginning to lose his patience. As if he
were addressing a restless pup, he rebuked loudly, "So easily does this Hari forget. Your proximity is alleviating this Sesshomaru's sense of smell from your city's malodorous odors." When Hari glared at him, without much thought into it he growled, "You are behaving like a virgin."

All attempts at a preservation of modesty stilled upon those words.

Scoffing at Hari's idiocy, he constricted his hold around Hari's stomach, making the dark-haired daimyōkai automatically recline a bit to alleviate the discomfort. Dropping his chin on a shoulder, he groused, "While this Sesshomaru is appreciative that this Hari intends to honor our respective personal spaces, our close quarters is necessitated. We do not have to call more attention to how discomfiting the violation already is."

His jaw clenched, Hari was drumming his fingers along the surface of his thigh restlessly. "Is this going to become a regular occurrence?" His muscles still felt like he was ready to spring in a moment's notice.

Sesshomaru's rejection was succinct and to the point.

Although self-conscious about the imposed-vulnerability the older alpha was putting the younger in, Hari's following sentence was laced with a trace of humor: "Were you inspired by what we just saw? I don't think anyone has ever called me...a virgin, and meant it as an insult."

Sesshomaru blinked. Before Sesshomaru could question him, Hari spoke over him, "Alright, you're exceptional. Hermione and I weren't contesting your formidability." His fingers were still pattering against his leg as he posed, "Is being able to do what you can do accepted back then? Or was your sword coveted and sought after for its abilities? Like some sort of legend passed on in what is like an old wives' tale?"

"Tenseiga is this Sesshomaru's possession," he deadpanned, leaving no room for debate. He buried his nose against the strange fabric, subtly whiffing its scent. "Late as he is, Chichi-Ue's reputation is still revered through my lands."

"I meant, was anyone barmy enough to try to steal it from you? If it's that illustrious...."

"Thieves and any imbeciles unable to access their common sense are killed for their arrogance."

Hari fell quiet, staring down at the hand and the pictures it held splayed across his abdomen. After an infinite pause, he plucked one of the Polaroids away and he brought the thin film closer to his face. "My last question regarding this."

"Should this Hari not ask this Sesshomaru until the victor of our wager has been decided?"

"I appreciate your cooperation and your generosity thus far," Hari reminded. "I know what it's like to have strangers prying into your past, so I've been trying to avoid any insensitive dips into your personal life. But the more I know, the quicker we are to sending you home."

Making a thoughtful sound, Hari offered, "I'll answer any of yours for the other Polaroid?"

Sesshomaru scowled, his patience drawing thin.

Hari took his silence as approval. He hedged, "It was mentioned in a...book that you'd had a spiritual experience. That you journeyed to the afterlife. The author was uncredited, so I can't be sure if you knew him or her. But should I take their claims at face value?"

"You can consult your book."
"If I could, I would. So that I won't have to ask you about your personal affairs. But history is often recorded with glorifications and inaccuracies. Besides, I think it's absurd to reference other people's interpretations when there is a better first-hand source for a more authentic account of the events that entailed."

Sesshomaru frowned. The knuckles of his claws whitened. He said lowly, "Only a few individuals had been privy to that incident. Is this Hari aware of the full circumstances regarding my descent into the Netherworld?"

"Your ward's name is Rin, I seem to recall," Hari said just as cautiously. His eyes were drawn to the razor-sharp nails near his extremities. "I don't know if this is true. So don't overreact. The author claimed that you weren't aware that her life was to be traded for your pursuit of power."

A pair of molten gold slits dropped sideways to scrutinize the pulsing Tenseiga. His arm tensed around Hari's waist.

He could read Hari's hesitance as he continued, haltingly, "It's not that I...look down on you for your...lofty ambition of the time. You were the eldest son. You had your priorities." His yōki was tightly wound around him, surrounding them like the cool riptides. "This is going to sound pretentious, but in the end, I think you showed a...a king's wisdom when you decided the price was much too steep...I'm glad you got her back."

He raised an eyebrow, drawing back and looking at him weirdly. He stated, "This Hari is troubled."

Hari instantly denied, "I'm not—"

"Any persistence in maintaining your deception tests this Sesshomaru's patience. Falsehoods are ineffectual against an inuyōkai's senses. This Hari's yōki speaks for itself."

Hari's eyes flew back and he stared at Sesshomaru. "You can read a wizard's magical aura?"

Sesshomaru stared back. "Can this Hari not?"

"Your 'sorcery stems from a different source from your subjects,'" Hari threw his words back at him. His brows were furrowed. Sesshomaru was pleased to note that all sign of distress had dulled with his newfound preoccupation. With climbing admiration, he said softly, "You can detect all sorts of things. And you can see what few wizards can. Is this a common trait among demon-kind?"

He grinned weakly when he saw Sesshomaru had been ready to open his mouth. "Yeah, I don't think so. Silly question. I'm sorry, that was rhetorical. This is a lot to take in. I've been finding out all sorts of extraordinary things about you."

Despite himself, a reluctantly flattered smile tugged up the corner of the daiyōkai's mouth. He noticed Hari's gaze sliding down his face, as if he'd been reeled by a fishing line.

Hari rambled, as if he couldn't help himself, "I shouldn't be surprised. Maybe you're just that special." He was practically vibrating with a new, imperceptible energy beneath Sesshomaru's claws.

His heartbeat picked up, racing past the steady pulse of the Tenseiga by his waist. In a timbre that sounded thick and heavy to his ears, he murmured, "This Hari is being forthright in compliments as of late."

The sorcerer's gaze was heavy lidded, and Sesshomaru became hyperaware of their close proximity and the placement of his claws and legs. His markings were tingling, as if someone blew hot air above each one simultaneously.
The air around them felt warm and suffocating. It suddenly became more excruciating to breathe. His lips parted insignificantly, as he watched the erratic bobbing of the sorcerer's Adam's apple when Hari swallowed.

His green eyes were filled with predatorial hunger.

That was why it had been a surprise the sorcerer tore his gaze away, when it appeared as if it physically pained him to have done so.

When the other Polaroid was yanked from Sesshomaru's possession, Sesshomaru lurched back when it was shoved between their faces. It'd obscured his vision of the sorcerer's features.

"The girl I'd mentioned yesterday," Hari said, in a timorous octave lower. His accent sounded thicker and coarser, dyed by the sounds of traffic underneath as he whipped around so that he was once again facing forward. Hari seemed determined not to draw attention to his little slip. "I said I was going to bring you it. Does she strike any resemblance?"

Glaring daggers at the picture, he wrenched the slip of paper away from his sight. It crinkled loudly in his hand as he scowled at the side of Hari's jaw.

The sorcerer was intensely favoring the cityscape instead of this Sesshomaru.

His eyes perused the image of a paneled wall screen, which moved as if it'd been captured from left to right. Unlike the ukiyo-e from before, this one seemed to be illuminated with better lighting. Looking askance at the subjects it depicted as it crawled on by at a snail's pace, his glower deepened as the female Hari had revealed was indeed not the alpha he'd been expecting. Instead the painter depicted someone with his facial markings and stripes, interacting with him in various domestic scenarios.

He bared his teeth. He said testily, "There is no one, aside from Haha-Ue, who bears my familial markings. Haha-Ue will not Mate with another male, in honor of Chichi-Ue's death. Nor does she have any relatives cloistered from my awareness."

"Wait, you don't know her?" Hari said sharply, glancing back. Color dusted across his prominent cheekbones when he met Sesshomaru's irate gaze. Still, instead of his eyes quickly leaping away like a frightened gazelle, he maintained their eyesight. "Does she have to be a relation to you?"

With climbing acidity, he emphasized, "The only demonesses that would bear our markings is if either Haha-Ue or this Sesshomaru took a Mate and had a chil..."

His grip slackened as a sense of numbness flooded his body.

"Oh!" Hari vocalized Sesshomaru's shock. His eyes widened. Automatically a hand reached up to clap over Sesshomaru's shoulder—as another male would've in compassionate camaraderie—in spite of their awkward positioning. He repeated, "Oh, this is your—congratulations, are in order. She's beautiful."

Sesshomaru's fixation could burn holes through the Polaroid squeezed tightly in his claws. He studied the female's blue crescent and maroon stripes, identical to his own.

With the recent revelation, the likelihood wasn't farfetched to conceive.

"Who commissioned this painting?" he murmured quietly. The artist had purposefully drawn attention that the color and the tilt of her eyes were not of their lands. There was something distinctively Asian in the female's fair features—especially in the scenes that'd painted her subtly
smiling—yet the puffiness underneath her eyelids were exaggerated with two thin sweeps of ink. A tip of his claw traced the curve of her face, outlining the inky dark strokes that represented her hair, the curved ears much like his, and the dabs of color that made up her eyes.

"I'm…assuming you did."

His eyes lifted. If Sesshomaru had commissioned the painting, he would've made certain the painter got that shade of green accurate.

As if sensing Sesshomaru's newfound interest, Hari said unsteadily, "Is there something on my face?"

"If you move, I'll kill you."

Hari's spine straightened so swiftly Sesshomaru was surprised he didn't hear the bones snap into alignment. Before the alpha responded to it as a threat, Sesshomaru was quick to order, "Maintain that position, and nothing will happen. Eyes forward, ahead of you, and continue to navigate us to our destination."

"This is extraordinarily impractical," Hari grumbled, yet he complied with the inuyōkai's whims like an obedient soldier.

Sesshomaru held the Polaroid high enough so that it was nearly level with Hari's dark head. Golden eyes rebounded between the picture and the Head Auror.

"I don't know what you're assuming," he heard Hari say slowly, "but I think you may be barking up the wrong tree."

Sesshomaru ignored him. Furrowing his brows, he frowned at the mismatch of hues. The one in the wall screen seemed to be a lighter shade, and he didn't know if it was the yellowed material of the screen influencing his perception or if it was really that color. He said uncertainly, "The colors appear…marginally bright."

"I think for that one, the exposure was set higher. Hermione probably changed the aperture and camera's settings as fast as she could, when she noticed how dark the exposure was, like the other one I showed you."

His mind drew a vacant response, from the unfamiliar jargon. Then it caught up and pieced together enough recognizable words to form an insinuation. With an annoyed exhale, he lowered the Polaroid from Hari's face. He took a quick scan of their surroundings. "Does it normally take this long to reach your Ministry?"

"The wizarding streets of Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley are located in the heart of Muggle London, the capital of this country and the city where our illustrious Ministry has made their base," he explained listlessly, sounding as if he'd recited this many times to people. It was further proven when Hari, in contrast to the tone before, said, "No, generally the Firebolt is a lot faster. I've been talking to you and multitasking my attention since some time ago, so taking my eyes off of the skies. I think safety is more important than haste. Plus you won't be startled by its speed if we take the slow flight. You can see our landmarks."

"This Hari's concerted efforts have been unnecessary."

"If you say so," Hari returned, although in a dubious tone. "You're not going to kill me if I move my head now?"
Sesshomaru replied with an ambiguous grunt, still feeling jilted from before.

He jerked the Firebolt to a stop, a familiarly red telephone booth being spotted in the foggy roads below them. He quickly steered them behind a giant bridge. The top of his head poked out above the closed overhang as he scanned for any incoming interlopers. "Y'know, I meant what I said. About her being gorgeous. In a manner. Again, your art style is not what us Westerners are used to."

Hari leaned heavily to a side, managing to pry a little of Sesshomaru's restrictive hold away on his waist with one hand and digging underneath the allowed crevice with the other to slide the Polaroid of the ukiyo-e back into his trouser pocket, uncaring that it'd collapsed like a folding screen in the compartment. "It's too bad you lived long ago. I'm sure if Teddy was any older, he would've loved to meet her."

Sesshomaru's mind churned over Hari's odd postulation. He conceded, "Rin is closer to your pup's age."

Hari vocalized a basic sound of acknowledgment. "Your human ward, what does she look like?"

"This Hari's packmate has not unearthed her likeliness?" he demanded. "She is the only female, human child that is above the filthy peasant ningen she shares the same blood with."

"The 'filthy peasant ningen' you're so fond of are going to be surrounding us once I make our descent. So I'd advise keeping quiet about your dislike, especially since there are proud Muggleborns in the Ministry. I don't want to break up any unnecessary conflict."

"Rin bears the same dark hair and eyes as her fellow ningen. She is of short stature, barely reaching this Sesshomaru's knees. Her kosode is comprised of alternating yellow and orange geometric patterns and a green obi. She's of human eight years of age. She enjoys making up nonsensical songs about this Sesshomaru and Jaken. She's a foolish, simple, determined girl whose loyalty and bravery exceeds other children. She lacks any fighting skills, but she has an adequate survival sense. She's intelligent enough to follow—"

"She's a precocious, gifted girl you value beyond belief. Say no more." Yet his expression was understanding. Hari angled his body sideways so that his forearm was up against the daiyōkai's chest—below the jutting spikes, at the lacquered breastplate—gently urging him back. "When I see Hermione, I'll ask her about your ward."

Sesshomaru's eyes narrowed. It was his honor that made him question, "This Hari is willing to do this kindness? When the wager has not been satisfied?"

"Merlin knows if I was in your position. I know this kind of seems like I'm going against the whole point of our wager, but if you have any requests, you should ask. The worst is that I say 'no.' I can't promise everything under the sun, but I'll at least think about it."

It was a concession he was willing to take.

The embarrassment that had overtaken the sorcerer seemed a ghost of a memory now as a commanding professionalism bled back into his tone. Looking around for any sign of humans, when it had been determined no one was in the vicinity, Hari floated them down until the tips of their footwear trailed the sidewalk. Eyeing the kimonoed arm wound tightly around him, he peered back at Sesshomaru over his shoulder. "You can let go now, please."

Sesshomaru ignored his request in favor of asking, "Is the future so absolute this Sesshomaru cannot change its course of fate?"
"…You know what I think about that."

His voice was tight. "Then this Sesshomaru has left Rin behind in a human village."

"Sorry—?" Hari's eyes pinched at the corners. "I'm not exactly following."

"If this Hari has not encountered any mention of Rin in your research nor have it brought to your awareness, it could only mean this Sesshomaru has followed the old miko's conviction to leave Rin and permit her to live among her kind until she becomes of age. Rin will decide if she desires to live in the world of ningen or yōkai." His intonation grew harsher with each word spoken. "If you haven't come across her in any text or paintings, that means she has decided to remain with the village and rejected this Sesshomaru's way of life. Rin died a human's death, and this Sesshomaru is helpless but to quietly witness it."

He'd replaced her role in his pack with this female.

Hari's gaze was contemplative. He'd been listening to Sesshomaru's insecurity with an ambiguous expression. When Sesshomaru was done, Hari said heftily, "She's very important to you."

Sesshomaru's eyelashes flickered.

Hari made a noise of thought, looking aside as he drummed his fingers along a thigh. "Do you want my honest opinion? About someone you obviously care about?"

"It's of no consequence if this Hari speaks with honesty."

Hari alternated the taps between his index finger and middle finger with his other hand on the polished ebony wood. "It doesn't exactly apply to your situation, so I don't know if this'll help you decide. But I don't know how else to put it." He swallowed. "A couple of years ago, I was angry at my godson for almost breaking something I held dear. I think I still have that dent in my pocket watch. Anyway, I left the Tonks property before I scared him or made him cry even more than he was. And I think you're starting to get the idea of how busy my timetable is. Long story short, I didn't see Teddy in years. I only communicated with him through letters and gifts, so that he didn't forget he still had a godfather that cared very much for him."

He looked down at his lap. "In the times that I was back on English soil, however temporarily, I make sure to see how he is doing. Never interceding, not making any contact. Sort of like an invisible guardian, but one that didn't know how to approach him after so long of silence. It didn't help that he sometimes transformed into someone else, so I didn't always know if it was him or some other child….

He made a frustrated noise through his mouth and he raked a gloved hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, this is going nowhere. The point is, you can watch her from afar, like I did for Teddy, if that's what you prefer. It's not horrible. But it doesn't make up for talking to him in person."

Sesshomaru's stare was vacant but for a brief moment. He echoed, "'Transformed?'"

"You saw him changing his eye and hair color to look like mine. And blue. For some reason he's very attached to the color turquoise. Teddy's a metamorphmagus. He inherited it from his mum. He can change any body part at will into anything he wants. He's basically like our version of Polyjuice or a chameleon, without all the hassles." There was a touch of pride and warmth as he recollected the pup's capability, unaware of Sesshomaru's wide-eyed look of understanding.

His gaze slid back to Sesshomaru. "I'm not telling you what to do or what not to do. It's really up to you. It doesn't feel right to prophesize your future. All I can tell you is that being there for a child
when they need you the most, especially from who they consider a parental figure and trust, is an honorable thing you'd want to preserve and keep. I don't know what your feudal mindset is, but to have a child's dependency is not a bad thing from our modern perspective."

"This Hari's official visit had been intimidated by Luna."

In a voice achingly sincere, Hari agreed, "As you saw, I hadn't planned on meeting him face to face. Yet he still treated me alright. It's like it'd never happened. There weren't any awkwardness. If your ward's anything like my godson, she cares very much for you and seeks your approval. Children can be remarkably forgiving, so long as you don't test the limits of that. They seldom want to leave a loved one, guardian or not."

Hari swallowed heavily but he maintained his level eyesight, even though his voice had become gravelly. In an uncharacteristically low octave, his voice reverberated deep from within his chest as he said, "Giving gifts is a bribe. They may like it, but it doesn't actually beat being there for them."

Sesshomaru's tall frame stilled. The hidden magnitude didn't escape his notice. Silvery white fringe shadowed the dog demon's eyes, but he gave a wordless, small nod.

Hari smiled faintly, looking pleased he was able to contribute some form of aid.

Sesshomaru's grip loosened, and Hari took the opportunity to pull away.

Green eyes scanned their surroundings. Peeking down at the ground below them, he meaningfully returned his gaze to Sesshomaru. He jerked his chin sideways, motioning for Sesshomaru to dismount first. Unlike last time, he put a finger up to his lips. A sense of urgency was being conveyed. He gestured to the humans in the far vicinity—since they were under daylight—and he repeated the confusing set of motions until the blank expression on the daiyōkai faded into comprehension.

Despite being the ages that they were, it was like they'd been reduced to playing games of his childhood, when he'd been toying with the servants and tutors in the years he'd been familiarizing himself with the shift into his inuyōkai form, and getting away without punishment for snapping at their ankles with his puppy-sized teeth. He felt his mouth reluctantly curve. It was both equally ridiculous and playful.

By the time they both prowled into the telephone booth, stealthily like hunters making off in the night, the tiny compartment felt tighter with the additional presence of the broom. Familiarized with the process Hari was going to take them through, he shifted his attention, peering through the paneled glasswork in a sense of self-preservation.

Several humans had their heads turned to them, yet of the ones seemingly making direct eye contact, they were as good as blind. A feeling of unease ran down his spine from being under their weight. Witchcraft had befuddled their senses. Their glassy, sightless stares implied tampering of visual depth and perception, so that what they were seeing was something else not completely out of the ordinary.

Mokomoko-sama curled silently around them, sheltering them from the unsettling sight, overwhelming and suffusing the sorcerer's scent with his own.

Hari was warning him not to drink anything or to react violently or to destroy any more wizarding property. He claimed his instincts were telling him something wasn't right. His sensation was still lingering in Sesshomaru's hands and mokomoko-sama when their approach in the Atrium was impeded by a female clerk.
She gave Sesshomaru a cursory onceover—lingering on his face and fine garments—before dismissing him. Her long curly hair was reminiscent of Hari's packmate, but dark as a horse's coat—as dark as her gaze redirected to Sesshomaru's sorcerer, making something in his stomach pitch and roll upon her transferred attention.

"Hello, gorgeous," she greeted boldly, avoiding Sesshomaru's glare. There was a rather large book in her lap, opened and inscribed with foreign characters Sesshomaru could only scarcely understand with the assistance of the translation spell.

The other clerks seated around her peered up from their assignments, saw Hari and Sesshomaru, and they looked back down. Their heads were nearly pressing together as they tittered over something.

"Miss Vane," Hari returned back, stilted yet cordial. His gaze swept the floating stacks of fancily gold-embossed parchments being penned by enchanted quills which were stained with ink at the tips. She and her associates had been folding each parchment into a square paper casing. Ornamental metals were being pressed into melted candlewax, which were dripped onto the back of each, when they had noticed their arrival.

As the folded parchments were cooled out on the security desk, Sesshomaru was able to see the large, official 'M' sigil of the governmental body embossed into the wax.

"Again with the formality," she sighed. She held her hand out, wiggling her fingers. "Like last time, just Romilda's fine."

Hari's wand slid down his holster with a muted click, and Hari flipped his weapon so that the end of it thumped against her palm.

Sesshomaru was staring at Hari incredulously. He'd been ready to demand if Hari's senses had fled him, but the dull glow of the female's staff over Hari's made his rebuke die on his tongue. He stared, riveted, as Hari's wand emitted the same colors of all the spells thrown in their interrupted spar.

Hanyous were rushing in the background, in a hurry to get to their offices or other appointments. Although they kept a wide berth around them, some peeked in their way. Sesshomaru noticed some interested glances thrown in his direction, but they would always drift back to his sorcerer as if pulled by an invisible magnetism.

The female's eyes widened the longer her scanning sorcery rotated through each spell-work. She looked up with a sharp expression. "What could've possibly made you use the Fiendfyre Curse?"

The females behind her instantly stopped their false preoccupation, fixing them with an astonished look.

Hari's cordial smile descended into a cold grimace. He jerked his chin over to Sesshomaru once. "I encountered someone dangerous. Deadly force might have been excessive." When she looked askance at him, his lashes flickered and, after rolling his lower lip in thought, he stepped closer.

When his elbows were placed on the desk and he dropped his jaw on his hands, the female's nostrils flared. Her hand went to her nape, tickling the dark ringlets there.

His voice lowered conspiratorially, so that only she was in hearing range, he shared, "While I appreciate your commitment to your job, you're only supposed to scan my wand for its specifications. Not the spells I used in the last twenty-four hours. Unless I'm unaware an interrogation is now required when a wizard registers his wand, who else has gotten this special treatment?"
She reared back, as if slapped. A hurt look entered her eyes but it fled not before long. "Eric relied too much on the old wand weigher. I don't care if it was destroyed. Or if I have to honor his retirement. He didn't do a good job." She lifted her chin, as if in defiance. "Imagine all the Death Eaters we could've caught if we scanned their wands before they even step foot into the Ministry."

"Even so, you need the Minister's approval before you decide on doing this." He gestured to their wands. "You could get into trouble. It's not just me. People get fidgety if you don't have the official sanction to back it up."

"No one said anything when I did it to them," she hissed. "You're acting as if I'd scanned you with a Probitry Probe!"

"You might as well have scanned me with it, when you announced what I'd casted!" Realizing his voice had gone sharp, he buried his face in his hand. After a deep breath, he lifted his head and coaxed, "I'm not saying that you don't make a valid point. I don't know why people didn't say anything to you, but they were most likely being polite. You need to talk to your superior before you decide to add on to the protocols. You could get fired. Or demoted, if caught."

"Are you...you're saying this as if you're concerned about me." Her brows drew together. She gave him a troubled look. "Will I really get into trouble?"

"Who is your superior?"

"You're not going to tell him, are you?"

"Not if you're telling him yourself," Hari returned, pulling his elbows away and straightening up. "He needs to put it forward to the Minister, to get it approved. I would tell him as soon as possible. So that when people start complaining, your actions will be protected. At this juncture, any wanker could sue you or the Ministry for slander and character defamation."

"They would do that?" she demanded, stricken.

"You know some who would." His gaze returned to the sealed parchments on the desk. "Am I going to receive one of those anytime soon, Miss Vane?"

She looked over and her hand moved to close over her mouth when she noticed the place he'd been staring at was her work station, where copies of Witch Weekly and the Daily Prophet strewn over the parchment pieces showed evidence of being recently read. A colorful spread was opened to be about cosmetics and how to receive someone's courtship. The newsprint, written by Rita Skeeter, was opened to reveal drawn picture accompaniments seemingly about him and Hari underneath the small print, him in the background as Hari was drawn to be giving a rousing speech.

Moving so as to block them from view, she stood in Hari's line of sight. Blindly filching a random message from the desk, she presented a sealed parchment to Hari. Her cheeks were dusted with a barely noticeable flush. "Here. Since you're here, you might as well get yours early. It saves our owls from making one more flight."

Hari accepted the message, sliding it into his pocket without another glance.

The female looked disappointed. "You're not going to read it?"

"I'll read it when I have time. But thank you." He gave another jerk of his chin to his wand. "You're done? We both know that's my Holly wand."

With an annoyed exhalation of breath, she cut the spell off and handed it back to its wizard. Before
Hari could tug it away from her grasp, she held onto the wand and demanded, "Are you going with anyone?"

The females behind her instantly scooted closer, as if providing her moral support under Hari's bemused silence. She said, now hesitantly, "It says to RSVP if you're coming with a guest. So we were wondering if you were going with anyone. Since, y'know." She darted a look at Hari's left hand.

"No, I don't know," Hari replied, reholstering his wand. He began his retreat. "But I understand what you're saying. I'll let you know if I make up my mind, Miss Vane. But I wouldn't place my hopes high. Why don't you consider one of my Aurors? Macmillan? Last I heard you can 'trace his family back nine generations of witches and warlocks.' I'm sure he'd love to hear your family's history." Seeing her doubting look, he added dryly, "And he thinks you're lovely."

She brightened a little. "Really?"

Hari nodded, but to Sesshomaru's bewilderment he noticed the hand the female hadn't been studying was relocated to his back, two fingers coiled together. "Then again, he's shy. Any bloke would be if a pretty witch was talking to them. So, uh, don't ask him directly to his face. Be discreet."

"He was a Hufflepuff," she agreed, although her dark eyes scanned askance at the Auror's face. Her painted lips frowned. "If you ever need a date…"

"I'll keep you in mind," Hari assured, smiling. "Remember, talk to your superior." He nodded to Sesshomaru and he inclined his head to the golden lifts.

When Sesshomaru strode over, forcibly pitching the females' presences from his mind, he inquired Hari if the female he'd been conversing with came from a family of fruit farmers. Hari's hand had been poised over the small of Sesshomaru's back—as if to push him forward—but he remembered himself and clenched his raised hand into a fist before it made contact. His face broke out into a broad grin, in response to Sesshomaru's question.

His eyes heavily lidded, Sesshomaru could still feel the ghost of the heat that had been over the tail of his spine as they walked away.

They did not see Romilda's confused look into her lap the instant they crossed the Ministry's invisible variant of a security spell several paces away from the security desk. The witch digested the immediate readings sent over to the guest log, which warmed her thighs. Peering at the newest entry of the yellowed pages that were charmed to be never-ending, she stared uncomprehendingly at the relationship status it recorded between Lord H. J. Potter Black Peverell and what seemed like Asian characters written in the little tiles.

With much deliberateness, she lifted her eyes to the magazine and newspaper on her desk.

"Harry!"

The lift adjourned with a jerky, groaning halt, making the occupants inside stumble from the unexpected stop. The gated structure parted, folding in on itself. The floor was full of hanyous, rushing to fulfill their errands.

His name was called again. Righting himself, Hari glowered down at a flashing, circular disk—among the many numbered on a panel—but he obligingly stepped out.

When they exited the lift, Hari nearly speared the back of his head on one of the spikes of
Sesshomaru's pauldron when he whirled around to the call of his packmate, who was hurrying toward them with a tall and thin blonde in formal dress walking closely behind.

Hari's packmate's wild brown hair was tied up in a messy tail that wound around itself. She was waving at them, her wand in hand, its tip fizzling from the remnant of casted magic.

It was by Sesshomaru's prerogative that the sorcerer remained unharmed. He neatly sidestepped around the sorcerer, allowing Hari to march forward to grasp his packmate by her arm when she came close. She was wearing garments similar to Hari—when he'd been underdressed yesternight—only looser around the waistline. In her arm was a tall stack of papers, marked and color-coded, and what appeared to be shrunken printed books.

Green eyes flickered to the female behind her, with what resembled recognition and wariness in his gaze, before Hari's packmate tugged her alpha's attention back.

Lifting the papers to hide her mouth, she bowed her head to whisper, as if she were in a rush, "Relax, someone of the old Advance Guard intercepted it. Be courteous. You know him." She clutched the stack closer to her chest as she withdrew. "I'm sorry. I have to take my leave. Greengrass will take you to meet your appointment. I'll meet you two again later in the Department of Mysteries."

The fair headed female walked into their line of sight, distracting them as Hari's packmate plodded away. The light from the floating orbs of light above casted a cold glow over her angular cheekbones and the wing of her long straight hair. She considered Sesshomaru with collected, blue-grey eyes before she gave a brief nod to him. She performed a brisker curtsey—indicating her higher station.

"Lord Sesshomaru," Hari said softly, his eyes never leaving her form, "this is Heiress Greengrass Daphne. She's head assistant to the Head of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures, to the Being division. Madame, this is Lord Sesshomaru, the ambassador under Witness Protection and mine."

"I've heard." Her expression didn't change from the severity of his tone. She straightened up and looked to the floating timepiece ahead. A frown broke out over her fair features. "You're not late, but you've taken your time getting here." She levelled Hari with a disapproving look. "A true lord of Black would not sully his image like that, especially in front of a creatu—"

She peered at Sesshomaru—taking in his narrowed, slitted gaze—and she tactfully amended her slip to: "—an honorary visitor. I know your timetable caters to his, but that wouldn't excuse from any tardiness." She turned on her heels, not deigning them with another glance.

"I'm sorry, some people are like that," he heard Hari whisper beneath his breath—for Sesshomaru's ears only—before he followed her, marching briskly so as to catch up with her. He engaged the female in a conversation. His gloved hands moved in a flurry.

With a disparaging sneer, Sesshomaru trailed after the younger daiyōkai, listening in on their dialogue.

Greengrass tilted her head to the side. "Originally my boss was supposed to coordinate the interview, as a favor for the Wizengamot. But he's in France, purchasing a gift for Astoria. The Minister arranged for someone else instead."

A look of relief flitted across Hari's features. He asked earnestly, "When is he going to be coming back? I haven't heard from him since…well….."
"It's not intended as a long trip. So I expect sometime relatively soon." She turned a corner, evading the gaggle of hanyous rambling toward them. When they passed, without looking back, she asked, "Does your visit to the Department of Mysteries have to do with your companion's federal investigation?"

"That's confidential information."

Greengrass made a little noise through closed lips. Blue-gray pinpricks traveled over to him fleetingly. "Calm. It's not because your ambassador is of obvious creature inheritance. I only care because my sister is one of the Unspeakables drafted into your small research team."

They fell quiet when they heard more people coming. First it was the faint echoes of footwear pattering on the polished travertine, then the chatter of male and female voices in the distance. They passed by the mass with only moderate commotion.

Hari tucked his hands behind him. He granted, "It may have to do with it."

"Astoria's going to tell me anyhow."

"I don't think so. Their involvement was only approved after they agreed to take a vow of confidentiality to any parties uninvolved. That includes family members."

Her lips twisted. She led them to a tall double set of doors. On the adjacent wall, there was a metallic placard etched with text that read: ROOM NO. 4. "This is where I take my leave. Mr Elphias Doge is expecting you." She curtseyed to Hari, then to Sesshomaru. She said hollowly, "It was a pleasure having your acquaintance, Lord Sesshomaru, Head Auror."

The female left them with as little fanfare as she'd been hastily introduced. A pair of molten gold trailed after her figure until she disappeared from sight.

When Sesshomaru returned his attention to his sorcerer, he inhaled sharply from the look on Hari's face.

He commanded, "What is distressing this Hari?"

Hari lifted his occluded gaze from the double doors to stare down the inuyōkai. There was a vulnerability Sesshomaru rarely had the privilege to see. After a considerable silence had passed, the sorcerer must've found what he'd been looking for because Hari conceded, "The man that we're going to meet…." His hand went to his temple, massaging circles. "He's not bad but he did something that I can still recollect. To this day. It's not a particularly fond memory."

His scowl deepened and he tore his gaze away from Sesshomaru. "Never mind how I feel. Just, just follow my lead. He's a special advisor to the Wizengamot. He used to be a Ministry of Magic jurist and an old colleague of my headmaster. Don't let his appearance or age fool you. He's influential."

"What is this 'old Advance Guard' this Hari's packmate spoke of?"

"Do you remember what I said about the Order of the Phoenix?"

Sesshomaru inclined his head.

"Before the formation of it, there was another one. When my parents were alive. And Voldemort. Doge was a part of both."

"And for what reason do you hold animosity against your kinsman?" he pressed, with a sharpness in
his baritone.

His gloved fists clenched. Stepping forward, the sorcerer turned his gaze away and he pounded on
the door. In a quiet murmur, like his nails were being pried out of him Hari hissed, "He fled the
Burrow. He left *schoolchildren* and innocent parties to fend for—!" He cut himself off from
divulging any more information when he heard someone approaching them.

There were heavy footsteps from the other side of the door. Then a wheezy voice—like the brittle
tremor of a brown, autumn leaf—demanded, "If you're the company I'm expecting, what did I tell
Harry Potter in the summer of 1995? When we first met?"

His hands were trembling with imperceptible energy. Crossing his arms—hiding his hands from sight
—in a slightly embittered tone, Hari answered, "You were escorting me from my aunt's house, with
the rest. You were all talking about how I looked exactly like my dad. Except, you said I had my
mum's eyes."

It took a while but eventually there was a click and the heavy dark doors parted. Beyond the crack,
an elderly hanyou behind peered warmly at Hari, then nervously upon Sesshomaru's aloof
assessment. His face was as weathered as tree bark. He was bundled up under layers of thick dark
fabrics, up to his jowls. On top of his head was a black, pointed hat that had seen better days. "Sorry
about the dreadful first introductions. It's become a habit. You can't trust blindly nowadays."

Opening the doors wider, he twitched his fingers. "Come, come in. Don't just stand there. I've
reserved this room only for a few."

He led them into the large, open space, illuminated by natural lighting and the giant mantle off to the
side, which threw shadows and warm luminosity over the chamber. The walls were aligned with
what seemed like metal chests—the color of a tortoise's shell—grouped and stacked into columns of
four. Each was neatly labeled with small pieces of paper, the dried ink heavy-handed at some spots
—particularly at the end of letters and at the end of curved characters. They took their seats around a
circular wooden table, where various sweets and ceramic cups were laid out.

The hanyou gestured to the delicacies. "Help yourself."

"Maybe some other time," Hari said politely, boring holes into the wizard's forehead. "But thank
you."

The hanyou made a disappointed noise through closed lips, but other than that he made no comment.
He turned his attention over to Sesshomaru, submissively lowering his eyes.

There was a sickly sweet smell about him that clung to his skin like a disease, one that followed the
aged *ningen* Sesshomaru would encounter in human villages. The wizard had hunched his shoulders,
his neck practically disappearing into the cowl-like shape of his robes, like a turtle retreating into its
shell.

Sesshomaru bit his tongue. This was the weakling that brokered Hari's animosity? A coward had
interrupted his spar? He was already well on his way to his deathbed.

Sesshomaru declined the invitation to pour himself tea, remembering what Hari had warned him. The
capsule hidden in the underfolds of his kimono, held up from the pressure of his armor against his
chest, was burning a brand through his skin.

Another winded noise emerged midway from the hanyou's windpipe, before he choked and coughed
to clear his throat. He waved away Hari's concern, his peripheral vision spotting how the wizard had
automatically gotten back on his feet. "Sorry, just a fit. It happens when you get old, Harry. It's something to look forward to, later, when you get to be about my age."

"You're remarkably hardy for your age, Mr Doge." His gaze swept the environment, lingering on the openings up high. "Is this room soundproofed?"

"Remarkably so. The young blighter I borrowed it from used it for all sorts of things you wouldn't believe." He poured himself a drink and piled what seemed like small, clear cubes powdered with sugar onto his plate. He took several swallows of his tea, until his airways were cleared. "It's difficult for people to enter without permission. It's a bastardized version of the Fidelius Charm, if you can believe it."

Hari sounded surprised as he said, "But we managed to find this room alright."

"Didn't Miss Greengrass escort you here?"

"Ah." Hari rubbed his eyes. "I see."

Noticing Sesshomaru's flummoxed expression—which had replaced his frank dislike of the hoary foreigner—in spite of the dried saliva in his mouth, wringing his hands the hanyōkai went to explain, "The Fidelius Charm has two functions. It keeps information confidential, so long as your Secret Keeper maintains their silence. The other function is to make a location Unplottable and invisible except to a select few. Those people are able to bring others into the secret. Didn't you have it in your country?"

"Confidential information, Mr Doge," Hari interjected, smiling tautly.

"The Asian Ministries, right? The accent's rather distinguishing." His hooded gaze dropped down to his gnarled fingers laced together. "You can only come from one of those. You're not from magical Britain."

"Is this an official inquiry?" Hari asked, straightening in his seat. He tucked his hands in his lap, wrapping his fingers together.

Sesshomaru's focus dropped down to the fingers that seemed to be wound tightly around themselves, before his attention shifted back to the elderly man across from them.

"What does the Wizengamot wish to know?" Hari requested. "If they've involved the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures—?"

"We're not here for an interrogation," the hanyōkai snapped, his breathy voice climbing. He took a long sip of his tea to collect himself. Sighing into the cup, he set it back down on the plate with a small clink. "I was notified by your mate, Weasley. I only did it as a favor for an old frie—"

"'Mate.'" Sesshomaru echoed sharply. His tone was as lethal as the edge of Bakusaiga. "This Hari has a Mate?"

Duel sets of lightly-colored eyes blinked and they rotated to fix the inuyōkai with disbelieving stares. The hanyōkai was the first one to say gingerly, albeit nervously, "F-forgive my slip of the tongue. It's difficult for me to remember countries have different sets of phrases, never mind our different species."

"It means 'a friend' or 'a close colleague' to us in the UK," Hari affirmed, fixing Sesshomaru with an uncomfortable expression. His mouth curled into an unsteady grin. "Um, it's nowhere close to what a magical creature's definition of a Mate is, Lord Sesshomaru."
"About that," the hanyou mentioned, turning to Hari, "you should get into contact with Mr Weasley. He's heard about the...incident between you and his sister." He nodded to Sesshomaru. "Several days ago?"

Hari breathed three words, bringing his hand to cover his eyes and forehead. His elbow dropped down on the table. He repeated, "Ron's heard about it?"

"You should talk to him." He swallowed another swig of the tea. "You're lucky I'm not Mr Malfoy. He's a nice young man, if not a little prejudiced. I daresay, if I wasn't substituting for him, this meeting would've acted out a little different. I'm not sure if you're of creature inheritance or a full-blown magical creature, but if it were the latter...I think I may have saved your investigation a fair amount of grief."

"Greengrass told me he was in France. He could've just Apparated or Portkeyed back. How did you intercept him?"

"I was an Auror, Harry, before I was a politician." His jowls lifted into a smile. "We're not so much prevention as we are capture and tracking and intelligence-gathering. I haven't lost my skills."

His last comment seemed to have struck a nerve, for Hari had lowered his arm and was contemplating the older wizard with narrowed eyes. His hand clenched into a fist. He said slowly, "You were in contact with Malfoy? He actually let you take his place?"

Those pair of dark pools widened. In a slightly irritated tone, he said dryly, "I'm allowed to have friends, Mr Potter. Lucius has known several of the Wizengamot members for many years. Before you were even born, he'd attended Hogwarts with some of us, or at least Abraxas did. It stands to reason why I would be in close quarters with the young man."

Leaning back in his chair, the old Auror said unsteadily, "Draco is a result of society and circumstances. Much like you and I were, Harry. Our upbringings and beliefs define us." His gray eyes—which glowed a dull intensity, like the seas of Sesshomaru's homeland on a misty day—lowered to the rim of his cup. "Some men are like Draco. They need a little pick-me-up once in a while. But men like you..."

"You're rather eccentric, Harry Potter." His scrutiny slid to Sesshomaru, who gazed back at him with a cooled expression. "Question, what was it that you've said or done to our media vultures? Their buttons are pushed. I could read their animosity simmering in the prints."

"They dared to approach this Sesshomaru," Sesshomaru growled, his claws curling into fists upon the memory. He recounted stiffly to him, "One fool attempted to blind me."

The aged sorcerer's jaw dropped. His hat slid sideways down his head—which gleamed under the fixture like a polished egg—until it was hastily uprighted before it fell.

Hari buried his face again in his hands. His voice muffled against his gloves, he moaned, "That has partly to do for it. Another part has to do with the provisional media censorship."

"You've censored the media," he repeated, brows climbing. He looked back and forth between the two males in his vicinity. "All for him? That's—that's not on. Even for a federal investigation. The Minister approved of this?"

"You dare question your Minister and this Hari when you were not seen fit to be informed of this Sesshomaru's circumstances? You'd do best to curb your tongue." The dog demon couldn't stem the snarl that accompanied his words. The wizard was of an untrustworthy party.
"Don't—don't take that into offense. I think what Lord Sesshomaru means to say, is this really what the Wizengamot wants?" His green eyes peeked between the gaps of his fingers, aimed at the dog demon inquisitively, as if he couldn't believe the amount of open hostility directed at a stranger.

Seeing Doge's frown from his peripheral vision, he explained, "This may not be an interrogation, but you'll have to report back something. So that you won't seem suspicious. You can't just say it was like prying information out of a cold, dead fish."

The puffy undersides of the old wizard's eyes crinkled. "I'll have to tell them something," he agreed, "but it doesn't have to be all-together new feed. How's your bill for magical orphanages doing? You've proposed a lot of corrective reform bills to my department, but that's the most controversial submission we've got from you. I'm assuming the ICW is going to be considering making it into a resolution sometime soon, after the international hurdles are cleared."

Hari was silent for a moment. His eyes were lowered to his lap. Dragging a foot behind an ankle, he at last mumbled, "You've changed, Mr Doge."

The hanyou blinked, wrinkles breaking out over his forehead as his brows creased. "Sorry, come again? You'll have to speak up. My hearing's not as good as it used to be."

"Why are you here?" He held up a hand, when Doge went to speak. "No, not as a favor. I already know that. Why are you here, instead of someone else? What incentive could you possibly have for volunteering to act as the middleman between us and the Wizengamot?"

He caught Sesshomaru's gaze, held it, and then looked back at Doge. "It's like what Lord Sesshomaru said. The Minister hasn't even told you everything."

"Kingsley's an old friend. I don't mind that he doesn't trust me with the information. It just means this case is of upmost importance." He leaned back in his seat, clasping his fingers underneath his mouth. It was that daunting, meditative pose—with a warrior's aura of formality and reflection—that Sesshomaru could see how he had been an Auror in his younger years. Doge was fixing Hari with a shrewd look underneath hooded lids.

Tapping the top of his lips with a knuckle, he mumbled, "You're both acting like I killed your Hippogriff. Does this animosity of yours have to do with what happened in the August of 1997, Harry?"

Hari inhaled sharply, crossing his arms and planting both of his elbows on the table. "Then you do know." His face was set in a stony expression. "I wasn't going to say anything but…I'm not saying I'm not still sore. But you know what you did was inexcusable?"

Doge's lashes flickered. He looked down at his hands. He said softly, "I know you're disappointed…." "You Disapparated in the face of danger, in Fleur's and Bill's wedding—"

"Exactly," Doge cried, slamming his hands down on the table. His chair scraped the floor as he rose to his feet. "It was an ambush! I was scared! When you get to my age, you're more aware how long you have left to live. I'm not young like you are. I can't make rash decisions and go running off like a hero—!"

"War is not about heroism," Hari roared, getting up as if yanked by a puppeteer's string. "Are you daft? It's about standing together, as a united front, against a mad, homicidal maniac! You weren't a civilian. You were an Auror! You were an Advance Guard! You were supposed to go against Voldemort's forces and not run the instant Death Eaters—!"
"I am a civilian!" His face was blotchy with red. He'd flinched when Voldemort's name was brought up. "Don't think that I don't think about it every moment I go to sleep. I'm not like Dumbledore. I don't believe his Machiavellian ideals. I'm not powerful. I'm not a knight of justice. I'd retired from my Auror days. That time has long passed."

He came around to table, approaching Hari with an outstretched hand. He said desperately, sounding wretched, "You're young. Survival matters in war. My safety and survival are the most important. You have the strength I didn't have."

Hari's response was sharp: "I was seventeen-years old. I only knew the spells I was taught. You know more than I did. And you forsake it to save your own hide? You were Dumbledore's friend!"

"But you took down He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, like you were destined to! I may have left, but you were all capable wizards! You didn't need a burden like me!" He lumbered forward on heavy feet, like a foal just learning how to walk.

"You had a wand!" Hari reared back from the gnarled hands as if they would stain him if they made contact, retreating until he bumped into Sesshomaru, who'd risen to his feet like the rest.

Claws settled on Hari's tense shoulder—features caught mid-snarl, his green eyes snapped to the additional weight—staying the wizard, squeezing once unconsciously, as if in comradery reassurance, before dropping. He moved past the wizard, so that Hari was at his back and he was shielding him from sight.

His golden eyes glimmered and had narrowed into slits. He towered over Doge, staring down at him as if he were scum. "How dare you think to lay a hand on this Hari, with your dishonorable reputation? You are not absolved from the cowardice and abandonment displayed in the tide of battle."

He did not see how Hari was staring at the point of his broad shoulders with wide eyes, a hand brought to his mouth.

"You're the one who claimed experience and the means of assistance," Sesshomaru accused. "Know your place!"

"Y-you are a magical creature. It's not a creature inheritance. Oh my god." Doge swallowed harshly, shrinking back. His focus was aimed at Sesshomaru's three swords and lethal claws that looked like it could crush someone's windpipe and tear out someone's heart with barely any effort. His chest was heaving. "I-I'm sorry. W-what I did was inexcusable. Nothing can forgive it. But—but…." "Mr Doge, eyes on me," Sesshomaru heard Hari command, behind his back. "Breathe. Your life's not in any danger."

Doge wetted his lips, gripping the table's edge as if to support his weight. He did as he was told, taking deep, shuddery breaths. His knuckles were bleached white. His skin was stretched tight over bones and spidery veins. "I-I want to redeem myself."

His watery eyes sought Hari's. "You were Dumbledore's favorite student. That's why I'm here."

Doge stumbled forward—his jaw trembled when Sesshomaru bared his fangs like an animal and inched to his right, as if he could entirely obstruct Hari from his view—and his hands shook like he couldn't control them. His airy, high-pitched voice like the thinness of paper, he quavered, "He thought that he could see the good inside all the people, however apparently insignificant or wretched, and he saw the greatest potential of the greater good in you, Harry. To help you now is to
honor his memory."

He lurched to the side, until he could see Hari's face. His knees nearly buckled from being in the proximity of the magical creature's muted growl of warning—he was treading on dangerous grounds—and the intense look the wizard was levelling him with over the creature's shoulder. "Harry. You've grown so much since I last saw you. You've coped with the aftermaths extraordinarily well. You've done so much…I keep hearing stories about you. Instead of discussing Umbridge, your name keeps being mentioned. And this new case! Y-you remind me of a younger Dumbledore. I wanted to see how you were doing."

The yōki behind Sesshomaru's back burgeoned from that, as if the younger daiyōkai was distraught and incensed. Sesshomaru's sneer descended into a snarl, taking those words as an insult to his alpha. He threatened, "Spineless cur like you has no right to make demands."

Doge's eyes were tight, when they looked back at Sesshomaru, who was reacting to the invasion of his territorial space with unpressed animosity. Doge was gripping his wrist, no doubt where his holster was located.

Sesshomaru took a menacing step, advancing to the wizard who had taken a step back. The tips of his claws were already tingling from his poison, hungry to taste hanyou flesh, when he felt resistance against his movements.

His head swiveled back to trail the line of his sleeve, where a gloved hand was gripping the hem tightly. His eyes snapped to meet the sorcerer's, who was not looking at him and instead fixated on the hanyou ahead.

"Those harsh words are unnecessary, Sesshomaru," Hari murmured, his voice resonating a little huskier and lower. He swallowed thickly, closing his eyes momentarily so as to compose himself. "But thank you. Doge, step down. Both of you, relax.

"I'm just going to say this. And hope we get over this, after I get it out of my system. So don't be offended. Doge, you were a bloody berk. And a gormless, daft arsehole." Opening his eyes, he redirected a milder, less harsh look over to Doge. "You mentioned Umbridge? I got the letter. The Wizengamot is already discussing her sentence?"

"I'm afraid so, Mr Potter." His mouth shriveled. "We know she's guilty. There's no denying that. But she has a good spokesperson on her behalf. There's a possibility she might get a lighter sentence."

"She actually managed to con a barrister?" He relinquished Sesshomaru's sleeve, watching it glide from his fingers. "For her case?"

"There may not be any love lost between you two, but she does have friends. How do you think the cow got her positions in the Ministry? She's not entirely hopeless."

Doge closed his eyes and summoned a chair to collapse into. He dropped his forehead against his hands, his hat slipping down his head. The fire nearby illuminated his skin, bathing what remained of his white fuzz with an orange glow. "There is a way that she pays for all her crimes. Mr Potter, what do you think of testifying?"

Hari scrutinized him. "I am not an end-all and be-all solution."

"Not just you. Influential as you are, your word alone will not secure a life-long sentence in Azkaban. You'd be one of the few willing to testify against her—all the people she's wronged—in order to get the conviction a lot of people want." He lifted his head from his hands. "But I'm not
saying it wouldn't contribute several nails in her coffin."

"People already know what I think about her. My distaste isn't that much of a secret. The barrister can call unfair bias and dishonesty."

"True," Doge said reluctantly, "but unlike everyone else she has victimized, you're of a much higher position. I've heard stories of what she'd done to you."

His eyes quickly darted to Hari's gloved hands, and then leapt back to his face. "This is my legal counsel, don't go overboard. Corroborate for what can be proven. You have proof."

Hari's voice had gone flat. "That aside, if I agree to it the trial will basically be a media circus of he-said versus she-said. I only have my memories to support further statements. And a few reliable witnesses, of which people could cry conspiracy."

He strode from Sesshomaru's side, brushing against him when he passed, and approached the sitting wizard. "Is she still going on about race supremacy?"

"That vile cheek of hers is going to get her killed one day," Doge grumbled, yet his tone had gone hopeful. He was looking at Hari with warmness. "Is that a yes?"

"If you think it'd help." He was still doubtful. "I don't mind being a character witness, on the prosecution side, if they count Pensives as compelling evide—"

A shrill sound broke into the room, shattering their conversation and making everyone jump. Sesshomaru instantly reacted, unsheathing a fang from a scabbard and swinging the blade up at the source of the deafening shrieks.

Torn pieces of red paper rained down overhead, like bloody feathers or snowfall.

"A Howler?" Doge exclaimed, astonished, his hands outstretched as if to catch the scraps.

Before Hari could respond, a bright-white, translucent apparition of a tiny dog bounded through the walls and excitedly leaped in semi-arches around the sorcerer on its four paws. Heads turned to the Head Auror and the Patronus. Then the dog flew straight up to Hari's face. It barked in a panicked, accented brogue of a male.

"Harry! One of Britain's magical monuments is being broken into. The White Tomb. Death Eaters and trolls! Mountains of them!"

"Dumbledore's body!" Doge breathed, his face turning purple. His gnarled hands dug into the armrests like talons. "They dare desecrate his final resting place—!"

The room erupted with a loud crack. The dog had disappeared, and so had Hari.

"Sesshomaru-sama!" A little girl of eight years of age croaked, slumping on the saddled two-headed dragon like snow melting under the spring sun. The world spun around her dizzyingly like a barrel roll made of tall darkened fields and trees and the reddening skies. The air had gotten chiller, with the threat of nighttime approaching Japanese lands. The tall canopies overhead shadowed them from sight.

She rubbed her throat, swallowing her own saliva to relieve the burning sensation. Her throat had gotten sore from shouting her lord's name from daybreak to sunset. Wiping the sweat from her skin, she looked up pitifully at her travelling companion—a stout, green-skinned water imp—and she
rasped, "Jaken-sama, I don't think today's going to be any different."

"Sesshomaru-sama, where are you?" he cried, scanning the woodlands atop of one of the dragon's heads and ignoring her. He gripped his staff tighter. His other claws shielded his bulbous, slitted yellow eyes from the sun. "Sesshomaru-sama!"

One of the dragon heads lowered to nose the girl by her neck, blowing cold air through his nostrils over her exposed nape, making her sigh with pleasure at the icy sensation running across her skin. She whispered a thank-you to A-Un, feeling a ball of fuzziness in her chest as the dragon nuzzled the side of her cheek. The dark, silky mane of the dragon tickled her nose.

The hem of her kimono lifted as she flapped it like she was trying to fling off an insect from the fabrics. She fanned herself with the breeze her movement produced.

"Rin!" Jaken scolded, sliding down the dragon's long neck. He bonked her on the head gently with his two-headed staff—which bore the heads of an old noblewoman and nobleman that both sported the Heian era's aesthetics—as a warning. "A lady does not lift her clothes like a mere animal!"

"I'm sorry, Jaken-sama," she sniffed, winding her hand through her side ponytail in search of a lump. The kimono slipped from her fingers. She breathed a sigh of relief when she didn't find anything, where the strike had landed. "Rin knows it's disgraceful. But I'm itchy. And sweaty."

"Yes, human girls are like that." He stuck his beak into the air, as if it could divine the direction of the winds. "I suppose we can find a hot spring or a lake when the moon breaks."

"Oh, thank you, Jaken-sama!" She cheered, wrapping her arms around the kappa.

"No, no, no! Release me, Rin!" His claws and bare feet flailed. His voice had gone high-pitched. "You're getting your sweat on me! Stop smothering me with affection!"

Rin patted his shoulder once and let go, smiling as Jaken scrambled backwards up to his perch atop the dragon's head. He was staring at her warily, like a toad ready to spring at a moment's notice.

She said hoarsely, "Are we going to be heading to a human village?" A thought seemed to occur to her and she perked up with newfound energy. "The village where Inuyasha and Kagome-sama are staying?"

"No, no, we will not be staying where the mangy cur is staying!" Jaken snapped, shaking his head vehemently. He moaned, "What would Sesshomaru-sama say if he saw us mingling with his half breed brother and his ningen? He'd kill us!"

"Sesshomaru-sama has been gone for some time, Jaken-sama," Rin said unsurely, her voice having gone small. Her eyes fell to her lap, where her hands were gripping the reins of the dragons' muzzles in a white-knuckled grip. "He hasn't left us this long before. Do you think he had something to do and forgot to tell us?"

"He would not abandon us without notice." Yet his voice sounded equally doubtful. He clearly remembered all the times the inuyōkai left them behind to fulfill his own agendas.

Jaken looked around their surroundings, his tiny body being bounced up and down from each heavy step A-Un took. Claw marks were left behind the wet soil, leaving a trail in the abandoned path they'd taken. "I would be vigilant, Rin, since Sesshomaru-sama isn't here to protect us. I've come across rumors that humans were recently abducted from a nearby village. It's safer to stay on the outskirts of the wilderness. My lord will kill me if anything happened to you—!"
A-Un lurched to a halt, the head Jaken had been sitting on rearing its head sideways when the heads sniffed something coppery beneath their lacquered muzzles.

The unforeseen action flung the kappa through the air, until gravity pulled Jaken down back to the earth. He hit the ground on his back.

"Jaken-sama!" Rin cried, sliding off the saddle, stumbling once when her feet made contact with the muddy grounds. She staggered over, invisible pins and needles piercing her feet from the long bout of inactivity they had suffered from the extended ride around the Western Lands. She collapsed on her knees by him. She peered concernedly into his unfocused eyes. "Are you okay?"

All she received was a groan. When she wiped the gunk off of his face with the hem of her sleeve, Jaken seemed to have regained his wits. He leapt to his feet—his back screaming in throbbing agony—and he pointed the head of his staff at the two-headed dragon. His face darkening a deeper shade of green, he blustered, "You dumb beast! Reflect on what you could've done! You could've killed me!"

"Umm, Jaken-sama?"

He tugged the cord of the Shinto priest's hat, which had been drooping down the side of his head, until it uprighted itself. He stomped closer, screeching, "What would your lord say if he came back to find his retainer dead—!"

A hand snatched the back of his collar, digging the brown-dyed cotton against his neck as she pulled him back until their cheeks were mashed together. Rin was pointing somewhere near the left side of them. "Do you see that? That reddish, blackish thing! Is that a foot?"

His beak had been poised to rebuke her for her insolence, but then his eyes caught sight of what she was talking about. Before he could confirm his findings, Rin was already shuffling over to it. "Rin!" he squawked, stabbing the end of his staff into the earth and heaving himself up with it. "Don't go near it! Riiiin!"

A-Un watched as the kappa chased after her, both disappearing deeper into the forest. Lowering their heads, they shook their mane to rid themselves of the mud the human girl's feet had kicked up at them.

The right head nudged the left with the top of his skull, nodding in the direction they'd left. His ears swiveled wildly.

The left one pondered for a moment—the metal clasps of their leather reins attached to their muzzles clinking together as the head shifted—before shaking his head.

By the time Jaken had caught up, he and Rin nearly fell over each other when he bumped into her back. "Foolish girl," he scolded, grabbing her by the crook of her arm and tramping over to see her face. "Didn't you listen to what I'd said? It's dangerous for a human girl to be running off alone—!"

"Rin thinks she's found one of the humans you said were 'abducted,'" she observed, tilting her head and pointing at her feet. "I would be careful, Master Jaken. There are glass shards around him."

He'd been ready to berate her for more of her flights of fancy, when he saw what she'd been pointing to. His yellow, misty orbs boggled over the amount of dried blood spilled over the body, crusting the aged face of the unconscious human before them. Thin lines of scratches littered the wizened face, like angry red scabs that had been stitched together with invisible thread. The elderly human was leant back against the trunk of a tree, his limbs limp on the ground. For some odd reason, strips of
white cloth were wrapped around the human, over his shoulders and arms and face and legs.

True to her words, there were shattered pieces of glass embedded into the tall grass, mirroring the canopies overhead. He gaped down at the balding senior. "What is a human doing here?"

"Is he breathing?" Rin had crouched down on her toes, her hand outstretched.

"Rin! Don't touch that!"

Her hand stilled inches away from the male's kimono. Staring intensely at the man's chest, her expression was troubled when she looked down his legs. One of them was bent at an odd angle. She crooked her head, listening to his laborious breaths. "His chest is still moving. I think he's still alive. But barely."

"No, Rin," Jaken said sharply, noticing the soft look that had flitted across her. "Whatever you're thinking, it's not worth it."

"But A-Un could carry him on his back!" she insisted, glancing up at Jaken with earnest brown eyes. "We could bring him back to his home. Look, someone's even gone through the trouble of bandaging his wounds!"

"Yes, that means he's being taken care of," Jaken retorted, his beak downturned. He muttered to himself, "But why is he left outside to weather the elements? It makes no sense."

He cut himself off when the bushes nearby begun to rustle. He leapt to cover Rin. His eyes wide, he brandished his two-headed staff at the bushes. "Rin, hide behind me!" he ordered. "You, out where I can see you! You shall taste the fearsome wrath of Nintōjō if you do anything funny!"

A shiny black nose poked out of the leaves. A sharp and narrow snout emerged from the foliage, followed by a face and a furry black body. Its ears were alert and twitching. It was growling at them with territorial aggression, its hefty teeth bared in a snarl. White scars defined its body, some obvious, some thin and almost indistinguishable.

All the tension left Jaken's body when he saw that its eyes were closed, either naturally handicapped or maimed. Nonetheless he kept Nintōjō pointed at the large canine. "Rin," he whispered urgently, his eyes never leaving the threat stalking around them predatorily. "Be quiet. Follow my movement. When I give the word, we run to A-Un."

Rin nodded wordlessly, unable to vocalize the terror which had gripped her throat. She cringed back against him, trying to make herself smaller and seem less of a threat to the approaching danger. Memories of putrid-smelling jaws and sharp teeth clamping down on her skin filtered through her mind. She whimpered, burying her face against the soft cotton fabric of Jaken's formal robes.

The canine sniffed the air and froze. The growling swiftly ceased, as if it'd never happened, leaving eerie silence, with only the chirping of crickets and nightlife filling the air.

Wiggling its nose—as if to confirm what it'd smelled—the canine's muscles relaxed its act of intimidation. It sank back on its haunches, its large head tilted. Opening its mouth, it issued a series of short, high-pitched barks.

"J-Jaken-sama?" The hands on the brown robes twisted. Rin opened her eyes, peeking over his shoulder. "Why is it doing that?"

The barking changed into what could only be described as chanting—repetitive noises that sounded softer than the throaty noises from before.
Jaken stared at the creature, gobsmacked. "Rin, what did you do?"

"What?" She got up from her crouch, still holding onto his clothes. Yet a smidgeon of confidence had returned to her. Her eyes were trained on the creature. "This Rin didn't do anything."

Upon the sound of her voice, the creature's tail thumped against the ground lazily. It vocalized what sounded like a strung-out, whistling yelp that undulated in its throat, which tugged at Rin's heartstrings. It repeated the sound, like the forlorn cry of someone calling for a friend. It emboldened her to step away from Jaken and approach the large beast cautiously.

"Rin!" Jaken hissed. "What are you doing? Get away from it!"

"There, Rin's not going to hurt you," she whispered, edging closer, her hand gingerly outstretched. "Rin! Get back this instant—!

The canine's jaws snapped in the imp's direction, nearly catching Jaken by the skin.

Jaken lurched back, raising his staff. Fire spewed out of Nintōjō's duel mouths. Despite its hefty size and spindly legs, like a black blur the four-legged creature darted the onslaught.

Rin retracted her hand, but before she could run away, she felt a warm solid weight against her legs. The large canine had wrapped itself around her, nuzzling the side of its head and snout against her face and licking the bottom of her chin until, despite herself, she laughed.

Its bushy tail coiled around her thighs. Dropping its head, its cold nose—which was so dark it looked like it had dipped its nose into a spilled inkstone—nudged at her limp hand.

She automatically reached up to scratch the canine behind its ears. A delighted gasp escaped from her when the creature—instead of reacting aggressively—gave what sounded like a rumbly yip and one of its back legs thumped the ground in unison with its tail. She took a quick peek at his nether regions. "Aww," she cooed, heat rising to her cheeks, as she gave an embarrassed smile. She patted his head, her fears melting away. "You're just like a big, black dog."

"That is not a dog!" Jaken fretted, yet he'd lowered his staff. The flames from before died down to flickering embers around them, extinguished by the breeze that'd swayed the branches of the trees above.

Rin bit her lower lip, her thumbs stroking the creature's soft black fur. Her voice shook as she asked, "A wolf?"

Her anxiety was doused when Jaken ranted, "Wolves are not black!" The large beast whined—it sounded like a whirring whine to her—as if in agreement.

"Then what is he?" Rin tickled him underneath the jaw, watching fascinatedly as his tail whacked the ground even harder, as if he couldn't help it. His head was slanted, allowing her more access to his underbelly and throat.

"Leave it, Rin. We must find Sesshomaru-sama. No time to dilly-dally with this creature."

"But look at him, Jaken-sama!" She hugged him by the neck, making sure not to squeeze too tightly. "His eyes are closed. Do you think he's blind?"

"Do you think he's doing it by choice? Of course he's crippled!" Jaken hobbled over to her, studying the creature with a shrewd expression. Coming to a thought, he shared aloud, "I think this creature's
the reason the human hasn't been brought back to a village."

"Aww, have you been scaring away the big, bad humans from this place?"

Jaken gaped up at her, unable to believe the saccharine crooning that escaped her already young, high voice. Her language skills had also disintegrated, like what he'd seen happen to women when they encounter something they thought was adorable. Horror climbed high into his voice as he said, "No, you are not getting attached to that mutt."

"Can we keep him?" She turned her eyes to him, big and wide. She hugged the canine even tighter. "Look at how friendly he is. He can't even see! Sesshomaru-sama would not mind."

"No, Rin." He said firmly, stamping the end of his staff into the dirt as emphasis. "That mutt's survived this long alone. He does not need us to baby him. Especially a human girl."

He jabbed the head of the staff at the unconscious human laid out by the tree roots. "He could be the only thing stopping this human from being eaten by yōkai or wildlife. Do you want this human to die?"

"No, but," she sounded hesitant, her arms loosening, "can't we bring them both with us?"

"Rin, I said no. And that's final!" He stabbed his staff several times in the direction which they'd come from. "Because of you, it's already night time. Didn't you want to have a bath, before you got distracted? Let go of the creature, foolish girl. You cannot tame a wild beast."

Rin looked reluctant to let go. She chewed her lower lip, giving both the canine and Jaken a heartbroken expression. The canine whined, as if sensing her distress, and nosed her by her cheek. Jaken's expression softened marginally. He crossed his arms, tucking his claws into his sleeves. "C'mon, Rin. We have to find Sesshomaru-sama. Protecting this crippled beast and man will only burden us and slow us down. Without Sesshomaru-sama to protect us, I have to act in his stead. And our safety is our upmost priority."

Rin sniffled, nodding timidly. She squeezed once, earning a choked yip from the creature. Jaken appeared like a huge weight had been taken off his shoulders when she obediently took his hand and left the enormous creature's side. Closing his claws around her fleshy human one, he gently led her away from the pair, back to where A-Un was waiting for them.

Before they entirely vanished from sight, Rin looked back over her shoulder, watching the large black canine get back on his feet and prowl over to the unconscious human, pressing his snout against a battered leg.

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to be a short chapter of much plot progression, but...some parts took a life of their own. But surprise! Jaken and Rin! The next chapter is titled "Judgment Call." The beginnings of what I like to call "shit hitting the fan." (／ᐠדגש／)*/*:・゜ By the way, I hope you all are alright with my emphasis on Sesshomaru's unconventional—some would say arrogant—speech pattern. I'm aware he starts using "watashi" to refer to himself later on (kind of like our "I") in the anime, but writing him as an arse that
eccentrically refers to himself in third-person has grown on me. It's become…endearing!
Much love to Pompom4u, pennameisblank, neveryears, Jubbles, Genuka, Sara, gurlygenes, and Mirabitur (and to Merlenyn on the Art Masterpost)! And thank you to everyone for all your support, your comments, bookmarks, kudos, and subscriptions! It is your attention and interest in this story that has made "Green and Gold" as popular as it is and as fast as it had! For that, I am immensely grateful and honored. The passion you guys have for this story is so absurd, I feel guilty not updating whenever my Inbox gets such incredible, intelligent feedback or notifications. I'm currently averaging about 40+ Word Document pages per chapter, as reimbursement for all your patience and sincerity. Hrmgh.

What is Green and Gold's exact timeline?
Simple answer: just to clarify, it's been several years after the Second Wizarding War. The HP cast is at the age to start families of their own. Long answer: because I feel like I'm going to get the same thematic questions eventually, I'll address some of them here. Events that happened before the epilogue should be kept canon, unless I've warned you that it isn't. Everything that happens in and after the epilogue though are fair game and up for my reinterpretation. The general modern world I'm writing here takes place in the early 2000s. Harry was born in 1980. Meaning when he was 11-years old, Kagome would've been between four-to-six years of age. By my prerogative, Harry was between 20 to 22 years old when a 15-year old Kagome jumped into the well.

HP-wise, it's about five-to-seven years after Voldemort fell (1998). There is a reason why I chose this age range for him. BUT! It's up to the readers how old they imagine the HP cast, if they really want. I don't like to think I'm detracting from their reading enjoyment by stating this has to be their exact ages. In an earlier A/N, I've addressed that I'd shuffled around the order of events in the HP epilogue. This is where the canon divergence comes in (but I'll try to address most of the canon and drop them in as Easter eggs as the story progresses). I've advanced Hermione's pregnancy, Harry's ascension to Head Auror position, etc. because one, I wanted to write these matured characters in these scenarios and two, I kinda wanted to give people something different and unconventional than the stories of Harry still in school or immediately post-BoH where he gets betrayed. It was one of the reasons I'd felt like taking up the pen again.

IY-wise, it's after the Final Act when the well allows an 18-year old Kagome back to the past, but before IY and Kagome marry. The IY cast is still relatively young and recent. Mostly I just think it'll be amusing to write scenes of a mature adult!HP interacting with a younger audience. And for us to have an uninformed third-party—especially someone who is a war hero and currently involved in law enforcement, who should be capable of identifying right from wrong—react accordingly to certain character decisions and aspects of the franchise…insofar as the ones that still make me frown, therefore deterring me from willingly immersing myself into the IY fandom fully and reading fanfiction that star certain characters as the central protagonists. Yeah. I don't care much for canonically immature or obnoxious characters. Rarely am I convinced otherwise. By the by, we're assumedly going by what is written in the Inuyasha Profiles book, stating that a ~500-year old Sesshomaru is roughly 19, and a ~250-year old Inuyasha is somewhat the human physical equivalent of 15...or 17. (I know. It blew my mind too.)
By the time Harry arrived outside of the castle, near the Black Lake, it was mayhem and chaos all around him. The ground trembled. The mountain air—smelling of pine and the stench of troll—echoed with eerie groans and desperate cries. Jets of light were being shot across the shores, illuminating the dusky skies like small bursts of fireworks and tapering into nothing whenever they missed their target.

His Aurors were crouched behind craggy rocks and whatever that could be used for camouflage—even a troll cadaver—occasionally shooting up to lob powerful spells at the enemies before taking cover once more. Their coats and capes were of a dark or muted palette, camouflaging their bodies semi-effectively with the encroaching night.

Three trolls, towering into the skies like stone obelisks with their grey skins, aimed to trample the wizards underneath or to smash them with their colossal clubs which seemed to be carved out of old tree trunks. One female, two male trolls. Harry could see that one troll's foot—when it was raised—dripped blood and gore. Around their thick necks was what appeared to be a leather strip, which was collared underneath their rolling chin fat. Both of their feet and hands were massive and spiked.

Killing Curses were being volleyed from within the Forbidden Forest. Huddled behind the tree trunks were hooded figures swathed in ratty tunics and robes—which once made for handsome attires. The stitching gleamed a silver or a shimmering black from the glow of spells or whenever it grasped light. The leafy canopy overhead shadowed their human bodies, making them difficult targets to hit.

Instead of the iconic skull-like masks Harry had been expecting covering the upper half of the fugitives' faces, they clung to their bronze-cast masks with the snake-like eye slits. Ceremonial in their elaborateness, the masks were more suited for a masquerade than for inspiring intimidation, blood chilling as they were for what they once represented.

Harry could identify which spells had caught them off-guard by the scorched dings and gaping holes blasted into the metal, exposing jaws or cheeks. What remained of the masks was chipped and fractured with black spiderwebs cracking lines along the smooth burnish.

His rapid reconnaissance done, taking advantage of the distractions Harry quickly threw himself into a desensitized mindset. The Holly wand jumped into his palm. Obscuring himself with the Deathly Hallow, he disappeared underneath his father's cloak. Harry set his jaw and gripped the edges of the cloak tightly so that hopefully no limbs were exposed.

Taking stock of his surroundings, he dashed across the tract of land, scanning for a specific color of hair.

Catching the bright red hair behind a clump of trees—stripped of their leaves—and undergrowth, Harry grabbed Ron's wrist before the tall wizard whirled around. "It's Harry," he hissed quickly. "Your Jack Terrier Patronus collected me. The situation?"

Ron's eyes widened, before he jerked his chin down. Harry released his wrist, and Ron slid down so that he was squatting. His red hair was in disarray, as if he'd just rolled out of bed. And he looked exhausted. Particles of sand clung to his hair, his wand, and his Ministry-issued boots. He also had a fresh gash on his cheek, which seemed to be knitting together with the aid of a healing spell.
Although the wizard's back was turned, because of the long ponytail Harry could see the man Ron had taken refuge with was Williamson—one of their senior veterans.

Harry had remembered the scarlet-robed man from the night he'd confirmed Voldemort's return. The wizard had made an impression in the Department of Mysteries, and even when Harry had been a greenhorn just being assigned his cubicle. Harry had made certain that Williamson—along with senior veterans Proudfoot and Savage—were kept in the team when he'd ascended as Head Auror and reshuffled the ranks.

Williamson, too, looked down when he heard Harry's voice. But he'd merely grunted in acknowledgement. Unlike Ron—who was giving Harry his sole attention—Williamson refocused on the magical creatures. His outstretched hand slashed through the air in multiple sideways Vs.

Crackling blue streams were pitched at the trolls, and like bombs the light exploded upon contact, tearing chunks of flesh and coarse hide off. The pained bellows made the atmosphere reverberate like thunder.

"I'd spotted Parvati, Dean, and Finnigan, when I was running forth. Who else is here?" Harry demanded, hunkering down. He dug into his trouser pocket for the Marauder's Map.

Debris and wooden slivers rained down upon their heads from a curse a Death Eater had shot at them, ripping through the lumber. Both Harry and Ron ducked their heads. Williamson had pressed himself flat against the tree, before returning fire.

Ron said, "Once in a while, we have someone conjure the *Repello Inimicum* shield. To make sure they can't call for enemy reinforcements. We're not using the three-charm combo that'd been summoned over Hogwarts' boundaries. I reckoned that would've been too much."

"I reckon disintegrating our enemies would be a bit much anyway. This is a containment job."

"Jordan's with Savage and Macmillan's with Proudfoot up ahead, Sir," Williamson reported, his voice coming in a little ragged. "We've got the Death Eaters on the defensive. They're resisting arrest. We'd set up the anti-Apparition wards where they are. The only chance of them escaping is if they dodge all of our spells and made a break for the shores. Where you'd gotten in."

Ron motioned for Harry to stop. "Here, Harry." He thrust his own copy at Harry. He said tiredly, "Hermione and I've looked and debriefed everyone. Fourteen Death Eater scum and five trolls. Well, three trolls now. Parvati's a dead shot. She and Seamus took down two of them."

Raising his head, Ron yelled, "How close are you to bringing down another one, Williamson?"

There was a grunt. "Very close!"

Dropping back down, Ron continued in a hiss, "Each pair's assigned one person to mark a Death Eater. Hermione's with a rookie. They're making sure no one's getting into Hogwarts, and that no dunderhead wants to be the next Harry Potter and sneak out of the castle. She should be safe."

Yet his voice sounded thick with concern and an emotion Harry couldn't place.

"She has the other map. She'll know if anyone's coming. She's also behind Hogwarts' magical defenses," Harry assured him. He analyzed the map, memorizing his Aurors' tactical positions and reading the scrolls above each pair of inked feet.

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He counted underneath his breath, "Five—six—seven—eight Death Eaters." His eyes snapped up. "I don't recognize some of these names. They're not…Voldemort's sympathizers at the wrong place at the wrong time?"
"N-no, the rest were killed. They refused to surrender themselves. A blighter got himself crushed by a troll's foot. It was horrible." Although his mouth had curled down for some unexplainable notion, Ron ticked off his fingers. "Two or three were accidentally AK-ed by their own comrades. I think it was Proudfoot's team that got the other one. Macmillan's fault, most certainly. The Death Eater just blew up. Guts everywhere! And I think Parvati's team hit one with a Reductor or a Blasting Curse."

A quiet expletive rushed out of Harry's mouth. He muttered, "If this continues, we won't be able to bring any in for interrogation or a trial. We can't simply Accio their wands. Not after they'd pillaged our standard Auror gear or by contraband." Studying the map once more, he demanded, "There was no way to have a few Aurors flank them from behind?"

Ron gave the air ahead of him—where he thought Harry was—an incredulous look. His face was bleached bone white, making his freckles stand out like brown dots. He said, "Spiders, Harry."

He grunted, "I think my Aurors would know how to handle a few Acromantulas—"

"—Giant man-eating spiders that secrete venom and lay up to a hundred eggs that hatch in six to eight weeks!" His voice had gone high-pitched. "A colony of them, Harry! They're still there!"

The earth suddenly shuddered underneath them.

"Two Death Eaters Stupefied!" Williamson announced. "One troll dead or unconscious!"

"No one said you had to go with them," Harry said to Ron. In the back of his mind he tallied the remaining numbers. "But, alright, I see your point. A stealthy operation won't work, where they are."

"Not if we're coming from deep within the forest," Ron agreed, his skin returning to a touch healthier color. He was shakily drumming his fingers above his knee. "They're not that stupid. Instead of fighting us here, they'd retreated to the forest outskirts. And they're taking advantage of the bodies lying out here. I think they can tell if someone's sneaking up on them if they hear shouting or see spurts of light behind them. It'd waste too much of our time and manpower to remain undetected."

"Your Patronus said the White Tomb was being broken into. This is the shores of the Black Lake." It was for this reason Harry had Apparated to this location, hoping that the loud crack wouldn't tip off the Death Eaters. He'd been fortunate the din drowned him out, and that the wards' areas of effect didn't extend to where he'd appeared. Harry persisted, "They have the terrain advantage. And two opportunities to escape."

"They won't take the one where they'd have to run all the way north of Hogwarts to reach Hogsmeade," Ron instantly refuted. "It's too risky. It's too much of an open field for them and no one's stupid enough to run deeper into the Forbidden Forest. They'd be easy pickings for the centaurs. We managed to stave off the Death Eaters gathered around Dumbledore's tomb and advance forward. A Dark Resurrection Ritual, can you believe that! Over Dumbledore's bones! It's like they're asking for more people to demand their heads!"

"Another Death Eater taken down!" Williamson hollered.

The enemy combatants were down to five men.

As if sensing the shifting of the tide, it was at this point that the intensity of the fight picked up. Dark and Cruciatius Curses peppered the air. This time Stupefying Charms were also tossed in as well as several creative ones originally thought to be too Light or unfit for combat against Potter's men.

Harry was silent for a moment. Then he said heftily, "Did you get a chance to see if anything was taken or desecrated?"
"Outside of the seal they'd cracked open? I don't reckon anyone of us got the chance to see if anything was damaged," Ron replied, frowning pensively at the map in Harry's hands. His fingers abruptly stilled. His eyes widened. "Harry, you don't think—?"

"I don't want to think about it," Harry interrupted, flicking a quick glance over his shoulder at the older wizard. His eyes returned to his strategist. In a lowered tone, simultaneously as Ron was speaking he hissed, "Actually, it's not just our national monument I'm concerned about. Do you think Voldemort would be the type to share his secrets with his minions? Your honest opinion."

"What could be more important than Death Eater scum desecrating Dumbledore's remains—?" Ron's mouth shut with an audible clack of teeth. He rubbed his eyes with a fist. His brows knitted in consternation, he at last murmured, "No, he's too paranoid. He may have been absolutely bonkers, but he wouldn't have been the sort to boast about that sort of information. It would open him up to anyone who'd want to usurp him. So it's not related?"

"I don't know." Harry got back on his feet. His gaze was set in the direction of the White Tomb. "But I'll have to see."

"It's in an open field!" His hand shot forward. Ron tugged him down, nearly yanking the silky material from Harry's frame. "I know everyone believes Killing Curses bounce off you, but you'll be an open target."

Harry shot his mate an annoyed glance, but it melted from the genuine alarm on the wizard's face. Breathing deeply, he lowered the Invisibility Cloak down his head and said, "Williamson."

The wizard looked back. His brown hair was plastered to his skin with sweat. "Sir?"

"How certain are you that three Death Eaters were Stunned?"

"The color of the light is unmistakable." His voice was grim. "I saw Savage and Jordan team up on them. And I think the last one was hit by Macmillan."

"Where?"

Williamson faltered, bringing his wand down to his side and scanning the forest up ahead. Pressed up close against the tree, he'd craned his neck. "From my vantage point, the furthest three on my left, nearing Hogwarts. It would be...north...west of the forest edge...in the direction of the Whomping Willow!"

"That's another reason why they won't make a run in that direction," Ron said flatly. He looked up at Harry's face and he nearly toppled over. "Blimey, you're not taking the fucking piss. You got Hermione's look on you."

"Ron, I need your expertise again. Williamson, I want your attention back on the matter at hand. But feel free to listen in and offer your opinion." Harry spread the charmed map down on the ground. He pointed to three stationary pairs of footprints. "If he's right, it's these renegades that are unconscious. It's convenient. It's now our priority to make sure they're not mysteriously killed off."

"Are you mental?" Ron demanded. "Have you seen the spells being fired at us? That's asking to be killed! We have to wait until the area's cleared and hope a troll doesn't eat them before we get to them."

"They don't know I'm here," Harry said evenly. "At least, I don't think so. They'd have to use binoculars to track my footsteps, and you know they won't touch anything Muggle. You didn't hear the Apparition Crack, did you?"
Ron had been ready to drill him for answers about the binoculars but, posed with the question, he shook his head. "No, it was too loud already. I didn't even know you'd arrived. But what you're suggesting is risking—!"

"I can sprint there with my Invisibility Cloak. Ideally I'd make it there without being detected." He leveled his childhood mate with a withering look. "If anything goes wrong, I want you and Williamson to have my back. But mostly you, Ron. I'd prefer my senior veterans to be focused on the remaining trolls."

Reaching over, he moved his finger to the capital lettering that spelled out where they were. He traced a zigzagging route from their destination and halfway up to the Forbidden Forest. "I'm going to be running from here to there, so my movements are a bit more unpredictable, before charging forward."

His finger swiped directly up to the southwestern outskirt. "They'll hear me approaching, so I'll need a distraction. You and Williamson will have to make a lot of commotion. I don't care what you do, but I need it to be loud. Then I can guard these three and possibly, stealthily, take out one or two. Three, if I'm being ambitious. I'm relying on you all to incapacitate the rest. That's option one."

"Option two." Harry retraced the tactical proposal on the map. "Same execution, but with added complexity. I'll be going in wand a-blazing, with Gryffindor recklessness, to get their attention. You'll like this. Chess pieces like taking Kings, right? Once I rip off the cloak, the surprise of my appearance will trigger panic and they're going to focus solely on me. They're five cornered Death Eaters. I can give you all a narrow window to take out the rest."

"We can overwhelm them in a pincer attack," Ron breathed, his eyes gleaming. All thoughts of protest faded away. "Either way you'll be our 'vulnerable' Queen, Harry. It's instinct. They'll be so focused on you, they'll forget all about us. They'll be thrown into a panic, seeing the bloody Harry Potter appearing like the Grim and reducing their numbers." His hands curled into fists. "Three minutes, give or take. No silent spells, not unless you want to take them by surprise. That's how long you'll grab their attention, before they realize that you're our diversion."

"Is three minutes enough?"

Ron's tongue swept over dry lips. "It'll have to do." He clapped Harry on the shoulder, squeezing tightly. "Godspeed, Harry. Don't get yourself killed. Hogwarts doesn't need another great man buried on our school grounds."

Harry nodded grimly. He peered up over his shoulder at Williamson. "Well? Your thoughts?"

Williamson was silent, as if struggling to weigh the consequences of airing a thought. He ran his fingers through his hair agitatedly. "Permission to kill?"

Ron's head snapped up. His expression was equally tight yet hopeful.

"We're engaging in hostile firing," Williamson defended. "They're armed and dangerous. A risk. Our objective is to remove the threat. They're a threat that requires lethal force."

Harry merely stared down the tall man. "Keep causalities to a minimum. Maim. Incapacitate. Cripple. Anyone who's purposefully increased the wizard death toll reports to me and the Minister for damage control. If they deliberately kill, they deal with the consequences and another psych eval. Is that understood?"

"That wasn't a 'no,'" Ron said softly.
"You are not cleared," Harry said curtly, his contempt cutting like a razor, "by me or the Minister. You may use spells with the potential to kill. I can excuse accidents. But the instant I hear an Unforgivable from any one of you, you're suspended from the field and sacked to a desk job for the rest of your career."

The senior veteran jerked his head. He whirled around sharply. Shooting at the magical creature's knees, Williamson replied, "I stand behind your decision."

Angry red lines oozed rivulets of blood down the rubbery grey skin, making the female troll's flesh appear like a poorly butchered piece of meat.

Harry growled, "Let's wrap this up." Green eyes slid to meet blue. He stared at Ron a pause too long, but he had to ask. "Ron?"

"It's bold. But it'll work." Although he looked sour that exterminating Death Eaters weren't a part of their plan, Ron had already dug out his charmed Galleon. He was rapidly squeezing it at periodic intervals, using the heating and the cooling of the metal to communicate in Muggle Morse code. "I'm alerting Parvati, of our change in plans. And Lee. You may call Macmillan. The git listens to you."

"I'll call Savage," Harry disagreed, squeezing the same rhythmic pattern for his. His head disappearing back under the cloak, he said hurriedly, "Then Proudfoot. Our senior veterans can run it by them a lot faster than if they did it. Ron, killing is not our objective."

Harry snapped his fingers once, twice, grabbing Ron's attention. When the wizard looked over, Harry stated, "Add on to that I want my senior veterans focused on bringing down the trolls. Round them up. Knock them unconscious. I don't care. Make sure they're no longer a liability. But killing everyone indiscriminately is not our objective." Springing to his feet, he commanded, "Williamson, status on the trolls."

"Proudfoot and I are placing the female troll under heavy fire. His team has her attention. She's not going to be able to join the last troll and double team us." Williamson felt an increase of temperature right behind him. Warm exhalations were heard by his ear. Swallowing against the ball of nerves, the Auror continued, "Parvati and Savage seem to be having better luck, Sir. It won't be long now for them."

"Five minutes. Then I'm making a break ahead. Get their attention off of me."

Williamson jerked his head. "Yes, Sir."

"You're doing well, Williamson." Harry squeezed his shoulder. "You and Ron, I'm impressed. All of you. You took the initiative and kept up the attack and reduced their numbers, before I'd even arrived. We finish this, and I'll mention your exemplary performance in my report."

His hand left the wizard. There were small indents on the ground leading away from them, where the Head Auror's feet had sunken into the soft silt.

To their right, Parvati's head twisted in their direction. Her mouth moved. Ducking down, she waved Seamus to take over for her. She went to debrief her team. It was several minutes later that their collective firing resumed.

It was then Savage's steady stream of fire that jerked and pulled away. After a while, theirs resumed, and then it was Proudfoot's turn.

Each one of their spells gradually became more ostentatious and grandiose, loud and colorful. Sometimes intricate. Vicious. Spells one wouldn't normally see or use. Like duelists showing off the
best of their Defense against the Dark Arts knowledge in front of a jury. Nonverbal spells were traded for showmanship and attention.

"We're assembling at Dumbledore's Tomb," Harry ordered. Underneath the cloak, his eyes were set ahead, envisioning the clear path he was to take. His knuckles were white underneath his gloves, clenched around the familiar grooves worn into the wand. "Make sure no one gets away."

"We've got your back," Ron said determinedly, his tall and lanky frame unfolding into an upright position. Purple bags were underneath his eyes. He was rubbing his thumb against his wand, rigorously scraping off the fine grains of sand that clung to it. "It might not be high up in the air, but you weren't a Seeker for nothing. Fly like the wind, Harry. But remember, constant vigilance!"

A cross between a quiet scoff and a laugh escaped from Harry's mouth, before he swiftly silenced himself. "My eyes are wide open!"

In the time he had left, Harry casted several Sticking Charms to the bottom of the cloak, making sure that his legs wouldn't be exposed by the drag of gust. He squeezed the Galleon several times more, before pocketing it.

Gripping the creature hide securely with one hand, Harry alerted, "I'm going...now!"

Ron's wand slashed skyward. Sparks of light shot up skywards behind him, exploding like fireworks.

Harry launched forward, sprinting across the expanse. Sand and pebbles were kicked up by the balls of his feet, crunching underneath his weight.

Although the unease from separating from what he considered safety in numbers settled like a heavy weight in his chest, he heard Ron and Williamson yell, hoot, and holler obscenities at the trolls and Death Eaters, joining the spirited cacophony that was raised by his team of Aurors.

Dean swirled his wand arm up high, whipping up a miniature sandstorm.

Bringing his arm above his eyes and squinting, Harry zipped to the right before skidding to a halt and bolting into another direction. He avoided pitfalls or conjured obstacles. Whenever he saw a spell zooming in his direction, he'd swerve or throw himself behind the nearest obstruction. Harry would feel skittish, like someone was watching him from the shadows. The memorable sensation of his skin crawling or heavy foreboding settling in his gut had saved his life many times.

He was closing in when an icy feeling of dread suddenly alighted goosebumps down his arms.

Harry abruptly hurtled himself out of the way. Green flashed before his eyes.

A crater was blasted where Harry had been moments before. Terror temporarily seized his thoughts before his mouth thinned into a pale line, and he used that close encounter as motivation to hasten his pace.

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Confundus!"

"Bombarda!"

"Confringo!"
"Crucio!"

"Mimble wimble!"

Hearing the rush of wind zooming in from his side, Harry's head whipped around. Small, sharp pebbles swarmed toward Harry like projectile-guided missiles, which he avoided by nearly flattening himself against the ground.

Stumbling back upright, he forced himself not to look back to see the spell's target, trusting that his Aurors are fully capable of counteracting the Oppugno Jinx. More and more Dark Curses came one after another.


Then there were Blasting and Cutting Curses, and flashier Jinxes and Hexes. With shouts reverberating in his ears on both sides, he could hear the tremor beginning to set into the Death Eaters' cries and he could spot the few unstable trajectories.

Sooner than he'd expected, the sprint across the shores was almost over. His sides weren't nearly in stitches, trying to breathe, but the punishing effort his lungs had endured across the expanse had been excessive. His calves were on fire. Careering himself over bodies prone on the ground, his vision was set on the unconscious or dead troll ahead. Its head was coated with dark red, browning from the stretch in time, and covered with lacerations. Someone had targeted the eyes, stabbing deep into the corneas.

Harry tore past the clashing, colorful jets. Up close, he could see the slow, laborious rise and fall of the creature's chest, which posed a problem in itself. Using the fallen troll as a meat shield, he quickly took cover behind the giant figure, right where its head was.

He'd gagged when the malodorous, rancid stink hit the back of his throat like a tidal wave. He swallowed down the instinctive bile, craning his neck to gauge the risk.

Eleven meters stood between him and the renegades. Corpses—both troll and human—lined the grounds, misshapen beyond recognition. Two wizards were partially hidden behind trees; the side of their silhouettes was exposed to the Aurors' vision. They were flanking one Death Eater squatting in the tall grass.

Harry's eyes narrowed. They were behaving like guardsmen. Burning the memory of the crouched renegade into his mind, he surveyed the remaining Dark wizards.

One was a bit further down from the three, also taking advantage of her surroundings as shelter. It was a young woman, no older than Ginevra. Asian. Her mouth was set into a grimace, fear gripping her and draining her skin white.

His heart clenched. On the heels of that was a dark, larger surge of guilt that never completely went away. Swallowing his emotion, he forced his mind to work. The implication of the witch's distance away from the rest suggested that her presence wouldn't be necessary for encouraging cooperation once any survivors were brought in for interrogation.

Taking a deep breath though the mouth, he scanned for the last one, unable to find him until the foliage shifted, as if like a mirage, and then dissipated. His gaze stilled upon spotting a familiar face exactly where the map had recorded the three names was.

Underneath the haggard-looking wizard's fancy robes was a nondescript choice of outerwear,
suitable for cross-country and changing weather conditions, and black greasepaint smeared in the area around his eyes. Unlike his comrades, his face was bare and gaunt, showing signs of starvation. Memories flooded Harry's thoughts as he recognized a red armband stitched around the Snatcher's right bicep. The name "Decio" was the most known moniker for the Snatchers' second in command. A former mercenary with multiple identities—so much so that no one really knew his real name—that had evaded his taskforce for far too long.

Harry was elated. It meant all three maps documented the Snatcher's real name.

He was keeping a vigilant eye over three prone bodies. It seemed like they'd been dragged over for this sole purpose, judging by the drag marks and the grime coating them. They were thrown over each other in a pile, limbs askew.

The former Chief Snatcher was uncharacteristically on the defensive and his twisted expression showed his displeasure of his assignment. But unlike his colleagues, this opened him up to act as watch. From far away, Harry could see the Snatcher's head twist this way and that, like a hawk guarding his nest, shouting orders to the frightened Death Eaters.

There were disturbances in the surrounding air, as if a heat haze had accumulated in a sizeable disk around the area of the four individuals. The recognition of that protective enchantment was like a cold splash of water to Harry's face. The Auror's eyes slide away to take in the Snatcher's companions.

They were all essentially in a ramshackle picket line. Ron was right; they were too smart. The six prone bodies strewn around the surviving five like shields showed evidence of that. To overcome their individual inclination toward self-preservation and to keep up the assault without breaking position, the traitors fought close enough for morale—but far enough that his Aurors couldn't take them out in one blow—taking turns to fire in volleys.

Harry's fingers were white underneath the leather as he considered his choices. The easiest method to get their attention was to leap out where everyone could see him and indiscriminately shoot spell after spell, without giving them time to think. But that strategy was that of his old Gryffindor self, of the inexperienced, frightened boy who he didn't have the reputation and reinforcements he had now.

The earth trembled once more beneath his feet, and a mighty roar resounded behind him. Like a second thunderclap the last male troll had toppled over. Harry heard what sounded like Dean and Lee cheering. Proudfoot was yelling, "One more!"

Bolstered by his mentor's declaration, Macmillan's bellow was ringing in Harry's ears like an annoying bee, arrogantly proclaiming that the battle was already won. All the Death Eaters had to do to earn their mercy was their unconditional surrender.

Harry inwardly cringed. Proudfoot did have a soft spot for the once-Hufflepuff. Although his mind was focused on dire circumstances, the crazy recollection of Ron's sour expression when Macmillan was chosen among the Head Auror's newly minted ranks by merit—and not nepotism—pierced Harry's head. Yet even the inevitable clash of differences did nothing to stifle the short burst of pride Harry felt.

His smugness died as soon as it came. His mind was racing. The three unconscious Death Eaters, he had to secure. The work was already done for him. Again he sought out the two individuals. He chewed on his lower lip, thinking it over. With this new development, there were many ways to approach this. He could risk the immediate plan on this newfangled gambit he had and hope for the best, or he could follow the blueprints of what he'd set out to accomplish.
Assessing the distance between the Chief Snatcher and the crouched combatant, he took a deep, steadying breath. An intake of confidence. And of trust. In himself and in his Aurors. Then with an exhale, he charged.

His eyes flickered up to see the female troll's status. Vengeful. Confused. Tiring out. Clumsy. But far away and preoccupied. His hands were shaking and his footsteps boomed in his ears as he closed in on the Snatcher and his cache. Adrenaline was giving him the confidence he desired and dulling his fears even as his heart was pounding like a jackhammer.

It must have been Ron that had alerted Harry's Aurors of his advancement, for the racket that Harry's veterans and senior veterans raised exploded into Fred's and George's worthy brand of pandemonium. It effectively diverted the Death Eaters' focus away from the footsteps approaching them. Even Decio was distracted, his gaze on the Aurors, trying to pinpoint who posed the biggest threat.

With Macmillan's vitriol echoing in his mind, by the time he'd crossed the short distance successfully relief flooded him so quickly Harry felt a little lightheaded from it. His whole world was condensed on that one wizard.

There was tension in the mercenary's shoulders, and his dark eyes were flitting around rapidly as if sensing something was wrong. He'd gotten on one knee, his wand fizzling at the tip.

Before the wizard's Shield Charm could be erected, Harry tore the Invisibility Cloak off, his wand carving a lowercase "n" in the air. The forest lit up with white light as energy was discharged from Harry's wand, and the next moment, Decio was screaming, writhing on the ground, cradling a bloodied stump where his wand hand used to be.

The blackthorn wand snapped under the force of Harry's heel slamming down on it, splintering the wood in the middle and resounding through the battlefield.

Four pairs of eyes darted over, and panicked cries began to rise like a crescendo.

"Harry Potter!"

"Potter! Potter's here!"

"Decio! Colloshoo!"

Panic was dangerous. Criminals who panicked were unpredictable. Like rapid-fire from a machine gun, advancing forward with each spell he thundered, "Protego Duo! Relashio! Incarcerous! Incarcifors!" Remembering the sight of Teddy's smiling face when Harry and Sesshomaru flew into the skies, he shouted, "Expecto Patronum!"

The curse—as well as the others that had followed—ricocheted off of the spiritual barrier erected around Harry, rebounding back at frightening velocities. The area around the Death Eaters was carnage.

Just as grass and foliage sprang up to entomb Decio with the three men in a transfigured cage, fiery purple sparks flared at the end of Harry's wand and the grip the crouched Death Eater had around the wand was released with a gut-wrenching yell when the streak of light hit. Boils had erupted along the reddened, burnt skin as the wizard doubled over, clutching his arm which Harry saw was sickly looking and weedy. Before his companions could pull him back, thin cords shot forward like a cobra strike, twining around the man's neck and limbs, and dragging him down with force.

As he went down, the wizard was shouting to his companions, "Go, forget about—!" before he was
gagged and bound and his face plummeted into the earth.

Their grips on his arms were ripped as an indeterminate four-legged creature—tall as a two-story house—stampeded in their path like a hazy blur. Trails of mist and vapor followed the Patronus as it momentarily forced the Death Eaters into a retreat away from the trees, before twisting away sideways.

A high screech—like rocks tumbling down a cliff, but less rumbly than a male's—pierced the air as the Patronus slammed into the troll's side.

One wizard straggled behind, refusing to leave his comrade. Harry plunged forward.

The wizard's hood fell as Harry drove his fist into his face, cartilage crunching satisfactorily beneath his knuckles. Blood was running down nose and teeth as the Dark wizard and willow wand flew back. Dirt and patches of grass were scattered up into the air upon impact.

The Holly wand plunged down at the wizard's mask and the one before. Two red flashes, then each were knocked unconscious by a Stunner. Harry swept the two dropped wands from the grass quickly, purloining them into his holster. His wrist snapped up.

He kept up the assault, not stopping to give himself or the other party time to form any fully-fledged thoughts, forcing them to concentrate on returning fire instead of running. They were parrying spells, inflicting and deflecting, one after the other. Some exploded in midair as two streams collided. He threw everything that was in his immediate repertoire. Anything to distract them from detecting the tall five shadows congregating on the other side.

Their faces illuminated by the pulsing glow of their wands underneath, the two Death Eaters were looking at him like death warmed over, haunted and scared and desperate, as if he were the instrument of their nightmares hunting them down. His hand tightened on the wood.

Their Shield Charms burst into small shrapnel, which disintegrated into flecks of shimmering iridescence under the punishing barrage.

Their triad of voices was drowned out by the roar of crackling fire as the sudden movement of their wands simultaneously directed the purple flames in two opposite directions: two toward Harry and one toward the Death Eaters.

All three wizards threw themselves out of the trajectory, watching as the curse dispersed upon impact on trees or rocks.

His hands left drag marks into the grass as he struggled to get on his feet. His head snapped to the right, just as the Severing Charm whizzed by.

Past the sweat matting his long fringe to his eyes, he could see the woman's pale face crumpling in despair when both she and her companion realized the Head Auror was the scapegoat. They'd whirled around in time to see Ron, Seamus, Lee, Dean, and Macmillan raise their wands and collectively shout "Stupefy!"

Hands were at the Head Auror's shoulders and arms, yanking him up, and Harry snarled, "Forget about me. I want the troll taken out—!"

Instinct—or perhaps blind luck—had him shove himself back, landing back on his elbows. The jet of green light whooshed by harmlessly, where his neck and chest would've been. Propelling himself around and thrusting his wand intuitively, he countered, "Sectumsempra!"
What sounded like a blade slicing through flesh and a faint expletive made the red haze from Harry's head fade away. Decio was scrabbling at his blood-soaked chest—his dirt-smudged face a shining scarlet—with one of his hands still gripping a wand he'd stolen from one of the unconscious combatants imprisoned with him.

His gloved hand had moved into an automatic spiral movement, and a powerful, jagged jet of scarlet light shot the wand away from the Snatcher's hand and blasted the Snatcher off of his feet. Decio flew back, his head crashing into the transfigured bars with a sickening thud.

"Someone heal him!" Harry roared, seizing an Auror by the lapel and heaving him forward. "I don't want him dying of blood loss just yet!" His vision set in the troll's course, he ordered, "Macmillan, with me! Everyone else, search them! Make sure they're bound and their wands confiscated! I want them rounded up and taken to the Ministry! Alive!"

His men hesitated. Then their footsteps drummed away.

A small throng of bodies passed him and Macmillan as they rushed to the shores where four Aurors concentrated on bringing down the twelve-foot tall troll. But before they could go any further, Harry's name was shouted. Giving the fair-haired wizard a look, he jerked his head to the fight. "Go ahead first. Proudfoot could use his protégé's assistance."

The Auror nodded, and the crown of shining gold curls was the last thing he saw of the wizard when Harry twisted on his heels to grasp Dean by the elbow.

"Sir," Dean said quietly, leaning on him and breathing heavily. "I've taken the liberties of calling for a Healer to examine the dead bodies. They said they're sending us a mediwizard. I'd asked them to bring Hippocrates Smethwyck, if they can, for you."

"Thanks." Harry pressed Dean's elbow and shoulder in brief gratitude, before lifting his hands.

Dean gave him a small smile, then he ran back to rejoin the veterans.

By the time Harry caught up, he could see however small the troll's brain was, bestial instinct had the magical creature battling Harry's Patronus—its imposing three meters extra in height dwarfing the troll—and wielding its club like a baseball bat, growing more and more disoriented whenever the club swung past nothing.

Open gashes were littered all over the creature's discolored skin, with pus and infections around some of the serrated cuts like someone had taken a rusty knife and a whip to the troll. There were dark, faded marks around the troll's ankles and wrists. When the troll jerked its chin centimeters up, what seemed like a strip of fabric was collared underneath its chin fat.

Parvati and his senior veterans were keeping a wide enough breadth so that the pressure of the colossal club or feet striking the ground wouldn't throw them off balance. Except for Williamson, each was paired up: Parvati with Savage, and Macmillan with Proudfoot. Parvati's group focused on spells meant to safely incapacitate, but the creature's magical resistance posed as determent for Stunners and the like, fizzling out whenever the jets of light landed.

Harry's gaze stole across her shiny, smooth plait to a blond and a greying head, as he neared the two Aurors on his way to Williamson. His mouth lashed down into a frown when he heard them making idle conversation instead of focusing on bringing down the troll however humanely possible.

"Ernest!" Proudfoot was passing abrupt, incredulous glances over his protégé. "Glad to see the plan's worked."
"They were hardly any trouble," Macmillan scoffed. Behind Proudfoot's clear shield, he was looking at the ghostly massive apparition with bafflement. "That one of ours? It doesn't look like—"

"Talk later," Harry barked, making them jump, "concentrate now."

The Auror immediately stood at attention. "Sir! But if it's one of our enemies—!

"It's mine, Macmillan. Now, focus! I know we all know it's dumb, but it's still a threat!"

Just as Macmillan was gazing at the back of Harry's running form, Proudfoot lobbed a Disintegration Curse at the club—which was already splintering from all the curses thrown at it—and the wood finally crumbled into small pieces.

Beholding the brown dust in its leathery-grey hands, the female troll staggered as both Williamson and Harry stopped to point their wands up at it. Thick ropes launched out in the speed of a grenade launcher, wrapping around her throat and feet and then falling as they failed to enclose around the two sizeable widths. The two Aurors hurtled themselves out of the way before they could be quashed under stumbling, gargantuan feet.

"Eyes!" a smoky voice that sounded like Savage's rumbled. "Someone take out the eyes!"

Promptly Macmillan began murmuring the incantation for the Conjunctivitis Curse—making memories emerge of a certain Durmstrang representative facing off against the Chinese Fireball—when Harry reached Williamson, who'd returned a brief glimpse before retransferring his attention to the towering threat.

The Auror's mouth moved soundlessly, and at once everyone could see what he was trying to do. Light pooled in the apex between the troll's thighs, appearing like purple taffy straining to glue them together as the female screeched and tried to rip them apart with the force of her legs.

"Proudfoot! Savage! Assist Williamson! Apply the spell in layers and get it to fall down!" Harry yelled, snapping his wand up. "Parvati, you and I are helping Macmillan with the Conjunctivitis Curse! Now!"

Both Proudfoot and Savage thundered at the same time, "Locomotor Mortis!"

Exchanging faraway looks at each other, they quickly sorted out the order of who should cast first. Williamson raised his wand, and Savage prepared himself to go next.

"Locomotor Mortis!"

"Locomotor Mortis!"

A pink torrent of fire discharged at the same time as the last Leg-Locker Curse was uttered, and two more followed right after. The first one hit the troll square in the breasts. The troll spun around, and one managed to batter the left eye and nose. The last one had missed when the troll turned around, which would've stabbed directly into the right eye like a sniper bullet.

With a spine-chilling groan that was a gravelly, deafening boom—akin to the sound of boulders grating against each other—the troll stumbled, eyes swollen shut. Its back was facing Proudfoot and Macmillan when Harry's Patronus slammed into it, making the troll at last lose its balance.

As the troll whirled its arms in a cyclone, Harry watched in disbelief as the new, vaporously unclear form opened what had to be its jaws and snag one of the troll's flailing arms, taking it down with a reverberating crash. Everyone toppled from the collision's tremors, like the ground underneath them. 
had been transfigured into a trampoline.

As Harry struggled to clear his head of any lightheadedness, with wide eyes he watched his apparition breaking into small balls of light, which drifted up into the darkening skies leisurely like dandelion seeds, eventually dissipating into nothing before the clouds could be reached. Like it'd never been there.

A scream roused Harry from his vertigo.

Proudfoot was helplessly tugging at his leg crushed underneath the troll's heavy bulk. The other hand was recklessly shooting spells up at the skin, crisping the affected area a blistering red and trying to free himself.

"Proudfoot!" Macmillan keened, his eyes wild. The Auror scrambled to his feet, howling, "Proudfoot, we're coming for you! For the love of Merlin, don't antagonize it!"

"Macmillan!" Parvati cried, staggering back up. "Don't! The troll's still—!"

Large grey legs stuck together thrashed like a mermaid out of water, nearly striking Macmillan from its devastating kicks. Rolling off its back, the behemoth was struggling to push itself up.

Clenching the wand in his hand and exerting force on an arm to shove himself up, Harry raised his wand to the troll's head and rasped, "Verdimillious Tria."

Just as his hand slashed forward, simultaneously green sparks detonated from the tip of his wand like bolts of electricity, shooting across the distance and smashing into the overlarge skull like a blow.

Harry swallowed, when he heard it impact. Rubbish as professors Quirrell and Lockheart had been, they made sure that Defense against the Dark Arts Charm had been drilled into their heads. All the multifunctional properties of the dueling spell and each of its three devastating upgrades had been memorized: from how it could act as a flare to revealing objects hidden by Dark magic to its most damaging potential.

A brief pause and three cries echoed shortly after.

The troll jerked like a rag doll each time the offensive Charm hit.

The implications of what they were doing made his mouth dry with sawdust. But he grounded his molars; then he opened his mouth and commanded, "Aurors, concentrate on casting fully-charged Verdimillious Tria spells! Keep casting until it's subdued! Don't make it nonverbal! I want its full paralyzing effect!"

He raised his wand. "Verdimillious Tria!"

"Verdimillious Tria!"

"Verdimillious Tria!"

Verdant electric current after electric current kept being discharged, Harry lost count after the fifteen one.

Energy crackled over the stone-grey skin, reddening the tissue all over. Enormous muscles flexed and spasmed involuntarily, fluctuating like roiling sea waves underneath a canvas, stretching the flesh to the point of breaking. The sickly sweet smell of frying bacon would forever be burned into his mind, as the troll writhed on the ground.
Limbs quaked violently, and suddenly there was the fetid smell of defecation. The troll gasped as if it were being strangled. Drool spilled over its chin and chest, staining the shores underneath a dark spot.

"That's enough!" Harry roared, seeing the instant the bulging eyes rolled in the back of its head and the limbs collapsed as if their strings were cut. Troll fingers and toes kept twitching. He sprang to his feet, gesticulating with one arm. "Stop! Everyone, stop!"

"Pull back!" Savage yowled. He'd dropped his wand-arm. "Wands down! It's over! The Head Auror said 'wands down!'"

Slipping and sliding, Savage heaved himself up, his head twisting around. Several shoulder-length strands from his slicked-back hair had escaped the miniature top knot, and his beard was coated with filth. His glare honed on a fair-haired wizard. "Macmillan, the Head Auror said 'stop!'"

Lost in his own world, Macmillan was uttering his second—his third—incantation when Williamson and Harry strong-armed him, one snatching the Willow wand from the tight grip and the other wrestling Macmillan's arms behind his back before either of them could be punched. His face was pink with excursion.

"Macmillan, calm the fuck down!" Harry reprimanded, nearly barking in the Auror's ear. "Our objective is not its death. Cease and desist, or I will have you for insubordination."

The stout noble sagged in Harry's arms, his fighting spirit fleeing him. His chest heaving, he said weakly, "Proudfoot's—"

Parvati was already hurrying to their fallen comrade's side, falling to her knees to inspect Proudfoot's injuries. "Where else does it hurt?" she whispered, frantically moving her wand over his leg. White bandages spun around wherever she'd tapped, encasing the limb like a splint. She pushed him down when he reared up.

She said soothingly, "Calm, calm down, Proudfoot. Don't look at your leg. Tell me where else it hurts."

Harry released Macmillan's arms. Trying to regulate his breathing, with a slightly reproachful look Harry told him, "I'm temporarily confiscating your wand. You'll get it back at the Ministry. Williamson, make sure he doesn't get it back until I give the official 'okay.'"

Macmillan staggered away several steps, lowering his head and clenching his fists just as Williamson nodded. Both of his men glanced over in Parvati's and Proudfoot's direction.

His glare lessening, Harry rammed his fingers through his hair, dragging his fringe back. When his breathing returned to a normal pace, with an aggrivated sigh, he said, "You're not in trouble, Macmillan. This is just a precaution, in case you get it into your head to take revenge for Proudfoot. I know you won't, but I don't like it when you lose your cool."

"Sir?" Williamson whispered. He was glancing between Harry and the Forbidden Forest where the rest of the team were gathered.

Not detecting any urgency behind the tone, Harry temporarily put him out of his mind. He held up one finger. Digging the Marauder's Map from his coat, he opened it with the key phrase and quickly scanned the contents.

A minute later. "Sir?"
Satisfied that there weren't any surprises left, when Harry peered up Williamson's gaze appeared conflicted. "Proudfoot's an old friend. Should I bring him to St Mungo's? We don't have anything in our potions kit for that. And I don't think any of us are experienced enough to cast the spell for mending broken bones."

"Yes, Sir, didn't Professor Lockheart banish your bones in Quidditch once instead, Sir?" Macmillan mocked, making the ponytailed wizard bristle from the snide tone.

It had been at the tip of his tongue to say that Dean had called for a field mediwizard, but then Harry spotted Macmillan's expression. Frowning, to Williamson he imparted, "I don't want to risk anyone of us accidentally failing to execute it properly. And Skele-Gro takes too long, if he has to regrow it."

Lifting his gaze to the fair-haired wizard, Harry said, "Macmillan, you take him to St Mungo's."

"Sir!"

"Sir?" Macmillan's eyes widened. Surprise and resentment flitted across his expression. He began heatedly, "Is it because of what happened earlier? I can still—!"

"Wasn't Proudfoot your mentor?" Harry said sharply, shoving the map back into his pocket. "Weren't you just concerned for him a short while ago? If it were Shacklebolt, I wouldn't exactly be protesting."

Macmillan's mouth snapped shut. He tried again, "It's not that. Was it my performance? Did you find it lacking? Alarming? I pulled my weight. I pulled as much, if not more, as Williamson had!"

"I'm not basing this off your performance or any favoritism. I'm basing this because I thought you were close to him, like a friend, and what any close friend would do is to bring him to a hospital and find him the professional help he needs." He strode over to Macmillan, clasping a hand over his shoulder. "Proudfoot would want you there. With him. We want him back in his cubicle tomorrow. I want you both back."

Macmillan's expression was dark, but he didn't reply. He shrugged off Harry's grasp, violently jostling their shoulders when he passed them by.

His gaze pinned at his teammate's back, when Macmillan was a safe distance away, in a low voice Williamson asked, "What's the real reason you chose him, over me? I've known Proudfoot longer. Ernest wants to stay and prove himself."

"Ernest is young. He makes mistakes. How he reacted shouldn't be held against him."

His gaze slid back to his senior veterans. "They were trying to perform a Dark Resurrection Ritual over Dumbledore's remains. I need clear-minded Aurors on the field with me. Can you honestly tell me that Macmillan, in his current mindset, would be a better choice over you?"

Searching the Head Auror's expression, eventually Williamson dropped his eyes. Savage shifted on his feet uncomfortably.

"Go with Ron and the rest of the team. I will join you in a bit. I heard Smethwyck's coming." He tipped his head toward the Forbidden Forest. "Make sure everyone's okay. Then check to see if all unconscious Death Eaters are transferred over to our division before you tell everyone to make their
way to the tomb without me. There will be a small change in plans. Ask Finnigan, Dean, and Lee if anyone would be willing to stay behind to assist our medical examiner and Parvati."

Seeing their questioning looks, Harry clarified, "I need some of my Aurors to stay behind in case something comes up while we're performing the investigation." Twirling his wand idly, he added, "Wouldn't it be terrible if a supposed corpse disappears or tampers with evidence while we're several meters away with our backs turned?"

"Wouldn't want anyone to rise from the dead," Savage echoed. Williamson wordlessly nodded.

With a last glimpse in his colleague's direction, Williamson turned on his heels, dragging Savage by the crook of an elbow, and they began jogging to the four figures viewable in the distance.

"I want the Death Eater I'd bound identified!" Harry shouted, before the Aurors were out of hearing range. "I want to know who he is and why he's so important that he was worth protecting!"

Without checking to see if his Aurors had heard him, Harry marched over to Parvati, noticing that Macmillan was still there. They were bent over Proudfoot. Regulating his exhalations, his face pale and sweaty, Proudfoot had an arm slung over Macmillan's shoulders, ready to be lifted onto his good leg.

"Proudfoot," Harry said, snatching their attention. He projected confidence and authority into his tone. "You're going to be fine. Macmillan's volunteered to bring you to St Mungo's and get your leg checked out. You'll be as good as gold tomorrow morning."

He made certain to provide the tactile contact, squeezing the wizard's shoulder once. Helping the man up and meeting each Auror square in the eyes once, he stated firmly, "I'm proud of you. Proud of all of you."

Macmillan was shooting him a backward glance over his shoulder as he led the hobbling wizard away. A brief moment later and they Disapparated with a loud crack.

By this time his adrenaline rush had died down somewhat. But Harry concealed his slightly trembling hands in the lining of his pockets.

The last of sunlight over the horizons spilled over the shores with a dying rustic glow and spotlighted the old mottled bruises over the reddened skin. The bodies scattered around the shores and forest line seemed like misshapen rocks. Parvati was examining the troll with grim contemplation. "What we did," she said softly, "It was torture, wasn't it?"

"Either we immobilized it or we humanely kill it," Harry said. "With as little casualties as possible. That's been the protocol. At least we managed to keep one alive. Maybe another one, we won't know if it's too late to save them until the mediwizard gets here and makes his prognosis. Keep your guard up."

"Artemius Lawson would love us," she added dryly. "I reckon Liechtenstein would welcome us with a celebratory toast."

"Let's not talk about troll-hunting and magical creature rights," he griped, scrunching his face. "I hear enough of that in the ICW." He blinked. With a new, thoughtful expression flitting across him, he started, "The Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures, for their Beast division…wouldn't their superior would be—?"

"Amos Diggory."
He swore. "Merlin's saggy left—!

"I'm yanking your wand, Harry!" Parvati said hurriedly, witnessing the dejected set of his mouth. "Goodness, Diggory's an employee. Their superior is someone else, someone as old as crumbs. Do you need to get into contact with them?" Upon seeing she was at the opposite end of the Head Auror's intensity, she immediately flushed. "Sorry, stupid question."

"Not stupid," he refuted, taking a deep breath through his nose. He closed his eyes. "But unless you want to volunteer us up for scrubbing troll guts and disposing of their bodies, I reckon they'd do a better and more efficient clean-up job than we ever could. They could mediate the damage control, once word gets out. But I don't think my Patronus would be recognizable in the state that it is in."

"Do you want me to summon them?" When his eyes snapped open in surprise, she grinned and explained, "You haven't told me to 'get.' That could only mean you want me to stay behind. You're like Padma. You two like making small talk before laying it on thick." Her nose crinkled. "I know you're the Head Auror and I have to listen to you, but I really could do without the unbearable smell."

"You've read my mind," he commented lightly. "Just transfigure something into a handkerchief, and hold it to your nose and mouth, if it's that horrendous."

"I can't believe you have the energy to be cracking witty quips," she said bitingy. She looked down at her sleeve considering, before shaking her head. "I feel like I'd just been thrown into the Triwizard Tournament. Did you know I was about to leave for home when we got the distress call? How in Merlin's name are you not bowled over with exhaustion, after all that?"

"I had an impromptu, early morning workout."

She directed a skeptical glance over. Then with the flick of her wand, she took a big breath—which she looked like she'd regretted immediately—and she announced, "Expecto Patronum."

A sleek, silver mongoose shot out. Its long, tapering tail weaved sinuously around the witch as it bounded about her playfully. Two more flashes and a pair joined the first apparition.

With a laugh and another wan smile, she communicated to her wand, "This is Auror Parvati Patil, requesting back-up from the Auror Headquarters. The situation has been diffused, at the shores of the Black Lake. We require assistance transferring V-Voldemort's men on-site to the Ministry."

She held her wand up, like a microphone, to Harry's mouth.

He leaned forward.

"This is Head Auror Potter," he spoke gravelly, "confirming Auror Patil's communique. I don't need the entire department. I want wizards from our Investigation subdivision and the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol. Five or six will do. Our veterans and senior veterans will have further instructions once you've arrived. Don't trip over each other and forget your wand in the excitement this time."

They watched the first one shimmer and then leap away on its stubby legs across the horizons.

"This is Auror Patil—"

"And Head Auror Potter. The password for the last Potterwatch broadcast was Mad-Eye."
"Right. We request the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures—Beast division—to send us assistance to the shores of the Black Lake. We have five trolls that we don't know what to do with. Some may still be alive. I know one's bleeding profusely and we'd disabled one more."

The second one went in the way of the first. Harry stared curiously at the last mongoose.

"Do you want to send Hermione a message?" she probed. "Get her away from the schoolchildren? She's brilliant. She'd be able to piece together everything, now that it's safe to look for clues. I know her husband's probably already sent his, but I figured...actually, I don't know where I'm going with this. You could just as easily call for another department."

"They'll know, once we bring everything back: the renegades and the forensic evidence."

Still he didn't outwardly decline. Gathering his thoughts, he at last said into Parvati's wand, "Hermione, Ron's not going to have an aneurysm now that the coast's clear. Meet us at the White Tomb. We need your input. Also, mischief managed."

Warmth flared from the map, bleeding through his pocket and into his skin.

It was still twilight when the reinforcements arrived.

Harry had exchanged quick dialogue with Hippocrates Smethwyck—whom Harry remembered as the middle-aged healer that had miraculously discovered the antidote for Nagini's venom and saved Arthur Weasley's life—before leaving him, and the healers he'd brought, in the capable hands of Lee Jordan and Seamus Finnigan. Several rookies and investigators were still excavating the Forbidden Forest and the shores of the Black Lake for clues when Harry saw that Ron and Dean had waited up for him.

"These trolls aren't English," Dean stated the moment the Head Auror was within hearing distance.

They were standing at the cusp of broaching the venerated property lines of the White Tomb. The meadow was serene and unspoiled, conflicting with the unsealed stone casket that lay in the middle of it. Harry noticed Hermione and another one of their rookies were up ahead, examining Dumbledore's remains and the area around it. Williamson and Savage were bent around what seemed like human bones.

His gaze instantly slid to the immense grey form that'd looked like the top of its skull had been bashed in by its own club. Harry said levelly, "A fact or a theory of yours?"

"We're lucky we didn't have to deal with any more of those buggering giants," Ron grunted. Looped around his arm was Harry's cloak. "But I have to agree with Dean. Take a look at this."

He passed Harry a leather strip. The strap was long enough that it'd take three or four men to carry it if it were extended to its full length. Harry gingerly rubbed his fingers against it, rubbing off the blood to read the miniscule lettering underneath. His mouth dove down. "'Made in USA?' You're suggesting—?"

"I know it's farfetched," Dean said, exchanging glances with Ron. "But you weren't here, before everything went to shite. Every single one of them was outfitted like the security trolls at highly-guarded institutions. Leather caps and all."

"The Committee will be able to confirm it for us for sure," Harry said skeptically, handing it back. "But magical Britain is a long travel way from the States. And no sane person would transport these creatures through Apparition or Portkey unless...." He trailed off, his eyes widening just as Dean
nodded grimly.

"We might be looking at potential trafficking," Ron rumbled gruffly, "between us and the States. It might also be circumstantial. My gut is telling me that some no-good Americans have fallen in with the wrong crowd though."

"Even if it's true, I'll need confirmation before we decide to go with this lead," Harry said thickly as memories swarmed him. "We butted heads with the Americans when we were there to help prevent their Washington Monument from being the site of a Death Eater ritual. Cases that cross international borders, especially those overseas, require close collaboration and coordination between our government agencies."

"We might have to get into contact with the American Division," Dean persisted, as they approached the three Aurors at the White Tomb. "I know you and their Director didn't exactly get along—"

"If I never have to meet their Director again, I will die a happy wizard. But yes, we might. I simply wish to avoid the headache that is jumping the wand, if at all possible."

"I remember he was a stubborn git, but the rest of their Aurors were alright," Ron remarked, grinning crookedly at Harry's irritated expression. "It wasn't that horrendous. We had their President of the Magical Congress backing us up. He even scored us tickets to see what their Quodpot was about, when it was all said and done."

His smile fell, though, once he caught sight of his wife.

She was chatting one-sidedly with a young, handsome wizard Harry couldn't place a name to, using him as a soundboard for her rapid-fire conjectures. He could feel the intensity of Ron's jealous scowl when Hermione finally noticed them. She waved them over.

"I see the remnants of a skeleton," Harry addressed. "Please tell me that's Voldemort's and that we're one step closer to recovering his body."

The unnamed Auror abruptly twisted his head to peer up at them, the moment he heard Harry speak up. With an earnest look, he blurted, "No, sir. I'm so sorry to hear you were dragged from your paid holiday, Head Auror, sir."

"What?" Ron barked, this time his indignation directed at Harry. Dean had drifted away from them when he accused hotly, "You're on paid holiday? How come I haven't heard of—?"

"Because you aren't sitting an ambassador from a foreign country," Hermione interrupted. Her eyes flicked up, her expression cross. "Ron, I told you about it eons ago. Stop being ridiculous. And, no, Harry, it might not be. They seem a bit too brittle. I'll have to have someone check."

Ron had opened his mouth to defend himself, but paused when Harry touched his shoulder and shook his head, mouthing the word "don't" at him. His mouth twisted sourly. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he mumbled grudgingly, "Well? What did you find?"

"Neither of you are going to like this," she disclosed.

Giving their younger companion a shared, deliberate look, they waited patiently until the wizard understood he wasn't to be a part of their conversation and he collected his kit to join the three veterans further away.

Despite being out of earshot, Hermione still casted a Muffling Charm around their vicinity. Bringing her wand down, she said in a hushed volume, "Dumbledore's wand is gone."
Both Harry and Ron stilled.

Their gazes plunged down to stare at the thin, withered hands—one of them a decayed shade of black—folded peacefully over the Headmaster's chest. The preservation enchantment had maintained the glossy sheen of his purple robes, which was speckled by tiny stars shooting across. Although his face was gaunter than it had been when the funeral rites were performed years before, Dumbledore still appeared asleep.

"I thought this was another attempt at a Dark Resurrection Ritual," Harry hissed, once he collected himself. He tore his gaze away from the macabre display and he pinned Ron with a severe stare. "I thought you said Voldemort wasn't the sort to share his knowledge."

"N-not if it would make anyone more powerful than him," Ron gulped. He brought his fist underneath his unshaven jawline. "I don't understand. This doesn't fit their MO. They couldn't have known it was the Elder Wand."

"I agree," Hermione corroborated, noticing their mounting distress. "There might be a small chance that one of them found out, but really? I doubt it. Everyone thinks it's Grindelwald's mark. We only stumbled upon the truth because we had a bonafide believer tell us its origins."

"If someone like Mr Lovegood had known about it, who's to say there isn't someone else who would? Before it became popularly known as a propaganda symbol for Grindelwald's forces?" Harry speculated. "I remember him talking about a Quest. How there were others who wear that symbol to identify themselves to other Questers. Maybe someone became curious and stumbled upon a valid source like we did."

"Are you honestly telling me you believe the kook?" Ron demanded, his brows furrowing upon recollection of the wizard. "Granted, what he said was true, about the Hallows, but he's a bit…." His finger made a circling motion near his temple.

"Sometimes he's a bit off, yes," Hermione concurred. She frowned down at Dumbledore's body. "But let's say you're right, Harry. If that's true, there are huge ramifications."

"Would it?" Harry asked lightly. He held his hands out toward Ron. Upon realizing he still held Harry's cloak, Ron's face turned white and he shoved the Hallow back into Harry's arms as if he had been scalded by hot water.

Harry stared down at the cloak that had remained intact all this time, passed down each generation from father to son. He almost felt like he could trace his father's existence, and his father's father who'd inherited it from his father—all the way back to their Peverell ancestor. Making his hands into fists, he said heftily, "If they're hoping to attain the Master of Death status, they're in for a long haul."

"Should we search for the Resurrection Stone?" Hermione asked, trying to peer beyond his occluded gaze in search of something. "You'd said you'd dropped it somewhere. In case they are, I feel safer knowing we had it in our possession than any Death Eater's."

"Or a Snatcher's," Ron added. He was frowning at Harry. "But they might not be chasing after a pipe dream. It is a children's tale, after all. They might've taken it because they associate it as Dumbledore's wand. Y'know, the wand belonging to the wizard V-Voldemort feared? No offense, Harry."

"None taken," he replied automatically. "But I agree with that theory. Or I'd like to, over the possibility of them pursuing the Deathly Hallows. It could be, again, circumstantial. Ron, before I got
"Getting ready to perform a Dark ritual."

"No, what were they doing? Their positions? Incantations? Conversations? Did you see anyone holding two wands? Anyone that was gloating about acquiring Dumbledore's?"

Ron scowled. "I don't know. We just saw them hovering over his casket and we responded." He scrubbed his face with a large hand. "We have so many magical monuments out there. It's never going to stop, is it?" He sounded so tired.

"No, Ron, we are not going to think that," Harry rebuked sharply. "We can't afford to lose morale. One day, this will all end. There will be a day when there won't be enough Death Eaters desperate to bring him back."

"That's the day when a new Dark Lord rises," Ron said wearily. "And when we're all dead."

"Ron!" Hermione snarled, scandalized. She sounded one moment away from slapping her husband. "This is not the time for another one of your episodes!"

"Both of you, calm down," Harry hurried to say, despite feeling like he, too, wanted to punch Ron. "We have to remain positive. Now, tell me, out of all the magical monuments in Britain, why would they go after the White Tomb?"

"Well, it's rather obvious, isn't it?" Hermione asserted, staring at him incredulously. Then her eyebrows dipped. She was giving Harry an odd expression, as if she couldn't recall for the life of her why seeing him alone was suddenly unsettling.

"It is, but I'd like to hear theories. Especially from two of the most brilliant minds I know." He levelled a meaningful look at Ron, a strategic chess player, and at Hermione, one of the brightest witches of their generation. "Let's put aside the fact that a Deathly Hallow was taken."

Tracing the outline of a crowned shield silently, Harry shattered the *Muffliato* Charm. He offered a smile, hoping it wasn't too strained. "Well, let's share with the class. What else could their MO be?"

"I imagine it was an act of desperation," Savage's voice rang across the short distance, inferring what the subject of their conversation was. "We'd stopped them at every juncture. It's quite possible they thought this was their next big chance."

Hermione made an undignified sound through closed lips.

"Or maybe," Ron scoffed derisively, sharing his wife's opinion, "they were struck with a case of the theatrics and decided wouldn't it be dramatic irony if they managed to resurrect the Dark Lord on the deathbed of someone that a lot of people claim was the only wizard he'd ever feared? Especially a Dark ritual on a powerful Light wizard's remains?"

"Dumbledore would be rolling in his grave if their attempt had been successful," Harry commented neutrally. "It would make a lot of people angry. Not to mention the press that'd eat this up."

"They could be doing it to taunt us, sir," the still-unidentified Auror raised. He appeared to twitch when all eyes turned to him. He maintained hesitantly, "M-maybe they wanted to upset the H-head Auror. He took down their Dark Lord. Maybe they're trying to send us a message."

"Like what?" Ron growled, wrapping a possessive arm around Hermione's waist, his hand flat on her rounded stomach. "Don't tell me you reckon they're saying, 'look at what we can do! We're not
afraid of you!' I don't think they'd pull something that foolish just to get Harry's attention."

"They might have gained the confidence now that they've got Americans having their backs," Dean offered. "Maybe this was this way of showing off their newfound partnership. Maybe they've grown arrogant."

"Or this could be an attempt to throw us off the trail," Hermione surmised. "We could be chasing a red herring."

"I think what we're all forgetting," Williamson chimed in, "is that before they got caught up in all this, they had families and respectable livelihoods. Whatever their reason is, they're also human beings. They were just like us."

"They reap what they've sown, making the decisions that they did," Harry reasoned coldly. "War is serious business, Williamson. I acknowledge some were coerced against their will. I don't begrudge them for siding with what they assumed to be on the winning side, and for being charmed or frightened into taking part of what they thought to be a revolution to win back pureblood and wizarding rights."

Multiple cracks were heard, like someone snapping wands, signaling that the last of the reinforcements had arrived. Everyone's heads spun around to take in the sight of a small army of wizards and witches clambering in the distance.

Returning his gaze, Harry finished, "But I can't forgive them for taking innocent lives, and subjugating the rights of Muggleborns and Muggles for theirs."

"Don't tell me you're feeling sorry for these murdering bastards, Williamson?" Ron demanded, turning away from the Committee officials and clenching his fists. Unsympathetic, he exclaimed to the wizard, "They've dug their own graves the moment they took the Dark Mark. And after? They've had plenty of chances to turn themselves in!"

"Also," the young Auror eagerly leapt back in, "they should've known better. They followed a madman. We had Harry Potter."

"And you!" Ron turned on him, appearing like flames were ready to burst out of his ears with how red his face was. Hermione held a firm grip around him, so that he couldn't advance toward the shirking wizard. He snapped, "You can stop kissing up to Harry. Buttering him up is not going to make him—!"

Hermione's hand had muffled Ron's mouth just as she chided gently, "What Ron means to say before flying off the handle is that you don't have to feel pressured to flaunt it in front of everyone, like you've got something to prove. You'll learn that trying to sweet-talk us isn't necessary."

Dean interjected, "Maybe not now, but eventually. We hear it enough from every apprentice the starting weeks that it's become repetitive and—frankly?—tiresome."

"I'm genuinely appreciative for having your respect and admiration," Harry reassured, looking back from having thrown his best mate a reproaching glare. Managing a less strict expression, he confided, "But I notice people who give me results and don't treat me like a celebrity. You were selected for your skills, not your ability to sing your praises for me or those that currently outrank you. We're not that insecure. Just be yourself, alright?"

"Y-yes, sir," the Auror stammered, peering back at him and his veteran Aurors with an unsure but newfound light in his eyes.
Harry's mouth pulled into a half-sincere smile. "Lovely."

Turning back to Williamson, he said, "It's fine if you feel pity for them. We all do. As our shrink claims, our empathy makes us emotionally stable and mentally sound to make rational, informed decisions. But we don't always have the luxury to falter. Sometimes we need to make the snap judgement, to neutralize a threat in a time of high tension."

Williamson hung his head. He yielded, "Yes, sir."

Hermione swiftly sucked in a breath, as if she'd felt her baby kick. Everyone's eyes landed on her in a panic.

Noticing the men's shared looks of terror, she waved off their concern flippantly. "No, no, it's not that. Fixing the Head Auror with a stern expression, she demanded, "Where is Sesshomaru, Harry? Weren't you supposed to guard him?"

Profanity tore through his throat. Ripping a hand through his hair, he groaned, "I was. It flew out of my brain the instant that I—!"

Looking over his Aurors wildly, his fingers digging into his scalp, he enquired, "Is everyone's alright with me leaving abruptly, if you're able to handle this by yourself? You don't need me to help gather the evidence?"

"Yes, yes, we're fine," Hermione coaxed, huffing an annoyed sigh through her nose. "We've got it handled. We'll meet you back at the Ministry. I think you might have someone who's a bit unsettled by your sudden disappearance."

"Unlikely. I'd left him in Room 4."

"Mate." Ron had grabbed his arm. His blue eyes were alit with a strange excitement. "I'd specifically requested for Doge to obtain special permission for Room 4. It's no Vanishing Cabinet, but the filing cabinets are there for a reason."

"Are you telling me—?" Harry's eyes flew back to stare at him disbelievingly. He hissed, "You're using Malfoy's method!"

"Hermione can show you," Ron disagreed, lifting what seemed like a metal bar from his pocket. The witch was shooting her husband an uncertain glance. She was biting her lower lip, not looking at Harry.

Ron had set it down on the ground gently and he backed up when his wife reluctantly uncrossed her arms. She arched her wand in a glowing, icy blue circle and the bar mushroomed back to an impressive human height.

"It looks like no one can fit in any one of these drawers," Ron said, "but they were made to deceive."

They watched, astonished, as Ron demonstrated pulling out a drawer—which'd dragged out the rest as if they were glued together—showing the hollowness inside.

Harry heard whispers burgeoning behind them. With climbing acidity, he stated, "You're saying that you and several others had been aware that there's been a security hole, all this time, in our Ministry that only a select few are privy to. Why am I only hearing about this now?"

"Oh no, it's not as bad as you think," Hermione explained hurriedly. "It's relatively recent. You're
looking at the only final prototype. Well, that and the few cabinets we'd scattered around every level. We didn't say anything because it was still in its experimental stages. I can confirm now, with a hundred percent certainty, no one's getting stuck in limbo this time."

"Really, the only way to access them is through this cabinet I keep shrunken on me," Ron verified. "You still can't Apparate into the Ministry. Not without this."

"...I'd Disapparated from that room," Harry argued, his brows creasing in confusion. "Wait, the Ministry has anti-Apparition wards set up. How'd I—?"

"Yeah, I heard the wizard that's in charge of that room used to be an Unspeakable. Not a good one, but an Unspeakable nonetheless."

"Then shouldn't I be able to—?"

"Would you like to waste your time and fail?" Hermione said shortly. She was tapping the tip of her wand irritably on an arm, still avoiding his eyes. "I was going to bring this up to you sooner or later, Harry. It could be a last-minute resort in case of another Ministry breach."

A part of Harry wanted to shake them by the arms and demand if they'd lost their minds. The other part of him was begrudgingly impressed by their ingenuity. Impatience won out. "You two have some explaining to do later," Harry growled an octave lower, stalking to their creation. He bent down to avoid hitting his head on the steel slides. Then he stood ramrod straight in the compact cavity, essentially feeling as if he were in a coffin.

"We'll see you later," Hermione promised. "Watch your wand." She shut the conjoined drawers, trapping him in darkness.

Several of his Aurors were loudly interrogating the couple outside when Harry disappeared with a telltale crack.

When he heard the crash, Harry tore through the drawers with a speed to rival the Firebolt. His eyes darted around, brushing through the bedlam that was his immediate surroundings. Dread filled his veins. The table had been upturned, with holes big and small burnt into the wood. Dingings and blackened scorches were left in the blocked-off entry that used to be the hall that Doge had escorted them down.

Wheezing gasps sliced through his thoughts, and the surge of concern was instinctual. Harry searched for the Ministry official. His vision soon landed on the wrecked furniture—or what had remained of them—and the wizard that was huddled down on the floor. The wizard's knees had been drawn up to his face. Pieces of upholstery and chairs were around the limp form. Hatless and pale, Doge was rocking back and forth, his gnarled fingers clenched below his kneecaps. His knuckles bled white over the wand that he was holding like a precious possession.

"Doge!" Harry swept down to his side, checking for injuries.

Doge was rasping, his chest falling rapidly as if he were winded. Harry's sight lingered on five puncture wounds and the handprint that was a mottled ring of colors from the different pressures that had been exerted over his neck. He latched onto Harry's sleeve as if it were a lifeline.

"You're going to be alright," he soothed, tracing his wand over the bruised skin and murmuring a soft, flowing incantation which almost sounded like song.
The Wizengamot advisor was trembling under the Head Auror's hand.

Harry pressed as gently as he could, "What happened when I was gone, Doge? Where's Lord Sesshomaru? Was it him? Did he do this to you?"

Doge's gaze lurched to the sealed doorway.

Harry's gaze wandered in the same direction, and this time he was able to make out what appeared to be the faint outline of a door in the conjured or transfigured wall. It was quite possibly meant to keep the magical creature out. The line of his mouth thinning, he had started getting back up on his feet when Doge's hand shot up to grip Harry's collar and wrench him down. The elderly wizard was shaking his head and wordlessly repeating the syllable "no".

"He is my responsibility," Harry said shortly, prying the death grip away from his shirt. Lightheaded and revitalized with newfound energy, he felt a bit numb to the world as the weathered hand slipped away, grasping at thin air. "I will take care of this."

"H-he," Doge croaked, his voice hoarse and feeble—reminding Harry that the wizard was an old man. He swallowed and said, "He went berserk. After you left. I tried to s-stop him."

Harry's eyebrows flew up. "You did?" He relaxed the tone of his voice when he realized how that must have sounded. He said casually, "I mean, he did? I'm impressed that you'd tried. He is an intimidating man."

He rose to his feet, dodging all frenetic attempts at reclaiming him. Only a small portion of his heart felt guilty when the ex-Advance Guard missed from an overzealous reach and had toppled over. "Calm down, Doge. I'll handle this. Take this time to regain your breath. Don't panic, that's it."

Turning his back, he said authoritatively, "I'm going to go find him. I'll be back in a few."

His eyes were pinched. "No, Harry, no. Don't try to be brave—!"

The Holly wand was flicked. The door slowly groaned open; then it stifled further protests from being heard when it was resealed. The abrupt blanket of silence was both unnerving and made goosebumps run down his skin. The glowing orbs floating above were small and dim, throwing an otherworldly sheen and long shadows across the floor, walls, and ceiling.

His back and palms flat against the conjured barricade, he breathed deeply once, taking a moment to think. It was difficult to separate his professional mindset from how he'd normally approach situations outside of his profession, especially when he fully expected himself to dive back into his duties after he sought out his wayward time traveler.

Yet Harry pushed away from the wall.

"Sesshomaru!" he called out sharply. Instead of hearing his voice ricocheting back in the traditional Japanese, he could almost imagine it being absorbed into the soundproof walls. There was a tension in the air that he could cut with his wand.

His wand kept close to his side, he tracked the demon's magical energy in the dimness, blindly searching for the familiar aura that was embroiled in foreign but powerful Dark Magic. But unlike the angry tempest he'd been expecting, Sesshomaru's magical signature felt like subdued disquiet.

There was something agitating the warlord.

But contrary to Doge's claim, Harry couldn't sense that there was any need for alarm. Not when this
was a far cry from the heavy, caustic Dark Magic that'd weighed down the atmosphere over the magical shores.

He felt along the wall with a palm, his fingers sliding across the dips and cracks of the cold flagstones for guidance. His footsteps were oddly muted—as if he were a ghost—yet he could hear the pounding of his heart, the blood rushing through his ears, and the oxygen in his lungs. Combined with the vertigo, it was a disorienting experience. His sense of smell was also impaired.

It might've been the effect of the mysterious properties of the Unspeakable's that Ron had mentioned, who had installed them into the chamber. Or it might be attributed to Doge's influence. Or maybe it was the fatigue that settled in—odd that it was, being that they were approaching nighttime, when the moon was up.

Either way his intuition was leading him to the end of the narrow hall and to the tightly sealed door, where flashes of orange light flared in the crack between the door and the floor. He steeled himself for a confrontation.

"Finite."

The colorful hues terminated instantaneously.

He barely had time to react as a white and red blur burst past the opened door, a pale hand gripping the Head Auror by the shirt and slamming his back against the wall. Momentarily dazed, his senses were smothered by the overbearing scent of animal fur and of Sesshomaru's scent.

Red sparks were fizzling at the tip of the Holly wand jabbed underneath the demon's jaw, illuminating from below both of the contours of their faces. The heat of their proximity seared Harry through his clothes.

Sesshomaru was growling lowly, his fangs bared in a restrained snarl. One set of claws were clenched over Harry's shirt and the other one was up over their heads, pinning him underneath. Fortunately he had the foresight of allowing space between their chests, so that he wouldn't impale Harry with the spikes on his breastplate.

Maybe it was that display of conscious thought that held Harry back from unleashing the Stunner. Despite the initial assault, Sesshomaru wasn't doing anything aside from examining Harry from head to toe, with a small, concentrated frown written across his face.

Although he felt like a cornered mouse, Harry promptly scanned the dog demon back, but for any signs of aggression. No jagged marks were noted and the color of his irises was still the same slitted depths of molten gold. Nor did he smell the acidic toxin that'd seep through Sesshomaru's claws. His swords were also sheathed, since the top of the hilts were digging into the side of Harry's ribs.

He exhaled, easing up on the punishing grip he'd shackled around a striped wrist. The glow from the wand ceased, and he shifted into a more open and honest stance.

He began cautiously, "Sesshomaru, what happened to your hands?"

As if sensing Harry's lack of ill will, the tall figure emitted a rumbly sound that came from deep within his chest. He bent his head. Long, fair hair fell forward as a cold nose trailed along the Head Auror's sweaty skin, making the wizard inhale sharply from the unexpected action.

Harry had turned to crane his neck away when a soft wetness laved up his throat, roasting him to his bones, burning like a brand. He couldn't help the knee-jerk stirring of arousal in his loins and,
horrified, he recoiled back against the wall. His face and ears scorching hot, he seized, "Stop, stop whatever it is that you think you're doing. Snap out of it!"

The menacing growl picked up again. Rhythmic puffs were ghosting along the slope of his skin.

Nuzzling against his neck, Sesshomaru was reverberating huskily, "Not all of this blood comes from this Hari. Yet this Hari had sustained injury, when you'd deserted this Sesshomaru."

A cool hand was sliding down Harry's chest, and the Head Auror sucked in a hiss when fingers pressed a spot over his solar plexus. Sesshomaru's hand stopped.

Closing his eyes, Harry grunted, "I think an elbow hit me when I stopped someone from fatally electrocuting a troll. I didn't notice." Reopening his eyes, he glared down at the hand over his coat. "Do you mind?"

"One cannot be aware of the extent of their injuries in the excitement of combat," Sesshomaru stated. Yet his claws had released Harry's shirt.

The dog demon took Harry by surprise when, instead of drawing back fully, he took the opportunity to stroke a calloused thumb over the path his tongue had traced, making Harry shiver from the sensation against the side of his vulnerable throat.

His deep brogue wielded as an intimate caress, Sesshomaru murmured, "Small and inconsequential, but a wound nonetheless. This Hari was careless."

The heat was spreading throughout his body, making his toes curl. Harry swallowed. He tried not to give away how he'd felt the instinctive ache of need beginning to kindle in him like embers preceding a fire. He raised his hand in resignation, his palm and five fingers splayed out flat. His hand made tiny pushing away motions in the empty space between their torsos with each syllable uttered. "Y'know what? Forget it. It's fine. Back up."

Sesshomaru's molten gaze was fixed on the dried blood encrusted over the back of the leather glove. "There is a smell of death and yōki that cling to this Hari, in the castle grounds that you'd absconded to."

The persistent challenge to his authority made the primeval, animalistic side of Harry want to unleash his own testosterone-filled snarl, but in his dizziness Sesshomaru's last words vaguely registered in his brain. He embraced that clarity of thought like a friend, anchoring his passions at a much safer level.

With another annoyed exhale, he peered at Sesshomaru somberly. Brusquely, he conceded, "You remember what I said about our fugitives running amok? These wanted insurgents sought to tarnish the remains of a powerful Light wizard…who I suppose I'd considered a mentor. I didn't lead you to his gravesite. It was very important that I stopped them."

Harry's expression darkened upon recollection, which seemed to inspire a shudder rippling through Sesshomaru's muscles.

He'd noticed Sesshomaru's reaction. "I'm not going to apologize for responding to my Auror's summon. Not when there were innocent lives at stake." Harry's brows creased into a troubled dip. "But, job or not, I realize I had a lapse in judgment. I should've notified you before going ahead."

His mouth was flattened into an uncertain, grim line. Gloved fingertips settled carefully above the demon's knuckles, barely skimming the skin.
Sesshomaru's gaze lunged down to stare intently at their hands, his head tilted and his expression almost that of curiosity and wonder.

Harry was analyzing his naked features, measuring the depth of the raw emotion that was transparent on the demon's face. He didn't say anything, merely taking the time to look at the bone structure and physical appearance of a man designed to stop someone in their tracks. He tried to look past the characteristics that'd marked Sesshomaru as an ancient magical creature. His lack of stubble on that graceful jawline, the soft curve of the demon's cheeks, and the incredible set of eyes finally drove it home to Harry that even with Sesshomaru's five hundred years of existence, at heart he was also a mature but uncertain young man comparative of nineteen-years in age.

Noble or sovereign, outside of warfare there was a high possibility that Sesshomaru could be inexperienced.

The confidence and the sobriety that came with this epiphany almost did him in. After a pregnant silence, with calculated delicacy Harry brooked, "I haven't known you for long, but this…loss of composure seems rare, of you. Even with the odd moments we've had. Is this related to my sudden disappearance? Or is there something else sincerely troubling you?"

That seemed to derail the moment they were having. Invisible walls were slammed down over the dog demon's expression, shuttering closed like blinds had been drawn. He denied, "Nothing distresses this Sesshomaru."

The demon lord finally pulled away, allowing them a larger breathing space between them. His head twisted to peer over his shoulder.

His eyes remained trained on Sesshomaru, even as a perturbed frown sliced across his face. Harry smoothed out his rumpled shirt and coat. He dragged the back of his hand against his throat, and then down at the side of his trousers to rub off the dried brown flecks.

The insight was a crescendo swelling in the forefront of his mind, but he tactfully withheld himself from making it known. His eyes having adjusted to the dim light, Harry raked his gaze around Sesshomaru.

He recognized the Shield Charm variant that had been erected over the far entrance. There were claw marks gouged into the shield, and this shot a spike of terror down Harry's spine at the thought of the cacophony that might've occurred had it not been for his timely arrival back.

"This is the *Protego horribilis*. Did Doge cast this?" His eyes beheld Sesshomaru's slightly singed fingertips. "Is that the reason why you'd attacked him?"

"Attacked?"

His knees involuntarily buckled as a swathing heat unloaded over Harry's neck and shoulders, encompassing him from the boa's surprising heaviness. Startled, Harry began pulling at the pelt—fingers burrowing into the soft furriness—and stopping only when an iron grip clamped down on Harry's shoulders.

Sesshomaru's expression was screwed as if he were highly dissatisfied by something the wizard had committed. The dog demon expounded, "Calm. This Sesshomaru is simply displeased by how this Hari smells. This Hari reeks of death." The two trailing ends of the fur were dragged closer underneath Harry's chin. Although the intensity of his frown had lessened, he sneered, "Your hanyou—as well as being a coward, he is a proficient storyteller. That is his claim?"
"Then let's say you're telling the truth. The handprint around his neck and the state of the room I'd found him in seems to corroborate his side of the story."

"He sought to prevent this Sesshomaru from pursuing this Hari."

"You're telling me," Harry said, his disbelief amplifying, "that preventative measures were taken against you? That Doge willingly raised his wand?"

Actually now that he'd said it, Harry could imagine how it could've gone down in his absence. It was more conceivable Doge's endeavor had been done on good intentions, than imagining the five-hundred year old magical creature had freaked out over his disappearance and then went on a mindless rampage.

Bringing a hand to massage the bridge of his nose, he muttered to himself, "He was an old Advance Guard. He can't be entirely useless." There hadn't been any physical tells on the lord indicating to the Head Auror that he was right to suspect dishonesty. That tone of indignation was also unfeigned.

He drew another deep breath, before he said, "Your hands." He'd glimpsed the clenched claws near the sides of his jaw. Deciding to be altruistic, he crooked his fingers, having slid an arm out from underneath the pelt. "I could heal the burn wounds. It'll only take a couple of seconds."

Sesshomaru blinked upon the change in subject. There was softness in the molten gaze as he replied, "Your concern is unnecessary. The skin will mend by itself." Sesshomaru stepped back. His long sleeves fell down, secreting his hands away from Harry's sight.

With the refusal and lack of distractions, Harry's mind could only focus on the man before him. The glow of the magical barrier behind Sesshomaru enveloped his silhouette with an orange light, emanating an august tinge to the pale hair—almost like a shade of blond. The feudal lord's overall impression was certainly less imposing without the gigantic shoulder-piece to add onto his height, but without it there was now an aspect of relatability he didn't possess much of before.

Harry's eyes roved down. The pelt Sesshomaru had adorned and was now placed on him seemed rare for its coloring and for its quality of fur.

Childlike in his wonder, Harry rolled a clump between his thumb and pointer finger, gazing at the texture curiously. Rubbing it between his fingers absently, he commented, "Is this a stylistic choice or is it tradition for you to wear…a boa? It's soft like fleece. But the fur doesn't come from any sheep or goat I've seen. It moves like a sentient magical creature's."

The Adam's apple in Sesshomaru's throat jerked. Perhaps it was that or the flicker of his lashes that Harry spotted his change in demeanor, however subtle it was. In a gravelly timber, he professed quietly, "Mokomoko-sama…is mine." The way he's said it so casually, imparted that the dog demon clearly expected this tidbit of information—however unnerving and upsetting it was for Harry to hear—to be of the norm.

Harry was battling between being both gobsmacked and appalled, and being horribly captivated by what's around his shoulders. Eyes wide, he blurted, "This is yours? Someone skinned you?"

"As all inuyōkai have, this Sesshomaru is also born with one," Sesshomaru assured, perceiving Harry's mixed expression. "There's no pain when it detaches. This Sesshomaru has full control over it."

It was incomprehensible. Harry stared at Sesshomaru for a moment. Then, without dropping his eyesight, he murmured," So, if I do this?" Gently, as if afraid to make contact, he slowly spread his
hand out, his fingertips barely touching. Then his hand was stroking the fur softly through the thin leather of his glove, deliberately meant to stimulate.

Magenta flashed over eyelids; having closed his eyes. The resultant shiver that'd ripped through Sesshomaru's body made Harry want to brush that long hair behind a pointed ear and to glide his lips along a striped cheek. Down at the demon's sides, his hands were curled into fists. The marks on his face and hands were also becoming slightly jagged.

Harry's hands faltered. His mouth dry, he stopped what he was doing and apologized, "I'm sorry, I was unaware." His face and ears were flushed a deep red as he recollected, with startling acuity, every time that he'd come into physical contact with it. His skin was tingling with imperceptible energy. He swallowed. "I won't do it again."

He lifted the pelt away from him, with the intention of gifting it back, but Sesshomaru's fingers settled over Harry's wrists and pushed them back down.

Golden irises were peering at the wizard earnestly. He leaned in close to say, "This Sesshomaru… doesn't…mind, purely…if it's this Hari." His hands squeezed. His eyes now flashed in warning. "Provided that this Hari does this privately. And sparingly, lest this Sesshomaru kills you."

That sounded less like an exaggeration and more of a genuine promise. Harry grinned shakily, but he nodded.

Sesshomaru searched his face. Eventually he turned on his heels. "This Sesshomaru is in a generous mood," he said, his back to Harry. The volume of his voice was dulling the further he stepped away—like he were suddenly submerged in water—and Harry realized this was the effect of whatever magic Doge had thrown over the room. That had to be why the demon had seemed reluctant to give them space before.

Sesshomaru was saying faintly, "This Hari may borrow mokomoko-sama for now. Until the smell dissipates."

Harry grasped his sleeve. "Wait!"

Both stiffened as the oppressive, heavy atmosphere lifted, and the return of their senses rushed back in as if they'd inhaled a sprig of medicinal peppermint.

Harry had propelled himself off the wall, just as Sesshomaru had drawn a sword. He'd thrust his hand against an iron breastplate, shoving Sesshomaru behind him, his eyes forward. He parried off a bright scarlet stream with a lightning-fast disarming charm, redirecting the two spells away to explode elsewhere midair. The flare-up chased the shadows away, and illuminated a weathered face and theirs. The wall that was conjured was gone, and so was the Shield Charm behind the two lords.

"Why are you doing this, Doge?" Harry reprimanded, once the brightness perished. He maneuvered himself forward, angling his body so that he was sideways, one arm extended in Doge's direction and the other hand slammed up against Sesshomaru's armor. "The situation has been pacified. There's no need to—"

"I-I left you behind that day. You and everyone else. And I'm so incredibly sorry. But not this time. I'm not going to run." Doge's face was pale and glistening with sweat. He swallowed. His fist was trembling around his wand. "Harry, please. Get away from him."

Harry's eyes shot sideways for a quick survey of Sesshomaru's emotional state—to make sure he wasn't about to strike—but he jerked back when a jet of light deliberately missed them by a
longshot. It ignited when it hit the ceiling.

"Don't look at him!"

"Alright, my attention's all on you," Harry appeased, deliberately lowering the tone of his voice. He kept his posture as relaxed and friendly as possible. Internally he was screaming. He said calmly, "I'm not looking at him. Put your wand down, Doge. Lord Sesshomaru's not going to attack you, isn't that right, Lord Sesshomaru—?"

"No!" The conviction in Doge's voice took Harry aback. The wizard's pale eyes were clear and focused, zooming in on the pelt on Harry's shoulders and the Head Auror's disheveled state.

His mouth firmed. "I don't know the specifics of what you've got yourself into, but I would feel a lot safer knowing you are standing by me than by that...that....Dumbledore would not want you by that Dark magical creature, Harry. It was Dumbledore's tomb you'd returned from, wasn't it? He would want you safe and out of harm's way. If he was still here. Please, Harry, run."

Panic had alighted Harry's thoughts, but he kept that at bay. He preserved his confident but defensive stance. "Alright, my wand is up." He twirled it expertly like a baton in his fingers, so that it wasn't pointed at Doge any longer. He said slowly, "I'm making my way toward you. Don't fire. Neither of you. This is all a misunderstanding."

"He attacked me!" His eyes were taut. "Why aren't you running?"

"I know. I know he did," Harry said just as Doge had aired his question.

His hand left Sesshomaru's chest. He heard the demon growl and instinctively made to move as if to stop him. But his movement was deterred when Doge detonated another stream of light waringly overhead.

The blood in his veins chilled. Past his racing heartbeat, Harry could hear himself saying, "My understanding is that you two had a disagreement, when I'd left. You tried to stop him from leaving, and he reacted."

"I was the victim!" Doge cried, his volume dangerously increasing. "Why are you taking his side?"

The urge to close his eyes and berate himself was almost crippling. But Harry maintained his show of strength. By now he was two-thirds of his way to the Wizengamot Special Advisor. "I'm not taking anyone's side," he mollified. "I'm not making any of you out to be the villain. I'm here for the both of you. But, Doge, I want you to do me a favor. I want you to put your wand down."

Doge's face was stricken. He moved his wand between Harry and Sesshomaru. "Then why aren't you telling him to put his sword down, Harry?"

"That's not how it works, Doge. I need you to do something for me first. I need to be reassured you won't do anything we'll both regret. Look, I'm making my way toward you. And he won't do anything to any of us. Put. Your. Wand. Down."

The wand straightened up in deceptively fragile, withered hands. Doge gesticulated to Harry. "Tell him to put his down first."

"...Fine." His voice firm, Harry ordered, "Lord Sesshomaru." Without looking back, he signaled to Sesshomaru to put his weapon away. "Please do as he says." After a beat, he added, "I would appreciate it. A lot. If you did. Please."
He'd added the last bit in hopes that Sesshomaru's generous spirit was still willing to play along. It felt like an eternity crawled by—where he heard nothing but his own breathing and his footsteps slowly plodding their way to the wizard—but eventually he heard the muffled shrnnk of the sword sliding back into its scabbard.

The relief that he felt was staggering.

"Alright, it's your turn to keep up your end of the bargain." He withdrew the hand that'd been facing Sesshomaru in the universal stop signal, and he redeployed it to his front. "We've both did as you've wished. Now let us feel the same assurance. Let's put this all behind us."

He saw Doge start to lower his wand, falling from arm level to below his heart. Then it halted. "W-why?" His voice was trembling. "Why do you have that thing around your shoulders, Harry?"

His leniency was boiling at an all-time low. In a curt tone, he stated, "It's none of your business. Doge, you are reaching the limits of my patience. Put your wand down." He was now only several meters away from him, but only a minute away if he sprinted.

Doge was searching him, his expression constrained. "I'm sorry. I need to be sure. Take it off."

The heavy, fluffy pelt contracted around Harry like a boa constrictor, as if Sesshomaru didn't want to release him. Upon sighting the Head Auror's instinctive reaction, Doge's eyes widened and his hand launched back up. Another spell was fizzling at the tip.

"Doge! Stop it!" Harry could smell and hear a liquid sizzling and dripping far behind him. Then he was yanked forward. There were forceful tugs against the soft fur—the old wizard was trying to wrench it off for him, his face colored with exertion—and Harry was nearly dragged off his feet as the pelt refused to let go. Then the withered hand pushed him away with surprising force, making Harry stumble.

Doge was shouting. "Run, Harry! Go get help!"

Harry regained his balance, and he could see the green glow on the dog demon's hand just as the wizard was ready to shoot a Dark curse at him. Neither one was willing to back down.

It only took him a split second to make that decision. His eyes full of remorse, Harry lifted his wand to the side of the glistening head. He whispered, "Obliviate."

Chapter End Notes

In the film, Parvati's Boggart was a cobra instead of the book-canon's mummy. I figured a mongoose Patronus would be fitting. So, next chapter: Question of Devotion. Sesshomaru discovers the existence of the Boy-Who-Lived mythos in the reconstructed Hall of Prophecy. Plus other things.
Ah, the length of this project has the potential to be grotesque. But wow! I am immensely grateful that you've taken your precious time to leave me your feedback. The overwhelming responses! Your support and encouragements! They've been incredibly invigorating for me during the writing process. Thank you for being amazing people, for your incredible maturity, and for enduring the long waits and long A/Ns. My heartfelt thanks and accolades to: jayswing96, pennameisblank, Genuka, forestreject, AnguisReginam, Suyii, you_arrogant_dick, malia, badwolfsvortex, enchanted_nightingale, itachisgurl93, and Antisen (and to Merlenyn on the Art Masterpost)! By the by:

For the fandoms, which adaptation is "Green and Gold" more faithful to? Again, it's not strictly canon. But certainly feel free to contribute and share with us your valuable insight! I know this is a big concern for the FF.net readers. But if you want, it's easier to just suspend your disbelief. If you want to get down to the nitty-gritty though, HP-wise, it's more the books and Pottermore's secret content. In other words, just assume everything is going by book canon. If somethings don't seem to jog your memory, I encourage that you fact-check the books or look it up online first, if you need a point of reference? I'll be happy to explain my reasonings, but I think it's quicker if you do it yourself. Because I'll be mostly referencing the book series instead. And if things STILL don't jog your memory, and it's obviously not coming from the film adaptation, you can now infer that I took creative liberties. And some JK Rowling's Twitter stuff. The movies will factor in as long as they don't contradict (ex. where the Deathstick was put "back where it came from" in book-canion vs. the destroyed Elder Wand in movie-canon). I'll be cherry-picking which extra additions from the film adaptation will further the story. Bits from the upcoming Fantastic Beasts film (2016) and its planned trilogy will possibly be included. The art-deco MACUSA in the film's promo! So excited to see how American wizards are interpreted! IY-wise, due to convenience, it's the anime and movies. I must reiterate, there will be canon divergences as Green and Gold progresses. Rest assured, I won't defy the important events of HP and IY canon. There wouldn't be much of point of me setting up clues and foreshadowing for you otherwise. I'll merely be taking some creative liberties—as we've already seen—so that we'll be having a relatively fresher story experience. But do keep a look-out for "Easter eggs."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sesshomaru studied the calluses of his palms and the green glow emitted at the tips of his claws. His hands flexed once, twice—as if relearning muscle movement. Seated rigidly atop the edge of the exotic but simple English furnishing, Sesshomaru's gaze snapped up once the magical partition finally groaned open.

Tiny balls of light were glowing overhead like lethargic fireflies, glinting off wild dark hair and throwing shadows over Hari's face. He was leaning with his shoulder against the doorway, surveying the demon with a weighted gaze. Behind him was a matching English armchair. With the positioning of his arms folded across his chest, the language of his posture was akin to a magistrate deliberating a condemned man's sentence.
As seen over the sorcerer's shoulder, the room that had been in shambles before appeared to be restored to its original state. Everything seemed to be set back in their place, including the upturned fare and furnishings. And at the roundtable they'd converged around hours before—now back to being whole and solid, missing the holes from Sesshomaru's corrosive poison—sat an unconscious hanyou. Doge's mouth was emitting soft, whistling snores. The old man was propped upright against the hooped backrest, his jaw hanging agape and the muscles in his face slackened.

Just seeing his face alone made Sesshomaru sneer as he recalled the events that had transpired.

Sesshomaru remembered that immediately after having been assailed by a stream of green sorcery to the side of Doge's head, the hanyou had been too disoriented to prevent a red spell from striking him. In that moment, Sesshomaru had culled his poison claws once he'd seen the elderly wizard tip over.

With the hanyou motionless on the floor, if it hadn't been for the steady rise and fall of Doge's chest, Sesshomaru would've thought he'd witnessed a quiet kill at the hands of another inuyōkai—especially with the hefty size of his mokomoko-sama draped over Hari's shoulders supporting that imagery. (For a small moment he allowed to himself, he imagined what it would've been like if the foreigner actually were an inuyōkai.)

The alpha had been as still as a statue, looming over his quarry with an unfamiliar and eerily calm scrutiny, his wand still fizzling at the tip. The sorcerer had stalked toward the motionless figure, the toe cap of his leather footwear stopping only at a scant distance away from the body.

Sesshomaru didn't quite know what he'd been anticipating, but it certainly wasn't witnessing Hari drop down to a knee and listening to him chastise the hanyou underneath his breath, sounding both rueful and critical. Hari had been massaging the bridge of his nose.

With slight concern and no small amount of curiosity, Sesshomaru had made to approach his counterpart, when he'd been promptly ordered to cease his movement. A seat had been conjured up in the middle of the distance between them, nearly startling Sesshomaru from its sudden appearance.

Doge had been levitated into the air with two quick wrist movements. Without confirming to see if his request was met, Hari had told him to take a seat while he went to clean up the mess. He rattled off an estimation of how long he'd be preoccupied. Then he'd charged Sesshomaru to stand guard and distract himself from observing what was to be done, for security reasons. To think the sharp brusqueness of Hari's command—so similar to the resolve Chichi-Ue would've shouldered upon calls to wage warfare, stalwart against the cries of both yōkai and ningen alike—had been enough that Sesshomaru's unthinking compliance had been instinctual….

His gaze traveled back from the body that had disappeared along with the Head Auror into the chamber for some time, away from the room where Hari was one-handedly bringing his chair over in his march toward him. The harsh, scraping sound of wooden chair legs being purposely dragged across stone grinded in Sesshomaru's sensitive hearing, setting his nerves on edge.

With steel inset his shoulders, Hari said, "So. A few words with you. If you'd please."

The legs dropped back down onto the floor with a strident clatter. Gloved hands pivoted the chair around so that the back support was facing the dog demon like a blockade. Swinging a leg over, Hari straddled the chair, fingers tightly laced underneath his chin in rumination. His vantage point had a direct line of sight to his associate, whereas Sesshomaru faced the direction of the closed entry.

A small frown made itself known on Sesshomaru's face. But Hari's uncouth sitting posture aside, he had the sorcerer's undivided attention. He analyzed the cleaned gloves before his eyes slid back up to Hari's face. It was just too bad that Hari's alpha front—the distinguished general who cared about
exercising his governance—was the man he was presently to be engaged in conversation with and not the solemn lord himself.

Kindness was put aside. Instead of unsure smiles and an impression of quiet indulgency, intimidation and presence had replaced them. This wasn't the man who'd confided in Sesshomaru that he sought companionship over being a trophy Mate. This was not the man who could inspire a wondrous loss of composure. This wasn't exactly the aristocrat whose chaste touch could spread heat down the tail of Sesshomaru's spine, enkindling arousal and making him harden underneath his lacquered *kusazuri* and silk *hakama*.

The longer Sesshomaru scrutinized the angular planes of those foreign features, and the shadows below the dips and curves, memories that had been handed down from antiquity began to stir inside him.

He thought he'd long forgotten this hunger, this physical thirst in the company of a desirable yōkai. The aftertaste of blood he'd licked from Hari's neck retained a trace of its coppery flavor, reminding him as it sat heavy on his tongue. His fangs ached to break skin in the penultimate ritual of Mating. Unlike the time before, the column of flesh below Hari's jaw was unmarred, like it hadn't been grazed in the first place.

Delineating the difference between memory and reality, Sesshomaru quickly clasped his hands over his lap, forcing his face back into stoicism. Only ingrained habit had him attempting to ignore his baser impulses.

"First and foremost, can you recall the specific incantation I'd used?" The pocket watch was slid out of his attire and snapped open with consummate care. With two familiar flicks of the wand, the ticking clock face was hovering up along the side of them. His wand held loosely down in one hand, Hari asked firmly, "If not, then can you recall the wrist movements? Or is it both?"

Sesshomaru's brows dipped. Lifting his gaze from the drawn weaponry, he said coolly, "Your inquiries hold the semblance of an interrogation. Why would this be a significant concern?"

The sound Hari released was a cross between a self-deprecating huff and a chuckle. "You sound so defensive. I only want a simple yes or no. Can you or can you not?" His humor fractured off. "Listen. Please, this is important for me to know before I say anything else. If it's a definitive 'no' for both, then there's honestly little complication."

Impulsively Sesshomaru countered, "The complication only exists within your mind. He did not comply with your demands. You resolved the situation. What difficulty could possibly remain?"

"Probable aiding and abetting, if you've mistaken the situation as easily Doge had." Hari grimaced. "On that note, on behalf of me and the British Ministry, I have to apologize."

Sesshomaru raised a brow. He remained silent.

"What happened shouldn't have happened. It was a poor representation on our part. I ask that you try not to hold it against us. But regardless of the prior incident...." His sight was now preoccupied with the floating clock, as if it held a higher significance over the dog demon. He mumbled, "Doge isn't a bad man, entirely, faults and all. Knowing him, he most certainly thought you were a genuine risk. That or he wanted revenge, since we've both antagonized him from before."

In pace to the ticking, his wand was drumming against the backrest. Hari continued muttering under his breath, "I just hadn't thought he'd have a prejudice against Dark Creatures. I'd thought—I would've never thought he'd have it in him. He said he'd wanted to repent—triggered by the obvious
stressors and repeated mentions of Dumbledore. Motives are never just one thing. The Headmaster was kind to him in his childhood after all. In hindsight...."

Sesshomaru had opened his mouth to interject, but the idle tapping stopped when Hari trailed off, eyeing Sesshomaru as if he'd just remembered that he had an audience.

His look of hardness ebbed a little. Hari sighed, "Apologies. This'll happen a lot; I'm sorry. I've been fighting to maintain professionalism, to control this in a manner that I know I can. You have no idea how grateful I am for your cooperation. I only request that you continue to trust me." His hand shot up, his palm facing Sesshomaru once he saw his expression. "It's a tall order, I know. But I'll be taking responsibility for him and for my decision. I will not be so arrogant as to claim responsibility for the whole, because that'd be demeaning of the courage Doge had demonstrated—however undeserved and utterly foolish it was. Still, as precaution, it's better that you remain unapprised."

"You think of me as a child? It's useless to attempt to keep this Sesshomaru unaware."

"Please listen to my rational first," Hari entreated, armed with an intentional smile. To Sesshomaru, seeing that was like glimpsing a peek of a crescent moon over a tall mountain range. He continued, "I actually don't think of you as anything patronizing. I'm thinking from a logical standpoint. That's all."

His fingers curled down to two fingers, which he used to briefly tap the side of his temple. "I'm assuming you don't have a natural resistance to our Legilimency. Would I be correct in this line of thinking, Lord Sesshomaru?"

Sesshomaru sat up straighter. The return to formality rankled the dog demon a bit—seeing as they no longer were in public eye—but he instead observed aloud, "This Sesshomaru cannot corroborate the authenticity of that claim."

"Yeah, not without experiencing it firsthand. Probably. Ideally we would test this, but my method of extracting information is specifically for conducting formal interrogations. It isn't exactly tailored toward gentleness, you could say." His expression appeared regretful. "I'm not subtle about it. Also, I wouldn't intentionally put you through that...."

Hari trailed off. His attention slid sideways to peer over Sesshomaru's shoulder, as if seeking someone else.

A muscle in his cheek jumped. The chair creaked under him as Sesshomaru brought his face a little bit closer, snatching back Hari's awareness. He posited, "The actions you have taken...what you've done, the implication is not lost on me. The hanyou did not listen to you. He raised his hand to me, disregarding your orders. He was obstinate from the start. Yet you'd spared his life."

Hari's gloved fingers twitched. "And you still haven't answered my question," he growled, "which I've noticed you've been trying to avoid. But yes, I did. I would have the legal authority to cast Memory Charms when I see fit—f—ing bollocks!" His face slammed into an upturned palm, muffling any further vulgarities.

Sesshomaru recoiled, both from the crassness spewed out of that mouth and from his accidental admission. He demanded, "You've altered his memory?"

For a while, Hari remained quiet. After another peeved exhalation, Hari said into his palm, muffled, "Plan B; fine, I see how it's gonna be." Shifting his position into a more casual stance, with the side of his face now cradled, he demanded, "Was that question a genuine concern for Doge? Or are you
asking if it'll happen to you?"

"Surely you do not mean to say your original extension of goodwill matters little," he challenged, muscles taut. Time and time again he was promised Lord Hari meant him no ill intent. But without sworn fealty to him, the suspicion lingered in the back of his mind. "Do you intend on breaking your pact with me, when this Sesshomaru has done nothing but exercise restraint?"

"There are consequences when a wizard goes back on an oath. So, no, I won't. Ours isn't official, but I don't like people who make idle promises. They're a waste of time. So the principle still stands."

Hari released a long, ragged sigh that sounded like it originated from the depth of his soul. "Let me try this again: what'd happened between you and Doge, prior to my return? If my hands are tied, I might not be able to protect you."

"Has your mind been affected as well? You yourself have witnessed this Sesshomaru's prowess firsthand. This Sesshomaru requires no protection." Conveying its owner's displeasure, the pelt tightened around Hari like a noose.

"You misunderstand me, Lord Sesshomaru." Without much thought, Hari thwacked mokomoko-sama with two patronizing pats, as if signaling for Sesshomaru to calm. His gaze flitting down toward Sesshomaru's blistered fingertips, he soothed diplomatically, "There are no doubts about your physical or magical aptitude. You're not helpless. You can handle matters yourself. In fact, I would worry for your opponent. What I'd meant was I can't always turn the other cheek when it comes to you. If other parties are involved, while I won't be actively seeking antagonism, you'll be putting me in a tight spot."

His ego was marginally appeased by the flattery. Still Sesshomaru growled, as a warning.

Hari was undeterred. A chin jerked toward the direction of the unconscious man. "The clues are there. I can theoretically piece together what'd happened…though to be honest, this is more a request for a peace of mind than making a fair, informed judgement. Did you give him added incentive to react hostilely? Your actions could've provoked him even further than what we said before I'd left. People have their breaking points."

"Be you selfish or fair, nothing this Sesshomaru has said was an untruth." Feeling the ghost of those pats against the small of his back, perhaps more petulantly than he cared he folded his arms into his sleeves. He gripped, "All this trouble, from just an old hanyou. Were my words unclear? This Sesshomaru did not think of you as hard of hearing. This Sesshomaru does not waste time on unnecessary battles."

For a moment, Hari stared. "You'd implied." Subsequently he said, "You still hadn't given me any indication that I'd made the right decision by choosing you."

Their conversation had suddenly left the precipice and dropped into uncharted waters.

Sesshomaru was struck by a sudden case of lightheadedness. It took all he could to remain expressionless as his resentment abated, and an unanticipated torrent of thoughts besieged him. From a distant awareness, he could sense mokomoko-sama slipping loose around the warm body it held, which even Hari had felt the momentum of it spilling down one of his shoulders and he'd made a motion to grab it from hitting the stone floor.

It was incomprehensible; those words should not affect him to such a degree, yet Sesshomaru found himself searching the downturned face for any relay of falsehood. Allowing himself the free fall, in a low rough inflection that grinded in his ears like gravel, he recited, "This Hari…has chosen this Sesshomaru."
The same indecipherable expression—when Hari's hands had settled over his moments prior—was there across the man's features when he looked up, making Sesshomaru think the ragged tone of his voice gave away more than he had mayhaps intended. His claws clenched underneath his sleeves.

The intensity of his gaze was that of a cautious hunter creeping up to their prey, waiting, searching for any openings. Hari said delicately, "That does...seem to be the case. I don't—I mean, his memory of this meeting is gone, you see." A hint of guilt crawled into existence. Hari gently reallocated mokomoko-sama onto a circumspect spot. "So there's honestly no point of asking him. I can only ask you follow-up questions."

Silence descended upon them, that the steady ticking of the clock and the pulsing of Tenseiga rung louder than any resonance Sesshomaru has heard in his life. Much louder than the beat in his chest and in his throat, that he wished he could reach inside himself to stop them from incessantly pounding in his ears. He studied the soft indents left in his fur, where gloved fingers had released their grip from mokomoko-sama.

With a deliberate upward tilt of his head, tucking the long hair that fell forward behind a pointed ear, Sesshomaru murmured, "Your devotion is unexpected."

Hari's brows rose. "Devotion?" he repeated, as if he'd heard wrong. After another pause, he spoke, "I suppose...I wouldn't use that intense of a term. He's a workmate. You're my responsibility. While not a felony or an act of misconduct, I can be held accountable for both of you. So think of these inquiries as formality and as a genuine concern."

"As this Hari has stated, the hanyou took preventative measures against this Sesshomaru."

"Yet your first instinct was to attempt strangulation."

"He is still among the living," Sesshomaru snapped, unappreciative of Hari's tone. "Do you think of me rash and hotheaded? It requires much more to strike my ire. Shameful as he is, he is not deserving of a death by this Sesshomaru's hands. Incidentally, the meddlesome cur cannot keep his wits about him. Any fool can see bravado had overtaken his senile faculties."

"Well, you weren't exactly presenting yourself under a favorable light, Lord Sesshomaru. You should count your good fortunes that Doge has a lousy track record." Despite valiant effort not to, Hari's mouth formed into a reluctant smirk. "I did a quick investigation. From what I saw, I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt. Thank goodness you kept a level head, even when he was being antagonistic. No one died a needless death." He suddenly resumed his restless tapping.

He was muttering, "It's no direct cause-and-effect I can point to, really, but I'll admit to being partially responsible." Raking a hand through his hair, he was chastising himself: "I'd like to say this could've been avoided entirely, but what's done is done. I'd called him a coward, knowing that it'd inadvertently goad him into being upset. Honestly, I should've seen it coming. I was being a bully."

"He lacks honor," Sesshomaru stated contemptuously. The heat in his voice had died down though as he assured, "Any grudge you have toward him is sensible. His disgrace plagued him, that even he realized he must regain favor for his misdeed. The only way to truly make amends is by dying honorably. He was undeserving of your compassion."

"I know that." Hari expelled a frustrated sound. "But at the same time, I know better than that. I'd let old pettiness override my good judgement. I was entirely capable of rising above—!" Drifting off, Hari was looking at him strangely, until a thought dawned upon him. Under a much softer volume, Hari breathed, "No, I understand now. Harakiri and seppuku. Someone like you would be offended."
Before he could press him on what he'd meant, Sesshomaru noticed that the sorcerer stole another sidelong glance away from him. Switching topics, Hari remarked, "You'd never answered my first question. Can you or can you not recall the incantation or wrist movement I'd used?"

"Do you think of this Sesshomaru as equally senile?"

"I'm not saying that." He reached out and closed a hand over the floating timepiece. "So I'm assuming you do remember then. I was intending for it to be kept confidential. Keeping you uninformed was to lessen your involvement as an accessory to this incident. But that's out of the question. So it'll have to be handled."

Upon hearing those words, Sesshomaru's muscles instinctively tensed. In his opinion, the sorcerer was making too much of it. Dissent was often sowed among political parties—allies included. "You've expressed that the action you've taken is not considered of any wrongdoing."

"It's not. Authorized Obliviators selectively remove memories from Muggles if they witness something related to us. But Doge is not a Muggle." Switching the pocket watch to his other hand, with his freed appendage he held up a finger.

"Nor did he violate the Statute of Secrecy." A second finger went up.

"Every action has a trade-off. He's a colleague, someone of import in our British Ministry. But I chose you over him. He's a wizard. You're a magical creature. That's not even taking into consideration your magical alignment. And not only that, I sided with someone from another continent, over my countryman. There's the rub."

By the time he'd concluded, all five fingers were extended. "I'm not sorry for defusing a potentially dangerous situation. I'm sorry that it had to be done. I pray that you understand the distinction, Lord Sesshomaru." His expression was grim. "There are underlying political matters afoot I don't want you to be involved in. There are people I know who'd be elated to use this to spark controversy. People love to complain, even when there's little to make a huge fuss about. The Minister and I are not in the mood to deal with that, just because the public wants a sensationalized conspiracy...albeit your existence here kind of is."

Sesshomaru claws dug deeper into the inside of his elbows. "Not everything is going to bend to your will."

"No. There doesn't need to be scandal, that's all I'm saying. The Wizengamot—magical Britain in general can't afford unnecessary distractions." His fingers withdrew to resume a new count, as visual emphasis. He ticked his fingers off: "We already have the Trials, military tribunals, the controversial ICW resolutions, the Minister's campaign for the upcoming election, ongoing investigations, and my wizards on Tour or on assignment. Then we have your magical time traveling accident, which we'll somehow have to resolve as soon as possible. We'll have to figure out a way to get you at the other side of your country's monument and back in your time."

It was bizarre. The connotation of Hari's surprisingly fastidious claims was a growing surge in his forethoughts. Unease radiated off of him. Instead of being proud that a daiyōkai of his station remained in control and hadn't let his yōkai side to get a better of him, Hari was uncharacteristically thinking as a statesman, strategically placing importance on the political ramifications over the afterglow of a decisive victory.

Sesshomaru would not have thought of him as an overly cautious warrior, from what he had seen from their interrupted spar earlier this morning. Nor would he have thought of him as methodical. Aloud, he managed, "It's not an act of treason. Yet this Hari doesn't want unnecessary trouble."
"Right, constant vigilance. I'm more concerned about controlling the fallout than having it be overblown into extraordinary magnitudes. We'll want no part in it." His mouth curved crookedly into a tight-lipped, enigmatic smile. "I will not be careless; not for a stupid misunderstanding."

He watched Hari begin to clip the watch back onto his apparel.

"So now on the off-chance that someone does riffle through your memories, you'll need a point of view that won't accidentally exacerbate the situation into something that it isn't." He sounded resigned. The chair underneath Hari creaked as he leaned back to make proper eye contact. "Keep this in your thoughts, and repeat it until you have it memorized: *we'd done nothing wrong*. Instead of confrontation, I settled the dispute as nonlethally and as quickly as I could without either parties deteriorating into mindless violence. He was being uncooperative. Repeatedly. Thus, I'd made the executive decision that I'd thought best in that moment."

Hari's vision was drifting away again. Rolling the silver chain between his thumb and pointer finger, he said, "Try to remember that when someone tries to navigate through your head. I've already shared with you of our preventative methods. Break direct eyesight. Or get someone's help. You should soon be able to identify which wizards are of my men by color or design of their robes."

For a moment, Sesshomaru was silent. Then he said, "If it would assuage your mind, this Hari showed considerable grace. His head did not roll." When Hari continued to look fairly disconsolate, he dared to voice, "This Hari is under no obligation to answer, but has there been something else on your mind? You've been inattentive in the span of this entire conversation."

That earned him a startled glance. Proud as Sesshomaru was that he was developing a finesse for catching him off-guard, he waited patiently while Hari brooded over disclosing further information.

Just as Sesshomaru thought that the sorcerer was going to rebuff him, with a minute frown Hari dropped the delicate metal link. Careful not to disturb the hefty pelt draped over him, Hari scooted back in his chair before getting up, swinging a foot over the seat to join his other leg. He apologized, "I'm sorry if it'd seemed like I was a million miles away sometimes. It's not related to this at all."

Sesshomaru cared little about its relevancy. His arms unwound from his sleeves as he stood up, as the chair dissipated behind him. "It must be a matter of significance if your *yōki* has been this tightly wound up."

"It has?" Aiming an ambiguous look down at his wand and then back up, Hari shrugged. "It pertains to my investigation. I was testing something. And giving my department and the others time to gather results." He stalled. Around his wrist, he opted to fiddle with a small precious gemstone—one among of his collection of cufflinks, as Sesshomaru had been told—as red as a drop of blood against a snow field.

Sesshomaru tilted his head, waiting for the sorcerer's indecisiveness to pass.

Eventually deciding to hell with it, Hari murmured, "Honestly, I was...half-hoping it'd be simple to reclaim lost or possibly stolen property. It's a bit worrying about what they stole, whether intentionally or not. But if it's been this long already since I left and it still hasn't come, I might as well face reality."

He must be referring to this White Tomb, Sesshomaru determined, throwing his memory a little further back. Still, he had to ask: "This Hari is referring to the gravesite, where you and your vassals fought...these 'Death Eaters'?"

A shadow passed over Hari's face. He allowed, "My unit and I officially apprehended a Snatcher."
The assumption was that they'd all died off, so I had to make sure before I leapt to wild conclusions." He made an irritated, clicking sound. "There was a recovered armband sent to Analysis. That turned out to be a complete waste of time and resources. If we apprehended Decio, then it's quite possible there are other Snatchers. Their status is just MIA or in hiding, than being killed off like we'd thought they were."

"They stole the earth where his skeleton rested?" Sesshomaru speculated, bemused. There had been that other miko whose smell of graveyard dirt and clay clung to her skin, which had left the inuyōkai little doubt as to her circumstances. Just the thought of someone disrespecting a final resting place made his blood curdle. Remembering the showdown long ago between him and Inuyasha in the border between this world and the next—and Naraku's impudence to dare desecrate their father's remains in order to collect the last jewel shard—he surmised, "Or perhaps it were...your mentor's bones? To perform a resurrection?"

"I don't know if it was a Death Eater or a Snatcher. But if it'd been his bones, then all of magical Britain would know by now and be roaring for us to take up arms. So it's a little more complicated than that. It would've been less problematic had my summoning spell worked. Considering the circumstances, I'd assumed it would've."

Hari stopped again, standing up straighter and looking elsewhere. With a swish of his wand, the chair he'd been sitting on flew into the distance, so that it completed the furniture set where he'd retrieved it.

Sesshomaru gauged the short distance between them. It required two—perhaps three—strides to bridge the gap. His gaze lingering on the imagery that his mokomoko-sama made on the sorcerer's shoulders, he prompted, "Such as?"

His question hung in the air as Hari's eyes lowered to the Tenseiga briefly, before raising to meet Sesshomaru's reserved ones.

Sesshomaru kept his expression neutral—neither antagonistic nor eager, but not entirely uninterested —when he saw that Hari's arms were crossed and his body like a rigid wooden post. From that stance, it looked like this was where he was to draw the line of confiding with the dog demon.

Eventually Hari succumbed once more. He exhaled deeply, his demeanor clearly indicating that he might as well acquiesce to an innocent question. Tucking his hands into his pockets, he allowed, "I'd left a Peverell relic with Dumbledore, to pay my final respects." His mouth curled. "A bit sentimental, I'm aware. Many people, including Dumbledore, coveted it. But its history...let's say it's a little ironic."

"This Hari willingly bequeathed a family heirloom to a deceased man," Sesshomaru restated skeptically. "To a person who would have no use of such treasure? If it was taken, you have no one to blame but yourself. There should've been precautions taken."

"I did take precautions, after Voldemort's stint. So what you're saying—while I understand completely—to be forthright with you, grandeur has little appeal to me. Very few knew I had it or were aware that it existed. This isn't something a lot of people would know. Only Voldemort would've had the gall to disturb someone's final resting place. And only my Office has the legal authority to order an exhumation. Only the extraordinarily daring would dig through a celebrated hero's remains, knowing very well they'd incur the ire of many authorities."

Sesshomaru canted his head. He laid a steadying hand on the trembling hilt of Tenseiga. "Why would this relic of yours be coveted? Aside from it belonging to your family's legacy, there would be no purpose in pillaging what rightfully belongs to you. They could seek extortion or purposely use it
"That's surprisingly what someone else had suggested to me too." The close-lipped smile broadened. "If I wanted to, I could file a property theft report and have the appropriate parties launch a formal investigation into recovering it. But I've no use for it. I'm inclined to believe its disappearance might've been circumstantial, for reasons I won't fully get into. This is only a minor setback."

"The existence of grave robbers isn't a rarity. Nor are they scarce. They're a blight to every country."

"If it really were grave robbers who'd unethically unsealed his tomb, common sense wouldn't make them think that it'd be mine. They'd naturally assume it'd belonged to him, because of a tradition we have here. I'd figured it'd be considered as a standard object I had buried with an extraordinary man. Besides, what good is acquiring a weapon, when it's designed to ideally work for only one person? As a trophy? It's ridiculous to go through the trouble—and I'm getting ahead of myself again, aren't I?" His eyes squeezed shut. "All in all, this is something I'll need to confer with Hermione and...oh, sweet Merlin, you haven't met her husband yet face-to-face."

Sesshomaru raised a brow. "Her Mate."

"...You've met Hermione. She's the Deputy Head of our department. Her husband, Ron, is one of our seasoned Aurors. You've seen two of his siblings already—Percy and Ginevra. Two of the five. I'm not even taking into account their parents and..." He breathed a sigh. "Hermione and Ron work well together. We're good friends. Which reminds me; I'll need to discuss with those brilliant nutters about something important." His vision was now upturned to contemplate the ceiling. Armed with a dark glare, Hari resumed, "We'd heard of the relic's existence at the same time, very long ago. People desire it for the supposed power you'll get out of it. What's troubling is that if anyone did know, besides us, then I suspect they'll attempt to gain the final reward."

"What could be more worthwhile than attaining this rumored power?"

"Many people can't help being defined by their greed. It's only natural." Hari was rolling his wand between his fingers. "So I'd say it's quite the certain title and the implication accompanying it. There's a story that comes with; one of our more obscure legends, if you will."

This time Hari's smile was all teeth. "It's just too bad they won't be able to attain true mastery. Not without fulfilling certain prerequisites. Any effort they'd make would anyway be in vain."

Nostalgic anticipation flooded through Sesshomaru, upon hearing that ominous promise. He marveled, "So you are aiming to reclaim your family possession."

"I suppose that'd be a lovely thought," Hari remarked casually, his meaning evasive. He was withdrawing a purple square piece of paper from his pocket. His vision traveled the distance between the exit and the conjured partition where Doge laid ahead. "But first, the priority is getting Doge to leave. We wouldn't want to cause the Wizengamot worry. Rest assured, I won't—we won't let anyone stand in your way. The well will be secured, ready to send you back home, Lord Sesshomaru. If not...we'll address that issue when it comes."

Sesshomaru's lips slightly parted, as a tendril of homesickness struck him deep into his chest upon hearing that. He was reflecting on how that particular inflection miraculously spun a memory of his youth, as he watched Hari turn away from him to begin confidentially striding back to his countryman.

When Doge regained consciousness, aside from the initial bewilderment of their surroundings, he...
retained none of his hostility. Nor could he seem to recall the entirety of their meeting prior to having his memory erased.

Doge's vision was slightly out-of-focus and his expression vacant, when Hari fed the hanyou an alternative account—sticking as close to the truth as possible—in the narrow window that they had before Doge's higher-cognitive functions returned. Hari even divulged the Disapparition, although he'd told Doge that when he'd returned he found Lord Sesshomaru in an annoyed mood; that with Doge knocked-out, the pair had been inconvenienced. Hari simply omitted a few details such as the animosity between Doge and Sesshomaru, what had happened when Hari left, and what took place after his return.

Hidden behind his back, his wand was glowing.

A sharp claw clattered idly against the pommel of Bakusaiga. Hari's mannerisms and continued competence under stress bespoke of willpower and experience. For someone who had just shared his grievances with Sesshomaru about the man, the sorcerer was oddly benign and civil—albeit reduced to stilted sentences.

Throughout the narration, Sesshomaru lingered in the background, moodily stroking his soft pelt which had been forcibly returned to him preceding Doge's reawakening. Watching the sorcerer interact with whom Sesshomaru thought now to be an eyesore, pensively he recalled the purple crane Hari had sent off, which he'd been informed was a memo to alert Shacklebolt of the incident. With little else to do aside from selectively listening in and watching Hari handle the situation, Sesshomaru had the luxury to further analyze the memory that was dredged up.

At any time the Inu no Taishō was away or preoccupied, it would be Haha-Ue and Sesshomaru alone with their vassals in the castle in the sky. A constant presence on the grounds would be the serene, distinguishable sound of the gakusō, a thirteen-stringed zither imported from the Central Continent. Sometimes by the time he'd completed his daily lessons, Sesshomaru would catch the last reverberations of what had been the bored, tentative plucking of silk strings in the direction of his parents' imperial bedchamber.

In privacy, Haha-Ue never cared much for Japanese social convention; that, as female, wealthy or not, she was going against tradition. Overlooking their large garden, trying to mimic the latest composition heard, Haha-Ue would be seated primly on her knees on the tatami floor with the musical instrument in front of her. Her playing would be reminiscent of Chinese or Korean court music she was fond of requesting from any visiting traveling troupe—various yōkai of prestigious musical families wearing magnificent costumes—that were intelligent enough to exploit one of her few known weaknesses, to perform their ensemble at their Royal Castle.

Music and dance were among the few observations of curious human rituals that demons didn't object to as much, and most yōkai refused to adhere to the ningen's trade embargo—erected due to unforeseen pirate raids—between Nippon and the Ming Dynasty. Mortals' plights and prohibitions were often considered beneath their concernment.

When he'd been little, he remembered cuddling up to her on the cushion, watching her lithe fingers stumble inexpertly over the long wooden instrument. It was one of the few times his mother dulled the edge of her sharp tongue—which she would carelessly stab like a poisoned needle in their court audience, eliciting provocation—and she relaxed her guard. The glow of the moon would bathe their silhouettes, sometimes eliminating the need for lighting lanterns. Her dark blue outer wrap would be loosely gathered around them, the soft fur keeping them warm in the night. Her scent would be soothing and familiar, and her long silvery hair would be down and unornamented.

Occasionally he would fall asleep to Inukimi's whispers and humming of drawn-out lyrics of the
high-pitched variety, her favorite lines belonging to the more romantic tales. Her strong lilting voice would fade into their view outside, carried away by the eventide breeze.

The nostalgia that'd surfaced from recalling that memory surprised even him. Emerging from his reflection, Sesshomaru studied the scene from across the room. If he stretched his imagination, he thought he could hear the tiniest grate of exhaustion seeping into Hari's modulated accent. It conjured remembrance of light rainfalls bleeding into a carefully cultivated garden—and in his mind, of the pattern of roiling sea crests raked into uniform white sand and finer gravel—as Hari's explanation wined down.

"Are you…." Doge hesitated, now capable of returning conversation than his parroted, one-word rejoinders. Licking dry lips, he repeated, "Are you quite certain?"

"Quite so," Hari reassured. The dull glow dimmed, and the wand quietly slid back into the holster. He held out Doge's hat, which Doge took and nervously adjusted onto his smooth head. His voice deepening into a somewhat patronizing tone, Hari said, "It's embarrassing. I know. Honestly, I was let-down by you. In front of my witness, really?"

Doge's face reddened. Refusing to look at the creature, he insisted to the wizard, "It doesn't happen often. Actually, no, I don't think it's ever happened to me before." The wrinkly skin scrunched up. Rubbing his forehead, he mumbled, "Though, I suppose fainting spells are something to look forward to when you get to be my age. I'm not that weak-minded, y'know. Y'know?"

"I'm sure you aren't. If you were, more people would hear. Imagine that. You might want to consider bedrest, Mr Doge. Or perhaps retirement finally."

Doge's mouth twisted. He hissed resentfully, "I am not the coward or the invalid you seem to think I am, Mr Potter."

"Believe me, I can think that no longer," Hari appeased. "You're a surprisingly strong wizard; I'd be gobsmacked if you'd need hospitalization. A shame if you're that weak of heart. And of mind. Although, I insist it might still do you some good." It was misdirection, and a challenge.

The bags under Doge's eyes grew more pronounced as he squinted. "You've grown to be awfully cheeky." His voice was low and whispery. Even he could discern that his competence was being called into question.

"Am I? I meant no disrespect." Hari stood up. His eyes swerved toward their exit briefly. Seemingly inspired, he prompted, "We were talking about Umbridge, correct? That's the excuse we're going for, when you report to the Wizengamot."

"I…suppose?" His forehead was creased with lines. Suddenly his features lit up. He blurted, "Would you be willing to be a character witness on the prosecution's side? Everyone knows there's no love lost between you two. But your disfavor is actually justified."

Hari and Sesshomaru kept their expressions straight, both refusing to let slip the déjá vu they felt upon this familiar line of exchange. It held enough of a similarity to the original's, that one might've suspected the elderly wizard to have practiced beforehand.

They saw Doge's expression turning apprehensive, as if a thought suddenly occurred to him. Doge had turned his face up to peer at Hari's carefully neutral one. In a quieter volume, the wizard asked, "That is, if it's not that traumatic for you, Mr Potter?"

"And why would it be traumatic?" His voice held the barest hint of tension.
Doge swallowed, his neck and chin retreating down into his cowl-like garment. "Of course it wouldn't. You're a survivor. You're the one in high position. She's detained in custody. The accused can't do anything to you."

"Doge." When he saw the hanyou flinch, Hari relaxed his tone. He said, "Mr Doge, I agreed to your offer much earlier. But you hadn't answered my question about whether or not my testimony would be seen as damning evidence. You know the barrister is going to call me into question during the cross-examination. Are Pensieves even admissible in trial?"

"They'll want to see the alleged incident. We'll have a much stronger case if we have solid evidence to back it up."

Hari considered him with a weighted gaze. He said slowly, "I could bottle my memories for you and have it to your office tomorrow. Would it be necessary to bring people to support my claims? I've heard of a few old schoolmates who might've underwent the same grief. Y'know what I'm talking about."

"We already have people that can attest to several witnessed crimes. So, no. If they show up in the Pensieve, it's not necessary, I should think."

For an inexplicable reason that Sesshomaru could not ascertain, he could see Doge's eyes were once again fixed on Hari's clenched hands, as if harboring a morbid fascination with those body parts.

Doge started, "I'll try to tell our prosecutor to be sensitive. But, just be aware. It might come to that. I know you're a proud wizard, Harry, but—!"

"You just told me there'll be other witnesses brought in, Mr Doge." Hari's tone was clipped. "The quantity is substantial. I want her in Azkaban for life. If my Aurors aren't seeing her in their prison rotations by the end, then I can't fathom how badly it went tits up. This is essentially a trial by media. We have a pile of evidence against her."

Doge leapt to his feet. The sudden vertigo of the action seemed to throw him off, but he held onto the edge of the table to steady himself. He croaked, "You know the press can be held in contempt of court, after formal arrest, for any coverage influencing public opinion before a trial. There are regulations. It may be Umbridge, but the cow still deserves fairness. You of all should know. You'd advocated for the Malfoys."

He gave Hari a searching look. "This may be unprofessional of me to say, but I know you have a...personal interest invested in this case. That's why I'm promising you she will serve a sentence. How long though, that's still up in the air. I can't guarantee life."

"Duly noted. But careful; your bias is showing." Hari's gaze traveled over to Sesshomaru briefly— who'd shamelessly made his eavesdropping no secret during their entire conversation—before returning back to Doge. His brows were furrowed. "I do have one request. If it's doable, great. If not, fine. At least I asked."

"I can remove myself from either opinion or see things from both perspectives, as they say," Doge was stating defensively in the same time as Hari spoke. "Which is why I can still advise this trial. In your case, of course you have a request." He sighed. "Everyone I've talked with has one. Alright, but please remember to be reasonable. What request could you possibly have of me?"

"Have the barrister call me near the middle-to-last batch. When the burnout's begun to set in." Hari crossed his arms. "I know this sounds high and mighty of me, but y'know why I'd be concerned...hold on, if you have my memories, would you even need me on the stand?"
"The barrister would want to question you, Mr Potter."

"Right, about the validity. "But is my attendance absolutely mandatory?" He aimed another meaningful look in Sesshomaru's direction, and then back. Two fingers were crooked, indicating for Doge to lean in. His voice lowered to a conspiratorial volume, even the dog demon had to strain his ears to hear him whisper, "She's known for her prejudices, Mr Doge. And you know of my situation. You're the Advisor, for both sides. So tell me, objectively, is it honestly worth rocking the boat?"

A tic had developed near the hanyou's jaw. Gnarled hands clenched into fists. Doge hissed back, "It's only one-to-a-few days, for your testimony. You may temporarily leave your witness in the protection of a trusted associate, Head Auror."

"I was referring to myself, Doge." Hari pinned him with a glower. "You know what happens between me and of anything of high-profile. I was talking about this earlier; I'm worried they'll spin this into a publicity stunt. And you know how little I think of the Wizengamot and the media. You can't blame me for anticipating a crucifixion."

Doge's eyes widened. He winced as if struck. In a hoarse rasp, he demanded, "How can you say that? I understand your paranoia, truly. I'm not questioning what you'd gone through. I can't vouch for those media vultures, but the Wizengamot—our Wizengamot is better than that. The Wizengamot you'd knew in 1995 had Fudge and Umbridge."

"Thank you for understanding. I appreciate it. But you forget, her barrister...if they're competent, they'll go straight for my jugular." Hari made a slicing motion with his finger across his throat as he stepped forward.

Falling behind Doge, he casually threw an arm over the hanyou's shoulders. His iron grip disguised as a friendly gesture, he effortlessly shepherded Doge—despite any feeble protest and polite foot-dragging—across the long chamber toward the door where Sesshomaru stood guard nearby. The inuyōkai's presence was ignored in favor of their private conversation.

As he maneuvered the Wizengamot Special Advisor onward, Hari susurrated, "Let's be realistic, from one Ministry official to another."

The illumination from the floating balls of light reflected off the men's heads and was mirrored on the floor. In the ethereal dimness, Doge's upturned eyes reflected a semblance of pity as Hari murmured, "You claim you want fairness. Once I'm called in, there will be little of that. People might not get the closure they're expecting. The focus won't be on her and the suffering she's caused. It won't be getting her victims the justice they deserve."

Hung over the man's clavicle, the glove made a creaking sound as Hari's hand balled into a fist. Almost like a late punishment for the tight spot that the older wizard had landed him in, Hari concluded, "I change my mind, Doge. Ask first whether or not my presence is that important to the case. If you can get the verdict without my memories or me there, in person, then we needn't even bother."

Ear-splittingly shrill sirens greeted them when Hari wrenched the door open, rushing in like a blast of hot air. Hanyous, adult to elderly, were scurrying in the corridor like panicked rats. The paper memos zooming high overhead was a brightly-colored flock of birds heading to their destinations.

Sesshomaru's claws went to his ears as Doge, drowning in bewilderment, shouted above the blaring howls, "You're retracting your offer!" His hat was tugged down his ears, serving as an ineffectual muffler. He blurted, "Are you telling me you won't have your memories to my office tomorrow!"
The noises picked up.

Whirling around, Doge boggled at his colleagues, trying to make sense of their movements. Some kept their heads low. Others were frantically searching for something or for someone. "What the hippogriff is happening!"

"Troll containment and the subsequent result of a counterterrorism investigation! Y’know, the usual!" Hari supplied offhandedly, seemingly detached of the chaos. That was until he perceived the imminent tidal wave that was fast-approaching them, after having noticed their whereabouts. His resolve faltered.

He swiftly gave a shove between Doge's shoulder blades, almost sending the man careening into the polished linoleum floor. Grabbing the door lever, Hari yelled, "It was good having your acquaintance, Mr Doge! See what your legal teams say before I deliver anything! Send me an owl! Or a crane! I'll be monitoring you! Don't be a stranger!"

He spluttered, "Y-You'll be monitoring me! For what?" Stumbling forth, Doge regained his balance and he orbited on his heels. In an attempt to be heard, raising his voice, he objected loudly, "Hold on a minute, Mr Potter, I'll still need to tidy—!"

"The room will be ready for the wizard that'd lent it to you!" Hari shouted, slamming a hand up to the man’s chest, shoving him back outside. "Thanks for acting as intermediary! And for substituting for Malfoy! Get back to me on the Umbridge case!" With a courteous wave, he shut the door in the wizard's face.

In the silence that once again had befallen upon them in the room, both his and Sesshomaru's ears still throbbed painfully from the commotion.

Hari heaved a sigh, dropping his forehead against the wooden surface. He was waiting. He only lifted his head when he thought he heard Doge's footsteps travel away, possibly being compelled to follow the moving turbulence outside.

After a minute, he squared his shoulders and he performed a clean, militaristic turn with a snap of his heels together. His wand was back in his hand. Scrutinizing the wide-eyed demon and their immediate surroundings, his gaze dove down on the remaining fare replaced on the table. There were pieces of red parchment still scattered beneath, which Doge had remained unaware of.

Hari proclaimed, "Well, one thing's resolved. Now, cleanup. Then we'll hopefully be ready to go."

The instant they crossed the threshold, the sorcerer transformed into the embodiment of efficiency. Hari's gestures and speech became more vivacious, more confident and emanating with renewed vigor as he interacted with various personnel on their way to the lifts. Before Sesshomaru's eyes, the vestiges of the tired daiyōkai had melted and a formidable alpha-general stepped into place. There was fire in his eyes now.

In the short while that it took Hari to bequeath two wands to his vassals and hand instructions on what to do with them, the distance between sorcerer and dog demon was broadened. The hanyous were an army of ants, with more and more marching up to the Head Auror that, even with his long gait, Sesshomaru lagged behind.

Hari's hands were dancing in front of him as he spoke. Orders were given to each and every misbegotten hanyou that sought Hari's attentiveness amongst the chaos. People were told to assess a situation and proceed with caution. Suspects in custody were to be identified. Interrogations had to
start without him. Before he came back, Hari wanted results from his department, the Committee, and another coroner if the medical examiner that was pulled from a St Mungo's was unavailable for the rest of the evening. His investigative and forensic units had to be ready to present their findings of what they had presently.

Clenched in a gloved hand was an interdepartmental Howler—which Hari had informed Sesshomaru back in the room—that was sometimes used to wrench his attention away from whatever preoccupied him at the moment. They were sent especially if their summons weren't being met and they were desperate to receive him. The letter having been repaired, beside its official Ministry seal was the black ink denoting the characters: to Head Auror PBP, from DoM.

Occasionally breaking from the issuing of directives, Hari's head could be seen resurfacing from the throng, looking over his shoulder to make sure Sesshomaru hadn't lost him. He'd wave the Howler high in the air like a crimson war flag, waiting to be found. But then the wizard's attention would immediately be snatched back by someone who thought to make themselves as his newest priority, and his feet would be forced to shuffle along. Judging by the rigid muscles underneath the strange attire, even from far away Sesshomaru could see Hari's patience was beginning to fray.

Six meters stood between him and Hari. Sesshomaru glowered at the back of people's heads. Having scoped out their distance, to the ones closest to him he barked an authoritative "Move."

Spooked by the unanticipated baritone behind their backs, the individuals who'd heard him hightailed from his path. Their mouths hastily sprung forth automatic apologies. Their eyes ricocheting around, before they realized who'd voiced the command, Sesshomaru would have already bypassed them, his tall frame disappearing into the congested multitude.

"You're in my way."

Four.

"Begone or be killed."

Two.

"Do you not fear death? Leave my sight!"

Closing in on his target, he detected that the sorcerer had been communicating with a man whose disheveled robes stunk of the spilled blood of mountain oni, perhaps having been in the presence of a colony.

Now within hearing range, Sesshomaru picked up on the trail-end of Hari finishing curtly, "—Could honestly care less about the Committee's concerns. Have someone turn it off! I think everyone's gotten the clue from the ruckus."

Hari was holding the liftgate open, his body and outstretched arm preventing people from accessing the emptied transportation. As if sensing the demon nearing, Hari's gaze snapped to him. He scowled. With hardly any warning, he reached forward and grabbed ahold of Sesshomaru's wrist, unceremoniously yanking the dog demon from the crowd.

Increased panic heralded their reunion, upon the crowd seeing the lords were ready to take leave of them. The clamor rose.

In the meantime, taking advantage of the momentum, Sesshomaru managed to neatly sidestep around him to avoid collision against his pauldron. Twisting around, the unadorned part of his right shoulder bumped against Hari's, before the sorcerer's fingers loosened. His back against the lift, Sesshomaru
regained his balance behind Hari, watching as the gloved hand shot back up against the frame.

"Sir!"

"Head Auror!"

"Warlock Potter!"

"Lord Potter!"

Before Hari could close the grilles, feet and flailing arms were muscled forth. Like the bending curve of a ship's hull, they were trying to push past the blockade that was the Head Auror to get inside.

Instinctively Sesshomaru pressed closer against the wall, away from the pandemonium, keeping his facial features as emotionless and unaffected as possible.

"Good god, you people. I know. I know. I have to—!" Hari abruptly turned his head, glaring up at Sesshomaru over his shoulder. Green eyes assessed the short distance between them, with a frown etched onto his mouth. Like a boulder, unmoved against the surge of bodies against him, he announced loudly, "Ours can wait momentarily! His can't! Lord Sesshomaru first has to be escorted to Level Nine!"

Sesshomaru stood up straighter, reminded of what took place beforehand. Irritation flooded within him, as he was being irresponsibly left behind like a worthless toy yet again. "You intend to be abandoning me? Where else would you be heading?"

"But, sir!" a meddlesome hanyou objected. "You can't! You have to—!"

"I said I'll come back after I escort him to Level Nine!" Hari roared, swinging his attention back to them. "Are you all thick? Do you not see this letterhead from the 'DoM'? I thought our Level had better trained wizards under me! Or were all my instructions from earlier unclear? Fall in line!"

The dog demon wasn't able to see his expression, but the weaker-willed half-breeds promptly paled in complexion, stammered apologies, and retreated far away. Only few were brave enough to remain within striking distance.

Spreading his legs out further until both feet were touching the structure, the Head Auror took on an oppositional stance. His elbows were bent and his fingers were clutching the framework, his three rings straining against the leather material. With a snarl, he addressed, "If you're with me, I'll meet you back shortly on Level Two, outside my office. Have the department gathered for a quick debriefing! Everyone else—be useful, find a more constructive use of your time, and stop wasting mine!"

With no one impeding him this time, the gilded grilles were slammed shut. Cut off from the commotion, the noises that'd been blaring in their eardrums muffled.

Hari jabbed the button labeled with the number.

The lift lurched beneath their feet, and they took off.

The sorcerer's head was bowed. His gloved hands were affixed to the gate, his posture loosened and broad shoulders sloped low. His breaths were long and regulated, as if he were taking the time to control himself. He seemed determined to meld with the gate.

"Are they always so...desperate for this Hari's favor?" Sesshomaru managed to say when the silence
became unbearable, staring at the junction between Hari's shoulder blades. The longer he gazed at him, the lower his opinion dwindled regarding the accursed wizards who burdened this Hari. A proverb from Central Asia popped into his head, of how a man who removes a mountain begins by carrying away small stones. He took a small step forward, his claws itching to hold something.

His wrist down by his side still felt the memory of that restrictive grasp, of fingertips carelessly brushing up against his sensitive magenta markings. The scent of tanned animal hide would be strong, Sesshomaru imagined, had he felt inclined to bring his wrist up to his nose to sniff the remnant scent—like how wealthier females would dab floral tincture on their wrists to smell and mask stale hygiene. Only his would be more masculine, robust in the way leather smelled and not quite as flowery.

"I'm their superior," Hari answered, subdued yet sounding offended by what Sesshomaru had spoken. "I handle their paychecks. I'd be the authority they report to. It's my job to oversee national security, which makes up a significant portion of our governmental affairs."

"Can they not get it from your soldiers or from their own observations?" Sesshomaru advanced forth another step. Hidden from sight, he pressed the affected area of his hand down against his hakama, relishing the soothingly cold silk brought to warm skin. "This Hari does not report to them. They report to this Hari. Worthless warriors who cannot think for themselves, who refuse to respect and follow rank, are liabilities."

Hari's shoulders began tensing up. "I don't hire people who can't be an asset and contribute when it's mandatory. For someone who's been involved in a country's affairs for as long as you have, I'd figured you'd be familiar with the fundamentals. They're not incompetent; they just need to be told or reminded of what to do."

By the time he reached the jawline, Hari admonished, "Do I have to get your permission now to leave you alone for a few hours? Or am I going to have to worry, being left to your own devices, that you'll somehow land us into trouble again? When I'd just cleaned up after you."

Sesshomaru felt heat rise to his features but, with considerable effort, he turned his face so that Hari would not see his self-mortification. His jaw clenched from the effort to stay his rebuke.

Before they knew it, the interminable silence was returning. Their ride became filled with nothing but the rumble of mechanisms and the gathering of thoughts. Both men ignored the instrumental music which seeped in from unknown origins.

After a short while, Hari was the first one to break the self-imposed silence. "Actually, no, that was petty. You don't deserve that. That was wrong of me and inappropriate." The admission had been soft, as if it pained him to say such.

When Sesshomaru turned to look, Hari had gone back to sightlessly staring straight ahead.

"I'm sorry. It's not that I plan everyday to end up having a strop." Hari's voice still hadn't lost its sharpness, but the bite was gone. His hands clasped behind his back, Hari confessed, "It's been stressful. Today especially. But I shouldn't take it out on you. I'm amazed that you've been remarkably patient with me. And with this situation."

"Rest assured, this Sesshomaru is not so easily affected," Sesshomaru returned candidly. He felt a little calmness return to him. "Your fervent placating is abominable. I am not one of your men, Hari."
"Hn. You’ve noticed that you do throw in the first-person singular pronoun every once in a while, right?" The smirk could be heard in Hari's voice. It was gone in a flash though, as the sobriety set back in. He spoke stiltedly, "Do you...remember the conversation we had...earlier this afternoon? Regarding your father's sword? That and, well, deaths and resurrections."

"This Sesshomaru has had many dealings with the Netherworld and its pallbearers, yes."

There was an extended pause.

Sesshomaru thought he heard the trail-end of a muted, "$\text{Good god.}$"

Hari muttered, "Of course there would be. In Asia. The existence of mythical pallbearers aside..." Fidgety, a thumb was seen tapping a knuckle erratically. "So, theoretically, it shouldn't surprise you if you encounter fantastical stories or happenings related to death and the afterlife."

"State your point."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but that sensitive nose of yours...." This time he met his gaze, fully turning around. "Hypothetically, let's say I dropped something somewhere when I was...seventeen? It's been some years now, but would you be able to locate it if you have the scent trail?" He dubiously considered himself before sending Sesshomaru a skeptical look. "I should smell the same. I haven't even switched cleaning products. You're a 'dog demon,' so I couldn't help but wonder—"

"—You wish to use me as an actual hunting dog," Sesshomaru stated. He eyed him for a moment, and then gestured to mokomoko-sama situated over his shoulder. "This Sesshomaru has your scent. There is no surety, but this Sesshomaru may attempt to track down its whereabouts. What is this object that this Hari seeks?"

"I might tell you after the spar I still owe you." His hand shot up. "It's not that I doubt you. Far be it. It's just if a summoning spell won't work, then a point-me is just as useless. It's a very small object. I have little confidence of finding it regardless of who helps me. Also, I'm inclined to settle our wager first. We made a magical contract, after all. Completing it should be our priority before the night's over."

Sesshomaru furnished him with a dirty look. "Don't think this Sesshomaru has forgotten the unforeseen outcome of our agreement. Neither is the bounty forgotten for the victorious party of our wager. Which has yet to be fulfilled."

"...Right." Hari was intensely studying the numbers nearing their desired floor over his shoulder. Two more. "That's why I want it finished. So there's hopefully no residual accidental magic lingering between us."

His concentration focused on the panel, he did not see Sesshomaru's mouth twist in displeasure. Hari continued, "You saw how occupied I'll be. I have a checklist of things I still have yet to do, people to meet and debrief, important forensic discussions to be had...having you needlessly tagging along would be an unproductive waste of our times. That's why I'm having you meet the Unspeakables first. The Department of Mysteries actually was to be our destination, before all this happened."

Hari indicated to the space between them. "Fortunately, if we've put up with each other for this long and we still haven't found creative ways to kill each other, I reckon you can handle quality time with them until a solution's been found. They're an eccentric lot, but not...dreadful. I can't vouch for their social skills. Actually, if some are impolite, please try not to blow up at them. They're probably unaware they're being disrespectful. They'll be excited about your case; about the possibility of an anomaly. Their Time Turners were all broken, and lo and behold with a time traveler conveniently
within their grasp, I can already foresee you being rather popular with them."

An invisible bell dinged, and a bodiless female announced pleasantly, "Level Nine, Department of Mysteries."

She began launching into a list of the various organizational bodies that made up its department, but Hari had ushered Sesshomaru out of the lift. They stepped into a short corridor where nothing could be seen but a row of torches and flickering blue flames. There was a cold draft, and an odor of chemicals and machinery was pungent underneath the balmy scent of dust and stone that obscured it.

The sorcerer led the way. Their footsteps loud in their ears, Sesshomaru kept close to Hari as they navigated through the nebulous interior that was a lot like a catacomb.

In their habitual silence, Sesshomaru reflected. It'd seemed as if Hari was implying that he intended to leave the inuyōkai in their company for however long it'll take to send him back. Sesshomaru quelled the instinctive urge to give voice to his displeasure.

Sooner than he anticipated, they found themselves lost in a larger circular chamber. The entirety of the room seemed to be painted in black shadows, from ceiling to floor, only interspersed with identical doors camouflaged into the equally dark walls. Each flame, from the branching candles up against the walls, dyed Sesshomaru's and Hari's silhouettes with a dull, eerie blue sheen.

Eyeing the unadorned doors, Hari cautioned, "Try not to touch anything."

"There is nothing that can be touched," he retorted, returning his gaze sidelong at his companion. He observed aloud, "You've not clearly explained to this Sesshomaru why exactly this Hari has orchestrated arrangements for us to meet this 'Department of Mysteries.'"

"Indeed? Well, with respect, don't you want to return home? Shacklebolt's right; this is their field of expertise. You'll eventually come across the right personnel if you look for the Time Room; it's hard to miss." Hari gestured vaguely at the dozen iron doors. As if lost in a memory, he recited faintly, "They know you're coming. The Unspeakables who aren't expecting you will have theirs locked. I think. There's still a chance a dunderhead forgot. It's neither here nor there, but I remember a sentient brain trying to eat my partner's face, deaths, ambushes... I wouldn't put much faith in any forethought. They honestly leave much to be desired after."

So the implication was that Sesshomaru should anticipate incursions. Balling his claws into fists underneath his sleeves, he growled. "Then you are leaving this Sesshomaru hereabouts. You're washing your hands of me."

Hari snapped back, "And you're over five-hundred years old! You don't need me—"

Realizing his callousness, he gentled his tone, "—to mind you like a warden, from day to night." Expelling a breathy sigh, he closed his eyes. "Sesshomaru, dea—I mean, not to sound rude, but I think you're attuned to the fact that I'm upset; not at you, don't get me wrong. I need some time to handle the investigative workload generated from tonight. I've already taken enough hiatus from it."

"You don't need to explain yourself to me. This Sesshomaru cares not for what you do on your own time."

"I promise you, I'll be coming back. It's just preparations. I'm not leaving you behind in the company of strangers. And I promise to be much more pleasant and proper once I get all the Ministry assignments sorted."

"There's no need for such promise." But given that the sorcerer had sworn to return to him, as
emphasis Sesshomaru stated, "This Sesshomaru requires no overseer. There is no one holding you back from completing your obligations. This Hari may do as he pleases."

"Yeah...I'll willingly interpret that as your, 'Go ahead, Harry. We're both grown-adults. I can take care of my arrangements while you handle your own.'" Reopening his eyes, he reached into his pocket to pull out his pocket watch and he clicked it open. He was glancing down at it in his palm as he murmured, "Are you really that uncomfortable being left behind? Even for a little while? It's perfectly understandable if you are. I could always..."

"There's no need for such compromise. Or for such exertion. This Sesshomaru shalln't interfere."

Hari sent him a long look. After a moment, without looking down he snapped his watch shut, dropping it back where it belonged. He stressed, "I'll have to leave you in five-to-ten minutes, alright? I'll return in a bit, accompanied by my Deputy Head hopefully. I want this to be a productive use of our times. Both of our times. Instead of being bored or frustrated with nothing to do, you have an opportunity to do something about your situation. Take advantage of it."

"As you wish," he repeated, feeling a slight annoyance. "Who specifically shall this Sesshomaru have to hunt down?"

"It's not a lot. But Greengrass Astoria, for one. So this'll sound strange, but don't get caught up in our politics. There are...rumors about her that I don't feel comfortable repeating. Be nice to her. Please." Hari's brows creased. "You remember the blonde woman we met; the heiress who'd escorted us earlier today? That's her older sister. They look a lot alike, except for Astoria's black hair. She's marrying into the Malfoy nobility, so please treat her as you would for someone of her station."

"So this 'Malfoy' is a daiyōkai."

Hari's concentrated features contorted into that of incredulity, before a mixture of a scoff and a chuckle seeped through. He snickered, "Alright, I'll admit, that's precious. No, I would hardly call him a demon. But he'll inherit the official Lord Malfoy title, once he marries. So that would make the younger Greengrass his Intended and m—"

"Your point is made. It will not be forgotten. We will await your return, Hari."

"...I mean it. Play nice. It's already bad enough her fiancé is a Committee head, and that we're forcing her to choose by having her cast her lot with us. We might as well be considerate to her situation. We should make it less trouble for her by being kind." His levity grounded itself back into sternness. "Also, when I mean 'don't touch anything,' really, don't. Not if it looks important. I'll let you be the judge of what is. Don't handle anything unless they give you explicit permission. Don't cause unwanted trouble. Be vigilant while I'm gone."

"You think of me as a child!" he retorted, miffed. "This Sesshomaru can keep his hands to himself."

"I don't think of you like that. People are naturally curious. And we have things here that can harm or kill you. I'm being considerate of your unfamiliarity, Sesshomaru."

Upon hearing the sentence in formal Japanese, Sesshomaru quieted. After a while, he said slowly, "Considerate or not, it's an extraordinary show of trust you must have, to be leaving me behind with unknown personnel." He also couldn't stop himself from demanding, "For how long does this Hari expect to be preoccupied?"

"Before midnight. I'll be cutting it close. But that's plenty of time for you lot to get started. Who knows? You may be brainstorming ideas with the research committee on how to get the Bone Eater's
Well working by the time I come back." As if seeing him for the first time, Hari directed a tight, quizzical glance over. "Is it really that extraordinary? You've extended me the same show of faith. It's only fair to return the favor. You haven't done anything so far that's—so I know I say this frequently, but I can't emphasize enough how much I appreciate your cooperation thus far. You've spared us from going through a lot of hurdles."

Canting his head, Sesshomaru peered down at the sorcerer. "This Sesshomaru can discern fact from fiction. Why should time be wasted on harboring suspicion when this Sesshomaru could more or less return retribution upon the discovery of an injustice or a falsehood?"

"See, that's what I find so surprising." Hari mustered up a small smile. "It's rare to come across someone who thinks like you. Your straightforwardness has been...continuously unexpected. Albeit harsh in the tough love department, but I think it's refreshing. You seem to have good character, Sesshomaru. You haven't told tall tales or withheld information. You don't play convoluted mind games. I honestly appreciate it."

His magenta-striped eyelids hooded. Feeling an all-encompassing need to return the flattery, with much more delicateness, he murmured, "There's a reason why this Hari still survives. You're the same as me. As another adept alpha from another kingdom, this Sesshomaru finds approval of this Hari." Sesshomaru took a step toward him, as he confessed, "This Hari may be high in demand; alas this Sesshomaru finds you worthy of attention, Hari. Your company has been tolerable. You have my favor."

Hari inhaled sharply, like someone had slid a dagger into his ribs, as his smile dwindled back into nonexistence. His face was as white as a ghost. "I'm honored." He cleared his throat. Retreating a small step backward, Hari acknowledged, "That's an astonishing execution of words. That's...something else, alright." He laughed awkwardly. "You certainly don't do things halfway. Thank you, Lord Sesshomaru."

He then ducked his head, missing Sesshomaru's perplexed expression, to scrutinize a random flagstone. His fatigue seemed to have returned. He admitted, "I, too, have come to think quite highly of you. I know it doesn't always seem that way, but I do think you're a remarkable man."

Sesshomaru had to clench his claws tightly to curb the strong desire to rest his palm against Hari's cheek and drag that face back to him.

Hari exhaled breathily, folding his arms tightly by the crook of his elbows. In a lower octave, Hari murmured, "So it's not that I don't appreciate the high regard. But I have to say this: we might seem alike on the surface, but I'd be cautious trying to look for commonalities that don't exist. Deductions are fine. Assumptions are not. Do you understand the point I'm making?"

"For the sake of your diplomacy, your wording tends to fall on the loquacious side," Sesshomaru drawled, masking his confusion by taking an aggressive step forward. "State your point, unless your speech this time is roundabout for how this Sesshomaru has mistaken this Hari for another."

An apologetic expression was seen ghosting across his visage. He mumbled self-consciously, "Sorry, politics have made me realize that I can't be a man of few words. People expect me to ramble. The theory is that they'll eventually connect to at least one of the points I make...and I'm getting sidetracked again, many apologies."

Heaving a sigh, Hari dragged a hand through his hair, his focus shifting over to the fur on Sesshomaru's shoulder. "Stop me if I'm a hundred percent wrong, but I'm rather half-surprised you associate...popularity and public image as indication of 'a strong alpha.' I've heard of the term 'alpha males' before, in association to humans, but you use that term synonymously for a leader or a
figurehead, is that correct? No, stop. I know it's not that simple in your culture. But for the sake of this question, am I in the least close?"

Hari's mouth was flattened into a thin line as he waited, until Sesshomaru deigned to vocalize a begrudging confirmation.

Hari's eyes squeezed shut. "Right. I know it's your personal philosophy to take things at face-value. And it's worked out for you so far. But don't. Not here. I'm sharing this from my sincerest goodwill —this is not feudal Japan; you're not yet acclimated with our traditions and our modern British inner workings. It took me years to grasp what I know now. You've only been here for...considerably far less."

"You seem to think this Sesshomaru to be lacking in intelligence," he remarked blithely.

"Honestly not. It's just what you're saying is uncannily...I don't know how to say this nicely, but you're shoehorning me into a package that I'm not fully familiar with. You're kind of projecting." Sesshomaru was thrown off when Hari's expression descended into something similar to guilt. In a softer tone, Hari said, "I know you're capable of following up on information, from what I remember when we first met. The people here behave differently from what you're used to, so someone in your position will naturally try to find similarities to the society they originate from. Erm, I know we've had our miscommunications, but I hope you don't think we're uncivilized savages. Because that'd be a horrendous outlook to have where we are now."

"Why would this Sesshomaru think that? Your empire has made many technological strides forward. That would not indicate savagery."

"True." His mouth twitched. "Alright, perhaps not 'savagery'; that's a bit of a non sequitur. It's all a matter of perspective. But despite our modern strides, somethings remain the same. Reputations get distorted all the time. Information gets distorted. I want you to be careful of getting the wrong idea."

The sign of ruefulness fluctuated, as the sorcerer seemed to recall something else.

His posture straightened up. Regaining his conviction, Hari asserted, "I'm saying this as segueway into you also understanding that it's the same for the Unspeakables' research. Don't jump to conclusions. If you want to understand something, go directly to the best source to test its validity. If you're still not sure, do yourself a favor and ask. Cross-reference everything. Don't bottle it up and assume you're right. Or assume that they automatically are. People make mistakes, so do yourself a favor and verify it for yourself."

"Your caution is noted." Still, Sesshomaru frowned at the thought of being surrounded by more hanyous. "Our continued cooperation is a means to an end. Henceforth our pact does not extend to others."

"I'm only one man, Sesshomaru. You can't always expect me to be available 24/7. And neither is Hermione. We can't both be pulled off assignment for too long." Hari glanced away. "On the brighter side, I'm not a complete twat. I'm sympathetic to your situation. Hence why you'll gain access to some of our best reliable connections one can afford here, even if we're not there beside you. I'm not leaving you out to hang."

"Big talk for someone of yourself," Sesshomaru retorted, both brows shooting up to his hairline. "This Sesshomaru would not have thought this Hari capable of making claims of arrogance."

"One cannot simply walk up to a Time Unspeakable," Hari stated matter-of-factly, "not unless they have someone significant enough to introduce them and apply pressure." Tucking his hands into his
pockets, he continued, "Nor can certain contacts be easily reached. I'm coming at this from a rational mindset. So it's not arrogance that's making me say this. This is my way of showing some accountability."

"You are repeating yourself. This Hari and your packmate have been adamant about secreting me away. You've been keeping me contained, even from mine vassals and mine subjects; this is an abrupt shift in priorities."

"Is that what you're worried about? Having your countrymen's help abroad will probably expedite efficiency and be loads faster, I'm not disputing that. But foreign policy requires sensitivity. It's not worth the political headache as of yet."

"In my time, there wasn't an alliance between our empires. Hadn't this Hari claimed one has already been formally established?"

"Right, you have a significant gap of knowledge to get caught up on." Lines appeared on his forehead as he struggled to recall a memory. "We actually did sign one, internationally, long ago. Ask me about the more relevant signatories later, if you wish to know which countries are theoretically today's superpowers. But the British Empire and Imperial Japan had a treaty formalized on the Muggles' side, thereby affecting us after they went through several revisions of then. I think it was the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902, which was then rendered defunct by the Four-Power Treaty—about twenty years later?—which was then later ratified into the Nine-Power Treaty. I'm not sure about the dates and the names. But there is an alliance between the Japanese and Europeans. And the Americans. And so on. Actually, ask me later about it, if you want. You might be interested learning about the Open Door Policy."

"This Sesshomaru would be interested acquiring knowledge of this future accord between our empires," Sesshomaru stated, quickly performing the mental calculation.

The uncertainty was a lingering shadow, but the implication seemed to be that centuries would have to pass before they officially came to an agreement of aid. In that span of time was how long it'll take for these foreigners to stumble upon them, or perchance the other way around. Very rarely were declarations of friendship brokered and maintained throughout. While their empires would come to have good relations—Sesshomaru assumed it would have resulted from trade—he was cognizant of the fact that most treaties existed to publicly settle wars and old grievances.

He'd heard rumors of so-called human 'Jesuits' in the province of Echizen. Word had spread of how one's servant—with skin as dark as Sumi ink—was under great favor with the young human warlord, Oda Nobunaga, possibly being considered for property trade before the foreigners would take leave of central Japan. Sesshomaru hadn't the chance to see one with his own eyes, but knowing the warlord's notoriously opportunistic proclivities, Sesshomaru wouldn't be surprised if that retainer was prestigiously offered the rank of a samurai.

A dark brow lifted into silvery fringe. "Why wouldn't now be a good time to learn of our countries' pledged alliance?"

"Because this is neither the time nor the place. However condensed I can try to explain our world history, it'll take me hours or days to explain everything. So just for now, you'll have to take my word that one exists." Hari's features held the slightest of dissatisfaction and impatience. "So, there is this problem of infringing on a country's sovereignty, by crossing borders or sticking our noses into foreign affairs without permission. The Bone Eater's Well is situated on private Muggle property—the Higurashi family's, I mean. The well's considered to be on sacred temple grounds. There are the legal land deeds to prove it. And the fact that it can pull you across a vast amount of time...it defies a law the magical community recognizes. I can't foresee this being a simple operation; in this case, we
might not be able to do what we normally can when Muggles are involved." His face scrunched up. "I might have to take extra steps."

"You are oddly invested concerning human affairs." Sensing that their conversation was coming to an end, for the sake of clarity, Sesshomaru insisted, "Time magic is an uncertain entity, as this Hari has maintained. You've established that it's unstable. By maintaining silence, by keeping this away from Nippon's borders and their jurisdiction, my countrymen will continue being unaware. Would it not expedite the process by bringing them in?"

"Your countrymen only informed us of its lore, that it used to be a sacred dumping site for demon corpses and how it'd been blessed by generations of shrine maidens." Examining his shoes, Hari sounded pensive as he mused aloud, "I wasn't warned ahead of time that it was a time traveling portal or that I should've been more careful with it. It might've saved us from this had they told me in the first place. It could be that, one, the people that make up your governing body are gits; two, it's a national secret kept close to their chest; or three, they're not fully aware of what it can do. Personally, I'm betting on ignorance."

"This Hari is hesitant to involve Japanese bodies unless absolutely necessary. Because of a lack of faith?"

"That's a bit harsh. But yeah, alright. I see where you're going with this." Bringing a hand back up to rub the nape of his neck, Hari admitted, "Listen, I like Japan as much as others do. Beyond being fascinating, it's a beautiful inspiration. Or at least the idea of what it represents. Japan has such a rich history and culture, it'd be a shame for it to be exploited once people realize what your magical monument can do. And not only by your government, but everyone else. Your country has undergone through much already."

"It is a beautiful country." He tilted his head, noticing that Hari's look softened whenever Sesshomaru performed the motion in front of him. "Hence, this would be where your Unspeakables come in. This Hari has vouched for their competence. Would there not be others of the same expertise in Nippon?"

"...I don't know about your folks, but our Unspeakables were the ones who invented the Time Turners. They've sworn an oath to keep quiet. They can't take advantage of the well's convenient existence and defile the space-time continuum. And they should know what they're doing. It's the next-best scenario. Needless to say, we'll have to hedge our bets on them."

He paused, as if deliberating on a thought. Eventually, facing him fully, Hari asked, "You will be good to her, won't you? The younger Greengrass, I mean."

Sesshomaru made a noncommittal noise, but a sound of acknowledgement nonetheless. He was intently observing the gloved hand that had already been raised—as if to make reassuring contact—up close to Sesshomaru's bicep.

But before the sorcerer's fingertips could reach his arm, the hand abruptly aborted the undertaking. Retracting his limb to someplace behind him, Hari instead smiled beatifically at him. "You'll be fine, Sesshomaru. Give them a chance."

He made certain to stress to him which two doors to avoid. Glowing red X's were slashed up against the entryways of the Brain-Room and the Death Chamber, which the sorcerer seemed to have determined their identification by memory. He advised him to mark the doors, for there's no telling when they'd reshuffle.

Ready to take his leave, his parting words were that he expected Sesshomaru to act maturely and not
go poking his nose in any which way, even if he felt physically compelled to discover what lay behind a door. He also wished him, "Really, best of luck."

There was a covert look Sesshomaru had seen being sent to the Death Chamber; and then Hari was gone, leaving him behind to attend to his more imperative Ministerial duties.

Left alone, Sesshomaru fisted his claws. He peered longingly in the direction of the lift which had taken the younger lord away from him. As if sensing his insecurity, mokomoko-sama curled around him, nuzzling against his cheek. Traces of tea and of oiled wood, and warmth, were brought to his awareness.

Inhaling the mixture of scents on his pelt, he closed his eyes to steady himself against the onslaught of inexplicable yearning which'd attacked him after Hari's departure.

Understandably, imperial matters took precedence. A man who threw himself into his servitude and delivered efficiency would generally be regarded as respectable. Under these specific circumstances however, it was more of an inconvenience. The fealty Lord Hari devoted to his Ministry and the verbal confirmations he declared to this Sesshomaru stood on vastly different levels.

His brows knitted as his thoughts descended into worriment. Being on the receiving end of Hari's attention might've been an unspoken privilege that Sesshomaru was now grasping he might've taken for granted. Normally he wouldn't care. In his time, yōkai would bend over themselves to satisfy him. They came to him regardless of his lack of enthusiasm. His skills usually made teamwork irrelevant, that the dog demon himself couldn't care much for starting alliances. There would always be someone there desiring his presence. Yet if he didn't feel in the mood to dismiss someone who swore their allegiance to him, he expected them to carry through like how his sire's subjects had, like how Jaken had, and even like how Rin had.

Loath as Sesshomaru was to admit it, a small part of him appreciated the comradery Hari expressed to him. He was under no disillusion that this accord forged between them held much of a weight though, having recently seen that mind and those powers turned against a kinsman. For that moment alone, Sesshomaru understood he was chosen to take precedence. Like their encounter with the female whelp, who'd desired Hari's amorous attention at an inopportune time, assisting the dog demon was determined to be of greater relevance. And her advances had been rejected. There were other tiny moments where Hari had seemingly sided with him, accommodating him above all else, that even Sesshomaru could imagine the concern that might arise were someone to bring news of its frequency to Hari's awareness.

Charity could only last for so long. Curiosity, once sated, took even less.

Once the charm of learning about someone new wore off, once Sesshomaru was determined to be a burden, there was no telling how long that goodwill would last. If he didn't at least attempt to secure his sworn loyalty—being the center of his focus or establishing himself as a person of significance—then he might be balancing on a dangerous, rickety perspective. Sesshomaru was already seeing that obliging patience of Hari's starting to fracture.

His mouth moved into a soundless scowl behind his fur, as he realized much of their conversation emulated whence they'd been flying over the kingdom earlier in the day. But due to recent events, their meaning had changed, radiating a foreboding energy he was not too keen on having it realized into reality.

With a last discreet whiff, he dropped the pelt.

Sesshomaru treaded closer to the closest door, his head cocked. The strange partition lacked a grip to
hold onto or any indication that it could slide open. Staring at it, he was contemplating how one might open what seemed like quite the heavy-weighted partition, aside from physical force or sorcery. When his hand reached out to try, he jumped back when the wall shook.

With a great rumbling noise, the circular wall spun before his eyes. The blue of the flames blurred, becoming streaks of color that followed the rotary movement. Then it all stopped.

Lifting his claws away from his vision, Sesshomaru now stared, taking in the relocations of the two X’s. The Tenseiga, even with the sorcerer’s vacancy, seemed to buzz sedately from one of the doors Hari had courteously notched for him. For a moment, staring at the stone door brought to him an old memory of Naraku’s incarnation bringing him and Jaken to the giant statues that guarded the entrance to the afterlife, before her death not long after at the hands of her predecessor. Frowning at the remembrance of the field of flowers where he’d found her, and Kagura’s haunting last smile upturned at him, Sesshomaru ruminated.

In the end—with the memory of Hari’s voice echoing in his mind like a phantom—having little desire to be seen as untrustworthy, he ignored his sire’s fang. Instead he followed his nose. Of the ten doors remaining, pacing the distance he detected eight held a distinct whiff of hanyou. Several contained a scent similar to the Greengrass female, as if she’d passed them by several times. But one was fresher, saturated, coming from the door his innermost yokai was being called to.

His curiosity piqued, he strode toward it. There were loud ticking noises the closer he approached, which reminded him of the timepiece Hari carried everywhere on his person.

Coming to a standstill, Sesshomaru assumed this was the "Time Room" he was told to find. And unlike the marked doors, there hadn’t been any prohibition against this one. Repeating his action, this time the door opened with little effort.

The harsh glare took him by surprise, and Sesshomaru made an audible wince that sounded like a dying cat.

Once his eyes adjusted, he scrutinized the chamber’s interior. When he detected no danger, he cautiously glided inside. The soles of his boots clanged down against the perforated metal, muted by the chimes and the tickings that sounded to him like a thousand hooves clip-clopping against the ground. Warily, his head twisted this way and that, perceiving timepieces both big and small. They covered the brightly-lit interior like an infestation.

Flashes of color, glittering like precious stones, caught his eye. He made his way in its direction.

"Pardon, is someone there?" A female’s voice echoed faintly from somewhere deep among the chamber’s bowels. "Can I help you?"

When Sesshomaru remained non-responsive, unintelligible whispers rose like a swarm of flies.

Louder this time, the woman said, "I know you’re there. Don’t play pretend. If you’re the company we’re expecting, you’re welcome to stay put. If you’re not, I’ll be there to escort you back. Regardless, please. Don’t. Touch. Anything! Thank you; I’ll be there in a few!"

By then, he was already at the far end of the room. Sesshomaru peered over his shoulder, turning his face toward where he thought he’d heard her voice to be coming from. Furniture, bookcases, and clocks blocked his field of perception. He eyed the direction where his nose caught her scent, among others. In all, he determined there to be a small group of hanyous awaiting his beck and call.

So the hanyou noblewoman was their alpha? He scoffed. Besides being more overt and
demonstrative than the mannerisms he was used to (some displaying a sort of refined politeness, exhibiting a formality different to the deferential humility one might show in Japan), the people here perhaps presumed too much. Someone of his station shouldn't be sniffing her location out himself. She or her packmates should be coming to him.

So with an annoyed exhalation of breath, he temporarily fell into the role of a footman. Their ranks aside, he'd thought it to be less demeaning than playing fetch to a hanyou. Crossing his arms into his sleeves, Sesshomaru inspected the source of the shiny light. It'd had originated from the clear crystal jar as tall as the demon.

Inside the bell-shaped structure was a man's preserved head. The decapitated head's pallor was white and waxen from the rigor mortis, with a dark ring of coagulated blood at the wound. With repulsed fascination, Sesshomaru almost couldn't tear his gaze away from seeing it tumble up and down in the billowing wind that was trapped within the tall glass.

Since it'd been cut cleanly at the neck, as the head flipped over once more, Sesshomaru could see the bone, the tendons, and the arteries as the head looped in an endless cycle of infancy and adulthood and old age. In contrast with the macabre depiction, the wind was somehow shimmering splendidly like the reflected surfaces of sand.

On the nearby desk were aged parchments that covered the entire surface, depicting plans and drafts of what appeared to be an ornate necklace with a spinning disk. Next to the drawings, illegible notes were written in indecipherable code, jotted down in black ink which smelt to him both old and freshly wet.

His claws drumming against his elbow sedately, he tallied the number of timepieces to occupy himself. Ten. Twenty. Thirty. Forty? Despite himself he found his gaze wandering back to the door past the jar.

Had he not familiarized himself with his companion's powerful yōki, he would've thought it felt uncannily similar to his. Unless he was imagining it, there was something in the chamber within which'd trapped a shred of that aura he'd grown accustomed to lately. Its magnitude felt muffled by the potent amount of reiryoku—a more peculiar aura than the spiritual power he was familiar with—which even Sesshomaru could tell doused the interior chamber, despite being on the other side of a closed door.

His restlessness increased.

It took him several failed recounts before Sesshomaru lost what little patience he had.

He advanced forward, eyeing the door, having determined that sating his curiosity with the allure of exploration was more worthy of his time. His claws tentatively reached ahead, half-expecting it to be closed to him. Yet the door opened as silently as the first, unveiling darkness. Another cold draft—harsher than having first stepped foot onto this floor—immediately whooshed out, raking chills down his skin. He mentally prepared himself.

His expression barely changed once he walked inside, even though he felt like he'd been dropped headfirst into the western alps. His pelt squeezed around him, insulating his body warmth. Despite his reservations, his feet followed the invisible pull of the beguiling temptress that was the sorcerer's yōki, beckoning him forth and offering him sanctuary from the spiritual energy threatening to suffocate him.

Sesshomaru could feel his neck straining as his head craned up to judge how far the towering shelves went into a shadowy, indeterminate ceiling. Guided by the tier of lit torches, he kept to the walls. He
relied on his heightened senses as he traveled deeper down into the hall of aisles.

Although he kept as far away as possible from the shelves, on each of them he could see glass orbs made of what used to be exquisite craftsmanship that were the perfect size to fit in the palm of someone’s hand. They appeared recently polished, yet none of them were very clear. Atop gilded pedestals, most had chips or hairline cracks; some glowed from the trapped liquid; others were as dense as a fog.

In each one however, he could detect wisps of reiryoku, which were building up to an intensity to make Sesshomaru feel somewhat nauseated. To alleviate his discomfort, he allowed a small amount of his yōki to rise around him, coating him like a shield against the spiritual pressure. He gritted his teeth.

Their combined purifying abundance accrued together to a dangerous degree that he imagined could be on par with the immense holy aura of the priestess Midoriko. A miko whom—as his old retainer, Myoga, claimed in the woman’s fight to the death with the demon Magatsuhi and others—had created the existence of the accursed Shikon no Tama. Sesshomaru had only been around three-hundred years old at the time when news of her demise made waves in the human and demon societies. He’d just started his transition into adulthood—his official training for the harsh realities of his birthright—when the supposedly powerful human fell.

As he passed row by row, he examined the spidery handwriting inked into the yellowing labels underneath each one. They detailed the year each had been marked, and illustrated unfamiliar characters underneath. While he still felt the effects of the translation spell on him—however purposefully diluted it was—he couldn’t tell if they were names or places unfamiliar to him.

He slowed to a halt once he reached a row marked as the ninety-seventh one, the aisle that called to his innermost yōkai. There was a low thrum that he could feel down to his toes, as warning to all those who dare come closer, threatening the potential purification of any trespassers.

Tenseiga was now pulsating in its sheath, rattling against his two other fangs, as though the Inu no Taishō were guiding his son once more from beyond the grave.

"Tenseiga...what are you trying to tell me?" Staring down at it, Sesshomaru twisted his mouth into a frown. Squaring his shoulders and dropping a hand on his sire’s fang, he marched away from the torches.

Instantly the prickling sensation of pins and needles intensified over his skin. Normally mere curiosity wouldn’t have been enough incentive for him to go against his instincts, if not for the silent encouragements being given to him. Like being in a heat haze, it was slightly harder to breathe in a sacred atmosphere similar to Mount Hakurei’s. The combination of coldness and conductivity made his fur stand on end.

To calm himself, he paced steadily, one foot over the other. He regulated his breathing. Several times his tongue darted out to wet chapped lips. Molten gold searched sightlessly, and it’d been entirely coincidental but in the same spot he felt the strongest of the younger daiyōkai’s pure demonic aura, his eyes landed on:

S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D.

add. from H.J.P.B.P.

Dark Lord
Sesshomaru studied the words above, which swum in his vision to twist into familiar Japanese characters. Despite its faint discoloration in material, compared to the other yellowed labels, this one—although tattered—appeared to have been inscribed recently. The decipherment was strange and indescribable, like he'd somehow mastered another language overnight yet he couldn't consciously grasp the comprehension. His eyes narrowed. Perhaps....

He stood on the top of his toes to get a better look, feeling a small reprieve from the reiryoku with the foreign yōki in his proximity. Sesshomaru reached up, fingertips hovering over the glass piece but short of touching. He was wary, remembering what he'd been warned. But he was sorely tempted by the familiarity of that disarming aura and by the protection it offered. There was no mistaking it. Deep down in his bones, he was certain this was the same ominous power that'd lured him to investigate its source.

The scent came first. The female. Greengrass Astoria. He soon became aware of footsteps softly pittering-pattering in the near distance, treading sedately so as to try avoiding detection.

His jaw clenched. Emboldened by the rush of adrenaline, he closed his claws around the orb, expecting the bite of coldness. The dimly illuminated cloud of ki within instantly surged to the point of contact, detecting the threat that was the daiyōkai on the outside, but it couldn't shatter though the glass barrier. Instead his hand felt warmed by the sphere, which felt as if it'd basked in the sun for hours instead of being trapped in this chilly hell that they were in.

As he brought it down to eye-level, carefully handling it, he felt the remaining vestiges of the sorcerer's demonic aura stir, like coiled roots unfurling from a long rest. Reaching out, it was testing. Twining with his.

Sesshomaru held his breath. He could feel both Tenseiga and Bakusaiga heating up in response, glowing blue and green respectively through their scabbards, bleeding into his yōki until their auras felt like one.

There was a long, uncertain pause. Licks of that encompassing aura were flooded into every crevice of his yōki. It was an uncomfortably intimate sensation, as if the sorcerer were here standing incredibly close to him, stroking every inch of skin for a fault. It inspired a hint of instinctual territorial aggression within Sesshomaru while he felt his whole worth being weighed against an unspoken measure. Like a guard dog on high alert, in the background the reiryoku was subdued during the assessment.

Eventually he seemed to have passed inspection as the fogginess in his mind eroded away. Although he still felt the presence melded against him—like a hand cupping the back of his neck as a warning gesture—he could detect the denseness of the prior atmosphere lightening up when the luminescence inside the sphere dispersed.

What broke through was a cloudy depiction of a grand stone chamber, beset with portraits and tomes all arranged in an orderly fashion. The distinctly cold illumination reflected indoors indicated that this took place either during the night or at the crack of dawn. In it were two males: one elderly, and one adolescent on the cusp of manhood. Both were engaged in silent dialogue, sitting down on this country's high furniture.

The age and eyewear almost threw Sesshomaru off. Yet those facial features and that lightning-bolt marking on the forehead seemed to indicate that this was a younger version of the sorcerer that he was seeing.
His thumb traced the curve of Hari’s jawline. Why would he be calling him to witness this in the first place? Sesshomaru found it debatable whether this was one of their incredibly realistic portraiture or if it were an actual depiction of the past.

The scene of the males talking abruptly shifted so that he was watching the miniature version of Hari striding to a strange stone apparatus that came up to his waist. There was a look of trepidation on Hari’s face as he approached. Sesshomaru noted that his foreign clothing were dirtied and ripped in areas, as if he’d been engaged in physical skirmish. His walk also seemed to favor one leg, not exactly limping but definitely careful to avoid putting too much weight on one of them. His eyes slid down to examine the long cut on Hari’s arm that had scabbed over.

Before he could examine him more closely, the scene in the sphere rippled. Submerging itself underwater, its new scenery only allowed Sesshomaru to perceive speckles of light refracted from above. If he imagined so, he could taste the saltwater and feel the depth’s suffocating pressure against his chest, with blue filling his vision.

Heat increased in his palm, and this time the inside of an inn filled the orb. A fire was crackling in a large hearth beside the two occupants, casting a warm glow over everything. Seated down was a female peasant wearing an eccentric, ramshackled selection of fabrics, if not poor in taste and practicality of wardrobe.

Opposite of her was a younger version of the elderly man with the crooked nose. He was wearing an equally-unbecoming maroon fabric dotted with blinking stars. In his youth the man was tall and reedy, with an air of sagesness about him. He’d been nursing a drink in his hand as the woman rambled, looking quite patient with her. When she'd finished shortly, he set the cup down on the wooden table.

They exchanged several more words. In a calm but disappointed intonation, the man was bidding her goodbye.

The woman reminded Sesshomaru of a glittering insect, with her large eyewear and shimmering threads. Hunched over herself, her body language was discouraged, yet she appeared desperate and confused on how to stop the man from leaving.

A female gasp was heard. Sesshomaru struggled to identify its origin, if it came from the woman in the memory or from the woman who was presently spying on him.

Dividing his awareness, he focused the majority of it on the performance playing before his eyes, and only marginally on the accumulation of scents that indicated her location. There was a figure swathed in a cloak of indistinguishable dark coloring just over yonder. From his peripheral vision, he caught a glimpse of her appearance—a long black mane swept back from a broad forehead, strong brows, dark circles underneath her eyes, a masculine jaw, and pale skin—before she ducked out his sight, unaware of how useless the attempt was to an inuyōkai.

In the memory, the glow of the fire nearby aflamed the man's long auburn beard and hair with the colors of sunset, when the beggar's face slackened. The female was slumped in her seat, her eyes glassy and unseeing. Her expression was similar on those whom Sesshomaru had seen that've lost their souls or suffered severe head trauma.

The man seemed taken aback by her change in demeanor. It was then that Sesshomaru could see recognition flooding into his pale blue eyes when, out from her mouth, the woman rasped powerfully as if she were in a trance:

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice
defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..."

As the last syllable faded, so did the image. In place of the two persons, calligraphy the likes Sesshomaru had never seen before blurred into existence.

Returning to the watery depths, it denoted in fine silvery letters:

Confirmed (?) 1980

Enacted 31 October, 1981

Fulfilled 2 May, 1998 — H.P.

Once the last character finished curling into existence, all words instantly dissipated into mist. They formed into indistinguishable serpentine shapes which reminded Sesshomaru of the blue dragon which manifested itself from his Sōryūha attack.

Both of his fangs settled back into dormancy, warm against his thigh, as he felt Hari's aura being devoured by the noxious energies within. Sesshomaru scowled, for no amount of shaking or amplified yōki could get the glass sphere back away from its murky glow. The aura was withdrawn to a phantom of its original presence. However, although fragile and stretched paper-thin, the way it still loitered around the demon was akin to a posted sentry, serving as an intermediary between him and the spiritual pressure doing their best to repel him.

He peered down at the sphere for a small moment, rewinding the words back in his head and picking it apart like a ball of thread. So she'd been a soothsayer. He glanced away to his side.

His interest had been roused, demanding to be fed. If he couldn't get his answers, then it was fortuitous that this female, who came for Sesshomaru, had a job that was to gather intelligence for him. Not taking his eyes off the end of the aisle, he announced, "Quit dawdling. It is futile to pretend any longer."

Her breathing quickened, having been found out.

Imagining the pest was debating the merit of flight or fight, he stated, "This Sesshomaru wishes to verify something. Did this...allegation of birthright belong to Lord Hari? Your complete honesty now, hanyou."

Astoria Greengrass did not expect her week to catapult the way that it had.

The first had been the Howler, with the entire department overhearing a furious Head Auror reprimanding them for sending him on unchecked findings abroad. Then it'd been her and certain wizardfolk of her division being handpicked by the Acting Minister to take part in a confidential research committee. And only a few hours ago, the Unspeakables contacted the Auror Office of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement about how their devices picked up suspicious magical readings at the venerated White Tomb.

For today, she and the people selectively drafted for this small committee wore their best suits and skirts, veiled underneath their official Ministry-issued robes standard for the Department of Mysteries personnel. The Unspeakables were no stranger to dealing with people of high diplomatic rank, to be engaging in cumbersome social niceties that took them away from their projects. The Acting Minister
and the Head Auror often visited them on their level, as well as the occasional foreign dignitaries brought in to sightsee the inner workings of their British Ministry.

Prim and proper, Astoria had readied herself to be exchanging pleasantries with three individuals: the Head Auror and his Deputy Head, and their misplaced time traveler. If not genial, then she imagined they’d perhaps mimic the strained civility similar to the tension fraught between her and her soon-to-be in-laws at the Malfoy’s dinner parties. Yet meeting the Oriental warlord of obvious creature inheritance in person, alone, shot all intentions out of her mind.

Ill at ease, she placed a hand over the rounded curve of her stomach that’d been hidden under a **Glamour**.

Her upbringing in the Greengrass household, as one of the last Sacred Twenty-Eight wizarding families left in Britain, came with the expectation of practicing pureblood supremacist ideals. Be that as it may, Astoria considered herself the black sheep of her family—a family of notorious neutrality in politics. While she had her opinions, she didn’t harbor that strong of a vocal prejudice against her "lesser beings." When her father commented about Mudbloods, she’d uncomfortably chide him or make a jest to remove themselves from the topic.

Unlike her sister, Astoria didn’t shine as brightly as her older sister did at their social functions. She wasn’t as refined or as pretty as Daphne was in polite society. Astoria had been rather reserved, preferring her tinkering or drifting off in her imagination. When their parents got ahold that Daphne failed to perform satisfactorily at the Potions section of the N.E.W.T. exam, Astoria saw that as an opportunity to one-up her older sibling. Her sister may have been one of the three divisional head assistants for the much larger Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, but Astoria was chosen to join the esoteric ranks of the Unspeakables for the Department of Mysteries. Astoria had her own office and she catered to her own timetable. Her focus was in the Time Room, but her fingertips were dipped in the department's divisions.

Astoria would’ve liked to think that it was because of her that Draco chose her to be his fiancée, but Astoria had her insecurities. When the Dark Lord was defeated, while her family was secretly disapproved of because of their known hands-off policy during the war, in the aftermath they weren’t as publicly condemned as the Malfoys were. Many people wanted for the Malfoys' arrests. The Malfoy Trials stirred many old grudges, that—even voluntarily providing evidence against their fellow Death Eaters—the once-upstanding citizens had to call in owed favors to avoid imprisonment.

Of the few, the Malfoys had miraculously gotten ahold of Potter. And, with him, his two mates. On the Malfoys’ behalf, they spun an extraordinary story of how they’d witnessed the beginnings of the family members becoming turncoats in their manor, defying the Dark Lord and his highly-ranked subordinates. They claimed that, without the crooked Malfoys' contributions, Potter might not be standing before the Wizengamot.

The insinuation was that magical Britain would’ve still been under the administration of a terror regime without the Chosen One to fulfill the terms of the prophecy and execute his distant half-blood cousin.

Other people were called in to verify the Malfoy lord and lady had done nothing but scream for their son at the final battle, forgoing their aid to You-Know-Who's cause and choosing to defect instead of fight.

Their testimonies couldn’t exempt the Malfoys of all guilty charges. But they’d been influential, among others, in attaining the lessened punishments. Instead of returning to Azkaban, Lord Lucius Malfoy II was officially stripped of his title, and stricken from reappointment as chairman to the Hogwarts Board of Governors and from all future seats in office. On the condition that he and his
family continued to provide information ensuring the tracking and capture of the wanted fugitives, they were put on a probationary period instead, owing many parties significant monetary reparations.

Another debt that the Malfoys had called upon belonged to the Greengrasses, for an incident that'd happened between their families long ago. Since they had a better standing in society, the Greengrass sisters were seen as bride-candidates for their pardoned Lord Heir-Apparent. The pureblood heirs were fully aware of what they would be getting themselves into when the dates were arranged.

To make the public fully convinced that the Malfoys had changed their ways would be to have Draco Lucius Malfoy marry into a Muggle-sympathizing family, with a witch such as Ginevra Molly Weasley, or a Muggleborn.

As sincerely remorseful and earnest to atone for what they did, the Malfoys had refused to stoop so low.

To placate public scrutiny, instead they intended to rely on the Greengrass' reputation and to join two of the Sacred Twenty-Eight families together. Besides their parentage, Daphne and Astoria fulfilled the Malfoys' remaining three requirements: a lady that was kind, well-read, and accomplished. Most of all, they were known to be more than pleasant to look upon. It soon became a competition of seeing which sister would be the first to crumble.

Wedding Draco wasn't an unattractive prospect. He came from Old Money. His family earned sufficient revenue from their apothecary presently, and profited from their ancestors' old dealings in Muggle currency and assets. Unlike his father, Draco still had a respectable-enough future in the Ministry. His weight loss and his grey pallor from his experience under the Dark Lord also didn't detract from his strengths and what he had to offer the Greengrass family.

It was being formally thrown into the Courting that made them awkward, as their childhood familiarity made it difficult for them to transition into romantic interest. It came as a surprise to Astoria when Draco seemed to prefer her company instead, escorting the younger and much quieter sibling to many social venues. He always wore long sleeves or something to cover the Dark Mark on his arm whenever they went out, making sure they were establishments of small numbers friendly to their sort.

Draco humored Astoria's idiosyncrasies. In return, she put up with his moods. Sometimes they'd be doing something absolutely ordinary, and he'd fall into a docile broodiness. His grey eyes would color with guilt from a memory that haunted him. Initially stiff in their interactions, over time the older Slytherin showed to be a witty, somewhat cordial gentleman instead of the bratty show-off he'd been in Hogwarts. He still liked hearing the sound of his voice. Astoria had thought herself to be a good foil to her boyfriend-of-then, preferring to listen to him run his mouth.

Occasionally his humor retained its mean-spirited nature; that part of his personality never completely went away, but he was more subdued about it. Their conversations also tended to tread on the careful side. Most of their topics revolved around spousal expectations, around their personal and professional interests. Rarely did they delve into social commentary or politics.

Had their relationship stalled or had they fought because of differences in opinions, eventually he'd bestow gifts upon her at whim—which she sometimes felt were bribes. Most of them were impractically ostentatious. They were often resplendent items he thought a woman liked, from what he'd seen his mother had. But he'd hit a spot of thoughtfulness here and then.

Although rare in occasion, the way Draco lit up when he thought he did her right made Astoria realize he was someone who sought approval as much as the next person. He wanted to feel that his actions made a difference in the world, that he could make a positive impact, wiping the slate clean.
For the duration of their dating, she felt that she could start to see below the surface of the otherwise cocksure wizard.

Her walls had crumbled.

A year and a few months into the official Courting, unfortunate circumstances had befallen upon them. No Malfoy or Greengrass was going to be born out of wedlock. To avoid scandal, the pressure their families exerted made insecurities emerge.

Astoria was realistic enough to admit she was fond of the idea of being engaged—that a wealthy, handsome wizard would choose her—but she wasn't sure if it extended to love. Instead of gushing about their impending marriage, they were expected not to draw more attention to themselves. The transition from a single witch to Intended to a wife and a mother-to-be was disenchanting. She felt more validated, more valued for her worth in her field than as the next Lady Malfoy.

While he fulfilled the husband-criteria most parents wished for their daughters, Draco was, at times, boring and predictable. She wished Draco was showing her that he was capable of forming his own decisions than obediently following his parents' will and what was expected of him. If what happened hadn't, would he have truly wanted to marry her of his own volition?

Unable to resist, her mind once more compared how he acted for her and for Daphne.

Astoria frowned unhappily at that constant reminder that her older sister worked closely with him as his personal assistant. From the get-go, the chemistry between Daphne and Draco was undeniable. Since their childhood years, the pair could easily launch into conversations that enthralled the both of them. For Astoria and Draco, they'd struggle to avoid topics that'd launch them into disagreements.

Feeling herself grow more and more upset, Astoria tore herself out of her thoughts. She'd brought her fists up close to her stinging eyes, when she remembered she had makeup on. Thankfully she hadn't made contact. Astoria instead blinked rapidly to drive away the exhaustion. When she felt sufficiently awake, she abandoned her hiding space, standing in plain view.

From far away, despite the lackluster illumination provided by the glowing spheres, the creature's tall silhouette stood out from the shadows like a ghostly specter. The Time Unspeakables had yet to receive research notes from the two Aurors, but the team had been debriefed briefly by the Acting Minister of Lord Sesshomaru's origins. Being updated on the potential circumstances which might've orchestrated his time travel was enough for Astoria's team to get started.

Seeing that he'd recaptured her attention, he turned his away disinterestedly to reexamine the prophecy orb. Interpreting her silence as out of fear, he said, "Put your mind at ease, Güringurasu. This Sesshomaru intends you little harm." His voice carried clearly inside the chamber.

Her hands had gone clammy, either from the sweat or from her nails digging painfully into her palms. The Acting Minister hadn't exaggerated. Understandably antiquated, the creature's attitude was consistent with a lot of their more dangerous modern populations. His long fair hair, his forbearance, and his cutting remarks also reminded her of a certain patriarch, only more primal.

"That's good to hear." While she didn't particularly feel inclined to, she curtsied before him, subtly wiping her hands on her robes. It was procedure to ask for confirmation of identity, but she doubted anyone in their right minds would want to trouble themselves by impersonating his mannerisms.

Raising her voice a touch higher than the socially-acceptable indoor volume, she said, "As you know, I'm Astoria Greengrass, one of the Time Unspeakables drafted for your research committee. I'm sorry it's just me; my associates are a wee bit preoccupied. It's a pleasure to have your
acquaintance nonetheless."

Her face downcast, she felt her ears burn when she realized she'd announced herself with her maiden name.

Fortunately she managed to not draw attention to her Glamoured stomach even as he briskly returned his introductions. He still hadn't let go of the orb.

Her mind ran. Was it a delayed response or was the creature immune to their defensive spells? Straightening up, she mentally reviewed the foreign word thrown earlier into their conversation. Her forehead crinkled as she asked, "Might I ask for a translation of the word you used earlier? A...hanyou,' I believe that's what you said?"

He didn't reply, but he did raise a disparaging brow at her—an action that uncannily resembled Mr Malfoy's.

The familiar strike of depression made itself known in her. She took a deep breath to steady herself. Mimicking her sister's prim composure and holding herself tall, Astoria turned her attention to the orb he held. She marveled, "How—how are you able to touch that, Lord Sesshomaru? That one especially?"

When he merely looked puzzled, she crept closer, cautious not to bump into the shelves. She elucidated, "It's just that the last person who touched a prophecy...is still at a ward in St Mungo's, for severe mental damage. Prophecies can only be removed by those about whom they are made. Anyone else would be stricken by their defensive spells. That—you shouldn't be unaffected."

"That should be my line," he retorted, the intensity of his focus back on her now, from their vicinity. Seeing those unnatural golden eyes on her and then seeing the resultant expression on his face made her think that he thought her intellect left much to be desired. "This oracle is not about this Sesshomaru. Explain."

So he was that sort of person. After this bout of forced socializing, when she went home, she was looking forward to crashing alone in her bed and allowing her brain to recuperate.

"I know all the spheres are still somewhat in disrepair, but I'm not dense. It's spelled to only register his magical identity. You shouldn't be able to hold onto it and be unharmed," Astoria repeated, theories already forming in her head. Wetting her lips, she asked nervously, "This...isn't the Head Auror I'm talking to, is it? Polyjuiced for whatever reason to look like the guest we're expecting? Because, if it is, this really isn't funny, sir."

"You think this Sesshomaru to look like this Hari?" he said, disregarding the validity of her question. She didn't know him well enough to understand, upon hearing her words, why his expression had lost a little of its hardness. He murmured, "Has your mind been addled? Only an imbecile would dare masquerade as me."

"Sorry, I don't mean it like that." Her eyes trekked to the orb he still held in his fingers, his skin blistered at the tips. She had half a mind to ask, but she didn't feel like one to pry. "If I may, is that one special to you or can you touch the other prophecy records? Actually, did you mess with anything else besides the one you're holding?"

Rolling a thumb over the glass, he frowned at her. "Rest assured, there are spiritual barriers that this Sesshomaru has no desire to touch. This Sesshomaru wants not to provoke such ki needlessly."

"I'm chuffed."
"...Moreover, you'd imparted that only people whom a oracle is made about can remove the artifact. It was not exceedingly difficult to track what remains of this Hari amongst the reiryoku. It recognized me." His voice ended at a low purr, having fallen back into his native language.

"You'd...tracked down...his magical signature?" Astoria whispered, focusing on the speech that was able to be translated. She faltered, her intuition whispering to her of something queer in thought that she was hesitant to realize aloud. She said delicately, "Th-that's remarkable. It's indeed Lord Black's memory of the prophecy. Of his and the Dark Lord's. But you're not...You followed his...heavens, you should not still be holding onto that. If you're not Lord Black, even with your natural creature immunities, you shouldn't be able to confuse it."

His mouth was unfurled into what she thought was a decadently-wide smirk—alarmingly smug. "So this is Hari's memory of his kingdom's war. It originated because of this oracle between the Hari and this Vol—" He saw her cringe, before repeating, "—This Voldemort. This war came to be because Hari was declared to be a formidable threat. 'Neither can live while the other survives,' this Sesshomaru recalls the soothsayer saying...what is the meaning behind this? She leaves much open-ended interpretations."

"Lord Sesshomaru, with much respect, as much as I'd love to answer your questions," Astoria began, wringing her hands behind her back, "for the peace of my mind and many others, could you please put that back where it belongs?"

When she saw his fingers constrict, Astoria offered, "In return, I'll tell you what I know about your handler? My position allows me some insight that's a bit more than common hearsay."

She could waste some time exchanging gossip, before they went onto discussing more serious matters. Such as what he remembered of whence he came and what he knew about this so-called time traveling portal. Indulging in his questions could help soothe the awkwardness that accompanied first interactions between strangers, and help establish Astoria as a credible source of information.

Sweeping an arm at all the dimly glowing spheres, to further entice him she said, "As you see, most records were destroyed in the events of 1995. His most definitely did not survive. Fortunately he retained the full prophecy in his mind, we were able to add an addendum. But his is among the rare exceptions. I only ask that you set the prophecy down to ensure its safety, and in case that it breaks or does harm to you. It's such a significant portion of our English history, I'd prefer neither of us get in trouble."

"Why would there be trouble? There was nothing barring access originally. This has nothing to do with you."

Poppycock. She had to stay her tongue from accusing him of being difficult. After a steadying breath, Astoria explained, "The Hall of Prophecy is forbidden area. I shouldn't be here, least of all you. How do I put this...you didn't bother to hide your trespassing. What you're doing is going to get us caught. I only followed you because you left the door open."

"Forgive my indiscretion." He didn't even sound remotely apologetic.

Astoria's eyes were involuntarily lured down to his mouth. The prophecy was close to his lips it looked like it was going to be swallowed. Astoria made a mental note for the prophecy to be inspected at a later time, for any potential damages or to see if they could recreate the ease that he handled the sphere. For now her priority was getting him out of the room before they tempted fate.

He'd noticed her worried glance. His gaze lingering on the orb, it was a relief to her when he
eventually he set it back, with gentle care, onto its pedestal. His fingers caressed the smooth surface; after then he departed without a backward glance.

Eyes wide as saucers, she stared openly at his face when he neared. Instead of feeling the awe or respect, she thought the colorful markings on his face dehumanized him. She could see they were too symmetrical to be applied and too clean to be tattoos, however much she was inexplicably reminded of tribal war paint.

He ordered, "Instead of making yourself a nuisance, this Sesshomaru will hear what you know. Leave out no details."

Her brow twitched. Remembering herself, she averted her gaze toward the pointed tip of his ear. "Shall we then?" she asked, gesturing in the direction of the exit.

Promoting their figureheads to a foreign emissary was a familiar task, although she hadn't thought she'd be tested on what was known about their Chosen One. Forming her mouth into a sideways half-moon, as an ice-breaker she commented, "I'm surprised you're unaware of the Boy-Who-Lived mythos. Everyone's heard of it by now, especially for a warlock whose influence is so global."

As he came closer, she added contritely, "By the by, my workmates and I apologize for making you wait. There was an important errand we had to attend to. It couldn't be put off. But now that I'm here, ask away."

"You'd mentioned a 'warlock,'" he said, as if testing the strange enunciation on his tongue. "What would a 'warlock' be in this empire?"

"In our old legends, warlocks were skilled warriors capable of performing all branches of martial magic," Astoria explained, recalling her childhood's bedtime stories. She felt a yawn springing forth, which she hid by hovering the back of her hand over her mouth casually. When it passed, she apologized, "Sorry, this would normally be well past the time for us to turn in for the evening. It's not that I'm uninterested by this conversation."

Blinking away the wetness at the corners of her eyes, she could feel her muscles unwinding as she continued, "In this country, we bestow the title of 'warlock' to a select few that demonstrate feats of valor." Feeling somewhat charitable, Astoria also warned him: "I'd be cautious not to erroneously designate someone of that. It's synonymously used with the term 'wizard' and to describe someone with an unusually fierce appearance. It's more correct to hear it being associated with someone who's been formally knighted for their high achievements in the arcane arts...basically for having superb dueling talent."

He acknowledged her words with a grunt, now within her vicinity. His nostrils had flared, as if ascertaining a stench in the air that was indiscernible to her. His eyes swept her from head to toe—for one heart-stopping moment, his gaze landed on her stomach—before moving back up to meet her gaze directly. "You said you know as much as the average person, if not a bit more. Thusly what is this 'power the dark lord knows not?'"

"Love." When she heard him automatically expel a sound of derision, her smile became a grin. She gestured for them to make their way in the direction of the door they'd came from. "Sounds quite ludicrous, I know. But I'm not jesting. It's common hearsay. You'll have to ask someone else to know for certain though. Gossip distorts the image we've been trying to keep precise. Whereas if you ask me, our esteemed Head Auror and Diplomat is truly an extraordinary war hero that deserves our respect."

The new expression that he gave her made chills run down her spine. She had to look away as he
observed frostily, "You seem to think very highly of this Hari."

Astoria chuckled nervously, twisting the promise ring on her left hand, not exactly sure of the reason behind his upset. She'd thought the two were inseparable, from what she'd been hearing from the press.

Desperate to correct whatever faux pas she'd committed, she spilled out praises: "Did I not come across as genuine? Like I said, he's an extraordinary specimen. And I respect him for what he's experienced, even at our worst. He'd most certainly had you believing he's misunderstood. Don't be fooled by his humility. I know he wants to be seen as the common wizard—"

"Enough of your mindless prattling."

The witch noticed as they traveled, instead of accompanying her by gentlemanly walking on her outside, he kept as close to the walls as possible. He'd been reluctant to leave the prophecy behind. Now he acted like he couldn't wait to get out of the Hall of Prophecy.

"Look, we wouldn't have given him the time of day if he wasn't known for something. I'll be candid: you're going to get the wrong impression, like some of our foreign visitors, if I don't make you comprehend the reason behind the extent of our gratefulness. We're not weird celebrity cultists. We don't worship him as a religion or anything; that's an exaggerated claim I've been hearing circling abroad. We only pay our respects, like any decent somebody would do, for someone who has done as much as he has in our time of great need. He took down the Dark Lord. He's a celebrated veteran. That's why we venerate him." Her forehead crinkled. She muttered to herself, "I need to make you understand this. What else can I say to you about the Savior that you don't know already?"

"...Savior?"

She almost lost her footing as she returned a baffled look in his direction, her eyes landing somewhere along the side of his face. He was looking at her, stone-faced. She blurted, "You never heard of it? Not once, even after all this time?"

"This Sesshomaru has," he denied. "This Sesshomaru simply never asked why that's been associated with this Hari. It's a lofty title. The respect your people pay him seem to go to extraordinary lengths hereabouts."

"I suppose...it does sound pretentious to an outsider," Astoria granted. She could feel exhaustion clouding her mind, giving her the ability to be desensitized. It allowed her to give voice to things she perhaps wouldn't normally say. "The media loves coming up with nicknames. They make for great headliners, even if they're nonsensical or ill-fitting misnomers. People have referred to our Head Auror as a war hero, the Chosen One, the Boy-Who-Lived, the Wizard-Who-Won, Defeater of the Dark Lord, Warlock Potter, the Lord Savior, the Second-Coming-of-Merlin... So on and so forth. Take your pick; we have a list. The very nature of nicknames simply makes them more memorable than actual names—good or bad."

"This Hari overcame this Voldemort," he interjected, cutting to the chase. "It is a feat; this Sesshomaru will acknowledge that kill. But merely ridding himself of his opposition is not deserving of such glorification."

To her, she thought he cut an imposing presence, emanating an intensity that could make people wilt under his gaze. Despite that, Astoria said carefully, "Perhaps not to someone abroad, like you." Her words had been as slow as molasses. She tried not to take it personally, but how dare he ridicule their hardships? There was an instinctive urge within her, compelling her to defend the Lord Black and, by extension, their reputation. She started, "I understand you came from a turbulent time as well. So
you may think your own wars hold a bigger weight, but we'd endured and suffered just as any country thrown into civil war.

"First of all, do you know how many British civilians our Dark Lord's murdered, in his bid for widespread ethnic cleansing? Even before he went mad, do you know how much his policies were endorsed? Or the incredible magic and influence he wielded? He was a prodigy. He was charismatic. Most of all, he was powerful."

Lightheaded, Astoria could hear her voice becoming heated. Her cheeks were flushed by a rush of adrenaline, as flashes of memories colored her dialogue. She still remembered the fear, the hushed whispers of her parents, and the tragic deaths of so many lives.

"To this day, he is still ranked as the most powerful Dark Lord in British magical history. Not even second to his predecessor—whom he'd murdered. Not to mention, the man he killed—Grindelwald—is credited for starting our First Wizarding War and for conspiring with the Muggle Axis Powers in WWII! They both sought to tear down our version of the Iron Curtain, and expose us to the Muggles. Muggles! They wanted war! And both were almost successful, if not for someone being there to stop them. Except ours transitioned from a charismatic wizard—supposedly—to a highly-ambitious, homicidal lunatic! Whom a lot of people had still believed in his cause! He'd tricked a lot of people into thinking he was the man to make our lives better.

"As time progressed, the Dark Arts did something to him. Poisoned him somehow. Riddle's policies started reflecting that. His erratic killing sprees became even more evident. I heard he was a different man when he'd been a student, more calculated in his murders, with more emphasis on keeping his crimes a secret. Then suddenly, he formed a violent revolutionary group. You-Know-Who's campaign—his terrorist cell, essentially—plagued our community for years. Claimed he was reclaiming pureblood rights, that as magic-born we stood on a higher ground than the Muggles. That we shouldn't live in secrecy. The we were losing our ways. That we shouldn't fear those 'weaker than us.' That our society was being choked by the existence of Muggles and Muggleborns. That we were pandering to our oppressors no more. That we weren't going to allow this travesty to continue tainting our generations. That...was actually smart politicking, uniting people by establishing a common enemy as a scapegoat.

"Even as he and his Death Eaters lost sight of their original mission, it was still remembered...which was why he had so many followers or sympathizers in the first place. He inspired nationalistic pride. And this all took place before we found out, posthumously, that this megalomaniac had been lying about his origins, by claiming he was a pureblood, when he was really a half-blood.

"So you may ask why the adulation? Our Dark Lord was so feared, people today still cannot utter his name. It was evident when his policies were becoming insane. His ranks became filled with criminals who'd kill or torture anyone at the drop of a hat. He'd launched fear campaigns. Thus before our Head Auror was taught magic, what he did...he'd done what no adult had, when he'd been nothing more than a defenseless newborn baby! He'd survived the Killing Curse and returned it back, miraculously vanquishing the terror that was the Dark Lord!"

Realizing she was making a scene, she struggled to regain her composure by inhaling and exhaling regularly. Once she felt less jittery, she resumed in a more clinical manner: "This is where the prophecy comes in. Because of him, we enjoyed eleven years of relative peace. Then all of magical Britain went to hell once he was resurrected."

Astoria held her hands up. Each finger was ticked down as she recited: "His old followers resumed their membership, lest they be tracked down and killed for betrayal—to be made examples out of. Disobedience was punished by torture or by death, and leaving was not an option. Riddle launched
us into civil war. Overthrew our government. Established his dictatorship. Was in process of creating a caste system determined by blood purity. And this'll interest you: that hypocrite brought some creature populations into our wizarding conflict, claiming to help them once he was in power. His reign would've threatened the Statute of Secrecy, insofar as eradicating Muggles or classifying anyone with Muggle blood as second-class citizens. I reiterate, it would've meant exposing our existence. And not just the UK. I heard there would've been a World War III—with his sights set on the rest of Europe and America. His ambitions for power would've challenged the status quo, likely through mass genocide and the like. He was an anathema. Under him, we would've rotted."

Tilting her chin up at him, Astoria finished, "Do you know how difficult it was to kill him? It took us almost half a century for someone to figure out how to dismantle his safeguards. And it took our Chosen One a total of seventeen years to finally fulfill his duty. In other words, twice—actually thrice, if those sources can be believed—he's managed to vanquish the most powerful Dark Lord ever documented in British history thus far. If not for our Savior, the magical Britain you'd see today might've been a cesspool of violence and segregation."

The witch purposely did not mention that he was also the only documented case of someone surviving the Killing Curse, and of being the first successful human horcrux. And how he broke past Gringotts' notoriously high security. And his own resurrection. And how he was basically gifted in certain talents, although she wouldn't go as far as calling him a groundbreaking prodigy; he was no Albus Dumbledore, Gellert Grindelwald, Hermione Granger, or Tom Riddle Jr. There was also the time when he'd spoken Parseltongue. Her lips curled. Now that she thought about it, Harry Potter did not sound like a real person. It was understandable why any outsiders would be skeptical.

She clasped her hands behind her back. Astoria finished dryly, "That's my spiel about our civil war. And that's why our Head Auror's so acclaimed. He rose to the occasion. And he delivered. Repeatedly. There are other reasons, like how he's set national records. But I'll spare you the boring details." She shrugged. "You've probably already heard enough. Or you will, since people won't shut up about him and his information is printed everywhere. And on chocolate frog cards too. To be honest, you will find it all a bit tiring soon enough."

This entire time, the magical creature had been in silence. He'd been giving her a hard-pressed stare —appearing a bit more frightening when she counted off, as if being reminded of something unpleasant. He had also been mouthing along soundlessly to her spiel, as if repeating several of the phrases would solidify their credibility within his mind. While she gathered her breath, an unhappy line was dipping between his brows.

He murmured, "This Hari sounds highly accomplished. As well as wielding significant power, with his achievements, logically your Head Auror would not seem like he'd prioritize...pursuing a venture based on another female's indeterminate oracle." For once, he sounded insecure.

Her brows flew into her hairline. That came from completely out of the left field, that she stated defensively, "Well, he is English. That would make him ours."

Astoria winced once she realized the implication of referring to him as such. "Sorry, that came out wrong. But because he's already revolutionized...I should think, after what he's gone through, it can't be helped. Divination nowadays has a bad rep too. I heard from Daphne that he, uh, wasn't quite sold by our Divination professor even then. His policies are also considered to be...more progressive than our history of diplomats. So I suppose he isn't the sort who'll currently place value behind 'oracles,' especially since only the rare few are truly blessed with the gift of Sight. This prophecy, anyway, between him and his—"

Her entire body cringed, once she came to another realization. Astoria spoke in a rush, "—I
apologize for not asking earlier but how much do you know of our civil war? Besides what I told you, I mean?"

"What this Sesshomaru was told." The intensity of his gaze doubled as he inferred, "There is an additional connection between this Hari and this Voldemort?"

"How astute of you." Her smile became further strained. "I see. Well, it's certainly no secret among the English. But I don't think it's my place to share that information if our Head Auror hasn't done so for you already."

"Did you not say you'll answer any of my queries?" he retorted, his timbre lowered to a dangerous rumble. He challenged, "This Sesshomaru was told your kind cannot go back on their word."

Feeling brazen, she replied, "And in all modesty, was I not answering your questions to the best of my ability?"

She tucked a dark curl behind an ear demurely, analyzing his expression from sidelong. "Actually, I think you're mistaken. It's magical oaths and vows that we can't break. It's only a guarantee with magic, to be more precise. Fortunately you're in the company of trustworthy experts!" Astoria forced her smile to broaden. "We've sworn an oath to keep our silence regarding your circumstance. So I'm not going against my word per se; I've explained to you of our recent sociopolitical timeline, which has been made public. But I don't feel at ease delving past that, especially with things that are so intrinsically personal to him alone."

His features descended into something unexpectedly dark and brooding, taking her aback. Rolling a thought in his head, he finally mumbled, "Then you shall be of no further use to this Sesshomaru."

"Pardon?" she asked, her mouth pressing together from what sounded like an accusatory tone. "Alright, if you think I'm so inadequate, perhaps you should ask him instead. Or feel free to dig through our old papers. It's his private business. It's not something you absolutely have to find out. It's not like your life will be any better knowing about it. I'm trying to demonstrate decency to your minder, Lord Sesshomaru, which I'm sure you'll understand."

"It's nothing to do with you," he said coldly. "You're unwilling to share this information for sake of maintaining discretion. You refuse to tell me of the relationship between this Hari and this Dark Lord. It can only be assumed that it's a disgraceful connection to him that this Hari doesn't wish to be spread."

Noticing her surprised reaction, he switched tactics, gesturing to the tagged records. "Since you feel so beholden to his goodwill, you may at least clarify what the characters below the yearly mark denote."

Their exit was now in sight.

"You can't read it?" she exclaimed. When he sent her an offended glare, she switched gears. At least he'd dropped the subject. She cleared her throat. "Many apologies. I didn't mean anything by that. I'm assuming you mean the abbreviations? S.P.T. are the initials of Sybill Patricia Trelawney. She's descended from the legendary Cassandra Trelawney, from a notable Seer heritage. In that same vein, A.P.W.B.D..."

The witch halted, feeling a lump lodge in her airway. Swallowing difficultly, she whispered, "It stood for Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, for our old headmaster. He was interviewing Professor Trelawney when the prophecy came to be. You remember my mentioning of the 1995 incident? The Dark Lord and his Death Eaters infiltrated the Ministry to retrieve the orb you just
held. As I'm certain you've already deduced, Lord H.J.P.B.P. is someone you know very well."

Out of nervous habit, she brought her hands over her stomach in a protective gesture. "He, erm, infamously destroyed all the prophecies in the attempt to make sure the Dark Lord couldn't get his hands on theirs. That's what I heard. So that's why they're...all...smashed..." Astoria drifted off, blinking, her face undergoing a sequence of emotions until she almost stumbled from the mental revelation.

She breathed, "Merlin's breath, I just heard the full prophecy. You and I just heard it in its entirety!" She beamed up at him, her cheeks flushed. "That's incredible!"

Her excitement seemed to be amusing to him. He said, "Up to now, you were able to interpret its contents to me. It's truly that privileged of an information?" He made a derisive sound. "How needlessly wasteful."

She shared dazedly, "I only told you what I knew from the press and common hearsay. A prophecy can only be heard by those that it's made about. Even Trelawney doesn't know. A Seer can't remember the prophecies they made. The only people who'd know are either dead—may their souls forever rest in peace—or were told by our Head Auror...if you can get the stubborn man to confess to anything...or get his attention."

Her amazement took an immediate downturn as memories swarmed her of whenever her colleagues had no choice but to investigate other sources, once they'd been turned away by the Head Auror or by his Deputy Head, all because of the workload that took higher demand over theirs.

Even worse were the times that the Unspeakables would slam into the brick wall that was the Acting Minister, whom anyone could see that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had in their pockets. Kingsley Shacklebolt's official decrees had impeded several of her higher-ups from bothering his protégé.

Astoria grumbled, "Realistically, it's enormously difficult to find him available. You'd have to belong to some sort of exclusive circle to formally petition him to take notice. Even then, you'll have to jump through several hoops."

Her voice had gone up in a mocking higher-pitch as she quoted bitterly: "'If it's not involving national security, crown and country, you're out of your league trying to bother him with your insignificant distractions. Your business is much too trivial compared to his much more urgent matters, to see the Head Auror in person. Think about filing a report instead. Eventually someone will find it in a pile. If it's really that important, it'll be placed somewhere on his desk for him to find or near the top of the pile with those other important-looking documents that I'm obviously pointing out to you for dramatic effect.'"

His face twitched for one millisecond. "This Hari has his priorities. It cannot be helped."

Overhearing him, she agreed quietly, "I know. It can be so frustrating. It's like they're his gatekeepers. His department doesn't give anyone the time of day unless you happen to have matters that coincide with what his definition of 'importance' is."

She saw his jaw clench. But other than that, with little else to say, they fell into an awkward silence.

At a loss, Astoria sized up the tall humanoid who now appeared to be lost in thought. Her mouth bore an upturned lip upon peering at his swords, as she couldn't help thinking how obsolete they were in the Modern Era against those who possessed magic and against the Muggles with their advanced technologies.
It also didn’t help that his attire was terribly medieval and barbaric, inspiring within her several antediluvian visions of the Silk Road and Oriental Muggles that lived by a warrior's credo. Beyond the armor's association of strength, she thought his appearance was more ethereal and fragile—fantastical in the romantic sense—than having a set of physical cues that Europeans would consider as conventionally handsome. Armor, silk, and fur: not quite the wear of a civilized man, however well-kept he appeared. Someone like him belonged in a museum, behind a display case.

Under the torchlights, Astoria squinted at the exotic creature to her side. It might've been because of his Asian genetics but regardless of how he spoke, he also appeared slightly younger than her. With his long hair, his facial structure had some elements of delicateness—highlighting his androgyny that was so at odds for someone of his stature. Astoria supposed on a shallow level, she might've been torn placing a gender to him if it weren't for certain characteristics, which all somehow pieced together his masculinity like a jigsaw puzzle.

That in mind, she entertained the thought that he could possibly be a vain creature. His brows were dark, which made her think he wasn't a natural blond. Astoria also didn't know how to feel about the two streaks of magenta over his eyelids, being reminded of her own smoky eyeshadow. She personally had not seen a man willingly apply cosmetics to their face unless in theatrical plays or to fit—erroneously—in the Muggle crowd.

"Have you not been taught etiquette? This Sesshomaru is not a performing attraction."

She was thrown off-kilter when the time traveler suddenly shifted on his feet, his eyes—bestial and reptilian—meeting at hers head-on.

Frowning down at her momentarily, he declared, "You speak with a distinctive quality only alphas have, but you emanate a presence with the conditioning of an omega or beta."

The witch was quite certain her exhaustion had finally impaired her cognitive abilities. She stared at him, wide-eyed and speechless.

When he got tired of seeing her mouth open and close, he repeated himself slowly, for her sake.

She struggled to make sense of what she was hearing. "What exactly are you trying to insinuate?"

"Merely an observation." His gaze was piercing and evaluative. "You needn't bother wasting your time harboring self-doubt about your station in life. You've laid your bed. You can only own up to it."

"I beg your pardon? How did you come to this leap of logic? I-I'm not doubtful about my...my position!"

"Then it's incomprehensible why you would choose to tie yourself down to this 'Malfoy,' to willingly smell that of a beta belonging to...another beta. If your low morale proves to be a hindrance, then this Sesshomaru must slay your insecurities."

He glowered at her, as if silently demanding why he had to suffer through this. His eyes flickered back down her figure, before returning up.

With the forcefulness of a tsunami, he told her, "You're undeniably in need of rest, howbeit you're coherent enough that people are still able to place their trust in you. And for just reason. You have your packmates well-trained; they are able to function perfectly well without their pack alpha there breathing down their necks. Earlier, you took the initiative by being the first to respond to this Sesshomaru. In return, they award you the privilege and the honor of summoning this Sesshomaru.
Have pride in yourself."

For a moment, her breath stopped. Astoria could feel her arms loosening from their crossed position, as her cheeks seared. Being an inventor that preferred her experimental tinkering indoors instead of the sun, she didn't have to conjure a mirror to know her skin must've resembled a blotchy tomato from his compliments, mortified.

"I-I thought Asians were supposed to be the conservative sort," she managed to whisper, her voice tremulous. What he was saying was lovely—albeit in strange creature lingo—but his expression didn't match. Astoria chuckled awkwardly, tucking a curl behind an ear. Her knuckle brushed against a jade earring. "Especially from your particular crowd. You're a bit of an anomaly."

His face contorted as if he'd encountered something that had insulted him. He demanded, "Are you being unnecessarily humble or do you truly lack the self-esteem?"

Astoria's mouth flattened into a thin line. Being reminded of personal matters, she turned her face aside, covering her mouth to hide what she knew was a hideous expression.

When Astoria remained unresponsive, Lord Sesshomaru supplied, "You're merely wasting your time pretending to be modest, when you don't despair from lacking lord and country. You're a reasonably attractive female—of decent bloodlines, competency, and intelligence. You have a respectable post. For someone of your station, it is inevitable to anyone that Mating a woman of your strengths will gain them great prosperity. Your Intended should consider himself fortunate."

She'd automatically opened her mouth to object but like a stone dropping into water, his words rippled through her, reaching the crevices of her deepest insecurities put to her by her in-laws and her family. After all, being the younger sibling, she was always compared to Daphne. She thought herself to be entitled to harbor some self-doubts. For a good part of her life, it'd been mostly her sister who soaked in the adulation.

Averting her gaze, Astoria mumbled to her feet, "Not everyone would agree with you on that."

"This Hari has assured your competence and trustworthiness. You'd responded adequately to me, this Sesshomaru is inclined to believe him."

Lord Sesshomaru strode forward, intruding onto her personal space. Short of reaching for her and tilting her chin up—his presence made her lift her head accordingly—he was surveying her an intense look that made her heart pound even harder. He smelt of steel and fur. In a low rumble, like stating a certainty, he asserted, "So long as you continue in this similar vein, you will not disappoint me. You underestimate your worth, Gurīngurasu."

She swallowed. Even Draco hadn't ever told her... Bringing a palm to the underside of her jaw, with her fingers up against the side of her cheek, Astoria allowed a small smile to surface. His confidence was infectious.

"I'm surprised. You certainly don't hold back with your flattery." Her thoughts feeling fuzzy, she murmured softly, "T-thank you. No one's given me recognition in...thank you."

"Your gratitude to me is misplaced. You'd simply needed reminding." He jerked his chin in the direction of the door. "In the meantime, our cooperation has been requested of me. Come, we shall await this Hari together. You may introduce this Sesshomaru to your packmates."

Feeling like a lost little girl, Astoria nodded faintly, trailing after him in slight wonder and confusion. That night, when she was sitting on her bed, with her knees drawn up to her chest and feeling quite
The letter her fiancé had owled her from France had been lying open on her nightstand. Having read the cold and impersonal contents of the short message detailing the wizard's return, she'd been absentely toying with her ring, rubbing the smooth portion of the sterling silver band. At her feet was a well-worn book on constellations and Greek mythology, borrowed from the Malfoy library.

Unbeknownst to Astoria, a feeling of dissatisfaction had awakened deep inside of her.

However much Jaken wanted to remain at the outskirts of the wilderness, it was unavoidable.

As promised, in the same evening they'd encountered the blind canine and its human, Jaken brought Rin to the closest body of freshwater that he could find. However, as they found out soon enough, the small pond was near the vicinity of the village where the abductions took place. Safely hidden behind cover, Rin was fascinatedly watching minnows swimming around her submerged legs and waist. They were darting like tiny shooting stars in the water, as she heard Jaken's voice loudly charging A-Un to stand vigil while she washed herself.

Then Jaken, determined to act in Lord Sesshomaru's stead, had left to gather further details and to perform the necessary reconnaissance.

After having cleansed herself of the day's sweat, Rin and A-Un made camp close to where she'd bathed, expecting Jaken's return to them shortly. The two-headed dragon had been curled behind Rin as she tended to a campfire, her small body being warmed from A-Un against her back and the embers in her front. Roasting on the biggest, flattest stones she could find were the few minnows she'd managed to catch with her bare hands.

The rations she'd dug from one of the knapsacks affixed to A-Un's saddle were beside her on the fabric she'd laid out on the ground. On it were small assortments of edible plants, mushrooms, roots, and berries she'd gathered for them. If they watched how much they would eat, they had enough to last them two more days before they'd need to stock up again.

When she felt A-Un stir against her back, she heard two soft yips and a whine. Almost immediately Rin thought she was going to see the large black canine emerging from the tall grass. She'd gotten on her feet, ready to scold him for following them, but her stomach dropped with disappointment when it turned out to be a docile village dog lured by the smell of roasting fish.

With its triangular ears folded against its skull and its tail tucked between its legs, it'd approached them slowly, cautiously—especially with the enormous dragon monitoring the dog's movements. The dog emitted several short whines behind closed jaws, making her think of distinctly wobbly yips and bark-howls from the crippled canine they'd left behind. She thought the brown dog had looked so sad and so hungry—Rin could see the shape of its ribs against the fur—that, with a heavy heart, she fed bits of fish to it.

Its tail had been wagging while it ate. Watching it glut itself on the scraps on her hand, she wondered if the canine was as hungry as this dog. It reminded her of when she used to go hungry before Lord Sesshomaru and Master Jaken came into her life, when all she had to sustain herself were either stolen or whatever could be scavenged in the wilderness.

For a moment, as she smiled down at its obvious enjoyment, Rin thought they would gain a temporary companion. She'd already begun suggesting names to it, waiting for the one that got the biggest reaction.
But then Jaken had burst out of the tall grass, and the dog—startled by the demon's sudden appearance—had scampered away, leaving pawprints in the dirt in the direction that it'd fled.

Nothing much happened in the night. After being chastised by Jaken about the danger she might've put herself in, he'd launched into a frustrated tirade of how people were superstitious, and how there were too many contradictions to differentiate which rumors were true. Human abductions became demon abductions. One village became multiple villages. Victims of all age and gender became only beautiful women, which then became men of any species who'd been targeted.

When he accepted the fish she offered him as consolation for his troubles, Jaken was sullenly telling her a story of how he'd heard a girl had disappeared from the village, along with her father and with her fiancé. He was glaring down the fish, which spanned a width of three of his knuckles pressed together, when he griped that her father had been found recently on the outskirts of the forest they'd just came from, except the young man who'd accompanied him was apparently still missing.

He'd warned Rin that although the humans thought the village to be cursed, it was most likely the fault of a demon or at the hands of malicious humans. It was safer for them to make their stay as brief as possible, and to find Lord Sesshomaru as soon as they could. They'll stay within the region where he'd last left them, to make his search for them more convenient. Before Jaken was lulled to sleep from exhaustion, he was murmuring that he wished Lord Sesshomaru would've trusted him enough to have introduced him to the Lady Mother long before, just so right now...they...wouldn't...be....

His eyes were finally closed, and no amount of gentle poking and soft shoves could awaken him. In Rin's opinion, he seemed determined to ignore her until he got his minimal amount of rest. The rise and fall of his chest became rhythmic and regular as the night passed on.

As she squinted at Jaken's face, to make sure that he was asleep, her belly felt warm and full from the minnows she'd ate. Drawing her knees up to her chest, with her pointer finger tracing the indentions of a pawprint left in the soil, she reflected.

It wasn't much later, with the moon reminding Rin of a large white ball in the sky, that she made up her mind to return to the forest without Jaken's permission. "I remember exactly where it was. It's less than half a league away," she told the sleeping water imp and the two-headed dragon. One of the heads was awake, lazily watching her through an open eyelid as she rummaged through one of their pouches tied to their saddle. The eyeball was a shiny, glowing lantern, giving her enough illumination while she worked.

Crouched down next to A-Un, she set aside more of the goods she'd picked, from before and from the village's vicinity, out on the grass. Without a frame of reference, she ended up choosing the berries and dried roots she'd seen Lord Sesshomaru try once out of curiosity, to see what was so special about them. Remembering him remarking afterward that humans could consume anything as long as it was edible, she chattered, "He must be hungry. And he can't see! Don't you feel a little sorry for him, A-Un? He was protecting a human too. Do you think that was his master? Either way, don't you think that's very noble of him?"

The dragon snorted.

"It's only for a short while," Rin reassured, petting his mane. "I'll be quick. You'll be able to find me, won't you? Before Jaken-sama wakes up. Or should I take you along?" She tilted her head, putting her hands on the sides of his face. Her thumbs were stroking against the glossy scales above where the lacquered muzzle would've been, in the way she knew he liked it. She whispered, "He might feel less scared if he knew you were there to protect me."

As if sensing the momentous decision that was about to be reached, the other head's ears flickered as
he groggily roused himself out of sleep. He was peering at Rin and his other head through his slitted yellow gaze, bumping his snout against the back of her hand. Cold air passed through his nose ridges, tickling the skin below her knuckles.

"Or maybe he'd feel better if he woke up to find you still there," she said, bringing a hand to also pat the newly awakened dragon head. "Then, if I'm not back in time, you would be able to lead him to me, wouldn't you?"

The two heads made a rumbly noise, as if in agreement.

She beamed at them.

Before she left, she found a stick to draw a picture in the dirt for Jaken. Ever since she entered Lord Sesshomaru's company, she'd never had to continue writing lessons. A trace of shame entered her for a moment, as she thought about all the children her age who'd know how to read or write the basic Japanese characters by now. All the calligraphy lessons her parents and brothers started her on have long since evaporated.

Swallowing against the ball of guilt in her throat, she drew her face with a grin and a side pony-tail jutting out where her head was supposed to be. She drew an arrow between her and the lines that were supposed to look like trees, with the large canine and a figure lying prone on the ground being circled. And because she felt like it, she dragged the stick against the earth several times until she was staring at the simplified caricatures of Jaken and A-Un cuddled together, with a bubble coming out of their nose to show that they were sleeping.

Her hand had automatically begun on Lord Sesshomaru's face. It was only when she'd finished his pointy ears, when her stick stilled above the half-arch which was supposed to represent the crescent moon on his forehead. She bit her lower lip. "Please return soon, Sesshomaru-sama," she whispered to the picture. "We miss you. Rin misses you."

Rin rocked back on the balls of her feet, tilting her head to examine the drawing beside her toes. Standing up, she dragged her heel across the dirt, wiping away his face.

"Are you really alright with it?" Higurashi Kagome asked Inuyasha for the third time, holding onto his hand firmly as he led her through the dark forest. She could feel the hard calluses rubbing against her palm, the texture of his hand rough but gentle—much like he was in personality.

The moonlight played off the silvery strands, casting a bright luminescence to his long hair. To her eyes, his fire-rat garment seemed to radiate a red glow under the tree canopies. If she looked up, she could see speckles of the starry night revealed in the gaps between the leaves and branches.

Inuyasha expelled his trademark scoff. "Keh! Not this again." He came to a halt, giving her an annoyed glance. Still holding onto her hand, he demanded, "What is your problem? We've already paid visits to the Spirit of Mount Azusa and the Great Holy Demon Spirit. It's a bit late to back out now."

Shouldering her quiver of arrows and the longbow strapped onto her back, Kagome smiled feebly. "It's only polite to give thanks to the people who've aided us on our quest. We only have a few more to go."

Since a certain waterfall was the closest on their way back from the Great Holy Demon Spirit, next would've been the demon Yakûrôdokusen they were to visit, the Master of Potions who'd repaired Sango's bone boomerang and given Miroku the antidote to the miasma that'd poisoned his Wind
Tunnel arm. Kagome felt obligated to express their respects to him, in her friends' absence, like she and Inuyasha had done for the people they've visited so far. She wasn't too keen on visiting the perverted old man though, despite her friends' gratefulness to him, especially when Inuyasha had confessed to her of the ramifications of the antidote's effects which Miroku would have to live with for the rest of his life.

Inuyasha's brows were still drawn over his face. Stepping closer he bumped his forehead against hers, his fringe against hers, as he searched her eyes. He drew his head back an inch, and then knocked it back against hers. "Okay, you were the one who wanted to do this. What's really going on?"

Kagome huffed, her smile growing involuntarily bigger as she felt his body heat seeping into hers. He may have mellowed after Naraku's defeat, but he was still rough around the edges. Kagome inhaled the balmy scent of trees and something else that she could only attribute to him. She remarked offhandedly, "You know, you can be romantic when you try."

His eyes widened, and he turned his nose up at her, looking away. His mouth had moved into an automatic pout as he gazed up at the stars. "I'm not trying to be romantic," he muttered mulishly. His furry dog ears were flattened against his hair. "Stop changing the subject."

She hummed noncommittally, pointedly glancing down at their entwined fingers. She hadn't been the one to offer to hold hands. "I just feel bad," she said softly, her eyes drifting to the rusty sword in its sheathe. "We've been on a journey for so long to strengthen the Tessaiga. Now I'm dragging you all over the place with me, so that I can be a proper miko. Even I think it's overwhelming. I'm stopping you from learning how to be stronger."

"Why wouldn't I aid you on your quest to become stronger?" he demanded sharply, turning his head back. He was staring at her incredulously. "Isn't it your turn now to learn? You need to learn how to properly survive in this time. You're my—!" His eyelids lowered half-mast. "Is this because we left Shippo behind with Sango and Miroku in the village? He can handle a few weeks without seeing you. He's probably dreaming about flirting with a human girl right as we speak."

"No!" she blurted, tightening her hand around his. "I mean, I miss him. But it's not that."

Looking up into his golden eyes which glowed in the night, taking in his whole otherworldly figure, she felt somewhat inadequate. Her eyes lowered to the Beads of Subjugation around his neck. She fingered the purple prayer beads, feeling guilty when she felt him automatically tense up against her, as if bracing himself to be launched face-first into the dirt. He only relaxed when she dropped her hand to his chest instead. She murmured, "Unlike you, it's going to take a long time for me to gain mastery over my bowmanship."

"You've fired Sacred Arrows before."

"I keep missing," she parried back. "I don't have formal training. It's a miracle that I can land a hit. You can just swing recklessly," here she mimed a tiny sword slash, "and you can still kill a hundred enemies. I don't have the luxury of missing, Inuyasha. I have limited ammo. Unlike me, you were made for the sword. I'm," she grimaced, "being a burden. I'm sorry."

Inuyasha didn't say anything for a while.

Kagome was startled when he clasped a large hand over her nape. "Stupid," he whispered in a low, scratchy octave. "Even if you were a burden, I don't care. You've saved our hides more times than I can count. And you're willing to learn now. That says something." He bumped his forehead against hers again, scenting her hair. He murmured again, "Stupid."
She smacked his chest. "Stop calling me stupid."

"Stop being stupid."

"Inuyash—!" Her rising volume was cut off when she felt his muscles feeling chiseled out of stone again. Withholding a sigh, she reached up to pull at a white earflap, feeling a childish pleasure when he gave an "ow!" She said flatly, "You're the one being stupid by calling me stupid. You're the idiot who wanted this idiot as a girlfriend."

Holding onto both of his ears protectively, as if he could guard them once he had them covered, he was staring at her with a befuddled look. "'Girlfriend'"

Kagome felt heat flood into her face and ears. Turning her back to him, looking at the ground and fiddling with her hands, she said in a rush, "That's what we call women in my time who are exclusively dating—um, seeing a, um, who have been wooed by—a man. Usually. It doesn't mean a female friend. I mean, it could. I've heard it used to refer to that. But the 'girlfriend' I have in mind is the more romantic version. We've progressed from being friends, right? Maybe it's too forward of me."

"I thought we were 'marrying.'"

At that, she had to turn around. Her eyes were wide.

"What?" he snapped. His hands lowered from his head. "Wasn't that what you wanted?"

Kagome frowned. "It's not what you want?"

"Keh, I'm fine either way." His cheeks turned red. "Oyaji 'married' Ofukuro. It's the ningen way. I'd thought I'd follow...in their footsteps and...we could...eventually...'marry.' If you want to." His voice had gone small at the end, as if his confidence had been punctured. He was mumbling, "Miroku and Sango also married. It was...nice."

"Of course I want to marry you. I think your otousan and okaasan would be happy." Actually that was a large step to take, but after being forced back into her time for three years and only having the well's powers recently reactivate, the tidal wave of emotions that'd surged within her upon seeing Inuyasha once more ultimately contributed to her decision to stay in the past. But this time, with no way of accessing the well's powers again. Her eyes softened. Seeing his face brighten up strengthened her resolve to go through with it. She just wished she could've met her in-laws in person, and have Inuyasha meet her mother one last time. "Married at eighteen, wow," Kagome breathed.

She tipped her chin toward the sky. She knew she shouldn't have been expecting it to go the way she'd envisioned it—considering the man she loved was an inu hanyou from the feudal era—but there was a small part of her that'd thought she'd be proposed to on a bent knee and a ring presented to her. If not that, at least she'd be wearing a Western wedding dress and whoever her Prince Charming was would be wearing a tuxedo. She looked down at her modern clothing, remembering the miko ensemble she'd changed out of and put into her backpack.

"Why do you sound so surprised?" he huffed, crossing his arms into his sleeves. His face still hadn't lost that broad, goofy grin. "People 'marry' when they're twelve. We're just. A little late. Behind them." His expression swiftly descended into worriment. "Is it a big problem that we're late behind them, Kagome?"

Her giddiness faded. She asked slowly, "Inuyasha, what do you know about marriage?"
"What's there to know?" he retorted, befuddled. "I see it happening a lot. I think it's nicer than demons Mating." His face was screwed into an expression of distaste. "It's not as...to-the-point."

Kagome frowned. "Mating?" she echoed, the last of the phonetic trailing off in confusion. She hesitated. "What do you mean?"

Inuyasha was about to explain, when his sensitive nose seemed to have picked up a smell. Sniffing the air, his brows scrunched as if trying to recall the scent, before he whirled on his feet.

"Inuyasha?" she inquired in a hushed voice, sliding an arrow from her quiver and bringing her longbow into her hands. All thoughts of marriage escaped from her mind. Drawing the string back until it was taut, she readied herself for more unexpected combat.

He waved her off, slapping her hands to get them down from firing position. "No, it's not—!"

Strands of moonlit hair obscured her vision as he jerked his head. "I know the smell. Can you keep up or do I have to carry you?"

"What is it?" she demanded, lowering her bow and arrow.

"I think—" He sniffed again, eyeing somewhere to his side. "—I think it's Sesshomaru's ward. But she's alone. The bastard's scent is not as strong on her as before." He leveled Kagome with a knowing look. "Do you want to get her?"

"Rin?" Kagome gasped. She could start to see Inuyasha becoming stir-crazy, shifting on his feet in impatience. Kagome whispered urgently, "Is she far? Hurt? Being chased? If she is, we'll be faster if you carried me."

Sooner than she'd finished, Inuyasha had gotten on his knees, his back to her. His arms were already positioned to take her weight. From all the experience she'd got, out of muscle memory she'd nimbly climbed onto his back. When she gripped his shoulders, Inuyasha took off, darting into an off-beaten route. The wind whooshed by them from the swift speed Inuyasha set, drowning out the noise of insects and blasting a cold gust against their faces.

She glanced over his shoulder, down at his legs. Kagome held on tighter. It was a wonder to her that Inuyasha could stand running barefoot in the wilderness, with rocks and sharp twigs everywhere to scratch up the soles of his feet.

"What do you mean Sesshomaru's scent is not as strong on her as before?" she asked loudly into an ear flap. There was a feeling in her gut that worried her. "Your brother wouldn't leave her out of his sights. He's probably somewhere close-by, with Jaken not far behind."

Inuyasha grunted, "That's the point. I smell the toad and Sesshomaru's dragon on her. But they're stronger than Sesshomaru's. I think he's left them behind again, the cold-hearted bastard. She might be lost."

"Inuyasha!" she rebuked. "That's your brother you're talking about. I thought you two made your amends."

"We did! I told you about the truce we made! We don't actively try to kill each other now. And he no longer tries to steal my sword." He sounded viciously satisfied by that. He added, "But I still get to insult him."

"Inuyasha...", she said warily. "I know he was a terrible brother. But he did help us defeat Naraku. You have to be the mature one."
"Kagome. Don't start."

"Wouldn't it make him more annoyed if you started being kind to him?" she tried. "Just imagine his face. You would throw him off-guard."

Inuyasha fell silent. Kagome hoped her words had gotten him to at least consider it, but judging by the stubborn set of his jaw from what she could see at the side, he wasn't about to change his mind anytime soon. Lifting her eyes away from him, she spied the dark outline of a small figure running deeper into the forest.

Rin still didn't know what sort of canine he was. She just knew it wasn't a wolf or a dog, since that was what Jaken had insisted. At a loss of the appropriate title to call out to him, thinking of its yips and barks, she simply settled for, "Where are you, wan wan-san?"

She glanced around her surroundings, wringing the pouch in her hands perplexedly. This was the exact spot where she and Jaken had encountered the canine and his human. Except the tree where the man had been laid against was empty, with the unconscious old man nowhere in sight. There was a human-sized spot on the grass where the blades had been flattened, which was a sign that it wasn't a delusion she and Jaken had suffered.

"Wan wan-san?" she called out again, this time uncertain. She knelt down, placing the rucksack on the ground. Hoping that he was nearby, she said, "If you're not here, then I'll lay this out for you to return to. I can't leave one of A-Un's saddlebags behind with you." Rin grabbed a handful of the red and blue berries, setting them into a pile. She hummed underneath her breath as she set the contents into tiny hills organized by color and type of food. She said cheerfully into the air, "I can't stay long and wait. If I don't return to camp soon, I think Jaken-sama would faint."

Her head shot up when she heard the bushes rustle. Gradually twisting around, she eyed the source of the sound. Soon enough, she saw what appeared to be a long furry snout, crouched low to the ground to make himself seem deceptively small. Its shiny black nose was wriggling.

"You're still here," Rin breathed, a wide grin stretching from ear to ear. It wasn't a waste of time after all. "Where is the elder, wan wan-san? I'm sorry for calling you wan wan-san, but I don't know what else to call you."

He didn't move.

Frowning, she queried, "Wan wan-san?" Reaching to grab one of each foodstuff, she cautiously inched forward, knees still bent. She stopped scooting forward when she was halfway to him. Cupping her hands low to the ground, she shook her hands invitingly. She coaxed, "I brought food for you."

The snout inched forward, so that now she could see a little more than half of his face. His eyes were still closed. The canine wasn't acting with any aggression, but he was behaving as if she might be luring him into a trap.

Her heart sunk. Of course he would be leery to trust a stranger. The scars around his body proved that. Reminded of the village dog that'd fed from her hand, Rin gathered her courage. When she felt sufficiently bolstered, she crept up close to him until she was only eight paces away. "Rin's not going to hurt you," she crooned softly, pitching her voice lower and more comfortingly. "Don't you remember me? Jaken-sama and I found you earlier today with another human."

His entire face was uncovered, with a little of his neck and body emerging from the bushes. His large
head was canted, ears perked and swiveling, alert. But he was silent. It felt like forever but, lifting one paw after the other, he ultimately crossed the remaining distance. He was sniffing at her palms, his wet nose brushing against the berries and the dried roots, before he blew cold air against her skin. The noise he made sounded like an amused whuff.

"I'm sorry," she said morosely. Small fingers buried into his surprisingly clean, trimmed pelt. The dark fur around his neck felt soft to the touch. She felt a warm fuzziness in her chest as she stroked him. "I didn't know what you eat. But these aren't poisonous! This Rin has tried them!"

The canine's entire body vibrated from the rumbly noise that he made. Breaking from her fingers, he nuzzled up against Rin, walking in a ring around her. When he came full-circle, his head lowered to her fingers. A warm, pink tongue licked her fingertips, the sensation making her giggle.

"You don't have a master, right? Now that the human is gone?" she asked, patting him. The food that'd been in her hands had been dropped uncaringly on the ground. "Would you like to come with Rin? I promise you I'll think up a better name for you, if you do."

She peered at him. If he sat back fully on his haunches, his lanky form was big enough that he would be eye-level with her. Maybe even taller. Rin assured, "Jaken-sama is cranky all the time, but he has a big heart. You'll like A-Un. They're very affectionate." With a gigantic smile, she chorused, "And you'll like Sesshomaru-sama. I know he'll seem scary at first. But milord's so dashing and heroic! And he's very handsome. You won't be able to see him, but that's okay! If you can hide, scavenge food for yourself, and not get in his way, I think he'll eventually accept having you travel with us."

"Gah! Someone shut him up!"

"Inuyasha!" Rin gasped, hearing him first before seeing him. For a quick while, when she saw his white hair and golden eyes, for a horrible moment she'd thought him to be Lord Sesshomaru. Then the red haori on his figure from far away registered in her brain. When Rin saw what appeared to be a pretty lady on his back waving at her sheepishly, she cried, "Kagome-sama!"

"Hello, Rin-chan," Kagome greeted warmly, sliding off Inuyasha. She was treading guardedly toward them, her strange blue eyes focused on the hefty canine baring his fangs at her as she approached Rin. She took note that Rin didn't seem scared of it. "And who is this?" Inuyasha was closely trailing after her, equally wary of the canine.

Rin hugged the canine from behind, to show that he wasn't dangerous. Almost immediately, the canine quieted. "Rin found him in the forest today. He's coming with me and Jaken-sama."

The adults exchanged a look over their heads.

"Rin-chan," Kagome started uncertainly. She surveyed the white scars on the humongous black form. "He seems wild. I don't think it's that safe having him around."

"Sesshomaru would have it killed in no time," Inuyasha muttered under his breath, but Rin heard him nonetheless. "Where is he anyway?"
Her eyes had begun to sting. Her face feeling hot, Rin asserted, "Sesshomaru-sama wouldn't do something as cruel as that." She rubbed her hands up and down the sides of the canine's neck, as if she could soothe him in case that he was anxious by what Inuyasha was saying. She was inspecting his tail, which was swishing languidly from side to side, occasionally thumping against the soil. Talking rapidly, she said, "When he comes back, he won't hurt...he won't hurt...he won't hurt him if-if...if he's called Sesshomaru-sama no Inu!"

Kagome's lips parted. Inuyasha's brows were dark caterpillars ready to fly off his face.

Rin looked down at the canine, whose head was reared back from the proximity of their faces. "Sesshomaru-sama no Inu. Do you like that, boy?" Rin heard a hiss, and when she glanced up Kagome was giving Inuyasha a reproving glower. Before Kagome covered his mouth, Rin saw that Inuyasha's mouth kept lurching up and down.

He said something behind Kagome's palm, shoving her wrist down. "'Sesshomaru-sama no Inu.'" His voice was wobbly and higher-pitched. "That's great. That's a great name."

"Rin-chan, I don't think that's such a good idea…." Her sentence trailed off upon seeing the expression on Rin's face. She was squeezing him protectively, as if she were about to take him away from her. Crouching down, Kagome managed a warmer disposition. "Wouldn't you think your Sesshomaru-sama would be mad to have an animal named after him? I don't think that is a dog in the first place."

"But he didn't seem to like 'wan wan-san,'" Rin returned.

Kagome stared at her, a hand brought up to her mouth. "Wan wan-san?"

"Where is that little toad of his?" Inuyasha asked, placing a hand on Kagome's shoulder. "Jaken should hear this. No, wait. I have a better idea. I will personally escort you two to him."

"You just want to see his reaction," Kagome accused him, swinging her head up to glower at him over her shoulder.

Inuyasha shrugged. "Don't you tell me you don't already have an idea of how he's going to react. I want to be there." He sighed dreamily. "Life is going to be great." Sinking down on his haunches to be eye-level with the girls, he scrutinized the beast. His nose wrinkled. "There's something about you that smells...familiar."

The canine yipped piercingly and licked a stripe up the hanyou's chin.

Scrambling back, spluttering, Inuyasha choked on his saliva, scrubbing his face with the hem of his haori. He pointed a claw at him threateningly. "He licked me!" He shot a wild look at his priestess. "Kagome, he licked me!"

"Aw, see? He's so friendly, isn't he?" Rin cooed, scratching the canine underneath his jaw. She could feel the weight of Lady Kagome's studious gaze levelled on them. "You like Inuyasha and Kagome-sama too, don't you?" The canine barked and wagged his tail, as if in agreement.

"Rin," Kagome said. There was something in her tone that made Rin turn her attention over to her. Kagome's expression was contemplative. "Sesshomaru is not here for the moment, you said. So it's been you and Jaken?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "And A-Un!"

Dark eyes settled over the canine in Rin's arms. The side of her face had been cradled in her palm as
she weighed something in her mind. Finally she said, "Until he returns, why don't Inuyasha and I keep you company? We may be able to help you brainstorm another name for your...new companion." She ignored Inuyasha's following refusal. Smiling encouragingly, she held her hand out to her. "Or if you want, Inuyasha has a super dog nose. He can find where Jaken and Sesshomaru are."

"But Sesshomaru-sama's been gone for some time," Rin mumbled despondently. The canine's body shook again, and this time he nosed her cheek. She buried her face against the dark, soft coat. Being able to hold onto someone warm chased away the bad feelings. "It's been several sunrises. Jaken-sama and I've been trying to find him for so long, and he still hasn't come back."

Both Inuyasha and Kagome seemed to freeze, thoughts and theories burgeoning free.

Chapter End Notes

Albeit on the slower end, but is a necessary set-up. Also intended as a cool-down period from the last tension-packed chapter and as preparation for the next. So! It's not absolutely concrete yet but I'm considering *Curse of the Deathly Hallows* for the next chapter's title head. Let's just say I'll be cackling diabolically behind the computer when it's finally uploaded. (As I write it, and not the atmosphere itself.) There's one bit in particular that makes me giddy to write, as it's sort of starting to address the trope(s) that I see in this fandom and maybe others. Having a little variation in the formula is a lot more fun!

Probably until mid-December, I'm going to be rather preoccupied with seriously intensive spatial design projects. Ergo, to tide you guys over during the wait, I've posted a music playlist on 8tracks. And updated the visual eye candy in the Art Masterpost. You can also now find me at tumblr!

Until then. Cheers and take care! ;)}
A lot has happened in my absence, but G&G OFFICIALLY HAS FANART! Thank you very much, suis0u! You lot should give a look-see through her gorgeous gallery over at tumblr. We'd met when I was studying abroad in Germany, but the fact that I can share her illustration with all of our readers is phenomenal.

To jayswing96, Escuro, itachisgurl93, badwolfsvortex, Genuka, enchanted_nightingale, AnguisReginam, pennnameisblank, Renee272, Kit, PhoenixPlume320, runqi, The_Rogue_Girl, Jorie2127, theHidden1, remey, Sara, joovette, AxZi, SkadiTheHuntress, Lizu, and especially to the lovely suis0u, your zeal for this project astounds me. (My appreciations to TheBlueMenace and Merlenyn on the Green and Gold: Art Masterpost, for being as excited as I am about our reader's fanart for the story!) I hadn't anticipated it'd take this long, goodness. ...I'm still stunned to be able to deliver content to you lot. I was despairing over this chapter forever, the outpouring of your enthusiasm and patience really meant a lot to me during the writing process.

To address a few questions publically, I realize G&G's clues and subtexts may not be easy to identify. But I think it's extraordinary how many ways readers can interpret the story and its characters; sometimes it's like seeing an alternate path the story could've taken. Plus, it's amazing reading all your theories. I've been archiving your comments and hopefully referencing them as I flesh out more content; they've been so helpful and inspirational, as well as touching. You've all had substantial things to say. And thank you to whoever'd answered my question in our previous installment! It'd contributed to adding and removing future scenes. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
"...Blow, O wind, blow, blow. Blow hard, O wind...."

Thousands of tiny granules were sparkling like glimmering stars when the figure that'd been lying prone on his back finally showed signs of regaining consciousness, fingers twitching. Akitoki felt his head throb as his mind struggled to formulate coherency.

The scent of freshwater, crisp and not at all stale, hung like an oppressive cloud in the air. To the average human, it would have smelt too unnaturally pure, clinging to the musky odor of stone and minerals like a corruption. Frost was crawling down his throat whenever air was sucked inward. Managing a groan, the taste of winter replaced the rancidness in his mouth—nearly making him cough up his lungs.

It was only with gargantuan might that his eyes cracked open. Groggy and rasping for breath, he thought of the worst when he was greeted by darkness.

He didn't know how long he waited, breathing raggedly, listening to the steady plip, plip, plip of water droplets hitting a hard surface in the same perpetual rhythm of a shishi-odoshi, where water could collect until the heavier end of the hollowed bamboo-shoot would thunk back down against the pebbled ground. By the time his eyes finally adjusted, he thought he was seeing…the polished luster of jade? When reason reared back up, balking at the thought of additional strangeness, he ridded himself of that notion with several shakes of the head.

Sluggishly, he brought the back of his hand to his eyes, rubbing away the thin film of crust. His nose wrinkled when he picked up the faint smell of herbs on his skin.

"How did I—?” he croaked, rolling over onto his hands and knees. His voice was husky, cracked.
His tongue felt thick and foreign in his mouth.

Long brown strands fell into his face, partially obscuring his vision. The warmth that'd been over his left shoulder was inexplicably seeping out. Soon, Akitoki found himself staring down at a material that'd fallen over his knuckles.

Clumsily grasping a corner, he lifted the cloth up to his face, narrowing his eyes at the textiles. Its finer details were indiscernible, but it didn't feel as thick as a futon quilt. Simultaneously it wasn't as thin as the fragrant-smelling straw and hay that peasants would weave together to form their bedding. Mesmerized by his thoughts, he suddenly recalled how craftswomen made their wares spinning and handlooming fiber threads, who couldn't afford the high cost of importing cotton unlike the citizens in the Northern provinces. This fabric he was feeling couldn't be that of cotton; not when trade with the Ming Dynasty overseas was strained; especially not around the rural communities.

Like a fire arrow launching out of nowhere, the pain in his skull suddenly inflamed once more, distracting him from his observations. A hiss escaped him as he bought a hand to the back of his skull, hovering over the his ponytail that should've been perched high on his head. What had once been firm now felt greasy to the touch. His hair-tie was gone. Instead, over where the worst of the headache originated, flakes of congealed blood had caked over the topmost of his head like clay.

His dreams were never this tactile. Nor did he think he was hallucinating; he wasn't even concussed. Lightheaded, Akitoki squeezed his eyes shut, forcing himself to take deep breaths. It'd only been mere few weeks ago when he'd been within the safety of his family compound once, having perfumed hair oil rubbed into his long strands. His hair had been pulled back, combed, and tied securely by his personal handmaidens.

While nothing seemed to be requiring immediate medical services, a despondency for finding himself in troubling predicaments swarmed him. Akitoki was aghast. After fulfilling his duties, he'd assumed the plague of bad luck had vanished. Even more worrisome was no matter how much he wiggled his fingers and toes, they were frozen logs. Merchants had lost fingers and toes to frostbite. Akitoki faintly remembered a farmer's wife missing an ear. Curling into himself, he lamented fatalistically to the heavens, "Fortune is once again not with me..."

Akitoki fell silent when the singing, warbling still, trickled back into his hearing:

"...Bring the fruits of the mountain. Chestnuts, mushrooms, grapes...."

Spooked, he seized the cloth closer under his chin. In the moment, it wasn't lost on him that he was behaving like a child huddled underneath a blanket.

Weaved into the singing was the ghostly howls of wind whooshing in and out of an unknown origin, that his ears strained to catch the tune dissipating into the air. His mouth was moving, unconsciously, soundlessly repeating what was heard. An index finger was tapping along to the melody on the ground. His brows furrowed, stumbling after clarity like a fish swimming upstream.

He realized that the longer he sifted through the pronunciations, the tune soon became recognizable to him. It would be the children of farmers, of the village his fiancée was from, that would chant this particular ballad outside. The person singing the verse had was a whisper shyly flitting about someplace in the distance, distorted and bouncing off walls like an invisible ball. The crudeness of her dialect sounded like she came from the regional area—far from the standards taught from living in the city—but he couldn't quite place her originating province. Her voice was distinctly young, sounding somewhat drowsy at the end.

He peered around him. Since he'd never taken refuge inside a cave or a chasm before, what little
geology he could make out in the cavernous environment was unfamiliar. Much to his chagrin, wherever the cold light was refracted, the dark walls appeared slickened with a layer of thin glittery material. He couldn't quite perceive what it was; not when everything was a murky sheen of greys and indeterminate iridescence in his eyes. Tall, fuzzy outlines broke his line of sight like pale columns. There was a draft though, surfacing from an unknown origin and making goosebumps arise from his skin.

His eyes abruptly widened. Akitoki twisted left and right, slapping the ground blindly for someone. There was no sign of Isogai. Panic alighted his thoughts. "Father-in-law," he rasped. Treacherous thoughts besieged him as he waited for a response. Nerves stretched as thin as rice paper, he repeated it once more, heatedly and urgently: "Father-in-law!"

When the last of his echoes perished, guilt momentarily flooded him, as well as an overwhelming sense of resignation. He cradled his head in his hands. Moist air settled in his lungs as Akitoki inhaled deeply, as he contemplated the next best course of action.

The disappearance of his traveling companion felt like an omen.

In spite of this, he couldn't abandon his Intended's father; not when there was a chance that Isogai was still alive. Akitoki felt that it would be premature to write off the old merchant as a lost cause. As daunting as the task would be, it would serve Akitoki better to scout ahead, assessing any potential threats before attempting to track down the man's whereabouts.

Akitoki jolted upwards, instinctively patting down his haori and kimono, seeking for anything to light up the shroud of darkness. His fabrics felt inexplicably damp against hypersensitive palms, raw and stinging. While his personal effects were still on him, his knapsack and sword seemed to have been robbed from him. With another groan, he dropped his face again into his hands, cheeks smooshed against clammy palms. Dirt-encrusted fingers were digging against the bridge of his nose and below the ridges of his eye sockets.

Many thoughts ran through his head. Why was he even here? For that matter, just how could he be here? Where could "here" even be?

His muscles tensed once more involuntarily when the singing manifested again: "'Round; 'round; go 'round. Waterwheel, go 'round. Go 'round and call Mr Sun. Go 'round and call Mr Sun—" The idle singing faltered into an eerie low drone, like she was trying to compensate for the forgotten lyrics by humming the tune.

Bringing the fabric to his nose, he inhaled deeply once more. Cold air filtered into his lungs, as his rib cage expanded from the action. As he breathed in and out, his thoughts raced, spiraling into dread. Dread soon bred into an overactive imagination. While he was often told that his superstitious nature stemmed from his grandfather, Akitoki knew that it was often because of people's beliefs in omens that'd saved them from untoward fates. Stranger things have happened in this era; Akitoki could only imagine the nightmare awaiting him if he encountered the source of that mysterious singing. It was only this moment of clarity that prevented him from calling out for help, on the small chance that she was not simply a child whom he could convince to mobilize a rescue party.

It was obvious to him that he was alone, with simply the voice as company and who knows what else. There was no reason for a girl to be here by her lonesome, much less this far away from a village. A heavy feeling settled into his gut like lead. She could be a spirit…or much worse….

Once he felt that it was alright to move, he cautiously staggered onto shaky legs—sore muscles protesting every movement—slipping and stumbling once before he regained balance, his hands thrust out for guidance. In a clenched hand was the cloth. He squinted ahead.
While it was difficult to even see his hands, there was a passage further above, with a brighter illumination. It was radiating from the human-sized cavity with the cold sheen of moonlight. It sounded like the singing originated there.

Regardless of his reservations, he was not staying here to rot.

As he stumbled forth, he tried to puzzle out what had transpired. Just how had he ended up here? His last recollection was accompanying Isogai's venture into Aokigahara—the Sea of Trees also popularly known among the villages as Jukai, rather than the designation that Akitoki was familiar with in the imperial city—and up Mt. Fuji. He also remembered strong gusts which didn't sound natural; instead he'd fancied it as the roar of a woman's laughter.

Recalling it sent an odd tinge of familiarity through his thoughts that a coldness washed down his forearms.

Clenching his hands into fists, Akitoki scolded himself for letting his imagination get the better of him again, although he felt that he was hardly to blame because of his current predicament.

The region surrounding Mount Fuji was known for many peculiarities. The dense forest around it was notorious for missing travelers and for practitioners of ubasute—where it was of the norm to carry the infirm, the diseased, or the elderly into a remote destination to be abandoned, so that their relative would die honorably without burdening their village. It was a custom practiced by this region. Since Aokigahara had the reputation it had, the young lord had assumed the purpose of their pilgrimage was to scout the location for when his soon to be mother-in-law eventually underwent this rite—and perhaps the mule-headed merchant himself.

At least it was, until Isogai begrudgingly imparted what his true intentions had been.

It felt like a distant dream where, days ago, Akitoki and his Kagome—bestowed with the dreaded forename "Suzaku" from her naming ceremony, until she took a liking to the alternative Akitoki had blurted out upon their first encounter—had been huddled over the haiku he'd sent her as part of the conventional poem exchange in the courting process. The both of them had been giggling, attempting to decipher the calligraphy's overall meaning which'd been lost in translation due to his naïveté at composing poetry. In the jollity shared afterward, after apologizing again for her father's mulishness, she'd taken solace in him by confessing that she hoped her lord Akitoki would take advantage of this opportunity to bond with her father.

Slogging further through his memories, Akitoki remembered experiencing conflict. It was to be expected that she thought of him as an ideal protector for her father. Grand reenactments of the young lord's valor had impressed her in the early days of their courtship—whereby he had to force himself to gloat of how he'd successfully dispelled the bad luck on his family, who'd been cursed for their ancestral ownership of the Celestial Robe and the Ken blade.

Still there were tales spread far and wide enough where they'd even reached the capital city that his clan resided. Akitoki was aware Aokigahara's other denomination was the aptly-named "Demon Forest" that his Intended liked him to venture into.

Looking beseechingly at him the way that she had, resembling the comely beauty of the nomadic priestess even more so than that time they'd first met under the sunlight, this village girl took his breath away. He remembered how sweetly she smiled at him, giving Akitoki her hand to take into his own. Improper as it would've been—as they were both unwedded—he'd yearned to kiss her then, to press his lips against each charming speckle along her cheeks, and to stroke her loosened hair. Regardless of the fact that his family disapproved of Akitoki's decision to marry a woman of a lower caste, incidentally being critical of their son obeying her whims like a love-stricken fool, the swell of
affection Akitoki had felt gazing upon her visage had been genuine.

In the stead of all sons born into the daimyo clan like him, Akitoki had been brought up on the *bushido* way of life: a gentleman's integrity, a warrior's code of conduct. That meant backing up his claims with the chivalry, wisdom, and courage expected of him. However simple her intentions were behind making the request, he was aware his manhood was being questioned.

He'd be a stain to the Hōjō name if he dishonored himself.

While he felt more courageous in the three years since his last adventure in the countryside, a little part of Akitoki that never completely vanished was unwilling, recalling rumors about angry spirits of those left to die and demons prowling the forest for their next unsuspecting victim.

Akitoki's breathing sped up as soon as a familiar memory gripped him by its red talons, conjuring up the night where he'd nearly been consumed by a demon—humanoid and dyed crimson from head to toe—who'd declared the "attractive young samurai to be his type."

Helpless to stop once the thought had arisen, Akitoki felt his face draining of blood upon his mind replaying the moment where the yōkai—regardless of his intentions to butcher Akitoki or, had the demon had his way, to keep him as his plaything—had introduced himself coyly and told him that Akitoki appeared delicious. It was an encounter which haunted Akitoki's dreams, and sometimes even his waking moments—he had no idea how he'd kept his composure when he first met his Intended, who'd shared the same name as the demon—although now the terror became a rarity after being taught ways to cope.

His throat constricted. On the verge of having a fit, he brought his hands to his mouth, swallowing his breaths as if he were gulping down water. Repeating the exercise, it didn't take long for his panic to abate, albeit fading into a low simmer in the back of his mind.

His footsteps slowed eventually, soon coming to a complete standstill as he stared, wide-eyed, at the behemoth of rocks before him. His hands lowered from his mouth as he beheld the monstrosity.

From what he could make out, the route leading up ahead was an intimidating endeavor to climb, which seemed to funnel into a crawlspace the higher his gaze traveled. Further up the chasm was a small opening that appeared manmade by a diligent individual. Where it led to, though, Akitoki wasn't certain. But the passageway could only take him outside. This was the only light source. The only problem was that the ascent incidentally led to the mysterious singer.

Whether he was being lured or not, he had few options other than taking the bait. Other foul thoughts were running amok through his mind as he peered down at the cloth clenched in one of his hands. As slow as a tortoise, he began wrapping the material around his fists. He whispered to himself, "Channel their courage. Don't mess up. Y-you are...you are more than you think."

What would Lady Kagome and Master Inuyasha say if he hadn't grown from their experiences? He felt ridiculous talking to himself, but he persisted: "Brave. Be brave."

"...Birds, bugs, beasts, grass, trees, flowers, bring spring and summer, fall and winter. Bring spring and summer, fall and winter..."

Gnawing on his lower lip, after another exhalation, convinced about his renewed vigor, he began the ascent, his arms trembling with exertion.

The journey up the slanted path was precarious. Heat bloomed in his neck and limbs, while a wet and cold sensation bled into his chest. It was only with much preservation that he managed to not fall
backward with each heave upward, despite his muscles screaming of fire. He found himself wishing, not for the last time, that he had the physical strength that came easily to the samurai and the farmers and the working caste. Keenly aware of the hair plastered against his sweaty face, he dug his nails into the surface. Shuddery pants wracked his body.

Abruptly, a debilitating dizziness had taken ahold of him less than a halfway up. His movements ceased. Squeezing his eyes shut, as the buzzing feeling resurfaced inside his temples—smashing and hammering inside his skull—he had to wait for the vertigo to abate. To soothe his nerves, he inhaled its dank, earthy scent. Don't fall; don't fall; don't fall; don't look down—all these mantras were repeated to himself like silent prayers sent to Buddha once he felt ready to recommence. If he didn't look down, he wouldn't be affected. It was all in his mind.

"Go 'round; come 'round; come 'round. Come 'round, O' distant time…. Come 'round; call back my heart. Come 'round; call back my heart."

He reopened his eyes. Fumbling for purchase, the higher he climbed, the more frigid the air became. His pants escaping as clouds of white mist, he soon found himself digging his fingernails into what felt like sleet that'd frozen over the stone in a thin layer. It crackled fragilely wherever he exerted pressure. Many times his legs skidded under him, and he could not get a secure grip other times. His fingertips were sweltering, like a thousand nettles stinging his skin.

While his morale was endowed the further he progressed, he was leery of the swelling volume of the singing.

Once the tunnel became a crawl-space, his movements slowed when he had enough of knocking his head against what was assumed to be either icicles or stalactites. Either way, his muscles tensed; coming into physical contact reminded him of gruesome tales of spikes plunging into the explorers’ unaware skulls.

Crawling on his belly, it was after he’d passed the worst of the constricting curvature that he breathed a small sigh of relief. He came back into a crouch. Spots danced in his vision, and he had to wait for his sight to adjust a much different exposure of brightness.

Once he'd gotten his bearings, his eyes expanded. Nearly everything in his field of vision was frozen over. The serrated edges of an undulating glacier—made of the clearest, most vivid crystalline blue he’d had ever seen—surged overhead. They were colossal tidal waves that had been halted in time before they could crash down. To his amazement, entrapped within the undulating waves were a great canopies of icicles hanging from the ceiling, resembling frozen wisteria flowers. Tiny balls of white peeked out behind the range of blues, like sunshine. With the illusion of being isolated from civilization, especially from the impression he'd gotten about waking in some sort of a tunnel system, an impression of desolation seemed to permeate the atmosphere.

He had no idea such a place existed in Aokigahara, if he still even was in the forest. Something in Akitoki felt out-of-breath beholding this majestic feat of nature that he would never have had the chance to witness were he behind castle's walls. His eyes darted across the clearing—flat and even in the middle, only interspersed with what looked like ripples that had frozen over the bedrock—sprinkled with clumps of snow around the perimeter and around areas closest to the protruding stalagmites.

An elated feeling bubbled in his chest once he discerned an unassuming hole, as tall as the average Japanese man, situated across the opposite end of the expanse. It had been partially obscured by frozen obstructions lodged into the ground and the structures like crooked pillars strewn randomly. Still, from where he was observing, he knew that this couldn't be the entirety of this cavernous region.
Holding his breath, Akitoki crept forth to avoid arousing alarm. He peeked over the edge.

And his breath halted.

Abruptly shimmying backward, Akitoki slammed his hands over his mouth, eyes wide. His heart was a roaring thunder. There had been this unnaturally ethereal glow to the area, yet it was the silhouette of a tiny figure in white that was burnt into his mind’s eye. She was not the fearsome creature he was expecting. It was the normalcy of her appearance that’d caught him unawares. Certain details were as clear as a painting as he recalled her long dark hair; it had been as dark as an otter’s fur, falling past her shoulders, with little blue ribbons knotted at the sides of her head. The contrast had been striking against her simple white attire.

Regardless of her identity, with her little toes poking out behind her attire, he remembered that her skin seemed considerably browner than his. Akitoki could only assume her lineage to be that of a Jōmon heritage or she was simply a child that'd been under the sun. If he could see her face, he would be able to discern if she had the characteristic wide mouth belonging to that indigenous tribe.

"...Birds, bugs, beasts, grass, trees, flowers, teach me how to feel...." The words faded into humming momentarily, before she breathed, "If I hear that you pine for me, I will return to you."

Hesitations warred within Akitoki. His first instinct was to trust what he was seeing. She spoke his language, after all. Yet the experienced adventurer in him was wary. The last time he took strangers at face-value, the party of village-women turned out to be demons disguised as the Lady Kagome's friends. He wasn't certain if this girl could transform into a feral creature once his guard was lowered. He felt himself wavering.

To make up his mind, once he managed to salvage enough courage to twist his head once more over the edge, inching forth a fraction back into exposure, he surveyed the potential threat. Of what little he could see, his mouth had compulsorily warped down sideways.

"If you truly long for me, I will come straight back," the girl was singing, still unaware of his presence. Her back was to him, her arms moving, preoccupied with whatever's in front. He couldn't quite make out what enraptured her so, but the form before her reminded him of a giant block of ice—although jagged and hacked as if someone had taken a blade to it. He squinted. It nearly seemed as if, encased within the frozen coffin, there was a long, dark silhouette.

Once his mind registered what he was seeing, his stomach plummeted.

Akitoki knew his limitations; he was diminished without his sword. Despite his stamina having been improved due to strategic retreats, his combat skills were overshadowed by the outrageously powerful individuals encountered in his travels. Compared to them, Akitoki felt that he was worse than a novice. (While he had been applauded for being brave and loyal—the few commendable traits that personages have remarked they were gratified he'd inherited from his clan's daimyo—Akitoki was levelheaded enough to acknowledge he lacked the proficiency of the gentries that'd been employed by the Hōjō clan for generations.)

It were only thoughts of the woman waiting for him and the man left to an unknown fate that emboldened Akitoki, pushing past the worry gripping him. What would his own Kagome, much less his honorable parents, think of him? Akitoki gritted his teeth. He was the son of a daimyo. A reputable lord does not flee from the first sign of danger. Neither does he cower and be useless when someone else might be depending on him, no matter the petty grievances he may have with the individual. A nobleman—any decent man in general, if they dared call themselves a cultured gentleman—was to be dependable.
In order to fulfill his objectives, he saw no other recourse but to move onward and escape. He closed his eyes once more. Breathing in and out—once, twice, and henceforth—he reopened them as he cautiously shimmied forward, his movements deliberately slow and methodical, eventually swinging himself over and dangling a leg over the cliff edge as he began his descent.

It was at this moment that he was partially glad for his environment, for there were no chances of having pebbles tumbling down the slick rocky surface.

It felt like forever, peering back and forth, but by the time the sole of his waraji struck ground, he realized with a grimace, that the rice straw of his sandals and the fabric of his tabi socks felt sodden. The back of his neck felt heated and his breathing, although subdued, was irregular.

Promptly, he crouched down to make himself smaller. Fearing that his weight would crack the ice, he was careful to apply pressure only at the tips of his feet. It was difficult to balance atop a smooth surface but as long as he maintained a slow pace, he felt confident navigating the place. Water could be heard squishing between his toes each time he took a step trailing the perimeter.

He kept a wide breadth, his back against the wall, eyes glued ahead. The shadows thrown against the walls were frightful, hulking figures hunched over as he snuck his way around the unknown danger.

"Birds, bugs, beasts, grass, trees, flowers," the girl hummed, still unaware. This seemed to be her favorite verse, from how delighted her voice sounded. From his position, he could now see that her knees were bent atop white fur which looked soft to the touch. Small, inconspicuous trinkets were laid on the ground. "Flower, bear fruit, and die. Be born, grow up, and die; still the wind blows. The rain falls. The waterwheel goes round. Lifetimes come and go in turn. Lifetimes come and grow in turn."

Breathing was challenging; there was a painful sensation inside of his nostrils which was as dry as a drought season. Cold white vapors were escaping his mouth. Clutching the blanket tighter around his shoulders, Akitoki snuck a glance at the remaining distance between him and the exit. His mind working swiftly, he estimated the distance to be roughly two rice fields. She had not noticed him yet. And there was no one guarding the exit. Hope was rising in his chest, curling his mouth up.

His triumph was short-lived though when his legs skidded under him.

Falling backward, instinctively, he exclaimed, "Shimata—!"

His knee and an outstretched palm crashed against the ground, cushioning his fall as he managed to land on his side. His entire right side was throbbing, the most of it located at his elbow and kneecap, but the pain was nothing compared to the time that a roadside bandit drove the backend of his sword into Akitoki's ribs. At that time, the incident occurred when the young lord had been accompanying Isogai and the merchant's daughter early into their acquaintance.

Tongue-clicking noises against his teeth resounded as a measurement of Akitoki's agony. Hissing at his blunder, his eyes shot sideways, gauging his biggest threat. It'd be a miracle of Buddha if she hadn't heard the commotion.

His heart sunk when his vision caught sight of wide, dark eyes. She had an oval face. Her hands were rising to her lips, her sleeves falling down suntanned forearms. Other than that, the girl was carved out of stone, her back ramrod straight. With how rapidly her skin was losing color, he feared that she would faint. (The girl was not of Jōmon lineage at least. Her mouth was as diminutive as the commonplace Japanese noblewoman. In the city, Akitoki had not heard great things about the Jōmon. There was no reasoning with them. The popular stereotype heard back home was that those coastal persons were, at worst, uncultured; animalistic and loutish.)
Although her features could be considered charming for someone of her years, his heart was thudding like a hundred war drums. It was suddenly much harder to breathe.

Abruptly, her eyes darted from his figure to her surroundings, before focusing back on him, and then darting sideways once more. She looked no older than eight years of age.

"I mean you no harm!" he shouted, slamming his hands onto the ground. The ice crackled under the force. Regret was forcibly quelled once he saw her shrink back. Berating himself mentally, he said, "I-I apologize if y-you suffered a terrible fright from me. I mean you no harm."

Despite his stammer, his words came slowly and with a deliberate courtesy. Staggering to his feet, he held his hands up imploringly. The blanket fell from his shoulders, landing with a fwoop behind him. He'd already taken a step back, ready to sprint, when he saw her bow her head until her forehead was nearly touching the frozen terrain. Her fingers were held in the customary position of someone beseeching a personage from a higher social standing than they were.

Something within him clenched when he saw her shoulders shake. No, her entire body was quaking.

The old Shinto gods must be laughing at him because, against all rational logic, he felt his expression become tender at the sight of a child visibly afraid of him like a shivering dog. In the back of his mind, he realized that this could be an act or a result of the cave's temperature, but Akitoki's instincts were screaming otherwise. Still he hesitated.

Behind her, by her toes was a spherical plate inlaid with gold etchings, harboring a cracked mirror. Behind that, placed atop a tiny altar was an assortment of damaged curiosities: a metal sphere that formed intricate patterns, a stone bowl, and a beaded necklace strung with a cowrie shell.

Akitoki had little idea behind the purposes of gathering these together, but it did not seem like they were for a ritual or for divining. While she did wear the color that stood for purity, her white garments didn't resemble that of any young spiritualist or shaman in training. Upon closer inspection, her white attire was embroidered with silver thread that seemed to gleam whenever it caught light. With how elaborately her outer robe was, he could only assume that it was expensive finery. It would be easy for him to mistake her as the daughter of a samurai, but her clothes were missing a family crest. He similarly doubted that any woman of the gentry would allow her skin to be browned to this extent.

Her head lifted when she heard his footsteps approaching. Her face suddenly took on a fearful expression.

To placate her, Akitoki reached into his sleeve and withdrew a gold brocade bag his family had received from trade overseas. Like how one would dangle string before a cat, Akitoki jiggled the contents of the brocade bag. The coins inside jangled and clinked enticingly. "H-hello. Hello there." He knelt down on one knee. Pushing past his nervousness, he introduced himself as kindly as he could: "I'm Hōjō Akitoki of the Izu Province. I hail from a long line of regents of the Kamakura Shogunate... a-ah, I'm sorry. I'd meant to say I'm of the blood with ties to the Fujiwara clan, with no relation to the Hōjō household of the Sagami Province that you might undoubtedly know of. If I may ask, whose family are you from? ...Might I know your name?"

He was close enough to perceive that her lips were colored with rouge, but hopefully far enough that he couldn't intimidate her. She smelled of white plum blossoms. Her eyes dropped down to peer at the offering, before shooting back up. Her expression was carefully arranged, mindful and vacant. Yet he could tell, by her telltale fidgeting and darting eyes, that her curiosity had been piqued.

That was a welcome reaction.
He mustered up a reassuring smile. "Is something the matter? Is there a reason why you're feeling so shy? ...Heavens, no, please raise your head. It must be uncomfortable to be genuflecting continually under these circumstances." To barter for information effectively, one had to be in good standings with the opposite party. If he had to endear himself to this stranger, he'd do his upmost to earn her trust. He resumed, "Could you tell me where I am? It's not much, but I'd like to reward you in exchange for your help."

Instead of replying, she simply shook her head.

Akitoki's spirits dimmed. Their one-sided conversation was telltale of the sort of conversation he'd come to expect from country bumpkins. Either they were gossipers unable to keep secrets to themselves or they were uninspiring conversationalists that were too intimidated to approach him. The rare exceptions were those that were quick to accommodate him because of his family surname, who had lofty aspirations to wed their daughters to anyone attached to land and wealth.

"Please don't be frightened," he murmured. "I hope I'm not scary. If it'd set your worries to rest, I'm not here to h-hurt you. I promise. I swear it on the Hōjō name." Akitoki was duty-bound by honor. Unless she was a wretched monster, he wouldn't dare lay his hands on a defenseless woman —no less a child. Outside of disciplinary action that was common among households, he held the belief that anyone who would intentionally harm human women was despicable.

After all, village girl or not, this trembling person was still a child in theory. If she was as young as she looked, she had a few summers to go before she'd be of marrying age. Thinking for a bit, he asked, "It may be presumptuous of me to ask, but may we...be friends? I know we've only recently met...."

The little face underneath the curtain of dark hair was slightly aghast. White teeth were sunk into her lower lip. Yet her composure did not break.

The awkwardness of the situation was strangling him. He struggled for words to put her at ease. "U-um...that is, if you do not mind? I-I think you're a very cute girl?"

Perhaps that was the wrong thing to say. He could see blood had rushed to her cheeks, however now she averted her gaze to be anywhere but on him. His opinion of himself plummeted to an all-time low. Hastily shoving the coin bag back up his haori, into the hidden compartment stitched into his kimono sleeve, he apologized for his poor selection of words.

Lowering his arm from the folds, with the small purse pressed against his forearm like a comforting weight, he said after a prolonged silence: "W-well then, maybe I ought to make myself scarce. I've taken up too much of your time. You have a nice singing voice. I couldn't help but be drawn in by it." He snuck another peek at her. Her demeanor hadn't changed. She was still an unresponsive mute. "Then...farewell...."

His voice trailed off.

She was eerily silent even now.

Casting a last look at the human-sized block of ice—he'd been mystified that, unlike what he thought he'd seen from a distance, a thin layer of frost seemed to have concealed the surface, making it impossible to see the contents within—he felt a shiver crawl down his body.

When he turned to leave, he heard a barely audible voice rasp: "I-I beg for-forgiveness for m-my in-insolence, milord. You—your words just now made me happy, I-I was at a loss of what to say."

Stunned, when he whipped back around, he could see that her head was bowed deeply to the ground.
Her voice muffled, she said, "Thank you for gracing our home. I'm honored to be in your presence." Without the sing-songy quality to it, her voice sounded more human to him. However, it reflected the tremor of just prior. "Par-pardon me, I'm Shiori of the village by the sea. Even though I was startled, that is no excuse for the disrespect I'd showed you."

"Oh, heavens." His own voice sounded exasperated to him. Akitoki dropped back down on his knees, his hands fluttering helplessly in the air. "You are shaking like the wind-blown grass. Please. Please don't be afraid of me. I feel like a terrible human being with you acting like this. *Why are you like this?*

"I-I do not dare, milord. But I should not stand until you forgive me."

"Fine! I understand! All is forgiven!" he blurted, his mind spinning. He felt like his head was overheating. This didn't make any sense. "That's why, please, raise your head! This is really upsetting! There's a limit to how humble one can be! Your forehead shouldn't even be touching the floor!" He could hear his voice echoing in the chambers, from how loud he was being.

"I-I'm—I am most unworthy to be in your gracious audience. I don't mean to cause you trouble." Her spine straightening back up, she tucked her hands above her lap. Her gaze was intent on his chin. "I…I deeply apologize, milord. Please, it's not much, but I hope you find this place comfortable. I know it most likely cannot match your castle…bu-but a lot of hard work went into making this place habitable!"

"It's nothing I've seen before! You did a great job with the place, Shiori-san!"

Her eyes expanded even more. "Re-really?" Shiori clapped her hands together once, looking as if she were ready to perform a prayer recitation. Her eyes betrayed her smile. "How wonderful. I'm glad."

Her voice, while retaining its huskiness and stutter, had become louder, that Akitoki could scarcely believe this was the same timid girl from before. Be that as it may, he felt his muscles unwind. His mouth contorted up to outmatch hers. "Me too. Thank heavens you're not as scary as I thought you were—! *Grk!*" He coughed into his fist to cover up his gaffe. From his peripheral vision, he managed to catch a glance at the blanket he'd discarded. "Um, uh, I mean, was that yours? Thank you. It was very warm."

"You were shivering in your sleep. Normal humans have frailer bodies. I was worried you would fall ill." Despite the eccentricity behind her choice of words, her meekness had transformed into a warmer tone. Shiori tilted her head at him, and Akitoki observed with wonder the otherworldly grace and dignity exhibited in her movements. It was difficult to fathom how such a slight girl could manage to carry his weight into this shelter of hers.

Before Akitoki could ponder further over the contradictory mental image, Shiori assured him gently, "You have nothing to fear from me. I will do my utmost to satisfy your needs, Hōjō-dono."

All goodwill he bore toward her dissipated. "'Satisfy…my needs'?” he repeated, shifting uncomfortably onto another knee. The innuendo in that phrasing was unsettling. Hopefully he was overthinking it. Huffing out a laugh, he murmured, "Shiori-san…your hospitality is…it is indeed generous of you to offer. However, I must decline. No, I must take advantage of it once more. Sorry." He studied her face as he asked, "Have you seen the elderly man that was with me?"

The sleeves that'd been raised to cover her smile lowered, and he could see that the corners of her
lips had fallen. She turned her head. Her tone was equally lifeless as she denied, "N-no…I-I can't say I have."

"…I'd like to believe you. Truly, I do. Nevertheless—" Akitoki reached out toward her, but his hand stopped when Shiori flinched.

She shuffled backward on her knees, her torso still kept in the same upright position. But her expression was tense.

"A-ah." His hand lowered. "Sorry. I startled you again, didn't I?"

Shiori didn't have to say anything. Judging by her reactions, he could already hazard a guess as to how she'd been treated by others in the past. Purposely kneeling in the proper samurai sitting position, with his hands clasped in his lap, pitching his voice softer, he coaxed, "That elderly man is my father-in-law. It's very important that I find him. If you found me, then you must have an idea of where he is. Or the whereabouts that we are in right now. We were traveling together."

Dark eyes returned to him, and then darted away to peer at the trinkets behind her. Her face could only be described as conflicted. She repeated this motion several times.

"I won't be angry if he wasn't with me when you'd found me, Shiori-san. I need to know so I have an idea where to begin." Akitoki forced himself to sigh loudly as he navigated his face up to the glacial top. He could feel her eyes on him as he lamented, "What will my poor fiancée feel if I came back to her bearing bad news of her father's disappearance? She'd leave me. No, she'll kill me. Shiori-san, please have mercy and save me! Any information will do. Ah, I feel like my hair is going to fall out thinking about how she'll feel."

Her eyebrows drooped. "You say that, but you…seem like a kind person. I'd like to help you, believe me." Her long fringe shadowed her eyes as she bent her head to him. Her voice was quiet: "I'd hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you were by yourself, milord. There was no one but you."

"I see." All exuberance had leaked out of him. He'd anticipated feeling disappointment, but the extent of it was crushing. He mumbled despondently, "I'd thought as much."

"I'm sorry. For what they're worth, you have my sympathies. I hope he is found…. And that he is of good health." Lifting her head, he could see that her eyes were luminous. In her new location, under the refracted light of the glaciers, the top of her head held the illusion of her hair being bathed in a blue and white glow. In a saddened tone, she muttered to herself ominously, "I fear I may be saying too much, but you should not have come to Aokigahara."

His lips parted. He could feel the perspiration sticking his clothes to the sweat running down his back. He spluttered, "Wh-what makes you say that? Am I still in Aokigahara?"

"…You heard me? Oh no. I didn't intend to…." Her tiny, rouged lips warped down. With how intensely her brows were furrowed, she seemed to be deliberating on something. Finally, she disclosed, "Y-you are. If I may, milord, I entreat you to listen carefully to what I have to say. I advise you well." Much to his astonishment, she became the adult comforting the child. Her tone and posture were all too alarmingly serene when she entreated, "Please submit. It'll be as easy for you as it was for me. You will not go wrong listening to me."

Unease was roiling in his gut. He cautioned, "Ara, ara. You shouldn't say such scary things, Shiori-san." Before his nerves fled him, he stood back up on shaky legs. They'd been semi-numbed by the pressure exerted on them and the icy ground they'd laid on. "Thank you for your efforts. I will remember this and pay you back one day."
"M-milord?" Her hands fidgeted in her lap. "Where are you... are—are you leaving?"

"Yes. I have to find Father-in-Law. I don't know what state I'll find him in, but he might need me."

"Don't go—!" Upon raising her voice, she shrank back, hands clasped over her mouth, looking equally surprised as him that she was being so willful. "I-I mean..." Her words were nearly inaudible behind her palms. "It's difficult to exit the cave. If-if you leave, you will not like the company thereof."

That sounded like a threat. His hand habitually reaching for the sword no longer in its sheath, he inquired, "Shiori-san?" Silence. "What do you mean by that?"

More silence. She seemed determined not to speak a word more to him.

Once the silence became unbearable, Akitoki dropped his hand from his waist. He felt terrible for seeing her as a threat but if she was keeping secrets from him, it wouldn't bode well to linger in her presence. "I see. By my leave then," he said awkwardly, flustered. He bowed his head hastily, ready to flee. "So long, Shiori-san."

"N-no! Please don't—!"

"Do you really think you can leave?" a coy, soft voice spoke from within the frozen coffin.

Before Akitoki or Shiori had a chance to react, the ice shattered in an upward explosion. Shards—like throwing knives—were launched everywhere, embedding into nearby surfaces.

Sharp fragments broke off from the bigger pieces, raining down overhead in a glimmering cloud.

"Shiori-san!" Akitoki shouted, wrenching her by the arms and pulling her down with him.

They hit the ground with soft cries. He shielded her with his body. His eyes were squeezed shut, one hand behind her back and one hand over the top of her head. Gritting his teeth, he braced for the impact. It was going to hurt.

"What an admirable show of bravery. It makes a woman's heart go pitter-patter." Spoken with an airiness, a mocking applause commenced, and Akitoki could envision someone in her twenties gazing at them with a pitiless smile. "Admirable, but unnecessary. If you would open your eyes, waka."

Akitoki and Shiori both opened their eyes, and they twisted their sight upwards. If it were possible for a human to pop their eyes out entirely, Akitoki was certain he'd be the first to perform such feat.

An immense, crystalline tidal wave had swelled above them, taking the brunt of the collisions. With the sound of glass shattering after plummeting from a great height, the shards broke like raindrops against the hard surface, eventually disintegrating into nothingness.

"If there's one mercy I'm grateful for, it's that you're still capable of intelligent thought. You were ill. Heavens, you have no idea how long we waited, taking care of you."

"Y-you have my thanks?" Loosening his hold on Shiori, Akitoki clambered to his feet. His fists raised, he demanded, "Announce yourself. Who's there?" A glimmering mist obscured his surroundings that he couldn't ascertain the direction of where the exit had been.

"I'm astounded that you don't seem to remember me. I don't think a day has gone by where I don't somehow end up hearing all of your voices." A long pair of legs was seen striding out of the mist.
Bare skin could be glimpsed each time they peeked out from underneath the side-slit of a skirt dyed the color of the ocean. If it were possible for him to collapse from the blood rushing to his face, Akitoki felt that it could be his fate. It took everything in him not to conceal his burning cheeks and hide behind his hands like a little boy. It was provocative, even by the prostitution standards found in pleasure quarters.

"Not that I blame you. There is a remarkably big difference between this body and the one I had when we'd met." To his wonder, there was no sound made from her footsteps. At her feet were scaled boots of a midnight-black reptilian hide that he had never seen before. "This one pales in comparison. With it comes height, voice, appearance, abilities...you understand, I much prefer the one I had before."

An arm was seen emerging from the cloud, waving it away as if it were a puff of smoke. Adorning her forearms were vanguards affixed with the help of teal fabrics, matching the dye of the intricate wheels on her attire. To Akitoki, however provocatively form-fitting the attire was on the woman's body, the collar and her three hairpins seemed like designs from the Continent. Without the obstruction of sight, a tall woman stepped into sight. Shell-like pauldrons protruded from her shoulders, strung together with the same gauzy fabrics that held her breastplate in place. Hanging at her waist were two swords.

Upon seeing them, unconsciously he'd repositioned so that his body was shielding Shiori from this person's sight. No matter how much he wracked his brain, Akitoki couldn't recall meeting any armored, blue-haired, teal-eyed women from the Mainland before. He was flabbergasted.

Given his lack of recognition, her gaze seemed disappointed. Tucking her hair behind an ear—her action revealing a small silver hoop piercing an earlobe—she said, "I know the color is different, but I even went through the bother of styling her hair the way mine was. Fortunately this face was born without markings, so I applied the same cosmetics you should've seen me wearing when we met; I don't mean the markings your friends last saw me with."

Markings? "C-could you...have mistaken me for another?" he offered tentatively, feeling even more on edge. Usually any abnormal colorations were an indication that the person in front of him was not human and was, in fact, a monster wearing the skin of one. The tip of the ear she exposed to him was also pointed up unnaturally. Not to mention that she was speaking as if she were casually discussing the demerits of a demonic possession. He could not allow himself to express the negative emotions in his heart.

"Hn...I don't think so. In spite of everything, your identity—among others—has haunted my nightmares these past years. I am told you are of landed gentry." She chuckled openly, without covering her mouth. To the average Japanese person, the display would be a demonstration of uncouthness. The woman continued, "Very well. We are not swine. We will compose ourselves in the manner as you are most comfortable with."

For every step she took, Akitoki took a step back. "Shiori-san," he addressed, "don't worry. I-I fear nothing that appears before me!" If he had his sword, the blade would be pointed at the woman approaching. Instead, he only had his fists for fighting and feet for running. Putting his fists up higher, he proclaimed, "I am Hōjō Akitoki of the Hōjō household. You, don't come any closer! State your name!"

Her lips lifted up. "How amusing," she commented offhandedly. "You're like a scared puppy."

The back of his neck felt hot. Mustering up any vestige of confidence, he demanded, "Who are you? I'm not one for raising a hand to a woman, but how come you've heard of me?"
Nonchalantly twirling her hair around a finger, she muttered, "So, it's come to this. All my preparations amounted to little, in the end...." Her footsteps came to a halt. The woman then heaved a sigh, teal-painted eyelids slipping shut as she tilted her face up at the structure she'd erected, with her arms outstretched. The strands she'd been toying with drifted back down her chest. "Pay close attention, waka."

His terrified curiosity had frozen him to the spot. Countless of scenarios were sprinting through Akitoki's mind. But what'd finally materialized defied his imagination. His expression beggared belief.

Floating ahead of the blue-haired woman's torso was the spirit of the so-called celestial maiden who'd been recorded in legends, whose sultry features defied conventional Japanese standards of beauty. Unlike their last encounter—when he'd last seen her alive—her body was, at present, dyed head-to-toe in greyish-silver. Gone were her uniquely-tinted eyes—teal, the color of marbles he'd played with in his childhood, he remembered thinking—and the dark hair that nearly all of the Japanese women were born with.

After she deemed Akitoki to have had his fill of her, she murmured, "Unbelievable. I had expectations. But this is what I get for thinking highly of humans." Her translucent forearms and the lower half of her torso were vanished into their fleshly prison. She wore the blue-haired yōkai behind her like a macabre wrap. With each gesture the phantom made, the blue-haired woman imitated, moving like a puppet that served as an extension of her astral self.

"K-K-Kaguya-hime!" Akitoki blurted, his voice cracking like a boy's. Falling back, he hastily retreated backwards, anywhere to be away from her. A gasp was torn from him when ice spiraled up his limbs, grasping his arms and legs, immobilizing him.

"What a lot of noise." Kaguya lowered her hand, and her corporal body followed suit. Without tearing her gaze away, she ordered, "Shiori."

"Yes, Hime-sama." The entire time during their exchange, she had her face and hands prostrated to the ground.

Her expression had been hidden when the man who'd been kind to her let loose a cry when the ice dragged him to the ground. The floor beneath him crackled from the force of the collision.

Betrayal was bubbling hotly in his throat. But the next few words he heard quickly doused scalding emotions: "You are unsightly. What have I said about being vigilant to keep yourself out of my sight while you're like this?"

"I deeply apologize, Hime-sama." Flattening herself even further, Shiori seemed determined to melt into the ground. "I shall endeavor to wash away tonight's transgressions for displeasing you with my appearance. If it'd please you, with your permission, I'd like to take my leave of you until tomorrow's moon comes. I aspire to do better tomorrow."

"Hn. I task you not to meddle. What concerns this human and I involve matters larger than your own." Kaguya glanced down, staring at the trinkets for the longest time. She murmured, "My five—no, my three treasures.... Shiori, what were you doing with them?"

"I was polishing them for you. I most humbly apologize."

"Enough. You shall not be cumbersome to me or to our honored guest." Despite the abrasiveness in the selection of words, there was the same cavalier attitude as when she'd been alive. Ignoring the quiet "understood" from the prostrated form at her feet, Kaguya began sinking back into the blue-
haired woman as the corporal form marched forward. There was an unnatural irradiance gleaming at the centermost of Kaguya's translucent chest. Threaded into a necklace, the black pearl, too, was soon submerged beneath skin.

Seeing her come closer, Akitoki begun thrashing like a wild beast. His eyes strained.

"Don't be rash." Bending down, she snatched Akitoki's jaw with the teal-painted nails of the female demon she possessed. Kaguya squeezed until he sensed he had to stop struggling before the pressure exerted crushed his jawbone.

When he sufficiently calmed, she wrenched him up by his chin until they were eye-level, concentrating on the obvious strain put on his throat and on the rest of his body that weighed him down. Her gaze was scrutinizing, her hand turning his head this way and that.

In the meantime, his breathing grew more ragged. Fear filled his gut like bitter tea that'd been left out to cool.

At last, with a satisfied smile, Kaguya crooned, "I see. This will suffice. At the very least, he is presentable. He's been well taken care of."

"I am eternally grateful for your kind words, Hime-sama."

"Yes. Promising." Her hands released him. Without Kaguya supporting him, gravity pulled him back down until he fell on all fours. Akitoki grunted at the impact.

Unbeknownst to him, dark eyes had flitted to his figure before dashing back. "I am glad." Shiori had hidden her face behind her long fringe.

"Then you are dismissed. Remember…," Kaguya's tone became cloyingly sweet, "…I know you've befriended this young landed gentry here, but I don't want to see you until tomorrow night."

"Un-understood. Then I will excuse myself, milady." Shiori kowtowed once more to her mistress. With slight hesitancy, she moved to perform the same for Akitoki. She beseeched, "Y-you are granted an audience with Hime-sama; p-please listen to what she has to say. You'll find that she's a most generous individual. Milord, I—I fare thee well. Excuse me."

After several more genuflections, she walked away, never looking back. Her tiny figure receded from their sight after ducking into the hole Kaguya had opened for her. The gap sealed itself after her, resembling seamless ice yet again.

"Such a good little girl," Kaguya remarked. One hand was clutching her elbow, and the other was raised into a fist below her chin in a ponderous pose. "You've somehow gotten her to like you. Although, she could stop stumbling over her words so much. It gives her a bad impression, don't you agree? No. You don't need to answer that. Put it out of your mind.

"Now then, young master—no, Hōjō-kun. You must be asking how this is even possible." Almost teasingly, she'd pitched her tone low and invitingly. "But first things first—your travel companion. Do you not wish to know what fate has befallen on him?"

Akitoki felt his muscles stiffen. He was brought up under the tutelage that demons weren't shy to tell falsehoods, if it'd serve their nefarious purpose. She seemed as if she was taking this opportunity to use fear tactics to intimidate him into submission. He opened his mouth.

For a moment he dared not breathe. Akitoki's voice had abandoned him. He groped for words that were stuck in his throat.
"Before we get to that, I want a temporary truce. To show my sincerity, I shall tell you a secret: do you know how simple it'd be for me to have pretended to be someone else? This body has a name." She gestured to the space before her chest. She declared airily, "Instead, out of respect to your comrades for defeating me and to you for throwing my Celestial Robe into a volcano, I decided to abandon all manners of pretense."

Although her voice and expression had taken on a frightening quality when she acknowledged his role, seeing his nervous expression, they soon became consoling once more. Kaguya reached out to pat his shoulder. "Rest assured, I only devour demons...mmh, and acquired a taste for certain exotic specialties. I am not inclined toward humans as the rest of my brethren, unless I have no choice."

His features immediately blanched.

"Likewise, I must apologize for my display of force earlier. I have to put on a show for the little one. It wouldn't do for Shiori to get silly thoughts in her head."

The sensation of her touch lingered on his shoulder. Although her hand had been withdrawn, it still felt like it was clamped onto him, pushing him down. To anyone hearing they were the preferred diet of their kind, it would be instinctual to implore the demon to make an exception and to let them go—for them to please take pity on them just this once. Despite knowing that, Akitoki could not bring himself to do that. Thusly, the words were swallowed back. All of his thoughts were centered around how unfair this was. He hadn't done anything to anyone.

His hands balled into fists. He felt that he was among the people least deserving of this fate. A nauseous feeling was building up within his stomach.

Perceiving the subtle change in his demeanor, her face splintered into a beguiling smile. She crooned, "I have a proposition for you. Will you listen to my words, Hōjō-kun? That is your name, isn't it?"

He remained silent.

Evidently, she could see his confusion because she broke into brief mirth. "So you do use your brains," she remarked, after her chortling finally calmed down. "I'm...impressed. You're unexpectedly mistrustful. That is to say, you're not wrong to harbor reservations. Would it make you feel better if I claimed any malice is in jest?"

Aiming a distracted smile down at his prostrated figure, Kaguya withdrew back, tapping her cheek in contemplation. Examining his face, she commented, "You'll have to forgive me for not being able to control my strength yet. I forget humans bruise so easily. How does your species get by without dying left and right? You also have such dulled senses, it must be nice to eventually come to terms with how blissfully ignorant your species are."

"...hy?"

"Hmm?" Inclining her head toward him, Kaguya cupped a pointed ear, feigning deafness. The hair that'd been waist-length when she'd been standing was now pooled down at the balls of her feet. "You'll have to speak up."

"Why?" he rasped. The stone in his throat bobbed erratically. There were many things he'd wanted to ask but under the weight of her focus, he started: "Why are you being amiable toward me? How are you still—? I was told that you were—!"

Out of everyone that'd contributed in her extermination, why was she showing an interest in him? One could only assume that she'd kidnapped him for retaliatory action. Yet he'd been an insignificant
participant during the incident; his goal back then was to dispose of the celestial robe out of family obligation. Akitoki had no memories of playing any hand in her death. (He'd been reassured by the demon-slayer and the traveling monk that it was natural, for Akitoki, that time had perceivably flowed without interruption, as he'd been affected by Kaguya's powers like the rest of the world. While he'd normally accept that explanation at face-value, they hadn't divulged why Lady Kagome and her companions had been exceptions to that rule. He could only assume that someone—or all of them—were born with a specific ability or condition making their bloodlines an antithesis to that magic.)

The last Akitoki had seen of Kaguya, she had redirected the arrow back at Master Inuyasha with the power of her mirror, and she'd then kidnapped the priestess when Lady Kagome took the blow intended for the hanyou.

In a world of monsters, deities, and powers thought to be impossible outside of folklore, it'd been easy to believe that the demon was a celestial maiden. Humans were far more trusting of divinities and celestial emissaries—beings that symbolized the existence of an afterlife: heaven and hell—than in the unholy monsters that terrorized their reality. It was later discovered the demon had taken a liking to the moon maiden's appearance, deciding to wear her skin and absorb her powers when the ethereal being had been ascending to the heavens. In Akitoki's opinion, the Tale of the Bamboo Cutter failed to capture the extent of her attractiveness. She'd made for a breathless sight that night under the cherry blossom tree by the lake.

Kaguya's mannerisms and speech, although drenched in mockery back then, were still delivered with a noblewoman's traditional refinement and cavalier attitude. Since Akitoki hadn't been there, in the recounts he'd heard from his companions when they managed to unfreeze time and return to this world safely, he was led to believe that Kaguya's personality changed swiftly when they'd been in her domain. In her castle, truer to the cruel personality a demon would have held after having lived for so long, Kaguya had discarded the pretense she'd maintained in order to deceive others into believing her transcendent origins.

The smile—on those features foreign to him—broadened. Seeing it made Akitoki avert his eyes. Somehow knowing that the demon was manipulating a face that wasn't even hers made it worse.

"If you'd asked me three years ago," she began slowly, "I'd respond with a different answer. But unlike your comrades, you didn't directly participate in the events that led to my death. You were too weak. Therefore, there is no grudge." Her declaration had been delivered flatly. "You were hiding—I seem to recall—clutching the celestial robe your ancestors stole from me as if it would save your life. How unattractive."

Under what brightness that remained, the body Kaguya inhabited matched the imposing environment. A frozen pond could be found in the color of her eyes and in her hair. Mottled with the pattern of natural light, her skin was of an unnatural paleness as if she barely went out under the sun. Studying the dejected slant of his mouth, she proclaimed, "Ningen, if it'd put your worries to rest, however deserving I'd once thought it'd be, I don't intend to seek vengeance."

His pride had already been hacked to bits by her words. His shoulders slumped. "...Really." He doubted the authenticity behind that statement. Men captured by their enemies were often tortured, sold, or attained to commit ritualistic suicide. If not for vengeance or for a meal, why had he been the one to be accosted? Her reasons for consoling him was suspect.

Evidentially, she'd discerned his skepticism because her smile dropped. With newfound solemnity, she criticized, "You callously take that tone with me only because you don't know what it is like to die. Did you once stop to reflect on the likely motivations behind my actions not long ago? Or did
you look at me and automatically associate me as evil?"

His mouth dried up.

"That is the narrative you humans have established. You selfishly hunt down and persecute anyone who doesn't fit your ideals. You cannot settle your differences and are so eager to start your own wars and segregate yourself over petty quarrels that the only way you unite is against a common foe—that being us." She frowned. "I know that, but I'm still giving you a chance. Will you prove me wrong? Will you hear what I have to say, ningen? You'll find me more reasonable than you expect."

His eyes shifted down to stare at the ground. So she simply wanted to talk? What little experience he'd gathered from his travels was whispering to him about the illusion of free choice being at the mercy of her whims. So long as he followed along the script she'd thought up in her head—and so long as she hadn't plotted treachery that'd end in his demise—he had a higher chance of surfacing out this alive. It never occurred to him to run.

Still, at this juncture, there was nothing to go on but conjecture. There was little he could do at this point other than hearing what she wanted to do to him. His cheeks mushed against the ground, he wordlessly indicated his consent.

"Splendid. I have no intention of picking a fight with you."

The ice around Akitoki's ankles and wrists cracked and splintered into shards.

"You will follow me. If for no other reason than being a guest in…," Kaguya glanced about her surroundings disdainfully before concluding, "my house, and for want of preserving your life, young master." Rising to her feet, without waiting for Akitoki to gather his bearings, she sauntered away, fully expectant that he'd follow.

Vivid recollections of demonic ninjas and the demon lord that led them, and a cranky inu hanyou with his tiny kitsune and a two-tailed nekomata—the latter trio being the only monsters that'd defied Akitoki's learnings of their gruesome nature and mercilessness—clawed their way through his thoughts. Those beings of supernatural origins had extended an offer of aid and compassion to him, albeit having to be coerced by their human companions to do so.

While he treasured the memories he had of his comrades, Akitoki honestly had enough experiences dealing with the yōkai and their ilk to last him a lifetime. This happenstance with the dead cemented this thought. If he managed to survive this encounter, he was going to persuade his fiancée and her family to leave the countryside for living a peaceful life with him in the imperial city, where there were little to no encounters with demon-kind.

As Akitoki swayed up, massaging his wrists and ignoring the stinging in his ankles, he heard her elucidate distantly, "I've come to understand that it was partially my fault for not explaining myself those years ago, instead of acting on impulse as I would to any home invaders."

She'd spread her arms up, as if beseeching the Shinto deities her species weren't known to believe in. Kaguya resumed, "Now, you may be loyal to your friends—and they may have been ill-informed of my intentions—but they'd ruined my Eternal Night. That makes it difficult for me to grant forgiveness. Subsequently, since you're here as their stand-in, you'll be responsible for the outcome."

Sweat was pouring down his spine. A pacifist at heart, he was inclined to expect good intentions from others. As he watched the colossal shell of ice overhead disintegrate effortlessly with a wave of her hand, Akitoki merely wished this were a bad dream and not a premonition of what was to come.
"Evening, Dawlish," greeted a middle-aged man. As cropped short as his hair was, under the
glimmer of the crystal chandeliers hovering high above, it still had the appearance of sheep's wool.
Wrapped around a forearm was a trench coat that belonged to the standard articles of clothing all of
his colleagues at least owned or wore to work. In his Muggle suit and tie, tailored specifically for his
stocky build, he made for a distinguished sight among the stacks of papers and case files amassed
atop a desk in the open cubicle.

The environment he was in could only be described as a congregation of bodies buzzing with
conversation in the large, open space ahead. Familiar faces could be glimpsed from the crowd but
other than their presence, amidst the fresher faces he felt like a stranger in the same department he'd
spent a good portion of his life dedicated to. Most heads were bent, but a few had theirs affixed
anxiously at the walkway suspended above.

A head of wiry grey hair emerged from beneath the piles of paperwork. Unlike his colleague, John
Dawlish was among the employees that stuck to the old uniform: enchanted robes—dyed a dark blue
that was nearly indistinguishable from black—made by a witch's wand. Folded over the backseat of
his chair was also a brown trench coat. Since his desk position required him to be located near the
front, he was seated within an open cubicle to receive papers and to point anyone lost in the right
direction. He was unaware of the funny sight he made with his bull-like appearance in his neat
office, incongruous against the cubicles arranged in orderly rows behind his.

Dawlish squinted up at the wizard addressing him, before his expression lightened up. The dour lines
underneath his eyes and around his mouth grew more pronounced as he returned, "Auror Robards!"
A charm had been casted on each employee-designated cubicle, amplifying the voices within the
invisible area of effect while quietening the ones outside the enclosure. His clouded smile lessening
into a wistful expression, he commented, "You're awfully energetic. I'd say 'good evening to you
too,' but I think we'd all rather retire to our homes by now. It's two-to-three hours before midnight."

Gawain Robards had been ready to grouse his own thoughts on the matter, when he noticed the look
lingering on the credentials hanging below Gawain's collarbone. He breathed a sigh through his
nose. Of course Dawlish couldn't help but be captivated. The badge was standard issued to all those
employed in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Employees had to carry it for
identification's sake. However, behind the blue lettering, engraved into the metal were motifs that
differentiated which division they belonged to.

Dawlish himself had been in active service not too long ago, before events in the Second Wizarding
War disgraced him. It'd been a miracle that the ad hoc Head Auror, before Potter's promotion, had
kept Dawlish within their ranks—albeit demoted to a lesser position—with the justification that
Dawlish had been among the unfortunates that had their free wills Confounded or had been mind-
controlled by an Imperio. The reasoning was that their services were still needed in the Ministry, and
it would be a shame to fire them for circumstances outside of their control when their records
indicated exemplary service beforehand.

That decision had not made the previous Head Auror—nor any of the Aurors that had been
pardoned—popular.

Out of sympathy, as if in pain Gawain rolled his shoulder and then made a motion to grab it,
covering the badge behind his elbow casually. He maintained an amiable smile. "You can't fault me
for that. My wife and kids pack enough tea for me to last me through the nights, by now caffeine
must be running through my veins."

Dawlish's intense concentration was shattered, and he had to blink several before he got ahold of his
senses.
With an embarrassed grunt, Dawlish pushed his chair back with a muted *skrrch* as he peered at the cubicles behind him. Snatching his coat and swinging it over his shoulder, he said briskly, "So everyone is assembled then. I honestly expected it'd take longer."

"We have a lot of subdivisions and other departments coming in," Gawain agreed, waiting for his old colleague to come around his desk. He pretended not to see the tremor in Dawlish's wand arm. "It's been awhile since we were told to wait. You're fortunate to have your desk assigned near the squad room. When we have to gather for assignment, you don't have to walk as much to the briefing as we do, don't you?"

He was sent a funny glance out of Dawlish's peripheral vision.

Gesturing at the bodies ahead of them, Dawlish questioned, "Do you see all these people? I take one, two, three steps, and I'm already there." The clearest conversation they overheard—passing by a group of wizards, with some individuals still gloved and dressed in hooded, disposable body suits—encompassed heated speculations concerning evidence of magical creature cruelty and exploitation. It's when Dawlish and Gawain strode their way to the back of the crowd that he asked, "It's not that I don't appreciate the company, but is there a reason for the chat? We haven't talked since…well, y'know."

"Nothing suspicious; I'd wanted to make certain no one was left out." Gawain passed a look over the group of Aurors that'd been sent out to the field: Williamson, Savage, Finnigan, Weasley, Macmillan, and the rest that'd accomplished their duties and were expecting, like the rest of them, the Head Auror's imminent arrival. Gawain had no doubt that, after informing them of the situation, the Head Auror would order those individuals into one of the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms posthaste.

Much like the flock of paper avians threading between the enchanted chandeliers, he felt bitterness encircling his mind. It wasn't long ago that Gawain was recognized among the forces led by the late Amelia Bones. Unable to help himself, he murmured, "In the glory days, that'd be me up there. Now it's all Potter's men."

"That's dangerous talk, Robards," Dawlish hissed, overhearing him. "What are you saying? You still have your position."

Gawain's expression pinched, before it eventually smoothed out. "You're right. That was an insensitive remark. Sorry about that."

"I didn't say that to make you apologize—" Dawlish grimaced. "Never mind. I am upset that he isn't here yet. I overheard that the Deputy Head came back and went to fetch him. How long are they going to keep us waiting?"

"The Deputy Head is back?" Gawain exclaimed, unconvinced. "That quickly? She was on-site minutes ago." If she was back, that meant they would be issuing assignments to them tonight.

"The Deputy Head," drawled a voice behind them, making them turn, "I heard, was summoned back because the Head Auror was taking his fine time with the Unspeakables, after saying he'd come straight back after dropping the ambassador off. A mate told me those eejits from the Committee managed to accost the Head Auror on the way back from Minister Shacklebolt, so she was sent to rescue him. She's good at convincing those busybodies."

"…Well, I suppose she did use to work for them. He went to see the Minister?"

"Aye right, did you know?" a woman piped up. "I overheard through the grapevine that the Americans are involved in this. I'd honestly thought our recent proceedings over there had been the
"Didn't we make sure their magical monument was left intact?" someone whispered to another. "Oh my days, I remember we had less than charitable things to say about one another, last time that we recently dealt with them."

"That's putting it lightly. My colleague, from one of the teams that went on the overseas mission, said they'd never seen someone as royally reprimanded by the Head Auror as their Director was."

"Erm, wasn't that a rumor? I imagine it was the other way around. Isn't that why the Head Auror loathes him?"

"C'mon, y'know he talks a big game. I only know that someone called someone an 'arrogant ponce' or something."

"Hush! We don't know anything yet."

"All I know is that there are talks of security trolls at the White Tomb. Weasley reckons that American suppliers are involved in the illegal trafficking of magical creatures to our country. And we know what that means if traffickers are involved."

"Did he? Auror Weasley said that?" Gawain interjected into their conversation. "Did he tell you this? I was enlisted in one of the teams you'd mentioned. The Aurors there have their hands busy with a presidential election, a wendigo infestation, Scourers, and No-Majs who saw something they should not have. Fugitives or not, I doubt they'd be desperate enough to be caught resorting to conspire with Death Eaters when they'd been thoroughly ousted to the international wizarding community like that."

"Surely, that's…not the case. Criminals band together."

"Scourers, I understand," stated someone unfamiliar. "They've issued international warrants for those blood traitors. Everyone's keeping an eye out for them. But 'No-Majs?' What are 'No-Majs'?"

"…Truly?" Gawain exclaimed. "You haven't been to the States, have you? They call the Muggles 'No-Maj' there."

"Robards," Dawlish said lowly amidst the debates happening around them. When the Auror's interest was reclaimed, he resumed, "Where is that person? I don't see him…no, not the Head Auror. Y'know who else it could be. The one that's always advising him."

Gawain's eyes widened, and his gaze flitted across the assembly in search of a man with long dark hair and a distinctive beard streaked with grey. A complex blend of emotions surged when little to no result was procured. His jaw tensing, he replied, "I can only assume he's…decided to hear from the Head Auror or the Deputy Head directly instead of waiting like the rest of us."

"I see. So that's how it is."

Just as Dawlish finished the sentence, a mechanical, grinding noise soon made everyone hone in on the walkway like a beacon. The rotating needle in the dial overhead oscillated down from the number three to two. A bell dinged and the set of heavy oak doors suddenly creaked open, revealing the access lift hidden behind.

The walkway shuddered. Emerging from the golden griddles side-by-side were the solemn figures of Lord Potter Black Peverell and Deputy Head Granger. They were both carrying paperwork. Accompanying their arrival was a diluted version of the hubbub beforehand, with government
workers shuffling their feet impatiently. Whenever Head Auror Potter had watermarked files in hand, Deputy Head Granger was always known to carry a fearsome multitude shrunken in her handbag.

The golden griddles receded back from the frame with a rusty screech. Likewise, the tall double doors moved to swing shut.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting." Potter's voice boomed loud and clear in the Auror Headquarters, no doubt with the *Sonorous* charm already in effect. Footwear could be heard clanging against the metal grating. Approaching the rail, he studied the faces of the personnel employed under him or at least had a direct relation to the Auror Office. Gloved fingers grasped the metal bar.

One of the biggest criticisms the Head Auror faced, beside his record-setting age to occupy the Auror Office, was his tendency to wear his heart on his sleeve. Harry Potter, as a wizard and a diplomat, felt too strongly; out of work, he was merely one of the people; he was too accommodating; he was too human with high aspirations for their society. While compassion was valued here now more than ever, outside of special circumstances, the expectation was that he had to be firm and uncompromising while he meted out justice from the local to national level. Because he represented the law, Harry Potter, as the authority figure of their department, had to be a professional—an enforcer of peace. To command respect, he cannot be seen as inexperienced lest he and their system were taken advantage of. His reputation of being a war hero had to be upheld.

It was easy for people to forget his age as he declared, "I will make this brief. There was a distress call, and everyone dispatched demonstrated exemplary performance. Threats have been neutralized and we have successfully captured seven-to-eight persons of interest alive, more or less. And, yes, some of the rumors are true. We have finally apprehended Decio—their Chief Snatcher."

He was interrupted when a round of applause broke out. People were either cheering, clapping, hooting, or whistling. Not the one to crush a cause for celebration, Potter waited politely for the ruckus to die down, before continuing, "You may give your regards to Aurors Weasley, Williamson, Savage, Thomas, Jordan, Finnigan, Parvati, Proudfoot, and Macmillan later. The Chief Snatcher is with the rest, who are either in isolated cells or in the interrogations rooms. We can't keep them in custody indefinitely, so we need to get a move on those confessions.

"I will be real here: we'd sustained one casualty, though I hear from our medical examiners that it's nothing fatal. I want you all to show your support nonetheless. I shall leave it to your discretion, although someone had informed me that Proudfoot likes chocolate frogs. Chocolate boosts happiness. Dark chocolate however will help his heart. Cards or sending some sort of a nice message wishing him a speedy recovery will do just as well, alright? Please have it owled to St Mungo's infirmary when you have the time. I'm certain he'll appreciate the thought.

"Besides that, you might be wondering why our seasoned veterans are here instead of directing the field teams—both our forensic wizards and the Disposal of Magical Creatures—where to set-up while they sweep the grounds for evidence and anything we might've missed. I'm told their speediness is in part due to the exemplary performance I'd just mentioned. The coroner is examining the trolls as we speak. Same with the wizard cadavers. He'll have results to the appropriate parties starting tomorrow. I especially give regards to the reports that'd been compiled at such a short notice, and given to my Deputy to hand to me. You have my admiration—those in the forensics and crime scene investigation division. Thank you for following orders.

"Now, the big question I see on all your faces is whether or not they'd succeeded in their Dark Resurrection Ritual. Rest easy, they will pay. For desecrating Dumbledore's grave and disturbing his final resting place, this travesty won't go ignored. We have foiled them at every turn, I have reasons to believe this is not so much made in desperation as much as it is a sign that they're growing bolder.
That, in itself, is dangerous. Analysis will be run on the skeletal remains found on-site; until we have concrete evidence, we cannot assume that they're Voldemort's. We'll have more information to you when it's ready.

"Everyone knows how this goes. In the course of several weeks, I want to hear results. Give me reports. I will hear debriefings from each of your superiors in the meantime. And while we will continue surveillance, my Deputy Head tells me psych evals have been scheduled within the next few weeks. Make sure you clear one day off your calendar for your arrangement with the shrink. No excuses.

"Remember, I'm holding everyone else to the same standard. Every person here in this department pulls their weight and are to get back to work after this briefing ASAP. Everyone is to assist their superiors as best as they can. Everyone is to contribute. Be productive. Make me proud. That is all." Glancing down at whatever was attached onto the first case file, he read aloud, "With the exceptions of Aurors Weasley, Patil, Thomas, Williamson, Macmillan, and Robards who are to meet me and Hermione in Briefing Room no. 3, everyone else is dismissed! Tomorrow's another big day. Do what you have to, to last the long hours. I don't want to catch any one of you with your heads down on the table."

At a loss for words, Gawain had to have his name called out many times by Dawlish before any attempts at regaining composure was achieved. While workmates nearby patted him on the back or on the shoulder sympathetically—or had sent encouragements in his wake—Gawain could only mull over why his name was included in the rolcall. For a heartbeat, he dared to breathe.

Having imparted a last, "You got your wish; take care of yourself now" to a still shell-shocked Gawain, Dawlish left him behind in the corridors to vacate the premises. While the rest of the employees funneled out of the corridor, Gawain had to rush to prepare for the meeting. Exhilaration tasted like tangy tea on his tongue. He could feel his blood pumping as he traversed the corridors, finally arriving at his destination.

Surrounding the enchanted glass enclosure of the Head Auror's office, similar to the design language of the cubicles before them the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms were initially intended to resemble the offices that Muggles in high positions liked at the time. Each Briefing Room had their distinctiveness, but Briefing Room no. 3 was unique in that it contained more contemporary craftsmanship from the British Isles with souvenirs brought back from the Aurors who'd traveled overseas.

Larger than how it appeared on the outside, encased within the stain glass exterior enchanted with writhing Irish Celtic motifs and a large number three, the room contained lacquered folding screens, a handcrafted mahogany conference table that could seat ten people, and what appeared to Gawain as Japanese ceramics laid out tidily on a silk table runner which could be worth more than his annual salary. Other than that, the room was largely comprised of Arts and Crafts furnishings that looked like a lot of time had been invested coordinating them, reminding Gawain of his mother-in-law’s appreciation of those specialty shops in Glasgow.

Aside from Gawain, there was only one wizard who had known relatives in Glasgow—and that was Pius Thicknesse: counselor to the Head Auror and Deputy Head Auror.

Seated to the Head Auror's left was the same wizard Gawain and Dawlish had been searching for moments prior, this time wearing a Muggle-styled pinstriped suit indicative of his support of Harry Potter taking office. At the head of the table was the Head Auror, with his Deputy Head sitting on his right. The three had been conversing while they waited for everyone else to gather. From the distance, it seemed that Granger had something on her mind even as she participated in the
Adjourning midway through his consultation, having noticed the intensity of the gaze on him, the same man Gawain used to work for had lifted his eyes to the door frame where the Auror stood by motionlessly. "Mr Robards," Thicknesse bade, "if you would close the door and take a seat, that'd be appreciated."

Gawain swallowed back his saliva when everyone turned to stare at him. Some had welcoming smiles. Others were indifferent or quizzical to his attendance. After shutting the door behind him, returning any mumbled "hellos," he took the only remaining chair left. At his right was Weasley and at his left sat Macmillan. His head and body felt ready to sway side to side from all the excitement, like how he would sometimes take his youngest by her hands in their house and dance with her to the energetic beat. Even being ignored by his seatmates couldn't ruin his mood.

With the reminder that the younger generations surpassed Gawain in preferential treatment, it always ate at him every day that his wife had to remind him that so long as his colleagues could back up their talk, he couldn't justify harboring bad feelings. The least that Gawain could manage, without letting that mindset affect him, was cooperating in their investigations without letting his resentment showing in his work performance.

Sliding into his chair, he waited for the Briefing to begin. He avoided eye contact with Thicknesse. Sliding the messenger bag off his shoulder, Gawain noticed everyone else had their memo pads open. Hastily, he dug through his bag. To his relief, without needing to look up, he felt Thicknesse's eyes finally lift from him.

Years ago that it was, Gawain remembered working simultaneously alongside John Dawlish and Pius Thicknesse. All three men had been competent investigators with decent achievements. Despite that, Gawain had gotten along better with the stoic Dawlish than the strong-willed Thicknesse. There was something unnerving about working alongside Thicknesse—capable duelist that he was. Then Dawlish had been noticed by Minister Cornelius Oswald Fudge for his ability to follow orders abnormally well while Gawain was handpicked by Head Auror Amelia Susan Bones for his performance in raids, leaving Thicknesse by himself.

At the time, Gawain remembered Thicknesse's heavy Glaswegian accent which'd differentiated him from the rest of his colleagues who bore the traditional English, Welsh, or Scottish dialect who'd lived in the South East for some time. Besides his gaunt facial features, Thicknesse was known for his high overhanging forehead that, at times, shadowed glinting eyes, making him seem sinister to the right people. Very few wanted to be seen associating with him outside of the taskforce.

To his old partners’ amazement, Thicknesse amassed an intimidating track record apprehending dark wizards, that even Head Auror Bones had been impressed enough to appoint him as her successor. With that, he’d surged ahead. For each successful arrest and raid, the more his confidence grew, and the more effort was made into quelling his colorful accent until he hardly sounded like himself anymore. Soon that old image of him faded as most came to accept that the headstrong Pius Thicknesse had a bright future ahead of him, naturally placing him in high esteem in their minds.

The threat of his existence could be attributed to why the Death Eaters had Thicknesse forcibly bent to their will, exploiting him for their gain and wresting his self-control away from him during the Second Wizarding War. With the unjustifiable homicide of Amelia Bones, the start of Thicknesse's commanding presence could be sensed when he rose to fill the power vacuum her death had left behind, soon moving onto the loftier position of Minister of Magic—a move which had been suspicious in itself, coupled with recent decisions that seemed erratic and out-of-character for him.

In the Trials, in his distinctly careful intonation Thicknesse was memorably quoted—missing the
identifying fast-paced dialect—to have stated that being held under *Imperius Curse* had stained his hands with blood. With his ability to make sound judgements impaired, he had not been in control of his actions, unable to resist committing the atrocities You-Know-Who's men forced him to. Hence he was resigning from his tenure—with the Acting Minister's blessings—turning himself in for his sentence.

No one had foreseen that he would be offered amnesty, paving the way for wizards who had their free wills similarly stripped from them, thusly being kept as demoted civil servants in the new Ministry of Magic.

At the helm of the scandal, Thicknesse could only keep a low profile, dutifully assisting whoever was to be the next Head Auror. As long as his activities were checked and he continued to demonstrate good behavior, his connections provided him a measure of security.

Gawain flipped through his journal, searching for a page that wasn't filled to the brim with notes. When he finally found one, he set it down with an ink pot on the table, with his own Self-Writing Quill poised to take notes. He was resolutely looking ahead at the Head Auror's jawline.

"I don't expect much tonight," Potter mentioned once he had everyone's attention. The case files were arranged at the left of his elbow, unopened. His hands were clasped together. "But it's the end of the day. I know you're all tired. Before I can let you leave, update me on what you can."

"It's still an ongoing investigation," Granger started. She'd cracked her journal open onto a fresh page. Her magical quill was suspended in the air, ready to jot down notes on its own. "When you'd left, all signs seem to point to what we'd discussed at the White Tomb. We might be looking at illicit activities. We have the appropriate parties working the graveyard shift investigating the collars and uniforms that the trolls were wearing."

"To catch everyone up," having said that, holding a hand up, Potter passed a glance over to Gawain and Thicknesse before resuming, "everything you may have heard might be true. It's still uncertain. Also, it's true that I'd sent an armband to Analysis. Even without being given the results yet, the existence of Snatchers surviving is an unfortunate reality. Thus, aside from certain individuals in this room, you're my top operatives suited for this mission. The reason why I gathered you here is in the event that our lead about the Americans turns out to be probable, we'll have to make correspondence."

"We don't have the time to stand-by!" Macmillan blurted from Gawain's side. "We've crippled their numbers with each arrest we make. We already have probable evidence that they're somehow involved in this. The best way to expose a secret is to get them to turn on each other."

"But why would they leave such an obvious clue when they'd been so careful evading our taskforce?" Thicknesse countered, the intensity of his tone intended to quell the Auror's fervency. Once Macmillan went quiet, he went onto saying, "That's easier said than done. Even with the Malfoys' help and the confessions we've acquired from the fugitives we arrested, we've still yet to find their base of operations."

"The Malfoys, for all we know, could be feeding us false information, stalling us until their old buddies make their getaway."

"And our department values their contributions. You know how this goes. So long as they provide us necessary Intel, the Malfoys are untouchable. There is no incentive for them to betray us."

"They're still a crooked lot," Weasley muttered underneath his breath. His hands clenched into fists. "Immunity agreement or not."
Potter said, "Ron, Macmillan, stop. We're over that. I hate to admit it, but Counselor Thicknesse has a point. Even with reliable Intel from our informants, the Malfoys are no help when the Death Eaters cover their tracks so efficiently. What were they doing here? Is there a new pattern to how they're scattered now—the Death Eaters and now the Snatchers?" Potter tented his fingers underneath his chin. "What else can you tell me?"

"You've already heard most of it," Finnigan answered. "The important thing is that we've obstructed another Dark Resurrection Ritual in the nick of time. And now we find out that the Snatchers who died that night aren't as dead as we thought? Hitting Dumbledore's tomb and bringing in muscle in the shape of trolls outfitted in American gear...something's awfully shady going on, aye. Let's just hope we don't unearth a smugglers' syndicate. We've got enough to handle."

"What about our operatives stationed overseas?" Williamson queried. "I'm more worried about a chain reaction. What's to say that only Americans are involved? I noticed everyone gathered here had participated at one point either in the exchange program or during our last mission in the States."

"Exactly. I've read up on your scores from our cultural sensitivity training. You're all better qualified for this task, should I give the order. It depends on the outcome of this meeting and the evidence that no doubtingly will reveal something or other." Potter reclined back in his seat. His expression dark, his eyes were glued to the ceiling as he said absently: "I have no problem pulling some strings. That's not an issue. I can give the orders in a few hours to the undercover agents you'd mentioned, as well as those still enrolled in the exchange program."

"You sound displeased, sir," Patil remarked. "Not just this instance; you've sounded like you have something on your mind this whole week. Is something else the matter?"

"...Hm? No, I was thinking that they haven't reported any new breakthroughs since the last time we communicated...or, rather, they haven't encountered a big enough golden egg to break this case wide open. It's not that big of a concern. Yet." Even as he'd said that, a severe frown was slashed across his face.

"I don't understand what they're hoping to achieve," Weasley spoke up. His eyebrows were dipped into a frustrated frown. "I want to verify something. I get that our objective is to not maximize casualties. It's to gather information, to round them up. But what's their goal, Harry? To enflame the enmity harbored between our countries? We get along on the surface, right, but with the existence of the press, everyone knows of the bad blood stemming between our departments. Or is this misdirection? We'll be losing a lot of manpower if we're sent on a wild goose chase."

"That's assuming that they're that intelligent," Macmillan replied, crossing his arms and leaning forward to look askance at Weasley. Weasley, likewise, returned his glare. Macmillan went on to say, "They always slip up sooner or later anyhow. This is to send us a message."

"And what message would that be, pray tell?" Thicknesse said curtly, the suddenness of his voice making the two Aurors tense up. "That they have allies? Now why would they reveal their cards to us, if that's the case?"

Silence spread like wildfire.

"Let's take a look at our leads before we come to any conclusion," Potter was the one to suggest, his scrutiny returning to eye-level. "I want my profilers on this to give us credible motives within the week. Have them cross-reference everything. Honestly, Williamson, at this time, your guess is as good as mine."

"Done and done," Granger answered. "I've transcribed that task into their timetables. They should
see that when they arrive at work tomorrow morning. I agree that our window of opportunity is closing fast."

"Thank you, Hermione. You're a blessing in disguise."

"If I may, for the Aurors you're sending overseas, could I ask if they can fish around for more information regarding wandless magic?" Thicknesse asked. Crossing a leg over his knee smoothly and glancing in Potter's direction, he explained, "We might as well; it will only benefit us in the long run. I believe this is a matter that greatly concerns the Head Auror. They have some well-known practitioners residing there and they have a long history of exploring that branch of magic."

"...Right, drills and training. I remember you bringing up something like that before on the dossiers." Potter's mouth trudged up into a reluctant smile at him. "Alright, I'd ask either the First Lady or the MACUSA President. Tell them I sent you. We can at least learn new tactics from them that'll also be advantageous to us. At least learning some of their specialized expertise will help us, regardless that I'm losing a few of my best Aurors for a while."

"We're forgetting something. What's our way in with the Director?"

"Bugger off, Macmillan," Weasley snapped, without menace.

Macmillan's forehead puckered from the confrontational tone. Stuck between the two, Gawain wished to sink down into his seat until he was out of their line of sight. If he hadn't been sitting between them as their buffer, the two younger wizards would've got up into each other's faces, this he had no doubt.

"The both of them nearly blew a gasket," Macmillan argued back. "You were there! Everyone thought they'd engage in fisticuffs at one point. You can't expect they'll be receptive to any of us, after that."

"That's a whole lark, Macmillan."

"Decorum, Auror Weasley, Auror Macmillan," Thicknesse warned, interposing into their row. "Have any of you kept with the international media? Regardless of the lack of secrecy surrounding the bad blood between the Director and our Head Auror, we're still political allies. If you continue provoking either parties—"

Potter held up a hand, ignoring the grim frown aimed at him. "Sorry for interrupting, but it's alright, Thicknesse. It's no secret the Director and I hold low opinions of each other."

His elbows landed on the desk. Surveying them, Potter mandated, "In the scenario that any of you that are sent there have to cater to that tosspot, pretend to kiss his arse as long as it benefits us. Don't bend over too much though; we don't want anyone to think we're easily taken advantage of. Also, keep quiet of why you're being sent there exactly. This is outside UK jurisdiction, if we find any ties back to the States. Remember, they will argue with us on this; the American magical policy is to execute criminals outright. I'm okay with giving them traffickers—if they are American—but the Death Eaters are ours. A death sentence would be a waste. At least here, we can give them the persecution they rightfully deserve.

"While you're there, somehow breach the topic of troll hunting no matter which Quahog you meet. I recommend finding the First Lady instead and striking up a conversation about her daughter. That's our golden fleece. If you can spend a moment of your time making small talk about the things she likes, it'll endear you to her. Mind you, I forgot if it was the Salem Witches Institute or Ilvermorny that her daughter attends; regardless, find out so that you don't risk insult. Now, if you manage to
find Samuel, don't ask the President about their national Augurey, no matter how much you
desperately want to find about the scandal. It's been hushed up for a reason. Don't antagonize him.
Remember, you represent our department."

"Be sensitive," Thicknesse advised, "to the fact that they're going through a counterterrorism
investigation against foreign instigators. There was even a fiscal crash. Realistically, we can't expect
to be greeted with all smiles and sunshine if they think we're imposing on them. It'd be pure Baltic
under those circumstances."

"Following that, the Americans have only just started to recover from the years of history the
Rappaport's Law had on them that'd segregated them from the Muggles—sorry, I meant the No-
Majs. And then this happened, right when Scourers were no longer that big of an issue." Potter
paused. Then he amended, "I'd misspoken; Scourers are still an issue. They've now integrated into
our modern society as domestic terrorists, conspiracists, and sleeper cells, seeking to oust our magical
existence to the Muggles. They're a bigger problem there than in Europe. Point is, the Americans are
feeling frazzled and nerves are strung tight across two agencies. If we jump the wand on this….

He left the sentence unfinished.

"In other words, you don't want our counterparts to think that we're snobbish, insensitive pricks
when we send some of our best and brightest over," Dean Thomas summarized, having read
between the lines. "Is that what you're saying? You want us to find out if this lead is valid and if it's
just trolls, and to report back if it's worse than we'd thought."

"More or less." Lifting his arm, Potter swirled the wand in the air. Smoke billowed out the tip, with
sinuous form writhing into words large enough for all to see. The more significant information was
transcribed as he asserted, "If you've gotten all that, in other words, you're running recon until this
lead on the potential trafficking of magical creatures checks out. Pursue underground contacts. Glean
what you can and bring it back to us. If trolls are smuggled across US borders and into ours, it's not
just me who wants to be on top of this."

"What do you mean? Is this counted as political intrigue for your associates? Or do you mean the
press?"

"Not quite." He began tapping his wand against his palm. "The Americans, and several other
institutions I know, would want to know everything about any exploitations, especially if there are
black markets, traffickings, or slave trades happening underneath our noses. We're already dealing
with wizards and witches being sold as child brides, slave labor, sex slaves, and whatnot. Imagine if
there are bidders or underground markets for the exploitation of magical creatures…. Regardless,
whatever you end up finding, I want to know."

"So this is a political issue. Macmillan has a point. Will Magical Congress stop us? Unlike before,
when we were given permission in a state of emergency, we're quite possibly infringing on their
jurisdiction."

"The US government will help us so long as it benefits them," Thicknesse mentioned
absentmindedly. "That's why we would have to emphasize that we'll be providing them substantial
assistance pinpointing any persons of interest of US nationality related to our investigations.
Clandestinely, of course. We'll be turning a blind eye to any magical creature trafficking rings
uncovered. In return, any Death Eaters or Snatchers with British citizenship found on US soil are off-
limits to them. We'll also get priority over any info from the interrogations."

Falling into deep thought, Thicknesse was muttering beneath his breath, "If memory serves me
correct, Magical Congress in downtown New York has a network of crucial information scattered all
over—with reliable sources in Quantico, the Pentagon, the FBI, the CIA, Homeland Security, and Interpol…. There has to be more, but if only I got to find out before I returned long ago. If I had access to my old sources…but they move around so much." He trailed off, unconsciously stroking his beard.

"They're still mostly the same as when we'd last seen them, Counselor, when we'd traveled to the Woolworth Building," Granger said, staring down at whatever the quill had copied word for word. In her line of sight too was her wedding ring. "Harry…might I…suggest wizards that'd be best suited? For this excursion? I know you have an idea already but I'm beginning to agree with our counselor's recommendations if we have to send Aurors over."

"We'd differed on three individuals only, Hermione."

"I still agree with Counselor Thicknesse on that we should take advantage of whatever connections we have," she reasoned. "I know he isn't here but Lee Jordan should be switched out with Ernest Macmillan. Senior Auror Robards is given; he left a good impression or so I've heard. I still say Seamus Finnigan should come along. Auror Macmillan and Auror Finnigan were in good standing when they'd been in the States….

Faltering, she then fell into a deep quiet, biting her lip as she brooded over a thought in her head.

"You both strike a fine argument," Potter conceded, when she remained mute. His chin dropped down further behind tented fingers. Focusing on Thicknesse at his side, he articulated, "I'm wary about sending Finnigan over though, to be honest. What do you think, Counselor? You're the one who brought it up first. I know he's half Irish—I remember that made him popular with several witches while we were there—but we have to be sensitive to their recent media coverage. I feel uneasy sending one of my best men out there who is a…before you get into a tiff over what I said, remember I'm also a Half-blood. I don't want to stir something if we can avoid it. Thoughts? Be candid on this."

Everyone sat up straighter in their seats. The pallor of Finnigan's face paled as he downturned his gaze onto his open memo pad, his freckles standing out like brown constellations on his skin.

"…I don't say this lightly to deliberately antagonize either you, Sir, or Mr Finnigan," Thicknesse eventually said, after having collected his thoughts on the matter, "but there would be potentially unsavory results if the world hears of further international conflict. We've already seen the backlash when word got out regarding the animosity between our departments. To this day, we still see the repercussions. It's regrettable that you couldn't keep a cool head, sir, right when the Aurors before you kept friendly relations."

"I know. It's a mess." For the first time since Potter was promoted, the man cringed. "We tried. We simply cannot get along. Our values and method of operations differ too much—the Director and I. I'm still trying."

Thicknesse issued a noncommittal noise, merely continuing to caress the coarse hairs of his beard in rumination. His gaze was heavy on his superior.

Avoiding his eyes, with newfound confidence, Potter declared, "Mind, this is still speculative—since we're waiting on the Committee's verification—but I would want the veterans on this. This would be the official order. Williamson. Robards. You two will accompany Macmillan, Lee, and Parvati to the other side of the pond. Make sure Lee hears about the deployment too. I will have your assignments ready in my office, when everything checks out. Until then, be ready on stand-by. Once you're there, I'm trusting you all to set a good example for us, alright?"
"Best to you, everyone." Having congratulated the chosen few, Dean hid his mouth behind laced hands brought to his mouth. "I remember what our mentors told us about how we, as the British, hold ourselves to a higher standard to the rest of the world."

"Whether anyone here believes that or not, broker good relationships while you're there—to show that we're still trying. See if we need more covert operatives, if this gets to be bigger than we thought. Ron, Finnigan, Dean…you're staying here with me. We're already stretched thin as it is. Hermione needs you for other assignments."

Seemingly recovered from the earlier mood, Finnigan sighed gustily. "Innit a shame? I can't believe I'm going to have to sit this one out then." Reclining back in his seat, he folded his arms behind his head. "At least bring back souvenirs, yeah? I remember they've got fine spirits that'll make Old Ogden want to add to his collection."

"Seamus," Patil said disapprovingly, "You're horrible."

Potter proclaimed, "I cannot emphasize this enough: be friendly, but retain decorum. We are to impress upon them that we are the height of professionalism. I don't want to get reports back about how offensive any of you acted in the States. Don't give them reasons to think…Hermione, what is it? You keep looking at me and not saying anything."

"Umm…I also have an alternative recommendation that you won't like," the Deputy Head said softly.

His expression immediately became guarded. As if physically bracing himself, he prompted, "Let's hear it then."

Granger hesitated, before her lips formed a thin line. "I know you're set on having Williamson overseas, but I need him here. I think…I think Ron should accompany them instead."

The gasp Weasley made sounded like a fish that'd been gutted. "Hermione!" he fumed, lurching to his feet. The chair skidded backward as his hands slammed down on the table. The glare aimed at his wife was unnerving to Gawain, who was watching the proceedings in bafflement. "Do you want me gone so badly? Why are you suggesting—?"

"—No, no. Not…any of that. I just went by—please listen—I just went by what was logical," Granger assured, albeit in a small voice. Her hands had been tucked in her lap, cradling the curve of her stomach. "I know I'm expecting—you want to be a good husband, I understand wholeheartedly—but the baby won't be due for some time. You'd be more useful to me overseas, working your charm on them."

Weasley's expression appeared hurt. "That's Williamson's role."

"No, not quite." She ticked her fingers with each person mentioned: "We don't necessarily need Williamson when we have Robards. Either one would serve the purpose of appealing to the older demographics, who still remember them. The nostalgia will help. Parvati is a show of solidarity for the female agents. Macmillan is for the single crowd, especially those his age; he can be attractive to the right people. Lee is good all around; his curiosity of Quodpot and his obsession for the Quidditch World Cup endears him to the sports-crazy ones, so we can depend on him to fill any gaps."

"Then why do you want me to go?" Weasley asked with a sour look. "It sounds like all bases are covered. Is it to fill Williamson's shoes? Are you saying I'm not as good as him?"

"Hardly. You're both equally talented, Ron. By process of elimination, while I wish I could propose
someone else, I think you'd bring more to the table. I personally can't be there, but the President and
the First Lady adore us. Both know you're an expectant father." Turning her face away, she stared
earnestly at her right. "At least, this is what I think. Do you think that's a bad idea, Harry? You
remember how Samuel liked us—the three of us?"

"Harry, I'm telling you—as a wizard to another wizard—this is a terrible idea. What if something
happens when I'm gone?"

"You know," she cajoled, "if Ron goes, that'd even endear us to the Director, who is married with
children."

Caught between the pair as the mediator, the Head Auror frowned. His fingers were drumming a
staccato beat against the surface of the table. Eventually, he responded, "I have my reservations on
this, as another man. Sorry, Hermione. Separating you two, when you're this far along, doesn't sit
well on my conscience." Noticing her crestfallen expression, he resumed, "That isn't to say I don't
see the merits. You wouldn't propose this…unless you really believed in it…but…."

Potter faltered. His eyes rotated down as he cupped the side of his face with an upturned palm. His
gaze could melt holes into the conference table as he contemplated.

"We've always stuck together though," Weasley went on to oppose. "We're a team, Harry—me, you,
and Hermione. It works. Why change a successful formula? We've never been separated before like
this." His hand shot up when he saw his wife's expression from his peripheral sight. "No,
Hermione, not to this extent."

Potter gestured to Thicknesse, ignoring the pair quarreling in the background. "Counselor, you
always have a different insight." Armed with a disarming grin, he appealed, "I'd like to hear yours on
this. Your consultation has helped me several times, since I took office."

Thicknesse frowned. Having been deflected with the task of convincing his superior over a
controversial subject, a dark cloud had fallen over his face. He seemed just as cautious to voice his
opinion, his thumb twisting the bejeweled ring on his finger gingerly as everyone—excluding the
married couple—pinned him with intense stares.

In Gawain's opinion, as he waited with bated breath alongside the rest of the Aurors, Thicknesse was
in a tough spot. There was the pressure of reinforcing the Head Auror's decision-making, against
making himself an enemy of one of the influential Aurors in the department. Knowing this however,
asking Thicknesse might be a cover for what the Head Auror truly thought of the proposition.

Unlike most divorced couples who'd been married for a long while, Mr and Mrs Thicknesse had
been without child. Therefore the Head Auror had to know that his Counselor's line of thinking
could be atypical from the average wizarding family. He was also known to value productivity over
feelings, a quality which the current Head Auror respected in the workforce.

Knowing his personality, Gawain could already anticipate what Thicknesse would say.

At last, Thicknesse replied, "I have to agree with the Head Auror, in some respects. If we're standing
by societal standards, normally I would loathe to separate a husband from his pregnant wife. I also
understand this reluctance might have to do with team separation; you three have a long,
commendable history of cooperation—"

Potter's brows rose. "But?"

"—but Deputy Granger has a point. It's not much of an added advantage, but it would tide the
American agents over faster if the President and the First Lady were seen fraternizing with our agents. Neither you nor the Deputy Head will be attending, so Mr Weasley will be filling that void. If we put sentimental objections aside, that asset outweighs the detriments. That is to say, the concerns are exaggerated. We are letting emotion cloud rational thought."

The color of his hair bled into Weasley's face. Clenching his fists, he demanded, "I'm exaggerating my wife and child? I'm exaggerating how I feel about leaving behind my pregnant wife? Is this a set-up, Thicknesse?"

"Anyone going will be outfitted with an International Portkey," Potter explicated in a hefty tone, both of his hands exerting pressure on Granger's and Thicknesse's shoulders until they relaxed their half-raised stance. As he stood up, his gaze was aimed across the table. "Your concerns are valid. Ron, I know how you feel—"

"Do you?" he retorted bitterly. "Don't tell me you're in on this too."

"—and I know how hard this is, but there's no conspiracy you're thinking of. I wanted to be sure the Counselor shares the same opinion, but if I allow this, you won't be leaving her behind entirely. There are methods to return swiftly if something unexpected happens. Since it's a special circumstance, you have permission to come back as much as necessary to take care of Hermione. I won't let anyone stop you from coming back."

"Do you take me for a Pygmy Puff? My brain is not a fluff-ball." His expression distorted. "You're being unusually ornery as of late, repeating yourself left and right. What's going on? It's not that I don't appreciate you coming to my defense, Harry, but I—"

"Ron!" Granger cried, her voice high and frustrated. "You're not being stationed there permanently. Why are you being so obtuse?"

"Obtuse? Me? You're the one who's been trying to run my life. Springing this on me; suddenly expecting me to follow along without question is so unreasonable, so—so—!"

Just as Thicknesse was calling out for decorum, the Head Auror's fist slammed down on the table. The couple fell silent. Having commanded everyone's attention, he said, "We are all prepared to make sacrifices in the line of duty."

In reality Potter's voice was gentle, but it sounded like his volume had been magically amplified. "That's the oath we took when we all decided to be Aurors. If you'd please sit down, I will explain. If this were in any other time, for any other circumstance, I would be on your side, Ron. I know that you think this is unfair or that we're ganging up on you, but I promise you that's not the case."

Weasley bowed his head, his mouth flattening into a white line. He could only be seen staring down at his hands, his legs spread apart as if bracing himself for an attack.

"The Head Auror said sit down, Mr Weasley," Thicknesse chastised. He'd sat up from his lounging position, his hands balled on the table. In a tone equally as strict, he charged, "Or do you think you're an exception because of your friendship with him?"

Everyone froze, upon hearing that. In the meanwhile, Weasley's face—even his lips—became an alarming shade of color.

Bitterness clawed its way back into Gawain's gut as he held himself back from making his resentments known. Among Head Auror Potter's glaring obvious flaws was his propensity to play favorites; that man had never forgotten how people treated him, and that either granted people some
measure of privilege or considerable anguish. It hadn't escaped the individuals in the room that Ronald Bilius Weasley had been given more allowances than anyone else—for his association to the Head Auror, who still held a soft spot for select wizards and witches.

Were Weasley any other individual besides Potter's childhood mate, by now he would be charged with insubordination.

As Gawain studied the hunched figure approaching his mid-twenties trembling with humiliation, he could only feel uneasy that Weasley would storm out of the room, and that the Head Auror would let him.

Glowering at the Counselor, in a distinctly lower octave, Potter asserted, "Ron, you are paid to do a job. Contrary to what Thicknesse is alleging, I hope you know you are not granted any special privileges." His eyes were unflinchingly cold when they landed on him. "Sit down. I won't repeat myself again."

The expression on Weasley's face seemed to indicate he was undergoing a tremendous internal struggle. Like a puppet lifting his arms and shoulders into a half-shrug, he uttered, "Blast it." He sagged back into his seat, his arms crossed dejectedly, scowling at nothing.

"Our public image is important," Thicknesse spoke softly. His gaze was affixed onto the solitary figure of the Head Auror by his side. "It's nothing personal, Head Auror. One of the more commonplace complaints about our department is our overzealousness. It applies to everyone. Aurors have been known to have the predisposition of cutting corners to get the results that we want."

"...What?" Granger murmured, her lips beginning to pull down. Her shoulders hunched. Judging by her new posture, Gawain could only assume this switching of topics was disconcerting to her. "Why are you bringing this up unexpectedly as a cause for concern, Counselor? Surely that's not an issue here. We've just come from a corrupt model of government. We're on the opposite moral spectrum."

"Just because you occupy the 'opposite moral spectrum' does not mean you're automatically disqualified from any criticism." His expression was harsh. "Whereupon I've been guilty of the same, I imagine you and the Head Auror aren't any different—and this is the issue about being obsessive over righteous actions."

Just as Gawain was starting to piece together what was being said, Weasley demanded, "What's this sudden speech about, Counselor?" Judging by the rigidness of his posture, he didn't seem to like the tone Thicknesse took to his wife. "I don't see how this has got to do with what we were talking about."

Like a statue coming to life, Potter exhaled through his nose. He straightened up. "...Sorry for digressing, but I guess this has to be said. It's not an implication." Everyone shifted their focus to him. "It is fact."

He glanced at the seated Aurors in the room, only lingering in the direction of Weasley, Robards, and Macmillan—making the three men squirm. Without tearing his eyes away from them, he announced, "This is short notice—I'd meant to address this publicly at later date when I've got the time—but I've been hearing rumors circulating around that some of our agencies are taking the law into their own hands."

"Who're these agencies that're doing what you're saying?" Patil demanded, one of her legs bouncing underneath the table. Her interest made Gawain remember that the witch was among the few in their division who made it their priority to be on top of any new rumor.
"They're under investigation," Potter answered curtly, cutting all further inquiries into the matter. Overlooking the witch slumping in her seat in disappointment, he resumed, "And I understand everyone's concern with what the Counselor's saying, but I cannot have the magical community associate us with condemnation. Just because we are in a higher-ranked position of authority does not mean anyone in this department is exempt from going through the regulations. Which means I don't want to hear reports about one of you mysteriously acquiring selective amnesia and then temporarily forgetting how protocol works. Don't go off the books. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement only has legal jurisdiction over criminal law; we do not have authority over legislation or prosecution in the justice system."

Finnigan frowned. "But aren't you a member of the ICW—?"

"The regulations exist for a reason, Finnigan," he spoke resolutely over him. "We do not want to follow Cornelius Fudge's model of corruption, when he was our Minister. If a jaded Auror starts going on a personal mission—that cannot be allowed to continue. I also cannot have someone accusing the Head Auror of playing favorites. That is to say, anything that'd remind the public of our department's previous models must cease. It's only a downward spiral from there."

"Has this to do with the recent grumblings covered by the tabloids?" Gawain chimed in, nearly startling his seatmates who hadn't expected him to speak up. He sat up straighter; being under judgement bolstered his confidence. "I think I understand. This'd happened under Head Auror Bones' tenure too. The most extreme I've heard are from unsatisfied civilians demanding the immediate disbandment of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. If the civilians can't trust us, then how can we freely move around without being monitored or obstructed in some way?"

"That's actually quite insightful of you, Robards," Potter praised, staring at him as if seeing the Auror in a new light. "Correct. That's the more radical notion I've heard—"

"Don't they realize how impractical that'd be?" Granger exclaimed. "You can't have a society without a Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Do they think it's that easy to replace us? Who else is going to protect them, venture into dangerous situations, or investigate crimes? Themselves—untrained civilians? They can't honestly expect society to be able to function without our presence."

"—while that may be true, Hermione, we have to remember that the recent models they've seen wasn't spectacular—when Voldemort had his coup. And quite a few of those civilians did participate in the war—granted, most of those veterans are in this department—so it's reasonable to expect that they think they're up to the task."

"The media isn't actually our friend," Thicknesse said, "if a story is worth more than their connections with us. Good intentions or not, it's not only our reputation at stake. This is damaging people's faith in us."

"...I understand that we could tone down on the reactionary engagements," she protested, hugging her stomach, "because that's the most criticized, but—and I'd normally hate to play devil's advocate—if we see something wrong, surely we have to act on it. Otherwise, why are we Aurors in the first place? Harry, it's strange that you're showing an unusual interest in our reputation when you're one of the stronger advocates of not taking their words at face-value."

He grimaced. "That's not true. It may seem sudden to you because, at the time, you were still working for the Committee. I didn't plan to speak at length about this yet."

Potter closed his eyes to the befuddled looks tossed toward him. His expression was cross, as if recalling a bad memory. He conceded, "This isn't something that just came up. It is my
understanding that we are under heavy scrutiny, since the last two Head Aurors after Amelia Bones has hung a stigma over our department. It was a topic of contention between me and the Counselor for the longest time. He has warned me severely about potential repercussions. This is our chance to demonstrate we've turned over a new leaf. So, don't violate anything. I will drop anyone who goes against procedure like a hot potato."

Dean's expression abruptly contorted. "You say that but what if it's someone we know with—with—Merlin, I don't know—a spouse and three mouths to feed? Aurors are family. If someone's caught misrepresenting the department, we should still somehow show a morsel of support to their families while their actions are under investigation. Even with the public backlash calling for their immediate leave, it's unfair to their families if we suddenly turn our backs on them."

"If someone's caught 'misrepresenting the department,'" Potter said, his expression flat, "family or not, if it checks out, I will have them quit. No and's, if's, or but's. At the most, they'll get their resignation pay. Maybe there'll be pretty words thrown into the public statement, depending on what they've accomplished in their years of service. Point is, no one is hired to be an Auror to satisfy a social agenda. I want hard workers I can trust and not off-the-grid vigilantes who think they're above procedure."

"Personal morals have no place in magical law enforcement," Thicknesse clarified. Everyone, excluding the Head Auror, tensed when he spoke up. "Hogwarts graduates are hired to uphold the peace, and to enforce law and order through our established procedural policies. We don't care about your ideologies or what you feel constitutes as justice. You may do whatever activist movement you support in your personal time, we aren't interested...provided that you don't abuse your authority or our resources in those situations. Tell me, why is it that we schedule for mandatory psych evals after field work?"

"It's to offer field agents psychological help whereupon necessary," Granger supplied, sitting up, "and to evaluate if they're still in the right frame of mind to carry out their duties properly. It's also to detect early signs of a mental breakdown, behavioral difficulties, dissociation, PTSD, and any unchecked behavior. The main point of the assessment is to determine dangerous risks, whether a person should be discharged for duty or if they are still mentally sound to make ethical decisions, as well as what therapy the...officer should be receiving."

Thicknesse held up a hand, staying the words on the witch's tongue. Closing his fingers into a fist, he stated, "Officially, the Head Auror has to investigate claims of misconduct until they've been either proven or disproven. The psych evals are only one of the investigative resources that we have. If a person is found guilty, it is written into the Head Auror's responsibilities to enforce disciplinary actions. That's the way it's been for the longest time, Deputy Granger. Anyone caught acting suspicious is only making it harder on Lord Potter."

"It's as the Counselor says," Potter interpolated. "We are to serve the public and to protect them. Our integrity is important. If we're seen as untrustworthy, then our ability to move around freely and enforce laws are hindered. We'd be as good as useless."

"I believe I'm understanding why you're bringing this to us now," Williamson said aloud this time. There was a crinkling at the corners of his eyes as he directed a tiny, knowing look at his superior who had his attention focused on the floating text. The spell had been condensing their conversation into key points.

Williamson said, "People can forget that they aren't paid to use their imaginations for the wrong purposes, and then slack off while the rest of us pursue real leads and are being genuinely productive. This was a long time coming, isn't it? The psych evals are coming up. Not to mention
that you have to hear reports on all the employees from all sorts of personnel. We might also be meeting the Director, who'd accused you of the same. No wonder this is bothering you."

"Expanding on what Williamson said..." the Head Auror underlined key text with his wand, neither denying nor confirming the allegation. "$\ldots$ to bring this back into what we were talking about, no one is to jump into the investigation with the intention to find evidence that'll support our case. The burden of proof lies with us. Honor that. If you are emotionally compromised or if this case becomes personal, I have no choice but to take you off the case. No one's exempt from this—even me. But I would have people focused on investigating real criminal activities rather than chasing imaginary leads simply to prove a point."

As somber as his reprimands were, it was extraordinary how their Head Auror still felt invigorated enough to deliver a lecture. It wasn't to say he was unaffected; his roundabout speech indicated otherwise. He seemed determined to drill this dialogue into their heads, even if he had to run around in circles repeating himself.

"We know the procedure," Macmillan groused, inspecting the path the words trailed in the air before adhering to the stain glass walls. His knuckles bled white as he clenched the arm rests, his nails biting into the intricate whorls whittled into the wood. "This is not to be anyone's vendetta. We get it. No need to prattle on about it."

"Then if you know the procedure by heart, it wouldn't hurt for everyone to hear it again. This is being emphasized ad nauseam right now because I have to stress how important it is to adhere to protocol while handling matters with the upmost discretion.\ldots In other words, I don't want to hear any more complaints about harassment or brutality while you're in the States. Don't abuse your authority. Get everything approved first before you assume all avenues are closed to you. If everything is pointing to the contrary, I want you to stop and use your head before you tell me there is something deeper that we're not seeing. You are to differentiate between imagination and reality."

To everyone's consternation, there weren't any notable signs of him flagging anytime soon as he resumed, "I can't believe these even are reminders I have to give. Be cautious. Use common sense. This is not only addressed to you; this is for everyone in this room and in this department. All in all, don't take cases personally. That is not your responsibility. No more misguided good intentions, am I clear? It's becoming a nuisance. And worrisome.

"If you find concrete evidence that invalidates our lead, don't be disappointed by the results and then come to me with bollocks that'll make us a laughingstock. Reflect on them first before you dismiss any result as untrustworthy. Don't do what some people do and continue searching for what's not there. I don't want to hear claims about someone being too good to be true or the 'internalized' tangent. Give me evidence when you're chasing leads. That'll save you in the long run, if you have something backing you up.

"I don't want to receive reports with omitted information or be debriefed on your gut feeling if it's been rendered defunct. If you happen to derive information from gossip, conspiracy theories, propaganda, public hysteria, ideologies, activism, or even watercooler talk, do your research first before you come to persuade me. No one will trust anything if it hasn't been looked into for credibility."

He paused momentarily, then amended, "Let me know though, if the number or disparity of rumors is suspect. I'll leave that to your judgement, whether something's worth bringing to my attention. But officially I could care less about what your instincts are telling you; at least, not without proof of probable cause. If we find out our lead about the Americans being involved in the illegal outfitting of magical creatures is a false trail, then we stop. If I order you to sojourn current efforts, then you will
stop looking into it. Don't waste our department's resources. Don't rely on circumstantial evidence or contradictory eyewitness accounts. Your actions are an extension of myself and a reflection of our department in the public eye. You're here because I have faith in your critical thinking skills."

What was left unspoken was: you were not hired to be a vigilante. Don't waste my time. Don't embarrass me.

"With all due respect, if you're both you and the Counselor are this suspicious about our investigative conduct, I'm surprised neither one of you are the ones volunteering to go," Macmillan scoffed, leaning back and crossing his arms. "Sir, Counselor, we are Aurors. We're better than that. I think everyone is already aware that taking matters into their own hands, without your permission, is a violation of the authority that we're granted."

"...Err, if you don't mind me asking, Head Auror, does this concern also partially to do with the ICW bill—the recent one—that's one of the most controversial?" Patil suggested, lacing her fingers in her lap. Noticing the questioning stares, she elucidated, "Tell me if I'm talking to the air, but remember the amendment everyone's been talking about? Regarding the resolution the ICW will vote on in the next global summit? We saw the infected cuts and scars on the trolls, like they were tied or abused. This'd have a significant impact on your bill, wouldn't it?"

"The one that addresses the hunting, trafficking, and endangerment of magical creatures!" Finnigan proclaimed, his eyes widening at Patil across the table. His head twisted all around, searching for a confirmation before landing on Potter. "Beasts, beings, and spirits, innit? You're in that committee!"

"Encountering the trolls is what finally broke the thestral then," Granger breathed in realization. Her mouth was parted. "And there are only certain ways to acquire security trolls, and no one would legally give criminals-on-the-run magical creatures as fighting power. Right, Harry, you were saying….many of your diplomatic colleagues would be interested in this case."

"You'd have to make revisions, if the lead on international smuggling turns out to be true," Patil said, vibrating in her seat. "Lichtenstein is already a foregone conclusion—with them being plagued by trolls and all. They're a guaranteed rejection. Are you worried it might endanger results of the Voting Bloc—especially with the United States of America?"

Williamson dropped his chin on an upturned palm, his expression bemused. "Actually, Miss Patil, the Big Five can block bills, but they can't prevent or end it. You're young; I'm not astounded if any of you'd get it confused."

"The Big Five's impactful for any Security Council resolutions," Gawain mused aloud, recalling the announcements he'd hear from the radio when his family dined in their house. "Their power to veto is terrifying for that committee. The amendment to the resolution Mr Finnigan mentioned belongs to one of the committees in the General Assembly."

"Any signatories abstaining contributes to the amount of 'no's'. The Head Auror would still need majority of 'yes's' to pass it. And—let's face it—it'd be detrimental to the amendment's success if the international community gets wind of hostile magical creatures aiding wanted criminals. This is already a controversial topic."

"Why are you all speaking as if it's his bill?" Macmillan griped. He snuck a peek. "I mean no offence, sir, but an amendment had been in the works by other parties invested in this."

"Well, he and I made it relevant," Granger said, her tone cross.

"Were you—were you and the Counselor waiting for an opportunity, Harry? You'd planned this at
Nay, Weasley, it's quite possibly to do with that federal witness of his in the protected persons service," Finnigan ventured. "And with the rumors about corruption and whatnot, I reckon we've had this lecture long time coming to us."

"Is this something Minister Shacklebolt has spoken to you about too?" she demanded. "Why else would you care?"

While he was being interrogated, there was a faint pride on the Head Auror's face as everyone begun speculating in unison. He inclined his head, as if contemplating the allegations. He divulged, "It's not only addressed to everyone in this room. Like I said, it's for everyone to pay heed to."

Gawain resisted the urge to groan. Potter had avoided answering the questions.

Glancing sidelong at his floating notes, the Head Auror swished his wand. The words followed the route until they stuck against the stain-glass window like a shimmering decal for everyone to read the next day. "We will be conducting surveillance. I want to be greeted with a break in the case soon. That is it until further notice."

Objections broke out, before Potter sliced his wand arm threateningly in the air, silencing them. "I've already talked to no ends about exercising caution and not to let your imagination run its course. If you don't want to hear this again, don't give me reason to rebuke you. Now, does anyone have any issues with this or any schedule conflicts? …No? Then, any last questions before I let you leave?"

Gawain hesitated. Slowly he raised his hand, feeling a little foolish for it when no one else joined him. When the Head Auror called on him, he asked, "How long will we be stationed there?"

"Who knows? Weeks. Months. It takes time for people to warm up to strangers." Potter shrugged. He smiled wryly as he huffed from his nostrils—as if he had found something amusing about what was said. "We need to reestablish trust before I expect we can get anywhere. Anyone else with a question?"

No one else raised their hand or spoke up. Granger was studiously avoiding her husband's gaze. Weasley was still glowering. Many seemed fatigued, already in the process of snatching their Self-Writing Quills or stoppering their ink pots.

"If there's nothing else then..." Ready to depart, he gathered the case files, knocking them against the table until they formed into a neat pile. They were then tucked against the crook of his elbow. "Valiant effort tonight, all of you. Rest well. You deserve it."

"But you, Auror Robards." Potter pointed at Gawain, and then flicked his finger toward Patil. He inclined his head. "I'm sure you're familiar with how this goes. Auror Parvati Patil will catch you up on what you'd missed. I've heard many things about you from the Counselor's mouth. Impressive records, Mr Robards. I have high hopes."

Gawain felt a soreness in his cheeks. He realized—after touching his heated face—that his mouth was stretched wide. Hearing the directive, Auror Patil smiled warmly at Gawain across the table.

Pulling on a delicate chain and tossing it up in a rotary motion over his right hand, Potter watched as the pocket watch landed on his left palm. The watch was unclasped with a flick of his thumbnail.

"If that is all...." Both the Deputy Head and the Counselor had risen to their feet when the Head Auror finished, "meeting's adjourned."
"Potter." Just as he was about to depart, a hand reached down to grasp Harry firmly by the forearm, where the wand holster was. The action nearly jolted the files onto the floor. Thicknesse had rotated his eyes down at him, a grim expression pulling the skin over his skull back. "If I may speak to you for a moment."

His heart was thudding in his eardrums. A cross between a surprised exhalation and tense chuckle escaped from Harry. It was a close call; he unclenched his fist. Jerking his head down sideways, he leaned in close to hiss, "I'd left my witness behind, Counselor. I have no time."

By now, his voice sounded foreign even to himself—gritty and gravelly to the ears. Harry had to restrain his urge to yank his arm away as he demanded, "What's this about?"

"That magical creature?" Thicknesse whispered, his grip loosening. His brows were sinking severely downward. "I thought you said you'd left him behind with trusted parties."

"Mind your words, Counselor." His tone was stern. "We're talking about the DoM. It's been long enough, honestly. They're not exactly the most sensible in social situations."

From Harry's peripheral vision, he'd glimpsed Hermione wrenching her arm away. She turned her heel on Ron, marching determinedly over.

Resignation flooded his entire body. He felt his muscles tensing into a practiced posture as he threw himself back into his professional mindset. While Harry thought that he should be feeling alarmed by how easily the dissonance was coming to him finally after all these years, the sense of whiplash—for this shift in mentality between work and his personal life—only dimly registered to him now, however surreal it should be.

When he wanted to be, or when the situation called for either, Harry was decent at diverting attention and at being inscrutable. Without looking away, Harry murmured, "Sorry, Counselor. Can it wait until tomorrow?"

Thicknesse had followed the motion of the Head Auror's head. He exhaled loudly through his nose. Before releasing Harry, he whispered, "One last thing…that matter concerning you and Doge—you may assert your diplomatic immunity. He cannot force you to testify."

His gaze lingering on the leather covering the back of Harry's palm, he let go. Loudly, Thicknesse said, "Very well. Since you're in a hurry." Bending sharply at the waist, he stepped backward, allowing a path to the Head Auror. He was gesturing toward the woman making their way toward them.

"Harry!" Arriving, she directed a wide, frazzled smile at him. Hermione nodded once to Thicknesse, her disposition withering once she sauntered up. Sidling between them as a blockade, she acknowledged, "Counselor."

"Deputy Head," Thicknesse replied amiably enough, straightening his spine. Gazing at her, there was no indication in his expression that he'd heard the strain in her voice. His hands were clasped behind his back. "I didn't anticipate you'd volunteer your husband for the off-seas mission. It's not what…most spouses would allow."

"Nonetheless, thank you for the vote of confidence earlier. No doubt if you hadn't pitched in, Harry here would've concurred with Ron...." Her sentence trailed off upon catching a glimpse of her husband trying his best to muscle through the crowd she'd forsaken him in. His face was an alarming shade of color.
"Your consultation is always appreciated," Harry said, his attention still retained on the wiry figure before him. "Apologies for keeping you this late. I'm surprised you were still around the premises."

"Indeed, it's fortunate that I had other errands today." Thicknesse's mouth twitched. He briefly eyed the arm curled around Harry's bicep before meeting his gaze. "I have to say, you've come a long way since—"

"—Harry, we have to go now!" Hermione said, beaming, tugging him by the arm until Harry had no choice but to finally budge. "Goodnight, Counselor!"

Shoving him forward by the shoulders, she ushered Harry toward the door despite his foot-dragging, determined to evade Ron. They turned their backs on Thicknesse, who'd stepped out of their way to avoid a collision.

Out of courtesy, before they'd reached the door, Harry managed to maneuver his line of sight. He had the intention of ending the night on a conciliatory note, when he saw that the tall wizard had his focus on tidying up his possessions, seemingly unconcerned with the public slight.

"We have to head to Gringotts," Parvati could be heard imparting to the small group congregated a few meters from the door. "C'mon, keep up. Keep up. We'll have to exchange our Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts for Dragots."

"We don't know exactly if we're leaving anytime soon," Macmillan was saying. Seen over people's heads, his expression contorted. "Besides, the current currency exchange rate is terrible."

"Chances are," said a voice that sounded like Williamson's, "if the Head Auror brings something up in a briefing, it's safe to assume it's going to happen. At least he had the foresight to give us enough time to say our goodbyes to loved ones. Isn't that right, Gawain?"

"You're young, Lord Macmillan. You don't have wife and kids to worry about, unlike some of us." With the last sight of Robards clapping Macmillan on the shoulder, both Hermione and Harry crossed the door's threshold. To any bystanders, seeing the pair emerge from one of the deceptively small Briefing Rooms would've startled anyone. With a speed that rivaled sound, they hurried down the corridors.

Despite the significant stretch of time they must have spent inside the Briefing Room, not much have changed. The magical chandeliers were still lit, with the occasional official either being seen migrating from cubicle to cubicle or standing just outside for a chitchat. With each cubicle they passed, indecipherable discussions—scrambled by layers of privacy charms—were taking place from behind the walls. The only notable difference was that the colorful paper cranes and airplanes weaving overhead have lessened in amount—representational of those stuck working the late shifts.

Upon hearing unknown footsteps growing louder and louder, the few personnel working as the skeleton crew poked their heads out curiously from behind the walls. Their eyes widened when their bosses rushed by. To Harry's relief, he had them trained well. In the span that it took to reach the stairs to the suspended walkway, no one went to impede their passage with trifling complications he could care less to be inconvenienced with. Hermione did, however, return smiles awkwardly to each employee that risen to their feet upon catching sight of her full figure. Harry only nodded to those that demonstrated attentiveness for Hermione's circumstance.

"Thicknesse's doing a lot better reconnecting with old associates," Harry remarked to himself. Once more, his mind felt submerged in a pool of icy water. He welcomed the clarity like an old friend, aware that it was not going to last. In the meantime, it chased away the exhaustion and made him clear-headed enough to handle the events which awaited him. When the golden grilles finally closed
behind them, he muttered, "But, Hermione—even for you—that was a little rude."

She pressed the button labeled with the number nine. "It's been a rough week." The lift lurched up. After a brief pause, she inquired, "Why did you sound so upset when you heard the Americans might be involved? I understand that it might be a worrisome development, but it's nothing that we can't handle. We have to construct a narrative and trace it back."

"...I don't know if this is ghastly of me to think this, but I'm worried that we might uncover something bigger than magical creature traffickers."

"Bigger? Y'mean the Elder Wand? Or does this really have something to do with your bill?"

"Hermione, I'm perturbed that you, Finnigan, and Parvati think this incident is somehow connected with the bill of magical creature rights."

She crossed her arms below her cleavage. "Well, you'd mentioned certain agencies would be interested. It's only natural that I would come to that conclusion. Tell me, honestly, is this because you don't want to get involved with the Director?"

Harry shoved his hands into his trouser pockets, deliberating on the jumble of considerations running through his head.

At last, he said, "You didn't hear this from me. Putting aside the issue of the missing Deathly Hallow, I'm concerned that this could be a case of smuggling and money-laundering. Think about it. Snatchers, hire-for-gold. Death Eaters, frozen vaults, fear, xenophobia, magical creatures, subjugation, trolls, and now a fighting force from an external source that we are in the dark about. Do I need to continue?"

Her arms loosened a bit, upon hearing that. Her expression was taken aback.

"And on the extreme opposite side of the spectrum, it could be that someone wants our communities to clash heads enough that we break diplomatic ties, possibly setting the stage for the Third Wizarding War. Granted, bare minimum, this sounds a little like what a Scourer would pull off. I don't expect this scheme from our European continent."

"We both hold the same opinion of any war-profiteering. It's an extreme theory to come to, but considering who fills their ranks, it makes sense." Her lips moved into a frown. "Everyone's a little paranoid lately. Your little impromptu spiel earlier didn't help. If I may, I still don't understand why you sprouted those earlier words."

Unconsciously, his upper lip had curled slightly and his eyes were narrowed. "How so? I think it's plausible for me to develop this distinct point of view. If I have to be the upright prick of this department to drive this message in, then so be it."

"With all respects, you sound...you should have a care, Harry. You realize how you'd sounded back there? Even now."

"I would think people realize I'm doing my job and reminding them of our limitations. Like other government entities, our powers cannot go unchecked. I like it when people are driven and motivated. I dislike it when it's for foolhardy reasons. Tell me, isn't this the same thing the Aurors preached on about for many years? It's one thing for a person to be heroic and do what they feel is right; it's another when it's essentially self-sabotage and detrimental to our progress."

"I know. We need capable people who can do their job and listen to orders. At the same time, we don't need people unable to perform without us there holding their hand. It's finding this balance
that's the issue. That's why we deploy people, to learn from other cultures and to take things in. So shouldn't it be a relief that our department is made up of freethinkers?"

"Not when they're taking the law into their own hands and go rogue. It's noble, I get that, but that's responding far beyond the call of duty and into misguided intentions territory. Blimey, if all I'd wanted was a chav, I'd go into the streets and find a heckler that's intimidating some poor sod. If I wanted a champion of social justice, I'd find an advocacy group. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"...It's above their responsibilities. You don't like that. You dislike anyone superfluously challenging the establishment."

"No, Hermione, I'm tired of hearing of how we're wasting people's tax revenue for Aurors who can't do their job and how, if things don't go our way, we take the law into their own hands. False accusations and the sort are unacceptable."

Her frown deepened. "Our office has protocols for a reason. I haven't heard any incidents recently where employees have—"

"How come you haven't heard of this?" he demanded brusquely, leaning in. His hand slammed up against the wall by her head. "Did Thicknesse not speak to you about this recently too? Bollocks, he brings it up to me nearly all the time. Was your pet project—which, by the by, is still a breach in security that we'll have to address—so important and time-consuming that you haven't heard the rumors?"

"Harry. Back off." Her words were uttered softly.

"I don't think I'm being insensitive," Harry murmured, not hearing her over the thoughts bouncing in his mind. "If one cannot be arsed to follow formalities, then they are a loose cannon. They're not ready to be an Auror. You know how I detest unnecessary coddling. We saw what happened to Malfoy—to the general public when Fudge was Minister. It happened to Dudley as well...."

Realizing he'd gone off on a tangent, he cleared his throat, glancing away to peer at the numbers counting down.

Gnawing on her bottom lip, with conflicted eyes Hermione peered at his grim expression. "You're exhausted. With your additional stress, while it may sound clear to you in your head, to me you're speaking gibberish. Help me understand, Harry."

"I'm clear-headed actually. Is repeating myself not do the trick for you?" His features contorted. "That's completely irrelevant. It's strange how you haven't...maybe there's a reason behind...the only reason I can think why this would be new intelligence to you is...oh cripes."

When realization dawned in his voice, his expression went through a transformation of concern and exasperation, before it arrived at resignation. He exhaled loudly, his shoulders sinking. Withdrawing his arm back, Harry said gruffly, "Any infraction reported to me has to be investigated for authenticity. This applies to you too."

"Did..." Hermione wetted her lips, reflecting on his odd behavior. Her prior tenseness had evaporated with the space put between them. "Did someone come forth, and report me...or Ron? Were you accused of doing...or not doing something?" Noticing his nonplussed expression, she explained, "You said 'this applies to' me too. You generally also wouldn't raise a stink about anything unless something big happened to change your mind. Or is this because Thicknesse accused you of favoritism?"
For a moment, Harry stared at her, his brows sloped intently downward. With deliberately careful words, he shared, "...There were a lot of variables." His tone was gentler. "What I got out of reports is that we could be better. Much better. It's worrisome when I read certain results from the psych evals, or when I hear of agents going off the rails on some sort of a moral crusade or are on self-imposed missions that I did not authorize. It's even more alarming if I hear Aurors throwing my name or our departmental authority around willy-nilly, when it could be further from the truth."

She was returning his skeptical look. "So this is a precaution then?"

"Honest, that's it, Hermione." He held a hand up. "I'd understand if you'd tuned out my prattling. I know I have a tendency to go on forever if it's made on the spur of the moment. Still, how is it unclear that, as Head Auror, I am obligated to follow through when accusations come up?"

"In the ICW, after the agenda has been set," she stated blandly, "once you're on the Speaker's List you have a set amount of time to debate the topic. You're doing the opposite of that, even though you have experience being a delegate. Things tend to get lost when you ramble."

"I always did better in informal caucuses." Seeing that they were two floors away from arriving at their destination, he clarified, "We operate as a law-abiding, peacekeeping entity—our department, that is. That means we have to evaluate our productivity and conduct. I have to remain impartial. While I do value Aurors who are passionate and want to make a difference and contribute, they have to be warned whenever they step out of bounds."

"That's it?" Her brows lifted. "Oh. Oh, I see. Well, you could've said so in the...." She readjusted the grip on her handbag. "Sorry, brain's not quite functioning well. I'm a little tired myself. I remember you're splendid at morale speeches. It's the same principle when you're lecturing people. You...you just have to be kinder."

"I suppose...it's my fault for not getting to the point. It's a matter of how we tailor our words. But I need them to respect me and follow orders. I'll be forced to take disciplinary measures otherwise. Which means any inconsistency that cannot give me positive results, or is more or less unproductive has to be reprimanded."

"Thicknesse told you this, I remember you complaining. He hasn't spoken to me about this. You said this was before I'd transferred? And even now? Who are these individuals you're concerned about?"

"No, no, no. I mean in general. I'll admit, it's gotten better since we've taken over. But what happened back then is still looming over us like a bloody cloud. If we want to be in office for a long time, then we have to take notice of our reputation. Work is not like the popularity drama among students back in Hogwarts."

"I know. It's of greater consequence in real life, since we're in charge of other people's livelihoods. We have the public media and civilians watching our every moves though, hungry for a scandal. They're the ones who put us in charge though."

"So we have to pay back their trust by being the Head Auror and Deputy Head they want. Which means...y'know what, I think I've talked to no ends about this. You get the point already. Manners maketh man."

As the lift's doors slid open, they walked out into the dark corridor just as the witch's voice began her automated spiel. Their noses wrinkled from the pungent smells. Sweeping her gaze across the floor, Hermione commented, "No one's here. Why is no one here?" The torches gave the illusion of blue streaks in both of their hairs.
"It was the same when I'd left Sesshomaru here. Be thankful. Either they've gone home, or they're hiding in their rooms working on their research projects. Or they're avoiding us. You did send them a Howler not long ago."

Just as Harry began talking, Hermione had instinctively sidled closer for body warmth. Reaching into her sleeve to withdraw her wand with a distinctive grapevine pattern whittled into the handle, she pointed it at herself and then at Harry. She murmured, "Muffliato."

When they could feel the charm taking effect, she lowered her arm to her side. "I addressed it under your name though, to make it official. The Counselor disapproved."

"...You'd sent it with my seal in the wax, didn't you?" Harry raked both hands through his hair, mussing it up. Recalling something unpleasant, he groused, "I can't believe Thicknesse doesn't trust you."

Hermione was avidly scrutinizing the flagstones. She replied, "He took Luna and Mr Lovegood hostage. He did a lot of horrible things, being mind-controlled notwithstanding. I can't exactly forget that. I'm also a Muggle-born married to a Weasley. Don't forget Percy turned him into the human sea urchin painfully at the Battle of Hogwarts. I think the feeling's mutual." She shot him a glance. "How do you do it, Harry?"

"Me?" Releasing his hair, he touched his chest. "You think I get along with Thicknesse?"

"He apparently tells you things he doesn't tell me."

"That's because I'm the Head Auror." His mouth curled up. "I think it's great that he's trying to make up for what he did. We have to commend him on that."

"I…." Her brows crumpled into a troubled frown. "Alright, I'll give him that. It's still difficult."

"I believe that's why this…" His gesticulated at the invisible air between them, rotating his hands in circular motions. "...this atmosphere you're projecting, unconsciously, makes me the better target to approach, in his mind."

"What are you trying to tell me?" Her voice was flat.

"Admit it." He folded his arms across his chest. "You can be close-minded, Hermione."

"We're discussing our flaws now? You are too, Harry, when you get tunnel vision. You're standoffish." She relocated a hand to her hip. "You play favorites. And you have a temper. No one's perfect."

"...Okay, so we all could undergo a project of self-improvement." After a thought, he extracted the New Marauder's Map from his pocket, unfolding the parchment. Glancing down at it as he mumbled the key phrase, he muttered, "Still, I have an excuse—thanks be to Voldemort's blasted Horcrux."

"You only use that excuse to beg off instances of social awkwardness. You act surprisingly normal for someone of your childhood experience—being emotionally neglected." When she saw Harry halt from the corner of her eye, her eyes widened. She said in a rush, "I mean, not that I'm invalidating your trauma! Did I come off as insensitive? That was insensitive, wasn't it? I didn't mean it like that!"

Harry had long since calmed down from his teenage broodiness which'd launch unexpectedly into an explosive anger, whereupon triggered. He was certain his expression was composed, even as he was staring down at the map's inky footprints and their owners' names printed above. Sighing, he stepped forward to elbow her gently, making her stumble in surprise. He said evenly, "That's in the past. I
think. I had you and Ron and everyone else."

He managed a roguish grin before turning around, his hands outstretched in a cavalier attitude as he walked away in the direction where the map indicated. "Isn't it spectacular that I didn't turn out like Voldemort? I was taught the ability to love and to forgive."

Rubbing her arm, Hermione made a face at the back of his head. Dashing up to him, she accused, "You're always like this. You don't have to brush it off."

"I'm fine. You sound like Helbert Spleen and his head shrinks. Drop it." Sensing that Hermione still wouldn't willingly drop the subject, he said briskly, "I told Sesshomaru about what happened to the Elder Wand."

At the man's name, the line of Harry's lips thinned when he felt a jerk in his groin. Harry swallowed hard. He still remembered the moment they shared hours prior. No one could easily forget the sensation of an attractive man's tongue and his hot breath against the side of their neck.

His shirt collar was choking him. Hooking a finger under the knot, he loosened the stranglehold the tie had around his neck. The room was suddenly sweltering.

"…What?" Hermione grabbed him by the crook of his arm. Her face was a pale blue from the flames above as she demanded, "Why would you tell him? It's supposed to be confidential, Harry! Only you, me, and Ron."

Even with Hermione hanging off his arm, Harry kept his momentum, dragging her along with him until the corridor funneled them into the circular chamber he'd last seen the Japanese magical creature. In a level voice, he managed to answer, "He's a dog demon. With his 'background,' he supposedly has senses superior to ours. I'm taking advantage of his presence while he's still here. Especially for the Resurrection Stone. He's confirmed that he has ties to the Netherworld."

"Based on what I'd told you? He confirmed it? But that's the stone. How could the other Deathly Hallows—oh! You think he can…really? Because of that sword?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted absently. His arm felt hot. "But it couldn't hurt, especially when we don't know where the Elder Wand is. I tried magically pinpointing its location, to no avail. I might as well try this avenue."

"I wish I knew more about demonology. This whole thing about the Netherworld, demons, magical artifacts that make one a Master of Death…." She gnawed on her lower lip, deliberating on a thought. Eventually, she said, "Retrieve the ring, if you can, wherever you'd left it. But more importantly, you have to keep an eye on your cloak. Whoever stole the Headmaster's wand could've known that it was a Deathly Hallow. They may have understood it beyond being the great Albus Dumbledore's wand and took it for that. It'd only be a matter of time before they pursue the rest."

"We don't even know if it was stolen," he muttered. Spotting an illuminated X—marked on the rooms he'd forbidden Sesshomaru—Harry turned his gaze toward the remaining doors that were following along the circular rotation of the wall.

Noticing Hermione's intense focus on the marks he'd made, Harry briefly explained their purpose as they waited for the rotary movement to stop.

"I'd never thought I'd care, but I'll be gutted if I lose all three. Especially to the Death Eaters or to those bloody Snatchers. These are my ancestors' heirlooms, Hermione…. Really, you'd excavated the site, and nothing came up?"
"No leads on the Deathstick, unfortunately." Hermione's expression pinched when the draft became colder. Clutching his arm tighter, she inched closer until the side of her stomach was pressed against him. Perturbed by the increase of body heat, when Harry peered back at her, she'd leaned over to study his map.

She listed: "Sesshomaru, Saul Croaker, Astoria Greengrass, Sue Li, Orla Quirke, Mandy Brocklehurst, Robert Hilliard, and Eddie…Carmichael." She frowned. "Carmichael?"

"The same wizard from Ravenclaw whom you'd confiscated that potion from."

"He tried to sell you and Ron a dodgy intelligence-raising potion!" Her displeasure deepened. "I heard the Department of Mysteries wanted him because of his high marks, but I can't believe he got drafted to help us. Strange. I thought I've seen him frequenting a different division."

Without a further need for it, he shoved the map back into his pocket. Harry reminded, "Carmichael got nine 'Outstandings' in the O.W.L exams; it'd make sense why Shacklebolt would include him. I think I've seen him…in the Space Chamber. I believe?"

"The Space Chamber?" she repeated. Her eyes lit up. "They study the aspect of space—one of the known limits of magic! Harry, that's why he's chosen! Time is one of those restrictions. That means it's related! Do you think he'll discuss his findings with me, since he's working with us? Actually, no, that's probably unlikely. He's sworn to secrecy, like the rest of them…. Harry! Are you laughing at me?"

"No, I couldn't." He smiled fondly at her. "But here you were, skeptical of him. What a one-eighty. You weren't like this when you mentioned Astoria to me."

Her eyes narrowed. "Greengrass was necessary because she's influential in the DoM. She's also engaged to Malfoy. We couldn't not involve her."

"Especially not when her fiancé's a head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures," Harry agreed. By this time, the order of the doors had reshuffled. "Astoria aside, aren't the Time Unspeakables the most qualified? To be honest, I thought you'd advocate for them in the selection process…although, I'm surprised we even got them to agree to help us."

"It's a top-secret project, with your name and the Minister's attached to it. The Asian branches of magic also don't come under the microscope often. Of course they'd be enticed."

"There are still a few concerns I have." They treaded closer, examining the doors that intentionally were designed without distinguishing marks. Hooking his fingers in the air, he remarked, "You just said this was 'enticing' to them, Hermione." His voice was hushed as they strained to hear what was beyond the doors.

"…Maintaining secrecy isn't the issue. I'm worried about what they'll do with the knowledge—yes, I know that's what you're anxious about—but we can prohibit them from doing any further research once we get Sesshomaru back in his time. It's one of the clauses we included; don't worry." She rolled her eyes. Her voice was equally quiet as she whispered, "The issue is that they have to continue the research projects—otherwise it'd create a disastrous backlog. We can't realistically pull them all off-assignment to help us facilitate a method to send him back. Some of them have to keep working."

"I've noticed nearly everyone else attended Hogwarts with us at some time or another."

"That's why Croaker is included, as the senior Unspeakable on staff. I had little say about the rest."
But I did advise Shacklebolt that our generation would be the most...accepting of Sesshomaru's heritage. Maybe. No one knows he's a demon. They only know he's a magical creature of Dark Magic inclinations. They finally came to a stop at one of the doors. The muted ticking noises made it clear that it was the Time Room.

"I think anyone'd be freaked out if they knew," he said dryly. Pressing his palm flat against the coarse surface, he said, "Although, I'm more concerned about how they'd get along with his personality and idiosyncrasies. Be ready."

Bracing himself, he pushed.

Once they reopened their eyes, their line of sight became a kaleidoscope of clocks and timepieces. Blinking rapidly, once they regained their bearings, they marched into one of the chambers that was enchanted to be larger than it seemed on the outside.

Unlike the outdoors, where prints could be tracked, the flooring was barren of shoeprints. Their eyes shot everywhere, searching for telltale clues. While Harry could map out the path to the Hall of Prophecy that lay to the right—no doubt Hermione could as well—they remained silent on the matter.

Instead, they marveled at the interior as they begun to cover the premises. There hadn't been the luxury to take in the view before. Outside of that one incident in their Fifth Year when they'd infiltrated the Ministry, they had no reason to approach any of the chambers—much less the Time Room—for any prolonged visits aside from occasionally escorting foreign dignitaries around key locations.

The ticking seemed to drown out all other noise—including the clanging their shoes made against the perforated metal below—as they ventured further into the space.

"Didn't your map point us here?" Hermione whispered into Harry's ear. "Do we need to get it out again? I don't see anyone here."

Just as he was about to respond, they heard a growl. Although the timbre sent shivers down both of their spines, while he felt Hermione's muscles tensing at his side, Harry instantly went to touch the side of his throat. He wasn't certain what expression he was forming currently, as the contact against his neck evoked the phantom sensation it'd experienced hours prior.

They both heard a masculine voice cautioning, "You may take my words as truth, because this Sesshomaru doesn't care enough about you to lie."

That particular accent and bellicose choice of words couldn't belong to anyone else.

Their brows shot up, before their features veered into two different expressions; one was more visibly distressed than the other. Abruptly, when Hermione went to turn her gaze toward her companion, her brows crumpled further. Harry was looking ahead. There was something unconscious to his smile that betrayed an immeasurable fondness.

Hermione's lips thinned, but she thought better of pressing the matter. That was when she noticed the oddity of the sight the leather glove made against his flesh. "Harry, what are you—?"

In that moment, Hermione and Harry exchanged looks. Noticing the scrutiny he was under, Harry grinned reassuringly and he shook his head. Placing a finger to his lips, he then pressed two fingers together with his other hand, pointing in the direction where he thought he heard that voice. Then he tapped his earlobe twice, a signal familiar to all the field Aurors that this was an opportunity to
Her expression laced with suspicion, Hermione nodded once. She squeezed his arm.

While they navigated the labyrinth of bookcases and furnishings, the voices seemed to climb. The voices that sounded like Astoria’s and Croaker's seemed to be the only two calm and placating voices among the heated academic discussions taking place.

"Lord Sesshomaru," a distinctly older wizard could be heard saying tiredly, as if he'd repeated himself many times, "we understand your reservations, but how about you share that crucial information with the rest of us?"

"It is not as simple as you transcribe it," he stated primly. "This Sesshomaru is not at liberty to say."

Eventually they reached a corner, and their field of vision adjusted into a grand opening encircled by transparent shelves that soared into the ceiling. Worktables and desks ranged the length of the room. Beyond the contents of the shelves—filled to the brim with books, inkpots, quills, parchment, and damaged Time-Turners—they saw four silhouettes with their heads bowed over the scrolls laid out over the middle worktable, the enchanted lights overhead turning their shadows into elongated, dancing wraiths behind them on the floor. One person was kneeling, her cheek plastered down on the table and her hair—brown in the light—falling from the bun she'd tied it in. Her spectacles were nearby.

The older wizard was a stocky figure with a full head of black hair and white sideburns—he had to be Saul Croaker. He had a hand up to his face. Next to him was the slim figure of a woman with long, dark curls. She had both of her hands on the table. Next to her was a tall man with hair that gleamed like copper underneath the light. His knuckles were white against the bamboo book he was holding, about to snap it in half.

While the three were squabbling, the tall figure of Sesshomaru stirred. Uncrossing his arms from his sleeves, he sniffed the air. Peering away from the group, glancing about, his molten gold eyes landed on Harry. His sneer melted into an expression that, despite himself, Harry felt his mouth begin to curl up in response.

He hoped the embarrassing heat didn't show on his face. Harry held a finger up to his mouth and he shook his head. His gaze swept the entire room.

The remaining Unspeakable was sitting cross-legged up on the mezzanine, flipping through tomes and stacks of parchment, muttering to herself. From what Harry remembered of the body count, that meant two Unspeakables—a man and a woman—had to be missing.

"Bugger what the Head Auror said!" the brown-haired Unspeakable cried. "He isn't here."

"Hilliard," Astoria scolded. The light made the side profile of her face appear haggard. "You're in the company of nobility. We don't use that language here."

"Apologies! But he really doesn't understand how important this is! Why are you making this harder than it needs to be?"

"This Sesshomaru understands the severity," he reproached, swiveling his head to glower down at him. He accused, "You yourself are the one that is hard of hearing. This Sesshomaru has told you my reasons. Know your place."

Harry felt Hermione smack the spot between his shoulder blades, making him stumble forward. Glancing back at her, she too was fixing Hilliard with an indescribable stare. Her face scrunching up,
she raised a fist below her mouth and she coughed intentionally.

Her eyes went skyward when she realized the Muffling Charm had obscured her cough into a buzzing noise.

"We're worried that your magical creature bloodline might have something that'll impede our efforts. Five hundred years, oh my days..." Croaker exhaled nosily into his palms, before peeling his face from his hands. Two puffy, dark triangles were underneath his eyes. "As our investigation currently stand, for that amount of time, we're asking only because we'll need to create an unprecedented Time-Turner. It'll have to break all known limits of the quantity of single Hour-Reversal Charms that can go into a magical artifact."

"Didn't Granger say that the Head Auror yanked him from a well?" the kneeling woman conjectured. Burying her face against her arm, when her yawn subsided, she resumed, "That's a magical artifact in itself—that national magical monument in Japan." Hopping onto her feet, she straightened up, searching through the scrolls and parchment. Finding what she was looking for, she rubbed her eyes before slipping her glasses back on. "The Bone Eater's Well. That's what it says. Couldn't we alter that?"

"We don't make the executive decisions for the world just because we want a shortcut, Orla," Astoria replied. Raising the back of her hand to her mouth, when her yawning receded too, she said, "That's government property of a foreign nation. We'd have to get permission from the Japanese Ministry to conduct tests. If this gets out, we'll have to consult with the world leaders, negotiate, and compromise. That's specifically what the Minister said we're trying to avoid."

"So?" Orla said thoughtlessly. "We just do it in secret, just as we always do."

Croaker chortled. "Easier said than done."

"Can't we have a few of their personnel take the same Unbreakable Vow that we've sworn? This is their monument, ain't it? Wouldn't it make sense that they'd help us figure out this conundrum?"

"Problem is that it happened on their soil, with one of our own bringing him here. It'd land the Head Auror in a lot of trouble. I think that's why they want to keep it a secret."

"Wasn't it an accident?" Hilliard reasoned.

"You're not thinking far ahead either." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "We all aren't. We're going in circles. Why in the world could this happen?"

Croaker opened his mouth, then slammed it shut. He peered down at the seemingly blank parchments. "Aparecium." With the spell cast, letters emerged, bleeding onto the surface. Reading the scrawled notes, he remarked, "Lord Sesshomaru, you said you heard the Head Auror through the well and after the sequence of spells you said he casted, he summoned you here?"


Most individuals, Harry knew, would be astonished seeing invisible ink revealed for the first time. However, Sesshomaru looked back at Harry, unimpressed—as if the novelty had worn off by now. The slant of his eyebrows and frown seemed to indicate the longer that the Unspeakables remained unaware of their newfound company, the lower he thought of their intelligence.

"Right, modern Japan. Of course." Grabbing a quill, the wizard scribbled out part of the text, jotting down the rectified info.
Hermione tugged on Harry's arm. Glancing at the pinched face she was making, Harry inclined his head toward her wand arm. Once he felt her cancel the spell, he raised his voice to say, "Pardon us—"

"We're in the middle of something!" The three Unspeakables bellowed in unison, each holding up a hand in his general direction. They were still preoccupied by whatever they were studying.

"Mandy, is that you? You found Carmichael?" a voice overhead said. "Thanks! If you could do me one more favor, here. Have a care and hold this. *Mobiliarbus*!"

Both Hermione and Harry had glanced up behind them just as a stack of documents came crashing down over the rails of the mezzanine. Before they both had the time to process what they were seeing, the documents decelerated until the papers were hovering in the air. They drifted like feathers, until they landed in a neat stack in each of their arms.

It was almost comical, the abrupt transition of Lord Sesshomaru's expression and the Aurors' bemused faces.

The three Unspeakables were still debating with one another just as the witch above hurried down, carrying a handful of sheets and books that obscured her head. It was a miracle that she could blindly circumnavigate around Harry and Hermione. Passing by them, she unloaded the contents onto the table, scattering them everywhere like a mini avalanche. She beamed at her colleagues. "I believe this is everything you wanted me to find. Mandy and Carmichael have the rest."

"Yes, 'Mandy and Carmichael,'" a voice that distinctly did not sound like any of the expected Unspeakables drawled from behind the papers. "Perhaps you should pay better attention to your surroundings."

"Harry, enough. *Mobiliarbus.*"

Sue Li's forehead creased, and she turned to glance back just as two stacks of documents thudded down on the worktable.

Her expression mirrored that of her colleagues once it registered in their brains who they were staring at across the distance.

"Go on then," the Head Auror said pleasantly. "You seem to be in a moment of something. I'd hate to break it." In comparison to his companion, his expression was nearly benevolent.

"I hope you have an explanation," the Deputy Head said. She had crossed her arms above her stomach, her face contorted nearly in disbelief. She demanded, "You lot don't typically treat guests like this, do you? I know the stereotype is that Unspeakables lack social skills, but this isn't proving it otherwise."

Hilliard bristled. "Hey now—!"

"I heard what you said," Harry said calmly, and the paleness Hilliard achieved made the stubble on his face more pronounced.

"How long were you here?" Croaker asked.

"Long enough."

Removing himself from the Unspeakables' vicinity, Sesshomaru had begun walking around the table as Croaker spluttered, "Head Auror, Deputy Head, we weren't expecting you for another few
hours.” The color of his face contrasted against his sideburns. "We didn't mean to…it was said in the heat of the moment. Anything else was also unintentional. Li?"

Hearing the severity in his tone, Sue clapped her hands over her mouth. Apologizing profusely, she rambled, "I thought you were someone else, honest. Last I heard—"

Harry held up a hand, stilling her words. He managed a kind expression. "It's fine. It's late. You thought we were someone else. Just don't do it again." His eyes roving down, paying no attention to the surge of heat by his side, he picked up one of the documents that’d been forced onto him.

"Sir?" a drowsy voice chimed in.

He glanced up, immediately placing a name to her face. "Miss Quirke, wasn't it? You have a question."

"I—uh, right." She readjusted her glasses. "Could I ask…you'd sent a…Howler to us. Earlier today."

Harry managed a taut grin, resisting the impulse to glare at Hermione over Sesshomaru's shoulder. "And as I recall, your department sent two. It was during a private meeting when the first flew in."

"That we did.” The papers rustled restlessly in her fingers. "Did—did anything happen this time? It was at the Headmaster's grave, sir." Her voice had become smaller at the end.

Staring at her momentarily, he conceded, "We'd engaged hostile forces. As of right now, my units are excavating the site. You'll hear about it in a matter of time, no doubt. I haven't received notice of any new updates or sightings…" He frowned abruptly. "As I seem to recall, this is a confidential matter. You lot are awfully trusting we are who we're claiming to be."

Just as he finished the sentence, a wand was pointed directly at his chest.

Excluding Hermione—who was removing the shrunken books and files from her handbag—everyone tensed.

Astoria was peering at him grimly as she challenged, "Tell me something that only the Lord Black would know."

His eyes trained on the witch, he stated, "Only you insist on calling me that, Astoria, after all this time."

The edges of her eyes crinkled. "Does that satisfy you?" The wand was withdrawn, tucked back into her sleeve.

"A bit." Flicking his wrist, his wand shot down from the holster and into his palm. "I hope you can trust that we’ve already taken precautions to ensure your identities."

"There's no need for further demonstration," Croaker proclaimed, his gaze traveling sideways until his eyes landed on the contents Hermione was unshrinking. He was staring at them like a wolf starved. "Are those—?"

"It's the rest of my research I'd promised to show you," she affirmed, sounding surly. Unbeknownst to the time traveler in their midst, it was painstakingly curated so that nothing incriminating showed up while Sesshomaru was in the committee's presence. "Is there anything you can tell me?"

"Apologies, Deputy Head. Due to the risks of tampering with the laws of time, strict laws and penalties have been placed on us. As such, we are not permitted to speak about our work."
"We don't need to hear about your work," Harry retorted strictly. He held the paper back to him, just as Hermione was engaged in a short conversation by Hilliard. He asserted, "You're permitted to tell us your progress without getting into the finer details and jeopardizing confidentiality. Can you come to that compromise? We chose you few for the research committee because we believe in your skills. What matters to me are results."

It was surreal watching Croaker opening his mouth, closing it, reopening it, and then closing it once more. He inclined his head, taking the parchment. "Of course. We'll strive to deliver."

"Unfortunately, Lord Black, there's been little headway made tonight. There's much to be digested." Astoria snuck a peek at Sesshomaru. Glancing back at Harry, she implored, "The Minister said, since you're his handler, we'll have to migrate through the proper channels. Is it possible then to arrange times to meet with Lord Sesshomaru? There are many questions we've yet to ask. It'd be convenient for him to be here."

"I'm fine with that," he said softly, turning his gaze up at the man who'd been standing stoically beside him. "Do you have any issues with that, Lord Sesshomaru?"

Sesshomaru sent him a weird expression. "What issues are there to be had?"

"And he gives his approval," Harry said, refocusing on Astoria who'd been studying their exchange with a queer air about her. Raising a brow at her visage, he asked, "Do you have any questions for me personally?"

Her eyes widened. "We can ask you questions?" Realizing what she'd said, her face flushed red. Tucking a curl behind her ear, she corrected, "It's not every day the great Head Auror has the time to comply with our requests."

"I like your positive outlook," he said in the driest tone he could muster.

"Harry." Approaching him, Hermione tapped her shirt, indicating to a similar location where he'd kept his pocket watch. "You should look at the time before you agree to anything." Making certain they had eye-contact, she tilted her head to his side where Sesshomaru stood.

Harry sighed. To Astoria's crestfallen face, he said apologetically, "Actually, another time would be best. We must take our leave."

"Oh." Her shoulders slumped. "Pity. Alright, when there's the next available time to be found."

"Please, no need for bitterness. I promise to come by another time." He shot Hermione an inquisitive look. "Actually, if you could spare a few minutes, do you have enough energy to stay behind to catch them up on any questions? You're the next best source."

"I suppose." Hermione cradled her stomach. "It's not like I have anything better to do."

Harry's gaze turned severe, but he had it in himself to curtail what'd sprung to his mind. "Hermione," he began cautiously, "don't blindly follow what I'm asking you to do, not if you really have someplace else to be. Is this inconvenient for you?"

"Ron's most likely waiting. Or at home." Her words would be cryptic to everyone in the room except Harry. She smiled at him. "Don't fuss. I don't mind."

"Do you need—?"

"No." Her tone was sharp. "Harry, I think you should escort Lord Sesshomaru home."
He'd been ready to reach into his pocket to remove the map. Staring at the strain in her expression, he dropped the topic. Harry tucked his hands into his pockets. "I'll debrief you later for the details."

"I expect no less."

"Sorry, Hermione."

"There's no need to be sorry." She waved him off. "Now, get going. Forensics expects either of us early tomorrow in the Committee. They won't have much, but they'll have something. One of us needs to be awake for that."

All sympathy he had for her vanished. "Early" for him meant arriving at six o'clock in the morning. He breathed, "You're putting it in my timetable." Closing his eyes briefly in acceptance, he said, "If you start feeling tired, turn in for the night. Don't be a workaholic."

"I know." She ticked her fingers off. "Talk about the well. Emphasize how we're not getting the Japanese Ministry involved. Explain how you are involved in all this. Answer any questions. Be attentive and forthcoming. Am I missing anything?"

"Write down any questions they have for me. I'll review them personally myself. Croaker, Astoria, Miss Quirke, Miss Li, Mr Hilliard—I want to know why Mr Carmichael and Mrs Brocklehurst weren't in this room with the rest of you. No, I don't want to hear excuses. You may explain it to Hermione." Sharply rotating on his heels, his shoes clicked together as he gestured to the path that originally led them here. "Shall we then, Lord Sesshomaru?"

True to his word, the sorcerer had returned to him from his trip to his barracks. He seemed rejuvenated, however inattentive Hari was still this late into the evening. It was however fortunate that accomplishing the responsibilities he'd left to fulfill had thawed whatever invisible barrier that'd been erected between them.

The time spent in the lift was unbearably silent, with Sesshomaru inhaling the mixture of scents embedded into Hari's clothes. The freshest belonged to the alpha's packmate; the other smelled suspiciously masculine and unfamiliar, located on his forearm. Were he not in control of his mental faculties, Sesshomaru acknowledged he would've felt irritated that others sought to infringe on his territory—especially for an eligible warlord that was highly sought-after, who'd supposedly surrender his bachelorhood to become Sesshomaru's Mate someplace in sometime.

When Sesshomaru looked beside him, the sorcerer had his hand was brought up to his jaw in a thinking pose, and an elbow was propped up by the other hand. Inserted into the crook of his elbow were several sheets of protected itineraries that Sesshomaru hadn't recalled seeing him transport before.

It took a while before Hari startled to attention, upon finally noticing Sesshomaru's fixation. He managed a wan smile. "Sorry. A lot's on my mind again." He spoke with a grittiness that one could only achieve either by just breaking out of slumber or talking for a long time.

If this was back in his homeland, Sesshomaru would counsel the younger alpha to stop being obtuse and to head out to any nearby bodies of water to soothe his throat. If it'd been Rin or Jaken, Sesshomaru would've already fetched the spring water and left it in a place that they would notice. His lids shuttered and he glanced away.

Hari was staring back up at the panel affixed into the lift's ceiling. "Did you lot talk about anything else that the Unspeakables might've 'conveniently' forgotten to tell me? I don't expect much. I only
left you for a few hours."

Sesshomaru began to say, "Nothing worthy of comment…"

He paused. There'd been a few subjects that'd plagued Sesshomaru's thoughts during the interrogation. With the theory that the Bone Eater's Well was a national magical monument capable of time magic, it meant that the intended Mate of his half-brother was a time traveler herself. That explained the strange stench that'd accompanied the human priestess everywhere she went, as well as the strange attire that he'd originally presumed was one-layered and short because of peasant origins.

He condensed his thoughts into succinct sentences for Hari.

"...A miko," Hari repeated in Japanese. He had diverted his attention from the ceiling, and was instead focused on Sesshomaru. "I remember reading that the current caretaker is a traditional Shinto priest. I was also told that the Higurashi family comes from a long line of holy men and shrine maidens. That shrine has been in their family for generations."

"Indeed."

Hari closed his eyes briefly. He murmured, "I remember thinking it was a bit farfetched that a national monument would be left in Muggle property. No one, though, mentioned any of the Higurashis being born into magic."

"The woman was able to fire Sacred Arrows." He frowned down at the hilt of one of his fangs. "She was able to purify weak demons. There was minor damage inflicted on possessed humans. Inuyasha followed that woman because of her ability to sense Jewel Shards."

The intensity of Hari's stare could melt ice. Eventually, once Sesshomaru's sentences winded down, Hari repeated, "Jewel Shards?"

Sesshomaru glanced up sharply, almost in disbelief that someone would be unaware of its existence. His expression cooled once his mind registered the foreignness of the sorcerer's features. "That is a matter that doesn't concern this Hari. It's in the past."

"This isn't significant to bring you back?" Hari said slowly. When Sesshomaru dipped his chin, Hari crossed his arms, legs spread. From his confrontational posture, he didn't seem like he would let the subject drop. After a while, he allowed, "Alright, what else? Anything happened that I should know about?"

About to divulge his experience in the Hall of Prophecy, remembering the distress Greengrass exhibited when she found him handling an oracle that was not supposed to be handled by anyone but those prophesized, Sesshomaru bit his tongue. Sesshomaru reflected on the duration he'd spent in the company of those foreign sorcerers. They'd reminded him of Jaken and the swordsmith Tōtōsaì, when those two fell into an academic rut. "The woman," he paused, and then amended, "Gurūngurasu mentioned the possibility of a…'Curse-Breaker'?"

"A Curse-Brea—they think they'll need to break a curse." His brows lifted into his fringe. "There are very few wizards still employed in that profession, after the war."

"They break curses." Sesshomaru tilted his head. Those sorcerers would be useful to acquire, if any had existed on his continent in his time. Most demons he knew would want the supposed immunity against individual or family curses. "That is the literal translation."

"They're effective at dismantling old enchantments and wards in ancient tombs or other historical sites. It's difficult to get a license. That's why they're scarce and high in demand." Turning his gaze
downward, Hari was mumbling to himself, "I can ask Bill. He has good experience already with goblins and wealthy clients. But then that's also…. Why a Curse-Breaker? There hadn't been a curse activated when I approached the well. Why wouldn't they tell me this in person?"

Maintaining his silence, Sesshomaru was fascinated by how the younger daiyōkai's thoughts were pieced together. Hari was muttering potential strategies and scenarios under his breath as they exited the lift and onto the Atrium that was quickly becoming a familiar sight to Sesshomaru. Overhead, the text that'd heralded his first arrival was a whirlwind of yellow butterflies—matching the warm glow of the torches—fluttering in the vaulted ceiling boasting the same hue as the night sea.

Leading the way, Hari's movements and any returned conversations were scripted, his mind clearly lingering someplace else. Although Sesshomaru had plotted how he'd react appropriately if they encountered the female clerk with the long, dark curls, she wasn't there at her station when they crossed the threshold.

Just as he thought Hari would direct them into the telephone booth, Hari swerved left. Once Sesshomaru gathered where he was going, he had to fight the temptation to wrench Hari back. He was making his way toward the heatless emerald flames that Sesshomaru recalled being among the two transportations he loathed with every fiber of his being, since stepping foot into this country. Organized into two rows, the magical fires were contained in plaster hearths—each as wide as warhorses.

Intent on glaring at the fire they were approaching, by the time they entered the hearth, Sesshomaru felt a miniscule pressure on the hem of his sleeve. He'd glanced down just as gloved fingers released the silk.

Dipping his hand into the pouch of silver powder, Hari advised, "While I have no doubt you can pronounce 'the Shrieking Shack' by now, proceed with caution." He held his fist out. "I mispronounced a location once, using the Floo service. I'd hate for anyone to experience what happens."

"What happened then?" he demanded, extending his hand. Granules of fine powder sprinkled down onto his palm, some escaping the crevices between his claws.

"It transports you to the nearest fireplace of the location it thinks you said." The line of mouth twitched up briefly. "I don't recommend it."

Ducking down to avoid bumping his head, Hari extracted himself gingerly from the fireplace. His footwear landed on the mat—dyed grey from soot and sparkling from the Floo Powder. Shifting his weight onto one foot, he leaned against the mantle, an arm cushioning the side of his head. With the green flames illuminating the planes of his face—accentuating the color of his eyes—the crooked smirk on Hari's face was nothing short of licentious.

Sesshomaru found his eyes honing in on the exposed patch of skin nestled beneath that high collar, where the strip of fabric was loosened and the three top buttons were unfastened.

"I'll have you go ahead without me for a bit, Lord Sesshomaru." Hari indicated to the stack tucked against his elbow. "These need to be dropped off in my Study. I'd hate for them to be damaged or—worst—lost. It's my overnight homework evidently."

Much willpower was required for Sesshomaru to tear his gaze away from that enticing display of flesh. Maintaining direct eye contact, he clarified, "This Hari is returning to your family compound."
"...Right, my 'family compound.' Grimmauld Place. That's a new term I haven't heard you call it before." His debauched countenance faded into an expression of wry humor. "I had a plan to go hunt for that heirloom I told you about. Two problems: my timetable is packed with appointments. The amount of Invigoration Draughts and Girding Potions in my kit won't last me through the day tomorrow if I'm sleep-deprived. Two, we haven't declared the winner of that wager we made."

A finger began tapping against the surface of the mantle. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I did specify the victory conditions had to be completed 'tomorrow'—meaning today."

"This Hari did."

"Joy." Even as he said that, he neither sounded nor appeared to be delighted. Adding one more finger to the motion, the restless tapping intensified. "There's a time limit. There's less than two hours. Good god, it takes one hour to just walk. I'll also have to set up, lay out the ground rules, make sure no one else can see us...."

His mouth thinning, Sesshomaru dug through his memories. Yesterday in the woman's townhouse, he'd been informed about the particularities of how business was officiated in this country. "This Hari mentioned," he said slowly, "that breaking this 'magical oath' of ours has a less severe penalty. There is, henceforth, little necessity to fulfill the terms of the contract."

Hari was staring down at nothing as he deliberated. "I could cancel it," he divulged. "We'd still get punished nonetheless, minor as it is; I promise you, we wouldn't leave Grimmauld Place for weeks. There is also the matter that it didn't manifest the way it should've." Straightening up, he declared, "There is still time, even if I have to force a tie. Wait for me at the Shrieking Shack. I'll show you the other side to the secret passage."

Even as his curiosity was piqued, his sense of adventure couldn't extinguish the competitiveness in him upon hearing the verbal challenge made to him by another alpha. The corners of his mouth was dragged up into a bloodthirsty smirk. "This Hari forgets the results of this morning's match. You are deluded if you think you can best this Sesshomaru."

Instead of being cowed by the show of aggression, Hari inclined his head. A gloved hand was encircled around his forearm, where the wand holster was. "You're not invincible. So I'll have to take that bet." A handsome smile unfurled on his face. "I have questions I want answered, Sesshomaru. We'll see what happens."

In the end, they thankfully did not have to resort to fisticuffs. Once they'd emerged from the secret passageway that led to the Whomping Willow, they had to transverse considerable distance around the Forbidden Forest to reach the clearing where the Dragon Pavilion was once erected.

Enormous enough to hold a stadium and six dragons, buttressed against a cliff, the pavilion was now the abandoned ruins of a stone amphitheater.

Whilst Harry knew better than to engage in any combat that'd put him in range of the demon's swordsmanship, Harry was also keenly aware that his opponent was more than likely to surpass the wizard in fighting experience and whatever advantages Sesshomaru's magical creature heritage allowed him. That was why, even at the mercy of his decidedly self-imposed restriction, Harry threw himself into his spell-casting.

Fatigued as he soon found himself, Harry had felt no regret unleashing a regulated but no less lethal arsenal of spells, since he felt confident that his opponent had the time and the range to dodge the barrage at vast distances.
However, even his precautionary actions didn't deter his opponent from relentlessly doing his best to pry victory away from Harry's rigid, unyielding fist. Each countermeasure made successfully against him was tempting Harry to go all out.

Beneath the moonlight, their silhouettes were encapsulated under a silvery glow. The evening breeze blew by their faces, where hair stuck to their skin by perspiration and long, wayward strands swayed in the wind. The two of them were currently caught in a stalemate.

*Bakusaiga* was hovering centimeters away from the side of Harry's neck, just shy of nicking skin.

Having witnessed what that blade could do, it was difficult for Harry to swallow that he could simply concede the fight here. Sesshomaru could earn this win. Conflicted, Harry had to squeeze his eyes shut momentarily.

Under serious conditions, as Head Auror or even as a recognized warlock who'd naturally come to take pride in their dueling magic, Harry might not have allowed the situation to devolve into this. It was still possible to escape from this predicament—his wand had been raised automatically, already fizzling at the tip with another Disarming spell, ready for a follow-up attack—but then he'd run the risk of defaulting to spells with little to no intent of guaranteeing his target any measure of survivability. It was the result of his apprenticeship under Shacklebolt which had ingrained in him training of how to force criminals into complying, and what his experience with the Committee has taught him upon encountering magical creatures that required necessary force.

Unlike a wizard who could amass a creative breadth of techniques, a magical creature relied on a predictable pattern of attacks based on the limitations of their abilities. Yet Harry remembered the close-calls and the sheer devastation left in Sesshomaru's wake had Harry not evaded them by Apparition.

Sashed at Sesshomaru's waist were *Tenseiga* and *Tōkijin*. The *Tenseiga*—whose abilities could be a Deathly Hallow in itself—upon recovering it, in the duration of the duel, it hadn't been drawn. It'd been a coincidence when Harry had forced Sesshomaru to retreat back a far enough distance where the other double-edged straight sword had been embedded into the ground from a sequence of Blasting Curses and Disarming Spells thrown at it.

Although none of Sesshomaru's blows had connected aside from a punch to the side of the face that'd nearly sent Harry flying—after that, he made certain to always try to put a little distance between them, so that Sesshomaru couldn't afford the same luxury of being able to easily capitalize on any perceived openings—Harry could still hear the ringing in his ears whenever Sesshomaru's swords whooshed by, striking thin air where Harry should've been. His heart was jackhammering from imagining what might've happened had one of mighty swings managed to stab him or shatter bone.

Testament of his intelligence, Sesshomaru had discerned that he'd have the upper-hand if he engaged the magic user in close quarters combat instead of being at the mercy of the mid-to-long-range spells from far away, despite the higher risk of being struck by the magical onslaught which could only be avoided by dodging, withstanding, or blocking what he could. His strength was impressive—Harry was admittedly captivated, like a child who got excited over knights and samurais, witnessing a swordsman demonstrating a mastery over the blade—but what'd truly enraptured Harry's curiosity was the magic being channeled through the atypical vessel like a wand.

The wizard never seen anything like that; at least, not in this country.

From his observations, his opponent didn't seem like the sort that Harry could depend on to hold back his recklessness; therefore Harry had to be the responsible party to carefully consider the flow
of battle. They were both competitive men. Adrenaline and fatigue often impaired good judgement.

To prevent his crushing disappointment or the taste of bitterness in his mouth from overcoming all rational thought, Harry had to reason to himself that, at close range, especially with his current state and the recent memory still eating at him for firing the dangerous Fiendfyre at the historical warlord, they couldn't take this chance that either of them could go overboard.

There was only one way to demonstrate that he accepted Sesshomaru as the victor. With a weighty sigh, Harry canceled the spell. The brightness was extinguished.

Sesshomaru instantly frowned. Suspicious and on guard, he gripped his hilt tighter.

Contrary to his nature, the demon was a surprisingly honest individual, and that straightforwardness translated to the way he approached the frontline. Aside from exchanging patronizing jibes, Harry had been in disbelief that there hadn't been any bluffs, feints, or elaborate countermeasures to deceive the opposite party. He simply took gambits at face-value and bulldozed through. It made Harry suspect it might not just be a personality quirk but also the result of having survived for over five hundred years in the society which he'd resided in.

Slowly, to convey his sincerity about being a good sport regarding his loss, Harry lowered his wand until the tip was pointed down at the ground. Harry didn't trust himself to talk; nor could he trust himself to bow respectfully enough to pass the warlord's standards without feeling as if he were demeaning himself.

Averting his eyes, Harry waited it out.

It didn't take long for Sesshomaru to understand the meaning behind Harry's gestures. The blade was reluctantly withdrawn, its sickly green light curving in the night sky before being sheathed away from sight.

Beneath Sesshomaru's watchful gaze, Harry folded his legs under him and he dropped down, falling backward until he was ungracefully sprawled over the grass. The earthy fragrance annoyed him. To someone of traditional Japanese sensibilities, his posture must've appeared unsightly.

Peering up at the stars, Harry could still feel Sesshomaru's eyes on him. The disdain was practically palpable in the air. They didn't speak for a while, during which Harry took the time to regain his breath. Rolling his shoulders, he stretched until he swore he could hear his joints popping.

"You held back." Sesshomaru's observation was quiet but no less accusatory.

Harry inclined his head. His mind was a blur, and his body was composed of mud. Harry's exhaustion—and perhaps prolonged exposure to the demon's eccentricities—had more than desensitized him to any resentment felt at the return of Sesshomaru's offensive address. He kept his silence. He did not believe he could properly articulate all the thoughts running rampant in his head; they were a chaotic mess of distractions demanding his attention. At best, he should impart aloud what his intuition was telling him, approximated in a kind way to Sesshomaru.

In the meantime, the sounds of grass and leaves rustling in the wind filled the temporary quiet. The gust moaned, rushing by them and filtering cold air through their clothes to cool their heated bodies. Crickets were chirping unceasingly and an unknown creaking noise was audible even at a good distance.

"...Why?"

Turning his head, Harry levelly returned his gaze toward him. Gathering his thoughts on how to
properly respond to his demand, Harry eventually sat up with a straight back and crossed legs to impress upon him a bit of respectability. Like explaining to a child, he said slowly, "We'd agreed on the victory conditions, Lord Sesshomaru."

He gingerly touched the side of his face, certain that he'd find a bruise in the mirror the next day. Sesshomaru's sheer vitality was staggering. Upon seeing Sesshomaru's glare intensify, before he could give voice to his displeasure, Harry confessed, "You're an important figure in history. You weren't someone that I...have to rein in. There's a difference between being a guest lecturer demonstrating dueling tactics and being a magical law enforcer, and you're definitely not among the criminals and whatnot in my fieldwork. I had to make that distinction. I apologize profusely if my decision offended you; that wasn't my intention. I was trying to avoid being a hotheaded idiot."

Sesshomaru's mouth closed. If anything, his new expression was bewildering to Harry. He pressed, "You held back to this extent...as an attempt to control rashness?"

"Did you want me to treat you like a Wanted criminal?" Harry snapped, eyeing the demon lord's equally disheveled appearance, his tone incredulous. Like his, Sesshomaru's robes were only slightly shredded or singed from their magical scuffle. Any light scratches or wounds have long since healed themselves. "I could sever a limb from you if you'd like. If that's not enough, I could aim entrails-expelling curses at you. Or would you have me to have used spells meant to permanently incapacitate you? I could also go into this with the intent to ethically put you down. I don't see the need for further escalation; I wasn't under orders from the Committee for an extermination."

The soreness of his jaw was temporarily forgotten.

To convey his seriousness, Harry channeled the air of authority exuded in his department briefings. Although his muscles were scorching, the coldness of the night threatened to leech all the warmth from his body. Ignoring the temperature, he steepled his fingers into a pyramid underneath his chin. "Like me, you didn't emerge unscathed. There are spells that work even if they graze you, and others that don't require physical contact. As we've seen, the Darker or more powerful the spells are, the more effective they are on you. You aren't entirely immune to their effects, Lord Sesshomaru. And we've already encountered scenarios where you'll have to break the layers of enchantments that are meant to suppress someone of your magical alignment."

Harry felt his mouth tug down further. "...If I may be honest, I'm not sure why you're upset. I was operating under the impression that this was friendly fire, and not a fight to the death. We fought under the parameters we'd both settled on. Actually, if I was to be honest again, I thought you were holding back as well. Did I misjudge the situation? In all seriousness, Lord Sesshomaru, I was trying not to be a dunderhead who goes needlessly overboard against a friendly opponent. But please inform me if my actions had offended you culturally or if I'd accidentally gone against a sacred dueling custom you adhere to."

Sesshomaru stared down at him. In his uneasy silence, it'd felt like forever before Sesshomaru deigned to turn on his heels. He was peering into the forest. "...This Hari has not committed any notable infractions," he admitted.

Hearing the return of that peculiar address, embarrassingly enough, made Harry feel a small ball of elation rising in his chest. While Sesshomaru had his back turned to him, Harry rubbed his arms quickly, producing heat from the friction.

Almost sounding defensive, Sesshomaru followed up with a surly: "This Sesshomaru was not upset by this Hari. There was no incident to speak of. It's a figment of your imagination."

A grin was threatening to split the lower half of his face, but Harry curtailed his snotty reply.
Managing a straight face, with his hands folded in his lap Harry allowed, "I'm not perfect. I can make mistakes."

"...See to it that this Hari doesn't," Sesshomaru said haughtily, twisting his head around. His expression was solemn. He stepped forward. "Ignorance is deplorable. Campaigning, politics, or otherwise, a warrior should always be in a project of self-improvement."

Harry's mind blanked. That misplaced sincerity was unexpected. He hesitated. Short of awkwardly thanking him for the unnecessary philosophical advice, Harry offered as earnestly as he could: "That's quite the observation, your lordship. Really wise and generous of you."

He'd started to rise to his feet, when that familiar pressure was exerted against his shoulder blades, warming him from chin down. Forced into a crouch, Harry found himself glancing down at the fluffy pelt again. The ends of it nearly trailed the grass.

"...What's this for—now?" Although the surprise on Harry's face was genuine, his voice sounded lifeless.

"This Hari reeks of sweat." With a clatter of armor, he bent down until he was balancing on his toes, sitting on his haunches. The two men were eye-level. "Aside from the smell of yōkai and similar stock, this forest is saturated with this Hari's scent."

"Hogwarts is my alma mater—no, sorry, I mean it was basically my second home. I'd also ventured into this forest quite a bit." Harry stared at him, uncertain whether to be insulted or not. Just as he was about to default to his second train of thought, his eyes widened. "You can smell."

A brow rose.

"No, no, no. Wait. Let me rephrase myself. That came out wrong." Harry waved his hand through the air, thinking about the possibilities. He'd dragged the ends of the pelt closer for warmth as his mind tinkered. Thankfully Sesshomaru remained silent while he worked out what he was going to say.

His eyes boring holes into the ground, Harry asked, "In your case, how do you tell if someone is lying? Or if they're in heavy disguise?"

"If they are terrible at pretense, it is simple to detect the signs."

"I meant to say, can you smell them?"

Harry stared at the three swords sheathed in Sesshomaru's sash. Although Harry was curious if that sword fully reanimated someone to when they'd been alive, in a spectral state, or in an undead state, the wizard had enough foresight to know that he shouldn't be following one of the Peverell brothers' footsteps. While Harry would never think to exploit Sesshomaru's resurrection capabilities, he was willing to take advantage of Sesshomaru's other sets of skills while he was still here.

If the dog demon could distinguish truth from falsehoods, he'd be invaluable to interrogations. Harry resumed, "To detect if someone is lying, even if they're under the effects of Veritaserum, we have to look for body language and verbal cues. I heard those with the intention to lie sweat more."

"That may be, but that is not always an indication." His eyes heavy-lidded, he tilted his head. "This Sesshomaru still has your antidotes."

"Keep them. I don't need them." His mind reeling at the sudden switch of topics, he persisted, "So, if someone is a Metamorphmagus, Polyjuiced, transfigured, disillusioned, invisible, or
whatnot, theoretically if they didn't have the foresight to change up their habits, you could distinguish a fake from the real one?"

Sesshomaru made a noncommittal noise between closed lips. The weight of his stare felt like a hundred rocks piled atop Harry's shoulders. After a prolonged minute, he said, "This Hari casted the enchantment. Is the effects of the ritual gone?"

It was like talking to a brick wall. A bit peeved, Harry glanced down at his palm, squeezing his hand into a fist. The leather creaked. Looking back up, he challenged, "Would you like to make another one and see?"

"…This Hari cannot tell."

"Naturally. It's not any magic that I'd had done to me before; it's a variant of the magical contract that was supposed to happen. I can assume there's only one way to tell if it's gone or not, and I'd be absolutely gobsmacked if it was that." He tucked his fists against his elbows, bracing himself for the question he was to ask. The holster was a reassuring weight against his arm, with the pelt embracing him like a person. He said harshly, "…What do you want from me, Lord Sesshomaru? You've won one request."

Sesshomaru's mouth had parted, as if he'd been about to answer with something already formulated at the top of his head, but then closed just as swiftly—as if he were reconsidering his options. The intensity of his gaze could burn someone through as he brooded.

Resisting the nervous compulsion to break eye-contact, Harry swallowed back the saliva in his mouth as he waited. Sweat pooled beneath his gloves.

Eventually, Sesshomaru stated, "This Sesshomaru shall need to contemplate on the matter further. Be reassured. This Hari may have an answer by the end of the night."

Harry stared after him disbelievingly. His brows wrinkling in deliberation, his hands soon moved to steeple into a triangle in the space underneath his chin. It would be just as easy to gaze at Sesshomaru as if he were addled, but it was more effective to slip into his Head Auror persona. Under a professional mindset, silence was just as intimidating. "Why do you need the end of tonight to come to a decision?"

"This Hari has no patience for frivolity." He nodded once, as if in approval. "It is understandable, after what you've experienced tonight."

A wave of déjà vu struck him, stifling overactive thoughts. Dread pooled into his gut. He had to say it. This was the best opportunity. He began, "…Lord Sesshomaru."

The expression of the demon's face darkened, as if someone had snuffed out the flame on a candle. Harry exhaled once. Although his muscles still felt sore, he attempted to rise to his feet once more. He jerked to a halt midway when he felt the pelt squeeze around him.

Freezing a bit, he looked down at Sesshomaru, who was nonchalantly returning his gaze.

Minutes ticked by at an eternity's pace. But after a while, Harry released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He gently grabbed fistfuls of the white fur, pulling it closer for warmth. He didn't have to look to sense the smugness radiating from the dog demon.

The angle of his mouth was a severe slant. He recognized the signs. Still, it was more reasonable to craft a diplomatic response, on the small chance that he could be wrong. "With all due respect,"
Harry murmured, "you've been acting…differently from the day I left you…alone…with Luna." His eyes narrowed. "What did she say to you?"

Folding his hands into his sleeves, Sesshomaru mirrored Harry’s stance, rising up until he towered over him. His voice was excruciatingly soft when he asked, "What do you think this Sesshomaru is trying to achieve?"

Harry recoiled; having his question thrown back at him wasn't something he'd anticipated. Faltering only momentarily, he started to say, "I'm going to be relatively straightforward, Sesshomaru. It's been a long day. My patience is shot." He mustered his courage. "Do you fancy…?"

His question died in his throat, upon seeing the expectant look on Sesshomaru's face. Beneath natural or magical light, Harry could fool himself into thinking that the color was a lighter shade of brown or hazel; he could even disregard the slits in the magical creature's irises. Under the moonlight, Sesshomaru's eyes were twin suns. Like a silver river, his hair seemed to glow with a luster matching the stars above, his magenta stripes like dark tattoos against skin as pale as the moon's surface.

Saying those words was like a final ultimatum. He wouldn't be able to deny it any longer and the comfortable foundations they've built their companionship on would crumble. If he wanted to preserve the camaraderie, his only options were to use subtlety and allusions. It was better to default to diplomacy—something they both were used to from their respective vocations—than testing the waters with his Gryffindor frankness.

Harry swallowed. His own attraction to the man had snuck up on him like a thief, until it'd clobbered him over the head. This was his fault for letting their flirtations continue this far. The temptation to fly away from this situation—to bury his head under his pillow, pretending that none of this was happening—was strong.

The mythos behind the demon-kinds of any country typically painted their reputation as magical creatures whose favored pastime was corrupting mortals. While Harry was leery about the prospect of heeding that superstition—especially since he was to be advocating for the better rights of magical creatures across the international pond, and he was more than aware history often came with embellishments—it would be foolish if he didn't take it into consideration.

Harry was not ready to dive headfirst into the complicated web that was Sesshomaru's budding attraction to him.

So, instead Harry heard himself saying, "Contrary to what people may believe, I know when something's up."

He shifted from one foot to another. From the moment he'd stepped into the magical world, he'd been barraged by admirers—with himself being a pursuer on three occasions. Recent memories were playing like a film reel in his mind as he stated, "This may be an unusual comparison, but you've been behaving...you're behaving like my godson. When he had no control over his base urges, when he was much younger."

"You are comparing me to your pup," Sesshomaru stated tonelessly, nearly unimpressed.

"The question about pregnancy, your...personal history in our spar this morning..." Pulling the sentient pelt off his shoulders, he carefully folded it in his arms until it formed into a neat bundle. He petted it once, as emphasis. "This. Altogether, what are you trying to accomplish? That's what I want to know. You weren't acting like this when we'd first met." Hearing Hermione's reports and reading about the sovereign's exploits only hammered in the notion that it was uncharacteristic of him.
"So suspicious, Hari." His mouth coiled up into a smirk, making Harry tense. "If you weren't so high in my favor, this Sesshomaru would be offended. This Sesshomaru has killed for less."

Harry breathed in once sharply.

Squaring his jaw, Harry found himself glancing at the red cherry blossom designs on the long, white sleeves as Sesshomaru unfolded his arms from his sleeves. "…This Hari values individuals who are forward. That is a commendable quality to have."

Before Harry could grasp what he was about to do, Sesshomaru had slid his hand beneath the folds of his kimono. After finding what he needed, he extracted his hand. A delicate chain followed the motion, swaying from the momentum. It settled against the magenta stripes of his arm.

Without taking his gaze off him, Sesshomaru held his fist out. Under Harry's full attention, his fingers bloomed like a lotus, unveiling a familiar pendant against his palm—a triangle metalwork with a line bisecting the circle in the middle. He was studying Harry's expression.

For a moment, Harry could only stare down wordlessly at the abstract eye. Feeling a coldness in his veins, he whispered, "The chain's the same as the one Mr Lovegood owns. He wouldn't…Luna—it's Luna isn't it? Why would Luna give you—?"

"This Sesshomaru has decided." The words were uttered with finality. "This Sesshomaru is to be this Hari's nenja."

Harry lifted his sight from the necklace. "Sorry?" he demanded. His grip tightened on the pelt. "Did you just say you wanted to be my…my what?"

With a look of consternation, he repeated himself.

His mouth contorted. Harry knew he shouldn't be looking a gift horse in its mouth—Sesshomaru could have asked for anything and Harry would be compelled to follow through—but some rationality to the newest ludicrousness of his life would be welcomed. "…I think I misheard. Why do you want to be my ninja?"

Sesshomaru's mouth had curled down momentarily, befuddled, as if he wasn't completely sure what he was hearing as well. "This Hari requires guidance. This Sesshomaru is volunteering for the role to instruct this Hari." He advanced a step forward, his gaze penetrating. With the intensity of a samurai pledging himself to a landlord, he declared, "Be honored you were chosen. This Sesshomaru will be an instrument in your progress."

At a loss of coherent thought, Harry repeated, "By being my ninja."

Even to his ears, no matter how much he said it, Sesshomaru's intention still sounded stupefying. "Why do you want to be…why would you want to do that?" Although Harry was lacking a Muggle education, he'd lived long enough in Little Whinging, Surrey to know he did not need a living shadow tailing his every move and operating from the dark, assassinating his perceived foes. Perhaps it was wishful thinking, but struggling to make sense of that declaration, Harry demanded, "Do you have nothing else to do? Is that it?" His face twisted. It was his fault if he made the sovereign feel useless. Injecting concern into his tone, he said, "I could give you something to do if that's the case. Or is this some misguided obligation of yours to return my hospitality?"

The frown on Sesshomaru's face deepened. "This Hari has been accommodating, however there are instances that this Sesshomaru will admit to feeling restless. My only entertainment has been provided by you." His other hand down by his side clenched and unclenched, as if imagining it
Hearing the verbal confirmation made Harry struggle to withhold the urge to plunge his head down and groan into the fur. Sesshomaru been following Harry around in foreign soil, with little else to occupy him with or anything familiar to comfort him. It was natural that the ancient warlord would compensate for his boredom and the insecurities of his self-worth by taking up this idea of his.

He continued, "This Hari is a sorcerer, therefore this Sesshomaru will not teach you what you already know. Howbeit, your strength and combat skills are lacking."

"I'm sure it's an offer you don't make lightly." Sesshomaru was a prideful man; Harry had to remember that. "But I don't require a...not that I don't appreciate and understand what an honor it is. But I am concerned what you're asking for might be for naught."

By now, he was close enough that he could stab Harry through with his swords. His voice taking on a frightening quality as he stared down the Head Auror, he commanded, "Since you lost to this Sesshomaru, this Hari is honor bound to uphold the terms of the wager. You will honor this."

He uttered a quiet but heartfelt profanity. He'd had good intentions, but if Sesshomaru was so intent on being whatever he desired to be in Harry's life, he wasn't going to complain—especially not when it sounded like it was only a platonic relationship that would be fostered.

Today had been eventful, fraught with many situational escalations from morning to night. Like how he'd tackle any surprises that came his way, he adapted.

Exhaling noisily and dragging his hand through his hair, Harry said, "Okay, just humor me. Please. When I asked you what you wanted, you seemed like you had something else in mind. What was your other option? Before you decided to go with this? Intel?"

"It is advantageous and benefiting, yes, but it is unnecessary." He scoffed. "This Hari has already been providing me with intelligence. It would be the height of foolishness for this Sesshomaru to inquire after something that's offered freely."

Sesshomaru nodded down at his outstretched hand.

The definition of surrealism could not encapsulate this moment. Waiting patiently until Harry realized that he wanted him to take the necklace, once it was taken from his possession, a hand rested heavily on Harry's shoulder. The pelt that'd been in Harry's arms slithered up their arms—Harry's muscles had locked, his instincts contemplating fight or flight—until their figures were both enveloped in its embrace.

His heart was thundering like crazy. This close to him, the magical creature smelt of something masculine, and the acrid metal of his armor and blades.

"Calm," Sesshomaru murmured, squeezing Harry's shoulder once warningly. Relinquishing his grip, his hand had left a phantom sensation behind as he retreated back to a safer distance. The enormity of his pelt was curled back around his right arm and shoulder, with the rest of it falling down his back.

"That woman." Sensing Harry's confusion, Sesshomaru illuminated, "The one this jewelry once belonged to."

The metal of the pendant bit into his palm when his fingers constricted. In a dangerously frigid tone, he asked, "You wanted Luna?"

"Her personal assistance would be greatly appreciated." He tilted his head. "She'd offered her
services as a resource. She'd foretold an *enlightening* future for me. That's why this Sesshomaru was offered this tribute."

"...I remember you asking me if Luna was trustworthy or not. That was in reference to this?" His mouth slashed down. "What did she say to you?"

"When the time was right, this Sesshomaru should inquire after 'the Three Deathly Hallows.' It was implied that this Hari would understand the female's words."

Harry found himself staring at Sesshomaru for the zillionth time tonight.

It wasn't until he could feel the sharp edges of the pendant poking him through his glove that the pain brought him back into awareness. He unclenched his fist. Clearing his throat, he stated, "That's... that's not far off. How awfully convenient actually. Sorry, it's something I might bring up to you. Later, not now."

His eyes narrowed. Just when he'd enlisted Sesshomaru's help to help him track down the Resurrection Stone, he found out that Luna had left the demon with a cryptic message. If this was any indication, just how much did she really know? He'd have to track her down and demand answers at the next available date.

Aside from social niceties, he needed a pretense to contact her.

In a casual roll of his shoulders, he then heaved a sigh. "I recognize a lost cause when I see one. Regardless, I'll see what I can do to put you through the proper channels to contact one another. We'll work something out. It's not like Luna wouldn't help you anyway." Now that he thought about it, he was oddly accepting of everything he was hearing. He wasn't certain whether it was because of a quirk in his personality or if it was a side-effect of the adrenaline that was wearing off.

His expression was filled with trepidation as he glanced up at the moon. Every time he breathed in and out, a cold puff of air was exhaled against the bridge of his mouth. For some reason, gazing at the moon had always revitalized him after a night of hard toil, sending ripples of serenity through his body. "Are you really that desperate to be... what do you expect for me to do anyway if you're my ninja? What I got out of it is that you want to be my professor?" He frowned. "For fighting?"

"Nen-ja," Sesshomaru corrected him, emphasizing the phonetics in his heavy Japanese accent.

He began listing his duties and what he expected from his *wakashū*—that being Harry's role to fill as student, apprentice, or protégé. He informed him that it was a time-honored tradition for an apprenticeship to be entered between an adult alpha and a younger demon, where the latter would undergo training in martial skills, warrior etiquette, and a warrior's code of honor.

His mind felt clear enough for him in this moment to evaluate what was being said and not being said.

Listening calmly, carefully to everything that was said, when the sentences winded down, Harry said, "'Shudō,' you'd called it. The way you're making it sound, it sounds something exclusive —*something more permanent*. Am I wrong?" He wasn't even certain why some parts of Sesshomaru's explanation sounded familiar to him. Something was off. This sounded like it went beyond a teacher-student mentorship. If anything, it sounded like a partnership or a feudal pledge of vassalage. "You do realize, if I agree to this, it'll be temporary, right? You'll have to go home eventually, back in your era, where I'm not even born yet."

Sesshomaru paused.
With suspicion dousing his thoughts, he stated, "Don't take this the wrong way, but what do you gain out of this? It seems like I'm reaping the benefits." Harry had learned it was usually best to be wary of agreeing to arrangements with clauses he wasn't fully aware of.

For once, he looked uncomfortable. "This Sesshomaru...has not taken a wakashū before." He glanced away abruptly, focusing on the forest. The trees were tall, black silhouettes in their field of vision. "There is a 'mutually ennobling effect.' It is implied that the nenja will be predisposed to behave more honorably himself, in his desire to be a good role model for his wakashū."

"...Does it really?"

Hearing the sarcasm behind that question, Sesshomaru sent a scathing glower in his wake.

"Alright. Alright. Sorry." Harry held his hands up in surrender. "You said both parties—meaning you and me—have to be 'loyal unto death, and to assist the other both in feudal duties and in honor-driven obligations such as duels and settling disputes.' In our situation, that's a bit...excessive. And impractical."

"You are worried about devotion." His tone was sharp. "This Hari has shown much loyalty and dedication to this Sesshomaru among our acquaintanceship. This Hari has proven this Hari's worth, that your word is honorable."

"I'm glad." His smile was strained. "I appreciate the thought. Really, I'm flattered you considered me as a candidate. But if this crosses the line..."

"You've eradicated that male's memories."

Swallowing hard, he looked down at his feet. Harry murmured quietly, "I'm aware I'm not entirely a good person but my sense of duty outweighs personal endeavors. I said I was going to fix this. I will bring you home."

"While it is doubtful a mere promise would compel so much devotion, you've proven to this Sesshomaru you're prepared to fulfill this objective, no matter the cost. This Sesshomaru is impressed by this Hari's determination." His expression was indescribable, but it made Harry feel very lightheaded being at the end of it. "This Hari has potential. Which is why this Hari will accept the position as this Sesshomaru's wakashū."

This was too sudden. He mumbled, "Give me time." When Sesshomaru's countenance became perplexed, in a louder voice, feeling a confidence he did not feel, he declared, "It's too soon. I'll need time to process this development."

"You are going back your word." His tone was flat and accusatory, as if he'd just been cheated.

He shook his head. "No, that's not it. From morning to now, I've been hit with many twists and turns. I need a break to reflect on everything that has happened—especially this." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "You won fair and square. I won't go back on that. I just need time to think about this further. It's not changing anything. I'm prolonging the inevitable."

"Then why would you request time to meditate on the matter when there is no further choice to be had?"

"Because certain parts of this arrangement goes against all common sense...." He trailed off.
He'd thought he'd seen movement from the corner of his peripheral vision. Scanning the premises, when nothing showed up, he glanced toward Sesshomaru, who was still glowering at him. Harry relaxed, his shoulders slumped. Since the mental state of Sesshomaru gave no indication of any disturbances detected in their proximity, it was logical to assume his mind was playing tricks on him.

He inhaled the scent of grass and wood into his lungs, acting as a balm to his nerves. His expression soon melted into a carefully crafted mask. His eyes were directly confronting Sesshomaru's unflinchingly. "I gave you time to think about what you could request from me. I only ask for the same."

To his surprise, although the intensity of the atmosphere around him was still frightening, hearing the headstrong rejoinder had Sesshomaru's lips pulling up in a reluctant smile. "It is an exercise in futility," he told him. "Nonetheless, this Sesshomaru shall entertain your request."

Harry chuckled. "You have no idea how long I can make you wait."

Unbeknownst to either one of them, as the pair went to restore the stone amphitheater to its former condition, obscured by the dense canopies, deep in the Forbidden Forest was a colony of magical creatures—whose head, torso and arms appeared to be human, with anything further down joined to a horse's body—had been gathered under the light of the moon. The earth shook under them.

Armed with makeshift bows and arrows, their hides were drenched in mottled white and black as they cantered across the field, hunting for their next prey. Those who chose to adorn themselves with jewelry rampaged at the front of the herd, leading the charge into a territory that'd once been forbidden to them years prior because of the Acromantulas that'd once made their den in this part of the forest.

Hooves rumbled against the soil, kicking up dirt and rocks. As the last of them started trickling in, fast at the heels of their elders, one of the hooves lobbed a chunk of earth into the air.

The solidified chunk sailed in a volley before gravity yanked it back into the earth. It scattered into pieces as it crashed down against the roots of a tree trunk.

Amongst the fragments was a black stone in the shape of a diamond. When the light was right, floating in the obsidian-like vessel emerged the golden inscription of a triangle bisected by a wand and a circle.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was split into two parts, from its sheer scope. It was a battle of attrition, but I'd finally conquered this beast! Hurrah! (By the by, did you know HP is canonically a Leo? And some people's headcanon is that Sesshomaru is a Scorpio. Coincidentally, if you look at their horoscopes, apparently Leos and Scorpios are romantically compatible.) So based on the PMs and questions I've been getting, should you want atmospheric clues for my writing, you now may also find me on tumblr! I throw in updates about story statuses occasionally with research and inspiration, among the hodgepodge other stuff that tickles my fancy. It'll hopefully make future A/Ns shorter, because I intend to dump a lot of my thoughts there instead.

Next chapter: *Curse of the Deathly Hallows II*. While it couldn't fit into this update, the
next one will contain a few bits I'd been excited to share since chapter 8. ;) Take that as you will. Someone is going to meet some persons. What a glorious meeting it'll be.

To all those who observe the holiday, Happy Halloween!
A lot has happened since I've graduated with my design degree, returned from Japan (Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka), and began working full-time at my own residential design firm. But we're back!

We have a lovely sketch of Sesshomaru! Do give suis0u's gallery a look. It was something that'd been drawn, inspired by my trip to Asia. Suis0u is a wonder!

Shout-outs to ijskonijnte, Lizu, kinpandun, jayswing96, itachisgurl93, Genuka, ElementalFoxGoddess, AxZi, enchanted_nightingale, pennamesblank, Wonderer_Of_The_Silver_World, 2ndDIVSpartan, Fremontii, Saj_te_Gyuhyll, 2ndDIVSpartan, WonderfulMelody23, The Rose (Icypolopeanut), joovette, TheOneWhoReads, Aynde, Antheila, and the rest on AO3 (and Merlenyn, for the Art Masterpost). I'm over the moon that we are accessible to a wide range of audience...

Even if you came in, unfamiliar with one franchise or initially skeptical about this wacky crossover (for a crackshipping, no less), thank you for giving G&G a chance!

The first two scenes of this update were improvised, thusly taking the longest time to write. (Do give thanks to my colleague Charlie though, for seeing my "randomly cryptic post on symbolism writing" on Facebook and for brainstorming with me. The first scene has his input in it.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One minute he was falling, his heart lodged in his throat like stone. He was plummeting down a black hole with no end in sight. His arms and legs were outstretched.

The next vision he saw was a world of green that reminded him of Scotland's lush greenery, with everything dwarfing him in size all of a sudden. He was on his hands and feet. He accepted the naturalness of his lowered elevation calmly, taking it into stride.

Every inch of his senses were sharpened to a vibrant degree. He felt lightheaded. Blades of grass, wet and adhesive to the touch, were crunching underneath quiet footfalls. His vision colored green. Crickets were chirping their songs.

It felt like leaves and shrubbery—their distinctive shape flashing in and out of his mind—were brushing alongside his face and sides of his body as he advanced towards to a sightless goal.

A brown, blurry shape darted across the top of his palm. It became a rabbit, scampering off into the horizon and disappearing into the full moon.

And then a desert, desolate and long. He didn't feel the heat—nor did he sweat—but he could understand that it was hot. From far away, with an eagle's precision he could spot someone marching.

With the cacti in the scenic background, their silhouettes painted dark shadows across the plateaus that looked like the ringed insides of layered cake. He understood the person he'd been gazing at
was himself.

Still with a fixed gaze, there was now a plume of smoke separating the sky, which he knew was evidence of civilization or a large campsite. It was decided to be both.

As natural as it was to breathe, a change in scenery happened.

Ahead in the distance, looming like a fortress was a domed sweathouse. It was constructed entirely of mud and bleached hay that looked dry to the touch. There, a great dark mass—wound tightly into an oblong ball—was atop the primitive construction.

The shape of the mass was indistinguishable aside from its color and its enormousness. It was as if someone had balled up the night sky and put it there for everyone to admire.

He didn't know how he could tell, but there was something to its shape that suggested the curl of a tail. What little moonlight that struck through the clouds gave a cold glimmer to the tips of the coat, suggesting a fur pelt which reminded him of the grasslands from the Forbidden Forest.

Surrounding the sweathouse itself, like a giant snake chasing its tail, was a moat. And wading in the moat were various persons, thin and robed in black. All bore indistinguishable features. Instead, they all wore helmets that seem to obscure their heads.

A cold sensation washed over him. They were just there, as if they'd always been there. They were proceeding to the sweathouse ceremoniously. By now, the back of their heads were pale pinpricks. The image of a skull flashed through his mind, and an intense fear swept through him.

The bite of cold reached his ankles. He found himself ankle-deep in water. His socks and shoes were sodden, the hem of his trousers stuck to his skin.

When he peeked down, he could see his reflection, as well as the white dots that blotted the expanse above as far as the eye could see, with clouds partially covering the big disk staring down at him from the skies. It was him. Just him. No other figures mirrored upside-down in sight.

But the tumultuous flow of the water chose not to preserve this caricature, and the image soon distorted. Reflected back from the murky depths was a face belonging to a man of stoic expression, bearing flaxen hair and bright amber eyes.

Instinctively, reaching out, he knew this was not his face. Ripples broke the surface of water once his hand made contact.

His fingers curved. It was the wand this time that was now being grasped in his right hand.

As if someone had thrown a Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder over his eyes as a smokescreen, his vision went black. There only remained his sense of touch, smell, and hearing, all of them enhanced to levels of richness that threatened to crush him. Suffocating him.

The water became ice. The chanting in his ears became an indistinguishable roar. The earth was trembling beneath his feet.

Soon, he realized with confusion, it was someone shaking him by the shoulder, calling his name. His eyelids felt like heavy weights. His body was an anchor sunk to the bottom bed of a lake.

After a few moments, with long eyelashes fluttering helplessly against his cheeks, he awoke to a blinding light.
Eyes still shut, Harry brought his forehead down to his hands. His fingers were clasped, and his thumbs were hard-pressed against the bridge of his nose. He took a long intake of breath—holding it in his lungs—and then he exhaled through his mouth. His chest rose and fell with the rhythm.

For the next few minutes, he repeated the cathartic exercise, collecting his thoughts. Judging by the drool left on his sleeve, it seemed he had fallen asleep.

It seemed to follow what Hermione had informed him about what Headmistress Minerva McGonagall had given a lecture about—regarding the symbolisms behind significant dreams and nightmares. While Harry couldn't exactly recall all the specifics of his reoccurring dream, he supposed that his Animagus transformation was progressing as intended.

It was what McGonagall herself had gone through, as well as Harry's mum, his dad and his dad's friends—including Harry's godfather and Remus. It was a tedious process of necessitating the leaf of a mandrake in one's mouth for an entire month.

Harry would not know his animal form prior to the transformation. The answer was supposed to be hinted at in his dreams. Harry had the expectation that he was a stag—maybe a buck—following in the footsteps of his parents.

He worried his lower lip. But perhaps he had been wrong. It was becoming more and more likely.

Currently Harry was seated inside his office, the tip of his shoe tapping restlessly against the laminated floorboards. His mouth still tasted of bitter herbs from his morning ritual; trying to mask the taste with toothpaste hadn't had any effect.

The temptation was there to check his pocket watch again for the hundredth time.

His eyes opened to tall stacks—a rainbow spectrum—laid out on his desk. The folders and parchments been organized according to a color-coded system. Manila files concerned cases belonging to the Law Enforcement department, green were psychological assessments, blue always contained reports from Forensics, so on and so forth.

There was one exception. A golden snitch, serving as paperweight, had been placed atop a manila folder. Disguised as another case file, the contents within contained updates from the Department of Mysteries and any information pertaining to the time traveler. Copies of specific passages from historic works were also included. To anyone else not privy to the secret, the majority of the content appeared redacted—concealing classified and confidential information.

Adjacent to his view was a green file notably thicker than the rest. Scrawled on its tab was a personnel's name. In it contained the newest documents from their recent evaluation. Staring at the name, Harry's foot tapping becoming louder. Finally, he averted his gaze sideways.

His sight skittered past the toxicology and autopsy reports, a rotary dial telephone that gleamed bronze, today's Daily Prophet tabloid, an ink pot and quill, opened letters from Kohaku Takeda-Mushin and from the President of the Magical Congress of the United States of America, and down the length of his arm.

Other official-looking documents spilled over his desk and out of sight. Instead of parchment for stationery and bills, upholding tradition the Wizengamot used sheets from a roll of handcrafted cotton fibers. Embossed into the laid pattern was the enormous Ministry of Magic seal.

And all the way down the lengthy text were the angular strokes and slashes that made up Harry's handwriting.
Silver candy wrappers were by an elbow he'd propped on his desk. By his other elbow was a red cup on a red saucer, filled halfway with milk tea. Preserved by a heating charm, tendrils of steam could still be seen wafting from the cup. Across the table was a silver serving tray. Balanced on it were a tea pot, napkins, a cup of sugar cubes, a small milk saucer, extra cups, saucers, and tea bags.

Framed on the alcove behind him hung ornamental framed portraits—the subjects depicting men and one woman wearing uniforms which reflected the time period of their tenure. Most of the painted Head Aurors were sleeping. Or having grown bored of watching Harry do nothing but peruse paperwork, their painting was left vacant while the subject traveled across enchanted paintings in the Ministry to socialize with other paintings.

In the center of the framed artworks was a large black-and-white map of the United Kingdom—including England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. White dots pulsed on the map wherever illegal magical activities were detected. The map spanned the length of the rosewood desk that Harry had inherited from the Head Auror who'd preceded him.

The activity had long since calmed down when it notified the proper divisions—reaching the Auror Office in extreme cases or alerting the Ministry of Magic Witch Watchers division to send out their Witch Watcher Special Forces—while the Ministry representatives stationed in the Improper Use of Magic Office conducted further investigations. It fell on Harry to disperse the proper assignments whenever Hermione was overwhelmed with responsibilities. Or whenever she was suffering from her pregnancy symptoms.

Reaching for an unwrapped treat, he broke the foil apart.

The sound of chattering and tinny squeaks broke the silence. Immediately he pinched the wiggling, enchanted mouse firmly by the body, popping it into his mouth. His teeth sliced the sweet into pieces, breaking the enchantment.

The intense medicinal taste of mint coated his tongue, instantly waking his brain. His sinuses were clear. All he could smell now was the peppermint oil, purifying the memory of the odor which'd emerged from his recollection.

Both he and Hermione had been in the forensics science laboratory of their chief medical examiner in the morning, listening to the summarization of the coroner's report of the post-mortem examinations that had been ordered by the Committee. The corpses brought out onto the wooden tables for autopsy had appeared in the same condition that they'd been magically preserved in at the site of the investigation.

Although the interior was a controlled environment, the odor had stung the nose. Like being in a meat locker, the stench of death had hung in the mortuary. It had intermingled with the scent of beeswax.

Floating above the bleached skin of each cadaver had been lit candlesticks. Several candles had already melted down into stumps. Clean sheets had been placed over the trolls, respectfully concealing them below the clavicle. Their appearance was arguably as repulsive as when they'd been alive, although they were easier to gaze upon with the muscles now having fallen lax in their gigantic faces.

Both he and Hermione had similar miserable expressions. His was having had little to no sleep, whereas Hermione had been acting off ever since Ron had been stationed overseas. (Harry had assumed Ron would've taken the opportunity to return occasionally, having been given one of the International Portkeys that the rest of the Aurors had been assigned. Yet with the way Hermione had been acting, Harry couldn't help but worry.)
It'd only been a few weeks; by the end of the month, they were expected to give the Head Auror a report.

He remembered observing his deputy beside him, reevaluating the state of their dependency.

Rather predictably, when Harry had recounted the events of that night to quite possibly one of the only two confidantes he had for this sensitive issue, he'd received a lecture.

Throughout his debriefing, it was in her body language that he could read that the witch was, many times, on the verge of blurting whatever was on her mind. Hermione's palms had been pressed together, fingertips tapping together erratically. In moments like these, he could still see the same eleven year old schoolgirl interspersed over the adult she'd grown into.

Out of habit, he came to her this time for counsel on the *nenja* and *wakashū* matter. He'd always relied on her researching skills.

Therefore it'd made him feel conflicted when, after hearing him out, she'd declared, "I don't suppose you'll like hearing this, but he *is* a demon. Eastern origins, dog demon or not. I'll see what I can gather but...," here she hesitated, before finishing, "...isn't he taking advantage of your kindness?"

That hadn't made him feel any better.

Harry exhaled once more. And it wasn't just him. Tension had bled into his workplace. With each day that passed, he could feel the inevitability that he'd soon be dragged into the marital conflict between Ron and Hermione.

The memory was still fresh in his mind, the night Hermione confessed to him her doubts.

It also made Harry realize, that just like her, what he'd been seeking was reassurance—to hear from another human being that he was reading too much into it.

He'd found his thoughts orbiting around Sesshomaru these days. Try as he might otherwise, there was always a gravitational pull bringing him back. The time traveler was all Harry could think of. After all, in his effort to be as broadminded as possible, Harry had misjudged.

Harry had underestimated the nature of the person he was minding. From that emerged a complication; Sesshomaru's attraction to him was an anomaly. And Harry was in a moral situation where he couldn't reciprocate. It was not a situation where they could have a one-night stand to get it out of their system.

Harry didn't have to be a magizoologist or a practitioner of demonology to understand that this development between him and Sesshomaru didn't bode well.

Although Harry liked to think he was above bigotry, demons had been a topic covered in his Defense against the Dark Arts curriculum. Even Gilderoy Lockhart, the con-artist that taught in Harry's second year at Hogwarts, had been aware of their infamy, fabricating a demonic encounter in his books. Much as Harry lobbied to push the betterment of magical creature rights agenda in the ICW, even he couldn't turn a blind eye to the reality that demons carried a fearsome reputation.

An Englishman with his education, Harry was more familiar with mythos on the Western hemisphere than on the Eastern front. The suffering that ensued after falling under demonic influence or possession became cautionary tales. Although different mythologies existed, and however overtly exaggerated eyewitness accounts may scatter around the globe, they all generally pointed to demons as malevolent entities that corrupted all those that made a deal with them.
Harry had simply never thought that he'd land himself in this predicament.

Gloved hands slamming down against the armrests, Harry shoved himself from his seat. The wheels of the chair skittered behind him as he went to pace his office. The carpet muffled his footsteps as his hands went to rake through his hair. His fingertips were digging against the scalp.

Sesshomaru did not belong in their twenty-first century.

Sesshomaru was from ancient Japan—from a brutal war period.

Sesshomaru was an archaic, historical figure of some sort of high upbringing.

Sesshomaru wanted Harry to pledge vassalage to him.

Sesshomaru was a Dark magical creature—a demon, no less.

Sesshomaru was a warlord, of culturally different and outdated values and traditions.

Sesshomaru only had Harry to rely on; he had been purposely isolated to depend on Harry. He only had himself to blame.

While Harry would like to think Sesshomaru grew attracted to him naturally, it would be naïve to think the attachment was because they were both nobility—presumably; Harry still wasn't certain about the demon's confusing titles—or that he was somehow charmed by him.

It wasn't as if he had a procedural rulebook that could advise him on how to handle matters as delicate as this.

On one hand, Harry could be being played. He could be deliberately being thrown off guard until Sesshomaru gained his trust for a nefarious reason. Although Sesshomaru could be considered younger than Harry by demon society's standards—Harry was still confused over that—Sesshomaru had over five hundred years of wisdom. There would be little that he wouldn't have seen by now.

On the other hand, a five-hundred year old demon might be authentically intrigued. There were many wild theories Harry could think of regarding how he'd captured the demon's attention in the first place.

Japan did have a period of isolation. If Sesshomaru was clever, then he was sowing the seeds for a secure future, whether if it was for himself or for his country's subjects. The demon had most likely discerned the benefits of allying with a foreign bureaucrat who so happened to not only command the entirety of a country's law enforcement force but also to have certain diplomatic influence overseas.

Although Sesshomaru's method was unorthodox—wanting to establish himself as Harry's mentor—that excuse could serve a dual purpose of deepening their camaraderie. If Harry thought well of him, then he would be more willing to accommodate him.

In a way, Harry could understand how, in the feudal warlord's eyes, it was an exploitable opportunity.

Harry's hands lowered, until one was rubbing the back of his neck while the other hand braced his forearm. He could feel the solid length of his wand holster as his imagination ran rampant.

Harry was only grateful that he seemed to be the target of Sesshomaru's focus, and not his deputy or—worse—the Acting Minister. While Harry did not think a sole magical creature could bring
instability to Shacklebolt's tenure, at the same time, Harry didn't ask to be in this dilemma.

Approaching the coffee desk, Harry whirled around in another circle.

But what's done is done. Running away from reality would change nothing. Any sane person would minimize the damage. They would confront the issue.

The quickest solution would be rejecting Sesshomaru directly.

Yet there were somethings particular about Sesshomaru that made Harry hesitate.

It turns out Harry was actually fond of the dog demon. Quirks and all.

Sesshomaru even had his thoughtful moments. He was kind to Teddy and Astoria, and he had enough mercy to give Harry space to consider his offer of mentorship.

He did not seem like a duplicitous individual, demonic nature or no demonic nature. If anything, he was not hiding his condescending attitude or downplaying the cruelty of his past exploits when those deeds came into light.

Sesshomaru certainly did not act like his Japanese contemporaries. They hid their disagreements behind smiles and a seemingly agreeable nature. In stark contrast, Sesshomaru was astonishingly genuine. Sometimes instances of forward behavior broke through aloof formalities. If the five-hundred year old magical creature did not like someone, the difference in regard was palpable.

Sesshomaru reminded Harry of Severus Snape and—to an extent—Lucius Malfoy, if both wizards had been Gryffindorish and attractive. That behavior of Sesshomaru's did not fit the objective of someone covering their tracks in order to make a good impression. And Harry did not think someone of that peculiar military background was that careless of an individual—nobility or royalty or not.

However, as cautious as Harry wanted to be, there was little evidence to suggest he was being played as a fool. Speculation was all Harry had.

The only noteworthy amendment to Harry's profiling, besides the development of a romantic and possibly sexual attraction, was that Lord Sesshomaru seemed to be a remarkably impulsive man. If it were an act, the dog demon would make for a frighteningly convincing liar.

At that thought, Harry's mouth moved into a self-deprecating smirk.

Should Sesshomaru prove to be too reckless, Harry might one day find himself in the position being forced to choose. The wizarding world was as unkind as the nonmagical one. If this was a ruse, not only would Harry have to follow up with countermeasures, but it would complicate matters. He would have to decide between pardoning those infractions with the highest authority and taking responsibility as the Head Auror.

Harry released a sigh so loud that he felt it down to his toes. If this was as simple as a ploy to get on Harry's good side, Harry could only hope he had the mental fortitude to see through any ulterior motives. If it was as simple as a crush, he could ignore it or gently let the other party down. Those alone were manageable.

At the level their flirting was, it was chaste.

Harmless.

Tolerable.
Within acceptable parameters.

He was not as confident if the time traveler's fancy surged into intense feeling for him. The development of feelings was often irrational and uncontrollable. A flickering ember could turn into a blazing fire. If it came down to that....

Harry faltered, frowning at the surrealism of such a scenario.

Regardless, a Dark magical creature that this Japanese figurehead may be, a person was not defined by their race. Sesshomaru will get the benefit of the doubt.

The hand that supported his elbow in a thinking position squeezed. Harry would not be bigoted. No matter which suspicions cycled through his head, unless proven otherwise, Sesshomaru was deserving of the same treatment of courtesy afforded to everyone else.

At this point, Sesshomaru was docile. It would continue to make life easier for Harry. It was better than were Harry to reject him, thereby facing the consequences of an unpredictable, spurned demon.

It was not so much denial as it was an accepting tolerance for his situation. Or a stroke of insanity.

He groaned to himself, "This is getting yourself nowhere, Chosen One. Why does this have to be so complicated?" He flung his arms up. "Just tell him. Save yourself the hassle."

It was easier said than done. Despite saying it aloud, common sense wasn't enough to spur him into action.

It only made the incentive to stay quiet—stronger.

An expletive rushed out of his mouth. Scowling, Harry marched back to his desk. Angling a hip over his desk, he hoisted himself up until he was sitting on a corner of his desk. He stared once more at the green folder, before he picked up the rolled newsprint.

When he unraveled the twine, two letters fell out. Dread pooled in his gut once he saw Doge's letterhead.

Harry knew this was all in his mind but he could swear the back of his hand burned. Involuntarily, his fingers curled. Already opened, it was an official claim form. The subpoena attached behind the first document specified the exact location, scheduled date and time of Harry's appearance for his testimony to the court hearing of Dolores Jane Umbridge.

Hermione's words were clanging in his head like a bell the longer he stared at the letter. Tearing his gaze away, he peered down at the remaining letter.

The letter had been dropped off at the Ministry earlier this morning by owl and had been left unopened. His mood instantly lightened upon reading the immaculate cursive. He could feel his fist unclenching.

Written by a female hand, it was addressed to him from Andromeda and Teddy.

Under the gentlest of smiles, he folded that letter into his trouser pocket—to be read later. The claim form was deposited uncaringly into his pocket. To set his mind on other subjects, he unrolled the newspaper. Scanning the adverts and columns on the front page, the main article caught his eye.

**ORGAN-GRO – THE FUTURE OF RUBENS WINIKUS AND COMPANY INC?**
Grinning up at Harry was a wizard around his age, but with impressive facial hair. He was waving about his tobacco pipe as he was being photographed by the small crowd gathered in his potions lab. Arranged on the table were Petri dishes, containing what appeared, to Harry, to be tissue samples.

Son of the exclusive manufacturer and developer of the Skele-Gro potion, young Potions prodigy Rubens Winikus III unveils the progress of the miraculous Organ-Gro healing potion in a special public appearance, wrote A. Fenetre, Special Correspondent. Having graduated Hogwarts of Witchcraft and Wizardry with high marks in N.E.W.T level subjects, Winikus III had the brilliant idea of combining the Oculus potion and Skele-Gro one day when his girlfriend punctured her eyes after an unfortunate fall on her knitting needles.

The article detailed the son's education and accomplishments, before generously divulging a portion of the ingredients needed for Organ-Gro: a Chinese chomping cabbage, three puffer fish, a small sprinkling of chopped Dittany, and stewed Mandrake—


Harry stopped reading when he heard the telltale sound of the cherrywood panels and wainscots collapsing in on itself like origami. Walls folded into nonexistence, immediately revealing tall two-way mirrors.

Harry winced from the sudden brightness.

Once the rattling faded, human and mechanical clamoring immediately followed. Through the ten walls he could hear the risings and fallings of discussions, heated exchanges, the ding of the lift doors, and braying laughter. (He didn't have to look to know the adjoined office outside was empty; his deputy had been sent to the Department of Mysteries earlier to check in on Sesshomaru.)

Bringing a hand over his eyes, Harry squinted.

With each side of the decagon, Harry had a line of sight to all the different divisions that made up his department. This transparency was a privilege afforded to every Head Auror. With this, Harry could monitor everyone, but no one could see into his office. Doors lined each side, granting him passage to whichever sector he pleased.

It could be said that every division had its unique interior. Being the largest department in the Ministry of Magic, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement were fragmented into the main branch—where he, as Head Auror, held the largest sway—and the administrative branch.

The Auror Office had their iconic cubicles that Aurors were passing in and out of.

The division of Hit Wizards from the Magical Law Enforcement Squad nearby had various wizards studying the Wanted posters lining the walls and bulletins.

Next to that, the Department of Intoxicating Substances, the Investigation Department, and the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol division were similar only in their vaulted barrel ceilings—arched trusses made of bricks.

The Wizengamot and Wizengamot Administration Services division had a corridor that led to a circular chamber within, with fifty individuals gathered around a bench seemingly in danger of collapsing under the weight of the piles of parchments.

Large tomes submerged the desks and shelves of the Administrative Registration Department.

The Improper Use of Magic Office—a room with a pair of file cabinets flanking the massive desk in
the center—and the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office—another cramped room filled to the brink with knickknacks and curiosities—were situated nearby.

The Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects had a tiny but drab office space filled with files and charmed Muggle objects.

It was from this last division that Harry saw a gangly wizard marching toward him, fists clenched and with a determined look. His face was red, that his freckles were invisible. He was wearing a trench coat, as if he'd recently returned from a trip overseas.

A stream of profanities flew from Harry's mouth. He sprinted back around his desk.

He'd thrown himself into his chair when Ron pounded on the door, rattling the glass.

"Harry!" Ron barked, his breath fogging up the mirror's surface briefly. He hammered the surface twice more. "I know you're in there! We need to talk!"

"Sod this," Harry growled. He could already see various wizards and witches poking their heads out, curious about the commotion. Flicking his gaze over his desk, he shoved all opened wrappers into the waste bin under his desk. Opening his drawer, he threw Sesshomaru's file into it, too preoccupied to notice the tiny metal ball that'd careened off. He slammed the drawer closed.

Harry scanned the perimeter of his office. Nothing would seem unusual to the untrained eye.

He squared his shoulders. Past his heart pattering against his ribcage, Harry finally bade, "You—"

He cleared his throat. "You can come in, Ron."

The door opened with a click, and the glass shuddered when it was closed again. Harry had risen to his feet when Ron maneuvered around the furniture. His footsteps thundered as he charted his way to Harry's desk.

Harry took a deep breath. "Isn't it a bit early to see me—?"

A fist collided against Harry's cheek.

Harry had to throw an arm out to catch himself. Clinging to the edge of the desk, he dragged himself back onto his feet. His wand was already in his hand. Cupping the side of his face, he demanded, "What the fuck, Ron?"

"You're a complete wanker, Harry!"

"That's why you threw a punch?"

A tense silence enveloped them. Both men were glaring at each other. Tension was palpable in the air. Yet, Ron was still unarmed; only Harry had drawn his wand.

After a while, Ron eased back. His arms were crossed over his chest. He grunted. "Did it hurt?"

"Shite, Ron." Harry gingerly prodded his cheek, and then his jaw. The entire left side of his face was burning. Past the blood rushing in his ears, he heard himself growling, "What do you think?"

"You deserve it, you plonker." Ron inhaled deeply. His voice had grown softer, as if he'd been satisfied with Harry's answer. He seemed to sag into himself now. "You okay?"

"No, I'm not okay. I'm pissed off, that's what I am."
"Good."

To Harry's surprise, Ron collapsed into one of the two armchairs across Harry's desk.

Ron was sprawled in an undignified slouch. Limbs spread like a ragdoll, he was gloowering at the engraved nameplate on Harry's desk. In the most unapologetic tone, he muttered, "Sorry."

Harry was about to unleash more obscenities, with the freeness that their American counterparts utilized, when he realized the racket they must have made.

His eyes lurched to the windows.

Relief engulfed him. No one seemed to have noticed. The visual reminder, that no one could see or hear them outside of the office's enchantment, dissipated the tension in his shoulders. He glanced once again in Ron's direction.

The tip of his wand lowered.

In the moment it took Harry to scan his surroundings, Ron had begun helping himself to the tea set. All of his movements—pouring tea, scooping sugar cubes with a spoon, and so forth—no matter how small, were abrupt and jittery. His gaze had remained trained on Harry's title that was etched a shiny gold in the black brass.

"You don't have anything to report?"

"No. I'm not here for that."

Pointing the Holly wand at his own unfinished cup, Harry watched as a jet of blue wisps formed at the end. Condensation soon formed on the ceramic surface, its liquid contents now having frozen over. His eyes pinned to Ron's form, Harry slowly sank back down. He'd brought the chilled cup to his cheek, dulling the ache as he waited for Ron to explain himself.

Harry already had an idea of what this could be.

"Hermione…," he heard Ron begin. Ron had brought his cup to his mouth. He mumbled to the rim, "My wife listens to my best mate. And my best mate listens to her, instead of me. I don't even feel like her husband. Isn't it brilliant?"

So you have gone back to see her, Harry wanted to say aloud. Instead he stayed silent, frowning pensively.

Harry had conversed with enough people to gather that social convention dictated marital problems were generally settled privately between a husband and wife. Harry had wanted the pair to work things out themselves. But as much as he wished to respect their privacy, he found himself slowly losing patience.

He realized he'd lent his ear to Hermione more often than to Ron. It was likely the result of a bias. There existed numerous factors that contributed to this partiality.

Nonetheless, because of that meeting, Harry realized he'd erred his other best mate in some way. It also didn't help that Counselor Thicknesse was keeping a close eye on the Head Auror, ready to chastise Harry for showing obvious favoritism again. The friendship between Harry and Ron reminded Harry of how it'd been during the Triwizard Tournament.

Knowing both their personalities, it had only been a matter of time before they had their
confrontation. If their job performance was affected by personal issues, Harry had no choice. If they had to rely on a neutral third party, then Harry was willing to offer his opinion.

There was also a part of Harry, the lonely little man who craved companionship that wanted to repair the friendship and make things to how it was before. Harry grimaced, shifting his attention back from his thoughts.

Studying Ron's slouched form, Harry felt the guilt ebb as he took in the sight of his Auror in his office. This was his command center. This was Harry's domain that Ron had forced his way into. Straightening his back, Harry asked coolly, "What do you want me to say?" He kept his tone inquisitive, but not intruding. Despite that, his knuckles were pale underneath his gloves.

"Don't." Ron grimaced. Scrutinizing his tea, he said, "Please don't do that. I want my best mate; not my boss."

The corners of Harry's mouth tugged down further, but he didn't say anything.

Another silence descended upon them.

Sensing that this wasn't going to be a quick conversation, Harry traced three sides of a rectangle in the air. Then, he slashed the wand down.

The door sealed itself with an audible click. With another wave of his wand, the wooden walls unfolded with sharp rattling noises until the office was once again submerged in the illusion of privacy. He assumed Ron might be able to relax now without the psychological pressure of feeling a hundred eyes on him.

Only the green banker's lamp on his desk and the wall sconces provided the office a cozy glow.

"I am your boss," Harry scolded. As emphasis, he gestured down at his nameplate.

Both Counselor Thicknesse and Acting Minister Shacklebolt had counseled Harry to make the distinction between work and his personal life. While it frightened Harry sometimes when he reflected back on the degree of apathy affecting his judgement, it became a source of comfort to default to that. As a Head Auror, it made the decision-making less emotionally draining.

Harry lowered his own cup, the side of his face feeling cold and numb to the air. He steeled himself. Echoing what he'd been told, he recited verbatim: "Policies and procedures exist so that complacency isn't an issue."

"I know." Ron also set his teacup down, clinking on the saucer. "But I want Harry. Not Harry Potter."

His eyes narrowed. As Harry had learned, acting professionally was often a failsafe method, versatile for many situations. He got outcomes based on productivity. He also appeared more qualified. Less people were willing to take advantage of him.

"...Alright, we'll do it your way. You have my full attention." Spreading his arms out wide invitingly, Harry declared, "Have on, Ron. Don't hold back. No worries about hurting anyone's feelings."

Ron averted his gaze. His sight remained trained on the folders, a dark cloud brewing on his face. With the illumination of the table lamp, the shadows underneath Ron's eyes became more pronounced. The scruff along his jaw was fuller than the grey five o'clock shadow along Harry's, as if Ron hadn't shaved for days.
Harry also didn't know if it was his imagination, but the infamous fiery red hair seemed to be thinning. And to Harry's wonderment, while it had been subtle before, it was evident that Ron had gained a bit of weight.

Ron squirmed, feeling the weight of the gaze leveled on him. At last, he mumbled gruffly, "How do you do it?"


"Alright, full disclosure? Why does she trust you, and not me?" His head rose. His eyes were a piercing blue. In a louder volume, he demanded, "What am I doing wrong?"

"I cannot imagine."

"And calling me out in front of everyone? Have I done something to you?" Ron's volume climbed with every accusation. His fists clenched and unclenched down by his thighs. "Why are you always taking each other's side? I thought I was your best mate!"

"The things you say." This was not good. He had to diffuse the tension. Harry stifled a sigh. "This is getting ridiculous. Ron, look at me."

Harry waited for him to heed the command. When Ron's eyes reluctantly beheld his, Harry tapped at his own cheekbone, ignoring the twinge of pain. He said, "Firstly, I won't say I don't deserve this, maybe. But I can't have this becoming a regular occurrence. I'm going to do things you happen to disagree with."

"You got what was coming."

"Ron, people are already accusing me of showing you favoritism." Seeing the defensive retort about to leap up, Harry gave him a stern look. "You'd just assaulted me in my office. You hit your superintendent in the face. It is well within my rights to have you written up. Or press charges. Fill in the blanks, Ron."

Ron's lips thinned into a long white line.

Channeling Dumbledore's unnerving calmness from his memories, Harry said, "Any other Head Auror would've sacked you. Yet we're still here. Why do you think that is?"

Ron's mouth opened and closed, incapable of finding the words. Unable to revive his fighting spirit, his eyes had fallen again from Harry's gaze. To keep himself busy, he fiddled with his thumbs, crossing and recrossing his legs.

Under a placating tone, he coaxed, "Work with me here, Ron. I'm not the enemy." As visual emphasis, Harry rested his wand down on the desk, making certain Ron heard the thunk. Clasping gloved fingers together tightly, he asked, "What do you think's happening between me and Hermione? If it's what I think you're going to say, that is bollocks. Hermione is my Deputy Head Auror. And she is your wife. That's it."

"Funny how you leapt to that conclusion, before I said anything—"

His patience diminished exponentially. Bitterness instead brimmed his sight. His palm slamming down on the desk, Harry barked, "Shut up!"

He could recall the knife edge of Ron's jealous accusations from their school years. "I know what you're thinking. I promise you. Nothing's happened. Nothing has been crossed! I swear on my
parents' graves..."

The defiance on Ron's face dimmed exponentially. He reared back, looking uncomfortable.

"...there is no affair! Hermione has been a faithful wife. I did not die for you to accuse me of—!"

"—Harry, I didn't mean it," Ron interrupted.

It was like a splash of cold water. Harry's rant died on his lips as he stared at his mate's lowered head, befuddled, doubting what he'd just heard. It couldn't be this easy, was the thought running through his mind. These past weeks, he'd been running through mental scenarios of how he'd resolve any fallouts. He'd been expecting a fight.

Although Ron's head was downcast, he could see blue butcher eyes—partially hidden behind that fringe—zipping to the wand on the desk, as if its presence could console his apprehension.

"I...bugger, I'm—" Ron exhaled. "I'm sorry. I'm paranoid, alright?"

The room wasn't shaking. Nothing had fallen. Only the sounds of their breathing rushed to fill in the silence.

The tension in Ron's shoulder seemed to have ebbed a bit, once he realized he hadn't landed himself at the end of Harry's infamous temper.

Ron shifted in his seat. The hush seemed to be getting to him. He was collecting his thoughts, his leg jittery, bouncing on his other knee to the speed his mind ran. "I didn't imagine you'd be this—" He couldn't finish the sentence, not upon spotting the sharp twist of Harry's mouth. Hoarsely, he asked, "Nothing's going on? Really?"

"Sorry to burst your bubble," Harry retorted. He'd folded his arms, his fists digging into the crook of his elbows. "If I were a lesser man, I'd be offended. Walk in my shoes. Do I look like the homewrecking sort?"

"You don't...you're not a homewrecker," Ron admitted. He worried his lower lip. His tongue darted over chapped lips. "Has Hermione said anything to you? I don't want to be a jealous prat but sometimes a man...wonders, y'know? You're her superintendent. She's not been...making eyes at anyone else, has she? Or have you seen anyone showing an inappropriate interest in my wife?"

A throbbing sensation made itself known between Harry's eyebrows. Pinching the patch of skin, he asked, "Sorry, have you talked with Hermione?" His hand shot up, halting whatever Ron had been about to say. His tone was grim. "No, have you two actually talked to each other like a civil couple?"

"I'm not certain what you—"

"For example, did you know she started crying? In front of me? It was about you."

It was as physical of a blow as getting punched in the gut.

"No," he whispered. He sagged further in his seat, as if someone had pricked him with a needle. "I can't believe—really, she was upset?"

"She certainly wasn't happy."

Ron's expression was heartrending. "Mate... for what it's worth, I'm sorry. She never said anything
about…why do you…why did she come to you? Blimey, when was this? She never told me."
Ron's voice was brittle, barely above a rasp.

"She was helping me with the ambassador's situation. It was the same day Dumbledore's Tomb was
ransacked." Exhaling a gust of breath, Harry leaned back in his seat. He explained, "She was
distraught you would accuse her of cheating. She's pregnant with your child, you wanker."

"I know that. Blimey."

Harry inclined his head. The rebuke existed nonetheless in his gaze.

"And you're telling me this? Now?" Ron's tone was incredulous. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Would you have listened to me?" he asked. Then his expression became inscrutable. "Never mind
that. It's only…I didn't want to meddle, y'know? This is your marriage. But this marital spat of
yours…it's far too long. Even Goldstein's picked up on it."

Ron flinched.

Anthony Goldstein had been assigned to them as one of their department's head psychiatrist, after
having undergone intensive training at St Mungo's. After the previous one retired, there had been an
opening and Harry, Hermione, and Thicknesse had been impressed by Goldstein's credentials during
their interview.

Goldstein had been just as approachable as Harry remembered him in Dumbledore's Army, his
personality just as sunny as the color of his hair. He was still shorter than Harry—and he was still
adamant in his resolve as a practicing Jew—but the boy Harry remembered him as was now a man
who had become self-assured in his skills.

Making up his mind, Harry tugged the green folder from underneath the papers. Then he asked, "Are
you two getting a divorce?"

"What the—?" Ron's eyes bulged. "No, I'm not getting a bloody divorce!"

Harry's brows skyrocketed beneath his fringe. With much deliberateness, he slid the folder over so
that the neat handwriting was illuminated by the table lamp.

Ron's eyes widened even further, spotting his name on the tab. "I-Isn't this supposed to be
confidential? Patient-therapist confidentiality?" Ron swallowed, his complexion paling. His freckles
were brown constellations on his face. He reached for the file, demanding, "Why is it this big?"

"Goldstein's notes are extraordinarily thorough," Harry replied dryly, watching Ron flip through the
documents at a feverish pace. "Which is why I'm inclined to ask what you're going to do about this.
With what Goldstein wrote down, I'm worried for both of you. Especially you, Ron. You always
look like you've slept over at George's shop for eons."

"Is that why you asked if we were getting divorced?" Ron demanded, his brows crumpling as he
skimmed Goldstein's observations.

He read the scribbles—**Disciplinary Charges. Problem-maker. Intelligent, aggressive,
temperamental, and defensive. Loose cannon. PTSD symptoms: exhibits signs of paranoia and
struggles reintegrating back into civilized society. Might require reassignment from fieldwork to
administrative duties to circumvent unavoidable work stressors. Pattern of behavior indicates—**

Ron declared, "This is a load of hogwash."
"I'll save you the legwork. You're not even supposed to see this." Harry leafed through the pages until he reached the more recent entries. As if by rote, Harry said, "There is an escalation of aggressive behavior in your remarks and actions on the field. He suggests PTSD—that's post-traumatic stress disorder—and depression. You have repeatedly mentioned your dissatisfaction at work and at home. He's noted significant weight gain in an abnormal amount of time. Tell me, what am I supposed to think when Goldstein reports to me about such? What's going on, Ron?"

"What does it matter if I've gained weight?" Ron retorted, his ears crimson. The white of knuckles was juxtaposed against the green folder. "You've read my file. You already have your answer. So stop pretending that you care."

Harry's stare could bore holes. There was the small part of him that was rankled by the obstinacy. It was the same small beast that snarled and wanted to break free whenever others had spread falsehoods about him or pushed him beyond his capability for kindness. Miniscule as it was, it was an insidious monster with an explosive temper lying in wait.

He took a deep, shaky breath.

_Hermione's shiny, pink face, wet with tears when she confessed her mixed feelings. Teddy's despairing face, when he nearly broke Harry's pocket watch. Malfoy bleeding, limbs eagle-spread in the water. Sirius being blasted with the Killing Curse, falling through the Veil._

He exhaled slowly. In and out. Meditative. He reminded himself of what was necessary for Occlumency. He was a functioning adult. He was better than this. Only individuals like Voldemort and Vernon let their anger cloud their judgement. Dumbledore wouldn't have allowed himself to be furious. He had to rein it in.

"Ron," he said through gritted teeth. He was displeased by how tight his voice sounded. Clearing his throat, he tried again. "Ron…you're not wrong."

Ron's head snapped up.

"It's difficult for me to care…because this has been something I've known about for a while. Unlike you, I haven't had a proper upbringing. But I'm selfish. I don't want to let you go. Not without due reason. So sod it. Let me ask this: are you unsatisfied at work? Is there anything we can do for you?"

"Mate…." Ron sat up. His expression was perturbed. "Are you—are you firing me?"

"No!" Harry blurted, nearly gawking at him. "Merlin, no. I was—I-I'm not great at comforting others." His breath whooshed out. "I'm asking…do you and Hermione need time? I can pull you off assignment—"

"HARRY!" Ron shouted, startling him into muteness. His eyes were a piercing blue as he stared him down. In a slow drawl, as if explaining to a child, he said gruffly, "Not that I don't appreciate it, but you realize how that'll look? To others? After you'd publically approved stationing me overseas? _On a special assignment._"

His mind was whirling, thoughts running rampant. He honestly hadn't thought about that. He'd been
more concerned about how to make this right again, to Ron. Once again, Ron was demonstrating social insight. Sometimes Harry forgot….

Harry winced.

His gaze fell on the coroner's reports on his desk. Written down was exactly the same toxicology details he'd shared with Harry and Hermione earlier, after having demonstrated the entomology spell results detected no evidence of blowfly larvae anywhere on the bodies.

He could remember the taste of resentment dying on his lips once he realized why she could be feeling inadequate. He could tell she was pushing herself for some invisible goal, like she had something to prove.

Many times Harry appreciated how Hermione's work principles seemed to complement his. Young that they may be compared—to the workforce they oversaw—the pair presented a united front. Wherever the Head Auror went, his Deputy Head was sure to follow. But the side of him that was psychologically attuned now recognized an emotional dependency after having permanently Obliviated all her parents' memories of her existence herself.

Ron was in a different category. At least Ron had parents and siblings to turn to. Hermione only had Harry. So loathe as Harry was to concede to the psychoanalysis, Goldstein had been correct. Their Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder only worsened their reliance.

Yet, habit or not it was for them to turn to each other for advice, Harry should've known better. While she'd brushed up gaps in her knowledge of magical customs, his Deputy Head was sometimes as socially awkward as Harry was. Clever as she was, she was not infallible. She could jump to conclusions in lieu of context and research material. She was overly critical.

He relied on her superior intellect and intelligence-gathering skills. They were the witch's strengths, just as Ron had his. However out of the three of them, only Ron had the semblance of a normal childhood and therefore could make a more astute assessment of wizarding social conventions….

Harry had to help them.

He peeked down at a certain drawer. There was an idea brewing in his head. He knew this was something Ron and Hermione would not do unless they had someone to push them.

Harry gnawed on his lower lip thoughtfully. He could change the subject to make Ron feel better, before Harry delivered his ultimatum. He had to establish solidarity. There was only one subject he could think of that'd distract him.

He also knew the trigger words, framing the request like letting Ron in on a secret that Harry couldn't even trust Hermione with. Even if it meant putting himself in a position of embarrassment….

"Ron," Harry said, steel interlaced in his voice. He had to ask before his nerves got the better of him. He made himself lean several inches forward in his seat. "Before that, may I ask for advice? It's for something unrelated. Hermione is useless on this."

At that, Ron's brows rose to his hairline.

The bait had been cast.

He considered Harry for a bit.

When he found nothing suggesting a prank, he leaned forward in until his chest was pressed against
the edge of the desk. Ron whispered, "What's on your mind?"

Harry repressed a smile. "The ambassador. The Asian one."

Ron blinked rapidly, his mind no doubt working to put a face to all the dignitaries he knew of. Finally he suggested, "That stuck-up tosspot—" he paused, then amended, "the diplomat? The one that talks funny like this?"

He'd adopted a dispassionate drawl to underscore his point. The imitation was accurate enough that, for a moment, Harry imagined he was listening to a Polyjuiced Sesshomaru.

Ron was awaiting Harry's admission. Once he saw Harry nod, he reclined back. His expression was thoughtful, like he was contemplating his next chess move. "What about him? Actually...before you left, you've never mentioned watching anyone under protective custody. Where'd you even find him? He looks like he's got magical creature blood in him. If anything, he's the one that looks scary."

"Don't say that." Harry grimaced. "I found him in Japan."

Ron's brows furrowed. "I know that. But how did you—?" Breaking off, his mouth formed into a small 'o.' The shine of curiosity made his expression livelier. "Hermione's keeping a tight lid on this too. I get you; you were given the assignment. But how is my wife involved? I mean, I understand she's your deputy—"

"I reckon he fancies me!" Harry exclaimed hastily, his ears turning hot.

Silence.

Unable to meet Ron's gaze, he explained, "I know the signs. I don't believe I'm imagining them. He's not exactly subtle."

When Harry snuck a peek, Ron didn't appear repulsed. There was wonder written across his face.

"The bloke fancies you? He's been giving you the eyes?"

"Gee, Ron, way to make me feel confident," Harry said sarcastically. "I'll have you know I'm quite the catch."

"But do you fancy him back?" he insisted. His face was fixed into a serious expression. "I mean, there's nothing wrong with that. But do I need to hex the git for you? If he's been bothering you, you should tell him—"

"Trust me, I'm not bothered by it," Harry interjected, although hearing Ron offer such a thing made his heart swell. He forced himself to confess, "I—it's actually...nice, for a change. I don't mind. That much." He'd simply never thought he'd be flattered to be on the receiving end.

Harry's shirt collar was choking him. He stammered, "Does—does this bother you?" He'd thought it would be impossible, but his ears seemed to burn hotter.

"No, no. It's fine." Ron had held his hands up in surrender. "So...you like him? I mean...no offense, mate, but I thought you were attracted to women." He began ticking off his fingers. "There was Cho Chang, Parvati Patil...then there was my sister..."

He caught Harry cringing. Ron gave him an inscrutable look, before mercifully continuing, "And I've never seen you batting for the other team. You'd certainly never made googly eyes at Gilderoy Lockhart, Cedric Diggory, or 'Bulgarian heartthrob Viktor Krum'—"
Now Ron's complexion became ghastly. "Harry, in the Quidditch changing rooms, have you ever —?"

"No!" Harry answered curtly, glowering at him. Clasping his hands tightly in his lap, Harry forced himself to say, "I never had inappropriate thoughts about you or any of the blokes on the team."

"Oh, thank Merlin." Ron's shoulders sagged, his face upturned dramatically to the ceiling in relief. "That would've been—since when did you start fancying wizards? You've never been...," here he paused, ashamed, before finishing, "particularly lacy."

"There was no 'starting,'" Harry retorted. "I considered it one day, and the thought of it didn't turn me off. I've accepted both ladies and blokes. That's it. My sexuality doesn't have to be that complicated."

"So...you bat for both... teams. I can't believe you've never told me—"

Unable to finish his sentence, Ron's mouth moved into an upside-down 'V.'

To his credit, Ron hadn't stormed out of the room like Harry had imagined countless of times of how he'd broach the topic of his sexuality. It also wasn't as natural as Harry had wished it was, but it was better than he'd been expecting. It felt surreal. He should be thankful Ron was accepting of it as he was.

As if it physically pained him to admit it, Ron spoke slowly to the ceiling, "I suppose he is handsome..."

Harry's mouth moved involuntarily into a frown.

"...I personally don't see it, but if you think he's attractive—"

"I know he's attractive. But I cannot return his feelings."

Ron's head slammed back down to gawk at him.

"Hear me out first. I know it sounds awful—!"

Mid-sentence, he watched as Ron brought a hand to his face.

"You're throwing him a wand..."

"There's no 'wand' being thrown," Harry objected. He breathed in harshly, reminding himself to be patient. "I'm telling you this because I want your opinion. I mean, blast it, it's only a crush. It's not like he's bending down on one knee. So it's...tolerable. I reckon you understand why I cannot return his feelings though."

"Do you fancy him back? Is that what this is?"

"Didn't you hear what I said, Ron? Look, if this operation has a short duration, I'm going to emphasize on a platonic relationship—a friendship...or an alliance, ideally. I'm not ready for a relationship. Especially not one of that nature..."

"Well, Tonks shagged Professor Lupin, didn't she? Bill married Fleur. And Hagrid was mad about Beauxbatons' Headmistress. There's nothing wrong with—"

"Whose side are you on?"

"Wait. Does Hermione know about this? You tell her everything."
Harry hesitated. Then, dropping his gaze, he said, "I realize, in hindsight, it may've been a big oversight."

Ron laughed hollowly. It was gone as fast as it came. "An understatement of the century, ain't it?" He'd folded his arms across his chest. "She chewed you out, didn't she? She'd be the sort to have a wobbly about this."

Dragging the words out was difficult. The effort was akin to swallowing apple pips.

"Hermione...didn't...give me the answer I wanted," Harry forced himself to admit. Taking a deep breath, he said to his desk, "I should've went to you instead. Do you...do you think...I'm doing the right thing?"

Ron was mumbling a few choice words beneath his breath that Harry couldn't catch.

"I honestly don't know what you see in...oh, right. I forgot. Your first crush was Chang. Of course."

Rolling his eyes at Harry's lowered head, Ron continued, "Look, I hate to admit it but whatever Hermione's said to you, she's likely correct. It's the same whatever gender it is. If you don't refuse him upfront, he's going to fall in love with you. You should tell him now. I know it must seem intimidating—"

"Don't be ridiculous...." Harry paused. Then his scowl turned severe. "Look, I'm hoping it won't happen. He's part of a convoluted plan Hermione and I thought up. He has to have enough common sense and be emotionally sensitive enough to sense a lost cause, yeah? If he doesn't, well...."

Ron groaned again. He again mumbled something underneath his breath. Louder, he asked, "He's an important person, ain't he? Some confidential, high-risk magical creature from a secret society overseas that for some reason you and Hermione have been authorized to go to great lengths for? I assume you're rejecting him because of professionalism, and not because he's got creature blood in him."

Out of everything Ron had blurted out, only one phrase stood out to Harry. "Secret society?" Harry parroted blandly.

"Haven't you read the subscriptions? It's been all the Daily Prophet's been talking about since you'd brought him here. He looks and talks oddly. And he's always with you. Obviously, people are going to speculate."

"Remember, I tell Kreacher to comb through my letters. I read what he's approved. I don't see why people would talk about—" Dread pooled in his stomach. There was one topic that the press loved to publish about him. Dismay melted into Harry's expression. "Ron, you aren't saying—?"

It was as if Ron read his mind. "No, no! Most of them's all harmless...the most anyone's done is hint that you two have been attached to the hip a lot more than...actually, you might not want to look into it. I know how you get...."

Ron trailed off, bringing his face away from his hand. Instead, he cradled his jaw, his eyes rooting Harry to his place. Then out of the blue, he declared, "You have gravitas."

Harry's mind spun. He spluttered, "I beg your pardon?"

"If what you're saying is true, that's why he's attracted to you," Ron declared, gesturing at Harry. "You're both diplomats. He's prim and grim. You're rich, gloomy, and distinguished. If he fancies blokes, of course he's going to want to shag the Chosen One. You are a walking success story."
Death has lent you gravitas. I can't say I envy you."

"…Honestly, I'm astonished that you even know the word."

"Hilarious, you are. But I heard Hermione say it once. I liked how it sounded." Ron spoke carefully around the pronunciation of the syllables. "Makes you sound posh."

"If you have the ability to joke, then you must be in an improved mood."

"You're also mul-ti-fa-ce-ted."

"Incredible. Keep that up, Ron, and everyone will comment on how Hermione's been a good influence on you."

They shared a private smile. For a moment, it was as if they were two mates having a pint in a pub after work hours, back when they were both trainees bonding over who had the worst work anecdote of the day. It was only minutes later when the illusion shattered, once both wizards realized they'd gotten off-topic. Their demeanors immediately shifted back into that of sobriety.

"It's up to you," Ron begun, "what you want to do. You're a functioning adult."

"I know I'm an adult."

"If you want to ignore it, fine. Y'know what I think about that. But I support you every step of the way."

Harry was silent for a moment. Then he whispered, "Even if it turns out to be foolish?"

The grin he received was bleak but lopsided.

"Well, maybe not always," Ron conceded, making it a point to gaze directly into his eyes, "but unlike Hermione, I'll back my best mate up—even when it's bonkers. I'm familiar with that Potter stubbornness."

"It's tough changing my mind," Harry joked, feeling the muscles in his face loosening. He must've been beaming for Ron's own to have grown looser. His hand crept downward. "In all seriousness, don't tell Hermione this. She knows but…."

"Mum's the word." Ron mimed zipping his lips shut. He twisted an invisible key and made a motion to throw it over his shoulder.

*Time to take the plunge,* Harry thought to himself, opening a drawer and seizing a stack of business cards tied together by a rubber band. Thumbing through them, he said, "I also don't want to separate you from your wife."

Ron blinked.

Finding the one he wanted, Harry leaned forward. "I'm doing this for your own good."

Harry slid a card over. Embossed on the black card was the name "IRENE TREMLETT," with "Post-Marriage Counselling" printed underneath. Underneath, white ink bisected the center of the card like a jagged tear, fading in and out of existence. Harry had thought it to be clever symbolism.

"Tremlett?" Ron muttered, reading the card. His mouth was slashed downwards. "As in, the bass player from *The Weird Sisters?* The famous one?"
"She's his wife," Harry supplied helpfully. "Remember the band that was there for our Yule Ball? Goldstein's a fan of Donaghan Tremlett."

Harry stole a glance at his pocket watch.

"Why do you have—?"

"Ron, everyone in your family have noticed. Everyone at work as well. You don't think I wouldn't ask Goldstein if he had any professional referrals to give to you?" He tapped the card. "I know you and Hermione won't do it. So I'm booking Irene Tremlett for you two."

Ron immediately launched into a string of protests.

"I'm sorry, but I really don't care. You don't have a choice. If it's not me, then sooner or later your mum might step in." Watching Ron wilt in his seat, Harry demanded, "Don't you want to fix your marriage? Is this an issue of pride?"

"No! I mean, we've thought about it. But—"

"But nothing. There's no shame in seeking marriage counselling. No one is going to think any less of you. Don't get your knickers into a twist, Ron."

Harry stood up, grabbing the pea coat draped on the backrest of his chair. He took a deep breath. Then he rattled off: "Send me your timetable soon. I want to know when the next available day is for you and Hermione. I'll do you a favor and tell her that you were the one to take initiative. It's the effort that counts, alright? She'll like that."

Scrambling to his feet, Ron mirrored his stance. He folded his arms. "Where are we going—?"

"I'm going to pick up Sesshomaru. I don't mean to be rude, but I promised him. It's our nightly ritual. You... I don't know what you want to do, but I assume you'd want to spend time with Hermione before you head back to the States again. You should."

"How goes the investigation in America anyway?"

"It's only been a few days, Harry," Ron retorted, although his expression had become queer when Harry mentioned Sesshomaru's name. He was looking at Harry strangely. "Do you two go on walks? Is that a thing?"

Harry disregarded that. "An update on the investigation's current status, Ron," he insisted, pulling on his coat. There was a glimmer of gold down by the leg of his desk. "Are there any leads yet? There should be operatives with loose lips...."

"We're still settling in. Rubbing elbows. All that rubbish. It's not that fast."

"I said I want a report by the end of the month. I want progress."

"Which you'll have." Ron shifted on his feet. His shoulders were hunched, with one hand gripping his arm awkwardly. Although he towered over Harry, the way he now held himself could make anyone feel like a giant in comparison. Ron added, "The Director still loathes you."

His voice had lacked heat. His gaze followed Harry's.

Harry's smirk was skewed. "Well, I don't expect to win them all."

Unlike the nights before, tonight seemed auspicious. A blanket of fireflies were like stars that broke
through the fog, illuminating the darkness like a thousand tiny lanterns.

Sesshomaru turned his gaze up, peering past the canopy of leaves. The moon reminded him of a large fish's eye, round and luminous in the overcast sky. Like always, the heady scents of pine and grass and rotted wood surrounded him, nearly masking the faint stench of blood and decomposition that laid underneath.

Crickets were chirruping. Beyond that, pointed ears registered the sound of gravel and grass crunching beneath footwear. His line of sight tilted. Slanting his gaze to peer behind him, amber eyes slid to take in the sight of the silent figure striding behind him.

Curiously, it was as if one of the burdens festering in Hari's heart had evaporated. The subtle change in mood had been in the way he'd greeted Sesshomaru tonight when he showed up in the Department of Mysteries, and in the way he'd drift closer to demonstrate a spell—as if he'd forgotten that he'd been trying to erect space between them ever since the night Sesshomaru had submitted himself to be Hari's *nenja*.

Once they headed into the Forbidden Forest, that geniality seemed to slip away. Although his mission at hand seemed to imbue the sorcerer with determination, a measured gait was maintained as they combed the forest.

These nights Sesshomaru looked forward to their scheduled arrangements, with each trip traveling further and further into the woods. Throughout nightfall, Hari would occasionally murmur gibberish that sounded to Sesshomaru's ears like "*Accio*"—followed by variations of words like "*Resurrection Stone*," "*Deathly Hallow*," "*Elder Wand*," or "*Death Stick*"—and then growling in frustration whenever nothing happened. When Sesshomaru had inquired once into the matter, Hari's reply had been terse.

Sesshomaru hadn't pressed him on it since.

Like always, the sorcerer had his gaze trained on that map of his. However this time he seemed to be lost in thought, a hand brought below his lips. Beneath those gloved fingers, Sesshomaru could catch another glimpse of that polished golden sphere Hari had been toying with. From here and then, he'd hear the same riddle being passed through Hari's lips: "*I open at the close.*"

The first few times of their nightly ritual, the sorcerer had been loquacious. Whenever there had been a lull, Hari had been compelled to fill the silence with any mindless thought from the top of his head. From everything that had been shared, Sesshomaru could only surmise that Hari was avoiding that certain topic, as if anticipating the question on Sesshomaru's lips.

Almost as if, the longer the silence stretched, he feared Sesshomaru would delve into Hari's insecurities.

It served as both an insult and a blow to his pride. On the one occasion that Sesshomaru was willing to volunteer himself as a whetstone to sharpen one's blade, his qualifications were met with skepticism. The only thing keeping Sesshomaru's acid tongue back from commenting on that display of disrespect was the younger alpha's questions into what the *shudō* apprenticeship would entail.

Sporadic they may have been, questions meant it wasn't exactly a rejection. The sorcerer was curious of what it'd be like under his official guidance. As the Lord of the Western Lands, Sesshomaru answered them to the best of his knowledge.

Often times their conversations had been one-sided, with Hari divulging whatever important tasks he'd overseen in the barracks. Many times Sesshomaru had struggled to understand what Hari chose
to tell him. Yet dignity curbed Sesshomaru's tongue.

He had decided it would be in his best interest to return the appropriate eye contact. Occasionally he'd grunt. Those gestures would indicate comprehension, obscuring any ignorance that might be perceived.

Getting Hari to lower his guard was akin to climbing a mountain. It was a slow progress, but everyday bore fruit. Whenever it arrived around the subject of Hari's many vassals, Sesshomaru had heard many personal grievances, suspicions, and praises that Sesshomaru suspected the sorcerer did not share often with others.

It was in the way Hari sometimes started a sentence, faltering in abrupt bursts—those arresting eyes, which reminded Sesshomaru of jade, always shooting to peek at him as if to confirm he'd been listening—before covering up those lapses as if they'd never happened. On occasion, he'd also asked Sesshomaru for counsel.

Sesshomaru assumed they were tests. Those moments when he answered were when Hari appeared startled, as if he hadn't considered that Sesshomaru could be a source of wisdom.

Displeasure coursed through Sesshomaru's veins once more, upon recollecting those memories.

It'd never occurred to him once that another individual would find him lacking.

The next few times into their forest explorations, Hari must've felt comfortable enough. They'd stalk past a snarled thicket, and Hari would reminisce that'd been where he nearly lost his life. Whenever they'd see domed cobwebs hanging from branches, anecdotes about spiders would be shared—"I know what you're thinking; they're definitely not yokai and they're not the normal tiny spiders either," Hari would stress to Sesshomaru—conjuring images of Naraku in Sesshomaru's mind.

Craning his neck upwards, Sesshomaru took in the webs draped overhead. The further away they searched from the steep slope—"Aragog's Lair; it's devoid of trees because it used to be a clearing big enough to house all those massive Acromantulas"—the less misty it was. The sparser the sticky webs became.

The intensity which had radiated from Hari when they'd first begun combing the grounds in the epicenter of the so-called lair had been enough to raise the fine hairs on the back of Sesshomaru's neck.

His eyes flicked back down, to hide his shiver of delight. He realized his presence was more of a comfort to the sorcerer than any usefulness, for Sesshomaru had long disclosed that it was nigh impossible for him to be able to pinpoint the exact location of this stone.

He could trace the approximate direction, but Hari's scent lingered everywhere. (Hari had confessed that it was likely because he'd visited the woods often in his youth. He'd apologized for his muddled scent.)

Abruptly, the mild-mannered dulcet accent filtered back into his awareness, snatching Sesshomaru's interest. His eyes were meeting green ones head-on.

"You called the Resurrection Stone by something else, I recall…." Hari trailed off in Japanese. 
"'Meidō Stone,' I believe. A…'Dark Path Stone'?"

A dark brow rose. "Indeed…" 

"Why did you call it that? Did you have something similar in your country?"
Irritation flashed through Sesshomaru. It must have shown in his expression for Hari to clarify, "I'm only asking because only few know about the Resurrection Stone. It's...an inside secret. Sort of. It comes from an English fable. You have to understand my confusion, Lord Sesshomaru."

Sesshomaru frowned. There was that formality being wielded once again.

"This Sesshomaru had not known there had been more than one Meidō Stone in existence," he replied truthfully. The only time he'd been aware of its existence had been the time he'd been reunited with his mother in their palace.

After rescuing his ward from the Underworld, upon seeing her son crouched over the tiny human girl, out of whim or compassion—Sesshomaru did not know—his Lady Mother glided over to place her necklace over Rin's still chest.

That jewelry had been a gift from his father; Sesshomaru couldn't recall anytime that his mother took that necklace off except perhaps when she bathed. She'd taken great care of the blue orb—it was as large as a child's fist—and the glossy pearls that strung everything together.

He remembered observing in wonder when a bright radiance was discharged from the jewel. The existence of the Meidō Stone had melted away from his care the instant that the human brown eyes groggily opened once more.

But Hari did not need to know the specifics.

Instead, Sesshomaru finished, "It matters little. Its existence in my lands is none of this Hari's concern."

The look that Hari pinned him was unsettling, and Sesshomaru met it with his own challenging glare.

Awhile later, Hari's dropped back down in favor of inspecting his map, as if determining it was not worth the battle. His mouth was now fixed into a dour slant. Hari picked up his pace so that he was striding alongside.

The muscles in his body loosening, Sesshomaru was only grateful Hari had the decency to not pry.

Hari seemed to be ruminating on something. After a while, he muttered, "Sorry. I realize this must seem like a waste of your time. But I'm thankful that you're here." He'd pocketed the golden ball with wings.

"It is as this Hari said," he retorted. "This Hari is seeking a relic deemed invaluable. With each new ground we cover, we are making headway. Your gratitude is, once again, inconsequential."

Hari didn't reply, although the corner of his mouth was beginning the crawl upward.

Sesshomaru peered into the distance, his nose wrinkling. The distinct stench of equestrians was stronger than before. Before the musky odor had been a mild afterthought, barely registering against the scents of mildew and grass he breathed in.

Originally honing in on the source of the scent, Sesshomaru had only glimpsed primitive tools or the backs of mottled hindquarters cantering away.

They always kept a wide enough breadth between them, only staying long enough to observe their movements.

When he'd first brought it to Hari's awareness, Hari had told him that unless it was a herd it should be
of little concern to them. It was their habitat. Although they are territorial, "centaurs" typically leave outsiders alone if left unprovoked. He'd given Sesshomaru a weighted look then.

Sesshomaru hadn't been certain of the arbitrary number which would constitute as a herd.

At the present, the stench was stronger.

The trail they were on had a cleared route. It was the path they'd avoided initially, for many hoof marks had sunk into the soil like grooves in inkstone. By process of elimination, it was only this and the outskirts of the hollowed clearing that Hari declared could be the remaining places they were to search. After that, he had no clue of where his heirloom could be.

They seemed to be operating off Hari's memory. As he'd put it, he'd dropped the stone somewhere near here.

The procedure wasn't as infuriating as it'd been when Sesshomaru had been blindly searching for his Sire's Tessaiga. After all, what was several weeks compared to two centuries? When he'd mentioned such to Hari, he had given Sesshomaru such an incredulous stare.

From the corner of his eye, he spotted when Hari abruptly became motionless. He heard Hari hiss an expletive, his face still buried in his map. Just as Sesshomaru was wondering how to react to the crass language appropriately, he heard a command that exceeded his expectations.

For a moment, Sesshomaru wondered if his ears had been mistaken.

When Sesshomaru turned around fully, Hari was rummaging through his coat—the foreign outerwear resembled a haori in length, except the men of this future seemed to favor round objects as fasteners and as substitution for lack of embroidery—before pulling out a pouch.

Sensing eyes on him, Hari inclined his head to the sky. He restated cryptically, "I asked if you could fly up there, Lord Sesshomaru? I'd rather you not be seen."

Sesshomaru didn't move an inch. He neither smelt nor heard anything that would pose a real threat to them. Yet this was only one thing that this could be. Searching his gaze, he declared, "Think naught of it. Their presence is of no concern to us."

His hand slunk down to the hilt of his scabbard.

"How could you have—?" Hari's sentence halted. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Of course you know. Look, I'd feel better knowing if you just kept watch, Lord Sesshomaru. It won't be long if they're coming to us."

Unraveling the leather cord, he reached into the small sack.

Sesshomaru's brows descended. No matter how many times he witnessed it, seeing it always caught him off guard.

Although it defied common sense, Harry withdrew the same long cloak he'd thrown over Sesshomaru several times ago. It was the same one that smelled of hide, which rendered one invisible to anyone's sight when worn.

Without looking in Sesshomaru's direction, he remarked casually, "So should I presume you're going to disregard that? As usual?"

Sesshomaru maintained his look of disapproval.
A sigh escaped from Hari. Slinging the cloak over an elbow, he advanced forward. Sesshomaru must have made a face, for Hari muttered an apology shortly after.

Their bodies separated by only a scant distance, Sesshomaru could hear Hari’s soft breathing as he showed him the contents of the parchment.

Sesshomaru stared, feeling the same odd warm sensation in his eyes as foreign sorcery translated the exotic characters for him. What he saw was a map with detailed landmarks and geography, indicating types of landmass and trees by various artistic techniques. Much to his fascination, the inked artwork was moving as if it had a soul trapped inside.

Sesshomaru had to bend his head when a gloved finger slid down to the inked depiction. It was a cluster of footprints rapidly approaching two pairs of footprints denoted as theirs. Various banners with their written names pursued after each one, the drawing rippling as if being blown by an invisible wind.

"Centaurs," Hari breathed. When he inclined his head up toward Sesshomaru, his eyes were luminous. "I recognize two—maybe three of the names. They might be heading elsewhere, but it wouldn’t hurt for us to be cautious."

"Your concern is trifling. They shall pose no difficulty to this Sesshomaru. Nor to this Hari."

"No. I don’t want to hurt them."

The hard edge of refusal was embedded in that tone. Sesshomaru narrowed his eyes, but he kept his mouth shut.

Eventually determining the silence as his acquiescence, Hari leant back. The crease of those dark eyebrows had relaxed a tad. "Understand…centaurs are a protected species. Self-defense is alright. But bloodshed should be our ultimate last resort." Cocking a brow, he lifted his arm inquisitively. "If you don’t wish to wear the Invisibility Cloak, I won’t force you. I only think you’ll be making it… difficult on yourself. I only ask you—do you wish to do this the hard way or the more sensible way?"

There wasn’t any need to ask. Sesshomaru eyed the garment. He had never paid it much notice before, but the magical hide seemed to spark the same source of curiosity from Tenseiga. Even now he could feel the small vibrations by his thigh.

His gaze went to dissect the expression directed at him. It was like staring back at a Noh mask crafted with foreign features, with only minute indicators to clue him in.

A reasonable man would choose the sensible approach. Hari had to be asking because he was gauging something about Sesshomaru’s character once more. Subsequently this called into question of the sort of impression he wished to impart on Hari. Would he be a strict mentor or would he fall into an indulgent role for this young alpha?

Or would he be determined to be lacking in competency?

Sesshomaru would not grant the sorcerer that opportunity.

Maintaining eyesight on that neutral expression, reformatting his tone into that of a challenge, Sesshomaru reproached, "Subterfuge is the strategy of mercenaries and spies for hire, unbefitting of those of higher upbringing. This Sesshomaru would think we are above such tactics."

Hari was frowning at him. There was a mystified line to his mouth as he reflected on the lesson.
Green eyes flashed from Sesshomaru and back again as he mulled the thought in his head.

Eventually, Hari's arm lowered. He said gruffly, "I apologize if there's been any cultural offense."

Sesshomaru merely inclined his head.

"Alright, we'll give it a go then. I know I'm being rude right now but I implore you to let me be the one to speak. It is their centaur way. Strangers aren't typically...." Trailing off, he made a show of shrugging his shoulders.

"Since we're doing this the hard way," Hari continued, "refrain from making any sudden movement. Constant vigilance. Be on your very best behavior."

Although Hari's voice had not been loud, it carried the authority of a general assured of his competency—a general used to getting his way. It belonged to a man used to carrying the fate of an army in his hand and giving orders. Right now those eyes were glaring at Sesshomaru, as if daring him to defy him.

Sesshomaru was seeing it more and more. Behind that illusion of a well-mannered envoy, beyond his mild agreeable nature that he presented to the world, the young sorcerer was a willful man at his core.

A thin smile was suppressed. This was Sesshomaru's insight into their apprenticeship.

The scent in the forest was growing stronger. The very earth was now quivering. Hari's attention had transferred with the change in their situation.

Emerging from his rumination, Sesshomaru made a low, rumbly growl in his throat. When he saw Hari straighten up, Sesshomaru forced himself to say in a pleasant enough tone: "Then this Sesshomaru shall have to impose on this Hari. You may prove your competence. This Sesshomaru will heed your caution and observe."

Despite the sorcerer's shorter stature, the gaze leveled on him could chill most men. But he kept his composure—his posture loose and open, nonthreatening—while his body language was being clinically appraised. Sesshomaru refused to lower his eyes or bare his neck. His claws had loosened their grip on the hilt of his sword.

Hari's demeanor shifted. Squaring his shoulders, he faced away from him. He was peering into the distance of the trail. "I think I see them. Follow my lead."

His wand was pointed to the ground.

The cloak that Hari had thrown over his shoulders rippled in the wind like a war flag as he marched forth. Sesshomaru didn't need to see Hari's face to imagine the expression on his face. It was in his confident gait and the rigidity of his posture that spoke measures. The map was nowhere in sight.

Sesshomaru was no stranger to the sight of warhorses. Human samurais and lords, even bandits, bred and mounted those magnificent creatures for mobility and combat. He was also cognizant that demons liked to bed humans, either coupling with them willingly or through rape. So although rare, horse hanyōs were known to exist. Even then, what Sesshomaru bore witness to now was extraordinary.

Across the distance, a small herd was sprinting toward them. What he saw was a baffling sight of crossbreeds with the upper body of a human and the lower half of stallions. No more than eight, they fell into formation.
Holes into the soil were dug from the hooves galloping across the expanse. The moonlight shining through the forest canopies casted a mottled pattern across the corded torsos of these odd creatures. Each centaur had hair that was ratty and matted, either left free-flowing or braided. Their complexions were as dark as their sleek coats, nearly camouflaging them into the woods.

It was the sight of quivers strapped to their backs—long leather straps bound tightly across muscled chests—and the longbows swinging back and forth in their fists, that would naturally put Sesshomaru on edge. However, the craftsmanship of the bows was crude, as if the wood had been whittled from primitive tools.

At the head of the herd was the largest of the creatures. Towering over the rest, darkness wreathed him from his head to facial hair to the rest of his four-legged body. Like his species, his nose and eyes were equestrian, incongruous against an otherwise feral human face.

If he was the leader, of all the centaurs, he would be the first whom Sesshomaru would slay. The design on the quiver seemed to signify status.

Another centaur of similar coloring was galloping closely behind, but his strap was not as ornamented as the one leading the charge.

A pair was sprinting behind them like a pair of military adjutants. One was a centaur with a red mane and a glossy chestnut coat. The other one was a fair-headed centaur with finer features—the opposite of the tall centaur ahead of them. Ugly scars crisscrossed his pale flank, the raised skin gleaming silvery white beneath the moonlight.

All four had their gazes fixed on Hari, who'd kept his composure even as they approached him at a frightening speed.

Sesshomaru did not sense any bloodlust from them. He released his grip from the hilt of his fang.

By now the rumbling was audible, with hooves clip-clopping against the dirt path. The sound was nearly synonymous to the vault of timepieces thunderously ticking in the Time Room.

When there was no more than half a field's length between them, the dark-haired centaur dug in his hooves, crumbs of dirt flying from the forceful momentum. Following his lead, the rest skidded to a halt.

A few reared up, forelegs kicking, before gravity yanked them back down. Tails were flicking back and forth. A few paced side to side, keeping their eyes on Sesshomaru.

None of them wore armor. It would take an easy flick of the wrist, and an acid whip would dissolve through flesh and bone.

Sesshomaru took a step forward behind Hari, his claws sliding into his sleeves. The sharp points of his nails were a light touch against the markings on his skin.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the grim slant of Hari's mouth as the small herd advanced. His attention seemed to be drawn upward to one centaur in particular.

"No need to bristle, young stallion," the red one spoke first, much to Sesshomaru's surprise. Like his appearance, his voice was doleful and serene. "We have no quarrel with you…"

"You're…Ronan, correct?" His tone was wary.

Astonishment flashed through the centaur's eyes. He inclined his long neck. "Tis I. And you are the
wizard—nay, warlock—who has banished great evil from our forest. You have grown tremendously —"

"Death Defier," the taller dark creature barked, dour as his expression was. It provided a strange contrast to the queer expression on Hari's face when the title was announced. The tall centaur strode forth. The pace was gradual, guarded—as if he were approaching his own execution.

The centaurs behind him began puffing air through their nose loudly, nostrils flaring. Their ears were flicking back and forth, fearful for some reason.

Once he'd closed half the distance, he halted, staring Hari down. "We have not been formally introduced. I am Magorian, chieftain of this colony." He hung his head.

Hari inhaled sharply.

Whispers broke the silence. A few shifted uneasily, looking at each other. But soon…the remaining seven centaurs followed, their heads falling like marionettes with their strings cut.

Faltering only the slightest by the unexpected gesture, it took a while for Hari to make up his mind on how to proceed. Sesshomaru watched in wonder when Hari made the motion to bow back.

The sorcerer was also the first to straighten his spine upright.

Raising his head, Ronan seemed to read the question in his eyes. He smiled. "Fret not. Although you have been trespassing centaur land, for your noble spirit in battle and for lending us your voice in your 'international meeting of wizards,' Chief Magorian has ordered you temporary safe passage. It is why you have not been killed. He has ordered close observation of your movements only."

"I see…I'd been wondering about that." He could see the rigidity had ebbed from Hari's shoulders. Hari glanced in Magorian's way. "I'm really appreciative, Chieftain Magorian, despite causing your colony unneeded concern. It wasn't my intention to—"

"Words hold no more significance, than do actions," the other dark-colored centaur declared, approaching them. His ears were flattened in the direction of the chieftain, his sight fixed elsewhere. His voice was begrudgingly respectful. "We do not meddle in human affairs. Yet you are still here… alive. Therefore…we pay you our respects."

Sesshomaru stared at him incredulously.

"Hello to you too, Bane." Hari's lips had curled in a wan smile. "I know. I survived. Perish the thought."

"Harry Potter." This time it was the fair-haired centaur that spoke—the one that Hari seemed initially interested in. His tone was noticeably friendlier.

"Firenze, you are still in one piece." His smile warmed. "I'm glad. It's been a long time."

"Indeed." The centaur's eyes gleamed. They were two bright blue orbs under the starlight. Of the eight centaurs, he had facial features that could still be considered as handsome. "You seem to have done my colony many great services. Not only that, but I heard you've been granted life peerage. You are not like how you were."

"More like I'd inherited the titles, for reasons, but it's all the same."

"And you've situated yourself in positions of power. Your growth is commendable." Firenze trotted
forth, unconcerned of the whinnies and distressed sounds that rose like the swelling of a tide.

He'd stopped momentarily when Bane moved as if to intercept him, but Magorian nickered a low warning from the back.

Ears flattening, Bane watched as Firenze shot him a smug glance before cantering past. His sight was fixated on Hari. Like the rest of his herd, it seemed that the presence of Sesshomaru was put from his mind, just as their leader Magorian was treated as an invisible but audible spectator.

Sesshomaru took another step closer behind Hari, glaring over his shoulder. Both centaur and sorcerer seemed intent on disregarding his presence.

"It's good to see you well," Firenze declared once he was only a meter away from them. "The dark cloud that loomed over you has subsided. You have once more diverted fate's decree. That is your calling."

"I...don't know about 'diverting fate's decree,' but thanks. I suppose." His voice was a little on edge. Hari scanned the rest of the centaurs, before addressing Firenze: "Is there something I can do for you and your colony? It's a bit too early to discuss the magical creature rights bill. I also assume you're not here just to say hello."

His question was met with an approving stare.

"Just as well. You have learned some centaur customs." Firenze shot a glance over his shoulder at his leader, seeking permission. It was only when he saw the head dip that he returned his attention upfront. "I speak for my colony. Our chieftain wishes to ask what you seek in our sanctioned lands. You have made many unauthorized trips."

Shame contorted Hari's features, before reforming into a genial expression. "I would apologize. In human society, it's a verbal sign of politeness. But I understand the inappropriateness in centaur culture. Has there been any suspicious activities—?"

"That is not what you truly seek. Ask again."

Hari exhaled through his nose. Lifting his hand, slowly, his palm facing away from him, he pointed to a gloved finger. Under a different tone, he stated, "I seek a stone from a ring I'd dropped. It was back when we were fighting Voldemort. I understand it might be in your lands, but legally it was willed to me from Dumbledore. I would like to fetch it before I or anyone else trouble the colony any further—"

"No one wants your Death Stone—warlock—or to hear you dress words," Bane asserted. The centaur sneered when he saw Hari's eyes shoot wide open.

For a fleeting instant, Sesshomaru thought he saw a gleam of something like triumph in those sable eyes.

The smugness withered when Firenze dashed up to the older centaur, snarling in Bane's face. Harsh exchanges were whispered, before Bane fell back, appropriately disciplined.

Firenze returned, his eyebrows crinkled in irritation. "You are operating under a misassumption. The longer it remains in our lands, misfortune will be brought on us. We see it as an omen, Potter. You did not need to mention the dead to curry favor with us."

"...How could you have known about the—?"
"I have heard word of your wizarding folklores. Your little foal...nay, Miss Luna Lovegood visited the colony. Your name has surfaced in the stories."

"Of course. Luna."

"She means well. Although I cannot understand the extent, she holds you in high regard. Just as she has divined her purpose to be that of a Magizoologist...." He was searching Hari's expression. "...A spirit such as yours covets the Death Stone? One would think someone of yourself would draw wisdom from times past."

Hari appeared as if he had half a mind to speak his thoughts, but he'd thought better of it. Once he noticed that the centaur was waiting for a verbal reply, he said, "What little attachment I have to the Resurrection Stone is sentimentality. Listen, if it's possible, I'll have the Deathly Hallow destroyed."

Whispers resurfaced.

Hari shifted on his feet, defensively crossing his arms.

"That is extraordinarily unwise," an accented, coarse voice emerged over hushed conversations. It came from a younger-looking centaur, smaller than the rest. "It would be for the best to forgo your arrogant ambitions and leave such things to fate. If it brings us misfortune, such is the cosmos. A human needn't—"

The centaurs rounded on the young male. It required some shuffling, but he was moved to the rear. They harangued the young colt unintelligibly.

"—we should have a care," he was arguing, but his voice soon became drowned out.

"You must forgive our young colt," Firenze said in a placating tone, although there was a twinkle in those twin oceans of blue. "Your quest is noble if not optimistic, Harry Potter."

A shadow passed Hari's expression. His posture was guarded. "If it's alright to ask, what are your thoughts about the Deathly Hallows?"

"I am aware of your legend. They are cursed relics from wizard history. Always the innocent and the desperate are the first victims, so it has been for ages past, so it is now."

"I see. Does...the rest of the colony hold the same opinion?"

"Perhaps." His gaze shifted, meeting Sesshomaru's momentarily in the journey up, before lifting skywards. There was the faintest angle to his mouth. He commented, "Every time my ears hear of your extraordinary tales, Potter, a common occurrence is that it takes place at night. It seems you are favored. The moon is the brightest tonight."

"Professor Firenze...."

"There is no longer need of that title. Hogwarts was never my home. My place is with my colony."

Hari was quiet but for a moment. He inclined his head. "You were a better Divinations professor than Professor Trelawney," he admitted, "but I understand. I'm happy for you."

Sesshomaru's eyes instantly narrowed. He could feel the vibrations of mokomoko-sama moving on his shoulder as the fur stood upright.

Hari glanced back at Sesshomaru, conveying a silent message, before returning his sight back to
"It might be an exercise in futility, but it will give me a peace of mind if I was the one to find the stone first before any Death Eater or Snatcher get to it. The Elder Wand...Death Stick is gone. So it's only a matter of time...."

"Do not despair. It is not as futile as it may seem." Gathering his hand into a fist, with one finger extended he pointed to the clearing where Sesshomaru and Hari had come from. "You have chosen an opportune time. What you seek is where your life ended and where your new life started."

"...Pardon? I don't mean to be rude, but we've searched—"

"What Bane said was not folly. We do not meddle in human affairs. Yet you remain unobservant to our hints to you from the shadows." Firenze scoffed through his nostrils. He added dryly, "One of our stallions reported seeing a stone that matches what you seek, in another of our nightly watches. At the time, it was paid no more significance than a pebble being tossed into the wide cosmos."

"Ah. Then perhaps, if it isn't too much of a bother, to save time would you be willing to guide us —?"

"Understand, much like anyone else, you are another wheel in the pivotal events that unfold in your personal corner of the universe. We have already overstepped our bounds. Search where you had not been considered before. Your destination lies among the tree's roots."

"...I understand. Thank you, Firenze."

"The time traveler as well...."

Finally, he had verbally acknowledged the dog demon's presence. Even as Hari tensed, gritting his teeth, Firenze's gaze was steady but critical.

"Harry Potter, I reiterate. I do not meddle in the affairs of outsiders. It is not the centaur way."

"I beg your—Luna told you about the time-travel—?"

"But I'll say this—both of you count among the unique individuals where planetary movements and providence do not dictate your fate," he continued, ignoring Hari's exclamation. "That is why you cannot help but be drawn together. I see the string of destiny entwining your futures. But be wary, travelers of time. Prudence precludes arrogance."


"Of what manner of magical incantation was that?" Firenze demanded, his ears flattened. Looking vaguely disturbed—having heard the whispered admonition—he'd taken a step back. Like the other centaurs, his tail was tossing in the air.

"That was not a magical—nothing, it was nothing, Firenze. I told him to calm down in his native language. Please don't pay any mind to it."

"I see...I have spent too long in human company, it has affected my judgement," he said mournfully. "It loosens the tongue and makes one suspicious."

Hari sighed. Closing his eyes, he stated, "One last note...Umbridge. You remember her? She's the
Ministry worker...she's the nasty witch who called you all 'half-breeds.'"

The smirks that sprung up on the centaurs' faces was an unnerving spectacle, but Hari did not comment on them.

"I hope it'll please you to know she's going to be given a trial soon, in wizarding society. There will be a sentence."

"Just as well. She has chosen her path in the universe. It is time for her to reap what has been sowed."

"Would you...permit me...or Luna to come by, to deliver news of Umbridge's sentence to your herd?"

"There is no need. To us, human systems of justice are needlessly elaborate and trifling." Nodding at Hari who had reopened his eyes, Firenze said, "Not all share my view—but it was good to meet you again, Lord Harry James Potter Black Peverell...Master of Death."

Hearing the last address, Sesshomaru's lips parted.

Firenze's forelegs buckled under him gracefully, until that limber body lowered with an arm swept before him as a show of genuflection. It was a more respectful gesture that touched the soul than the bows the centaurs demonstrated prior. The tips of his long fair hair touched the grass.

Hari seemed troubled by the sight. His brows were scrunched, and his mouth was set into a grimace. There was an unflattering shade of white to his face.

Once Firenze straightened his back, under their joint scrutiny the centaur stated, "Do not worry. The stone belongs to its rightful owner. No one dares approach a cursed object—no less a small unintelligent animal. It will be where it is. That is, if you do not blind yourself to your sense of sight."

He whirled around.

"Let me guess...," Hari murmured to himself, "if I still cannot find it—."

"Then perhaps it was never meant to be. Good luck, Harry Potter...and time traveler."

They could not see Firenze's face, but the centaurs he was approaching shared smirks—secretive and enigmatic.

With one last condescending look at Sesshomaru, once Firenze rejoined their ranks, the centaurs ambled off at last, apparently satisfied with their deliverance. Magorian led the herd, followed by Bane, and then Ronan and Firenze.

Sesshomaru and Hari watched as their bobbing tails disappeared into the woods, no longer within sight. All the tension melted from their frames. Sesshomaru shifted his attention back on Hari, studying the stouter man. His thoughts were running wild, assessing the memory of that conversation.

Finally Hari spoke, "I'm sure you have questions."

The timber of his voice sounded pensive, bleaker than it had before. The shift in tone was nearly offensive.

"This Sesshomaru is able to piece enough of the puzzle together," he retorted, his arms falling from
his sleeves.

"That's remarkable." Hari lifted his eyes up to the sky. Reaching into his pocket, he explained distractedly, "In wizarding society, I've heard people call centaurs 'stargazers.' Their sort typically won't give straight answers. So tonight was...interesting. To say the least."

There had been three noteworthy revelations from this exchange. Yet Sesshomaru held himself back from making his real thoughts known. Instead, he silently reevaluated his decision to go through with his idea. He had, after all, come face to face with one of Hari's past instructors.

Sesshomaru's reasoning for suggesting a mentorship in the first place hadn't been entirely altruistic. The objective had been to forge trust and dependency. *On him.* After considering all avenues, following the *wakashūdo* tradition would've been the swiftest method. It was also the decision determined to be of most flexibility, should Sesshomaru decide to take it a step further or if he determined it wasn't worth it in the end.

Nevertheless with a relationship of pederasty came a system of order. Roles were strictly defined. Narrowing his eyes, Sesshomaru said, "That woman...has loose lips. This you should be aware."

"I'll have a word with her."

"Your attitude does not match your words."

"I said I'll deal with it. Luna is none of your concern." Hari turned around, his wand clenched tightly. "Let's go. We seemed to have missed a spot. You may ask me questions while we walk."

His lips thinned. After a while Sesshomaru followed, countless considerations emerging within the murky depths of his mind.

Their relationship might not follow traditional convention. While Sesshomaru was an alpha, Hari was also an alpha. With that came the inherent need to establish one's dominance; it was in their nature. The foreigner also seemed unaccustomed to the official customs which followed the practice between warriors. It might be a foreign concept or it was a practice that had fallen out of date.

Their education would have to expand past training him only in martial skills. Once they accepted the rites, Hari would have to learn his place.

Conversely that strong sense of responsibility, powerful witchcraft, and inner strength made the younger general an appealing candidate. There was potential; Sesshomaru had begun to see it in their initial meeting and as time passed, he was starting to believe in it. This young alpha knew how to adapt and take command of a situation. He would not have to be a frontline warrior; he could eliminate annoyances from the rear while someone like Sesshomaru took care of the rest.

The only shortcomings Sesshomaru could think of were that Hari was not a traditional warrior of martial skills and that he was a foreigner.

But those were easily amendable.

Militaristically, it was still a worthwhile prospect. Sesshomaru would be the gardener to nourish the tilled soil and beckon it forth until it grew fruit. He could be that guiding hand—the sole person to support Hari, provide for him, and train him. He would consume the sorcerer's thoughts. He could curate the devotion so that treason would never cross his mind. Hari would hang off Sesshomaru's every word.

In return, Sesshomaru could use a general—a devoted individual with different experiences,
impressive feats, and a unique perspective that would not be found in *Nippon*. A yōkai's lifespan was ample; amusements were rare to come by. Collections weren't unheard of.

In his path of conquest and power, Sesshomaru might have need of someone in his Court with the sorcerer's seats of power. His abilities complemented his. Best of all, Hari was a well overflowing with knowledge of the future. And it was in a dog demon's inquisitive nature to investigate—to unravel and break mysteries apart.

It was not an offer made lightly. In all his years of observing yōkai undertake the brotherhood contract, it'd never occurred to Sesshomaru that he might desire one for himself—to fight alongside him. Only time will tell if Hari was worthy of being his Lord Consort—a companion capable of speaking their mind while being capable of deferring to their lord in public.

But for now, he will allow Hari the illusion of choice. Hari would be his first *wakashū*—and Sesshomaru's only.

"Then this Hari may tell me," Sesshomaru spoke, "why would they laud you with the title of *Master of Death*?"

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Hari *Apparated* themselves back when the sun began to tint the skies yellow. There was a contrite smile aimed at Sesshomaru, a gloved hand releasing the kimonoed sleeve. Hari scanned the premises, surveying the paved roads and the dark windows for signs of life. Finding nothing of alarm, he flung the Invisibility Cloak from their heads.

Sesshomaru straightened back up, watching intently as Hari turned his back on him.

His shadow was an elongated dark form against the grey stone.

He remembered the eerie instance when the constant murmur of woodland nightlife fell silent. His back had been pressed against the trunk of a tree when he heard loud rustling noises in the direction where Hari had disappeared off to.

His sight had shifted over. Thoughts of Deathly Hallows and Masters of Death fell away once he'd spotted Hari emerging from behind another tree. The sorcerer had been nonchalantly plucking a strand of webbing away from his hair, the fingertips of his leather gloves dyed with wet soil and grass. One of his hands had been gathered into a fist.

There had been something about the image the sorcerer made—with the light of his wand highlighting his silhouette and illuminating a narrow area of the dark woods—juxtaposed against the high of conquest in that handsome expression which stole Sesshomaru's breath away.

The memory of that moment melted into current sight of the foreign man ascending up the six stone steps.

Striding forth with one of his hands in his trouser pocket and the other raised midair as if in a gesture to knock, Hari had the palm facing away from the dark door when the architecture loudly lumbered sideways. The heavy groan of stones grinding against stones clanked in their eardrums as the townhouse unfolded back into their plane of existence.

Immediately upon the pair broaching the threshold, when Hari closed the door behind them, the same small wrinkly creature scurried out of nowhere. Kreacher was croaking his lord's title, his haste suggesting his eagerness to attend to his lord and guest. He was at the door before they could blink.

Witnessing the excited energy behind the display of servitude, the déjà vu Sesshomaru experienced...
was disconcerting. For a moment, he could picture himself in Hari's position, and Jaken in Kreacher's place.

The difference was that Hari was a less aloof lord than Sesshomaru. Without much fanfare, the sorcerer began stripping himself of his coat—missing Sesshomaru's wide-eyed reception to his actions—to place on a nearby rack. Hari greeted his indentured servant with an amused air about him, midway between unfastening the jewelry on those bizarrely stiff shirt cuffs and rolling his sleeves up to his elbows.

Spotting the condition of his master's gloves when Kreacher closed in, the bulbous eyes sunken into that hanging skin expanded. Agonizing over the soiled leather, Kreacher snapped his fingers and a handkerchief materialized between spidery joints.

Snatching Hari's hand, the small creature began scrubbing the stains away as if his life depended on it.

Sesshomaru felt like he was an unwanted audience to a private moment. He respectfully averted his eyes.

In all his fantasies, he'd never imagined he would come to miss the shrill voice of his retainer or the childish chatter of Rin. Wistfulness unfurled within him and his claws clenched. Tuning out the halfhearted remonstrations, Sesshomaru's gaze lowered to the hand kept in one of those formfitting pockets.

When he'd inquired whether the search had been successful, Hari had stared at him for the longest time before his fist had unraveled like a blooming flower.

The heirloom was different from how Sesshomaru imagined the Meidō Stone to appear in this country. He'd been expecting a likeliness to the jewel Haha-Ue had worn.

Instead, in the center of Harry's palm had lain a small jewel in the shape of a diamond—smooth and polished on all eight sides. Its pristineness had made for an incongruous sight against the dirty black leather.

The otherworldly miasma emitted from that jewel felt similar to what was in Hari's pocket. Thick and cloying, it was a powerful energy that'd make one's hair stand up and someone of good instincts do their best to avoid it.

In the Western Lands, the miasma would cling to its victims like the ghoulish pallbearers of death, threatening to clamp down on its victims and drag their souls into the Netherworld.

Hari seemed to have understood the gravity of what he held. The Deathly Hallow had been handled with delicacy, secured in the winged golden ball. That had been what Sesshomaru had taken note of.

"Thank you, Kreacher. It's fine. Honestly, I'm exhausted. I only have enough time for a short nap before I have to head back to work. In fact...." Hari turned to the only other aristocrat in the room.

"Lord Sesshomaru, would you like to stay behind today to rest? I believe the Unspeakables would understand. It's not necessary for you to accompany me. I also hate repeating myself but...I trust you will remain silent regarding tonight."

There had been gravity in that dulcet accent.

His gaze sharpened into a glare. If a retainer would grind himself to dust serving his lord, a warrior of Sesshomaru's caliber should be able to do the same. He declared, "Rest is unnecessary. This Sesshomaru does not tire easily."

His expression was searched for any sign of falsehood, before Hari nodded respectfully—showing his approval. The gesture was similar to Sesshomaru's countrymen that another wave of déjà vu crashed through him.

"Alright. Thank—good night, Lord Sesshomaru."

"...The sun has already risen."

Hari smiled. "All the same. Kreacher, could you lead our guest to his room upstairs? I'd appreciate it."

The last thing Sesshomaru saw of him was another acknowledging nod in his direction before Hari shut the double doors, disappearing into the sitting room.

That left Sesshomaru and Kreacher by the stairs. They both regarded each other with mistrustful eyes.

"If Lord Guest would follow Kreacher…," Kreacher rasped in a tone equally as surly as Sesshomaru's expression.

"There is no need for your service. You may leave."

It was as if Kreacher had sucked on a lemon. A sour expression twisted his face.

Perhaps he was hard of hearing. In a louder timbre, he reiterated, "This Sesshomaru knows where the guest bedchamber is. You can retire for the day knowing you've completed your duty to your master. You may leave my sights."

An indescribable vexation pinched Kreacher's face further. He seemed about to object, but thought better about it, mumbling "undeserving…what guest bedchamber…foolishness…Master is too kind."

Incapable of finding fault in Sesshomaru's logic, Kreacher bobbed a short bow. He vanished with a *pop*.

"Such insolence," Sesshomaru muttered under his breath, ascending up the steps. Left alone with nothing but his thoughts to keep him company, his mind ran.

Sesshomaru tried once more to imagine the younger alpha as a consort, be decked in finery befitting of his Royal House colors and branded with Sesshomaru's mark, ruling with him in the Western Lands. Trained in magic and in sword, his Mate would be an intimidating presence beside him on the battlefield. Few would dare oppose them. He would be stunning.

Sesshomaru would simply have to acquire InuKimi's permission—and her blessing. His Lady Mother would have her wish of conserving their lineage fulfilled, while Sesshomaru would have his general—someone who was pleasing to the eye and was actually of use to him without incurring his ire.

It subverted the need of following gender expectations; there would be little disapproval met if Hari refused to act the role of a Lady of the Court.

Hari was a sorcerer—thereby capable of performing miracles. Any protests could be silenced with the excuse of knowing powerful witchcraft that Sesshomaru's countrymen lived in ignorance of. It would be more of an uphill battle to convince others that the Lord of the West was not being lulled into complacency, bewitched by mind-altering magic.
The only question would be what sort of yōkai Hari was.

About to enter the bedchamber, Sesshomaru froze when he felt the miasma below surge. It was akin to the powerful aura Tenseiga would release when it resurrected the fallen. His sword was shuddering in his scabbard, clattering against the lacquered sheath. His gaze snapped back to the double doors that sheltered Hari within.

There was a tall man standing in front of the closed doors, peering around him. His expression suggested something akin to melancholy. He had a distinguished, scholarly appearance.

For a moment, Sesshomaru thought he was gazing at the sorcerer himself. But it couldn't be. The clothes he wore did not match the style of uniforms the young noble preferred for wardrobe.

The stranger was tangible yet everything about him seemed duller—as if all drops of vitality had been sucked away until all that remained was a shade of a person. The coloring that a living person would have had been dulled, like he had been painted on silkscreen.

This man had no scent.

The spirit—with Hari's face—looked up. Then he vanished.

Within the blink of the eye, he remanifested himself where Sesshomaru stood. Sesshomaru inhaled sharply, drawing Tensaiga midway from its scabbard. But his movement halted.

The male spirit was unarmed and of taller stature, towering over this Sesshomaru. Past his round spectacles and his receding hairline, although lacking markings his handsome facial features were familiar enough that there was no denying a close blood relation. There was also likeliness in the dark hair perpetually in disarray, and in the broad shoulders.

"Ah." The specter's tone sounded disappointed. "Bugger. I was hoping for more of a reaction."

The spirit's stance suggested passive aggression, contradicting his appearance. Sesshomaru's vision focused on laugh lines around the male's eyes and around his generous mouth.

The specter was calm when Sesshomaru made his assessment. But now that he was done, he extended a hand—his palm facing Sesshomaru—in a proud gesture instead of an actual desire to shake hands as the natives of this country seemed to favor.

The man introduced himself as, "Lord Potter James. The wizard you've been eyeing is my son. I have a problem with that."

So this was indeed the dead patriarch.

In a much colder tone, Sesshomaru asserted, "Lord Sesshomaru of the Western Lands does not seek nor need your permission."

"There it is. You're a 'sovereign lord,' I've heard." Lord Pottā chuckled, but the sound had a humorless ring to it. With casual elegance borne of practice, his arm dropped back down. "Funny, with your age, I'd expect more wisdom. And at least some reservations."

"Yet you sought this Sesshomaru, for dialogue. This Sesshomaru does not normally permit unsanctioned audience. Explain to me why you believe me to be foolish when this Pottā has committed the same social transgression."

"Wow. No wonder Lily's enamored. You're another version of Snape. That snark…." He laughed
again, running his hand through his dark hair, making it untidier. His attention had refocused on Tenseiga.

Sneering at the open interest, Sesshomaru instinctively shifted on his feet. The fang would be hidden from his sight.

Having observed his defensiveness, the expression that spread across Lord Pottā's face was inscrutable. "Listen. You're lucky the Resurrection Stone can't conjure a corporal body. I'd grown out of cursing people for the fun of it, but for you I can make an exception. You. Should. Leave. Harry. Alone."

A sharp stinging of his palms made itself known to Sesshomaru. Unclenching his fists, he growled, "You've mistaken me as someone who cares. This Sesshomaru will not be spurned by your paltry threats."

"You got a problem with it?"

"You will not deny me your son's aid. He has given this Sesshomaru his oath. This Hari is this Sesshomaru's path to conquest."

Lord Pottā sighed. "Do you even hear yourself? If it weren't for Miss Lovegood putting my son on your radar, you wouldn't even be remotely interested in him. You boys would've cooperated like professionals. And then when everything's said and done, you'd just part ways. Why complicate things?"

The specter wanted explanations. If that was his aim, Sesshomaru determined, he would get them. Forcing himself to curtail his own irritation, he said, "Your son has the potential to be greater. This Sesshomaru will bring your son to new heights, unrestrained by the fools that bridle him. He should be ashamed to be under the dominion of his inferiors."

"And you're nothing but a bigot who cares for nothing but blood purity," Lord Pottā hissed. His anger was an incongruous sight on those comely features. "I don't share your views. Neither does my wife. And neither does Harry. You're a Dark creature. Don't lie to me; I know you're a demon. Because of that I cannot, in good conscience, approve of such a union."

This was unfathomable.

"...Regardless of what you may believe," Sesshomaru rejoined, his brows raised, before continuing in a low timbre, "you will do no better than this Sesshomaru. You cannot mean to tell me you don't notice your son is different?"

"So what?" he dismissed briskly. "Harry is a wizard. He belongs to us—to wizardkind—regardless that he's special. You don't deserve him. He can do better than you."

"So you do not deny the fragrance in his blood."

"Of course his magical core would seem the same to you. Old Magic now flows through his vee... iins—"

Breaking off, Lord Pottā cleared his throat. Plucking his spectacles off, he cleaned the lenses with the hem of his dark coat. This time, lacking heat, he redirected, "Let me try again. Why are you blindly trusting Miss Lovegood's words? Before some days before, you've never met her. You're not from here. And not even from this time. No offense, but your lifestyles and tastes don't match. It doesn't matter that you're Japanese; your armor doesn't hide the frilly dress you're wearing underneath. Harry wouldn't even touch his dress robes after his fourth year. Did you know he burned Dudley's hand-
me-downs when he became of age?"

Sesshomaru held himself back from rolling his eyes. It seemed Hari had inherited his Sire's propensity to run his mouth. "It is dishonorable to mistrust your allies, especially if they've proven their worth and loyalty. To cast aside my contention based on my appearance is especially telling of the man that you are."

It seemed that he had hit a nerve when the emotion in those hazel eyes changed. He looked taken aback.

Studying Sesshomaru under a different light, eventually he said, "It's the height of dishonor to mistrust your friends, you're not wrong. But my son is not your mate…not when you obviously desire more."

"This Sesshomaru has not spoken of Mating."

An opportune opening had landed in his lap. Unable to help himself, Sesshomaru could feel his mouth move into a wide smirk.

Like a sibilant caress, he purred, "But it would not be outside the realm of possibility…were your son to desire courtship. It would rid this Hari and this Sesshomaru the tediousness of locating a female to bear us heirs."

Lord Pottā's stern gaze wavered. He looked uncomfortable for a brief moment before his jaw squared.

"I….alright, I'll humor that fantasy. So what can you provide Harry when he can settle for just about anyone else?" Replacing his eyewear, the ghostly patriarch paced around Sesshomaru. His round spectacles did not hide that predatorial discrimination. "Safety? Comfort? Communication? The training you're so dead-set on making my son have?"

"This Hari has agreed to an apprenticeship. It was erected through proper channels."

Never mind that Hari seemed to be procrastinating on him giving his official consent.

"Let's ignore that elephant in the room for now. Going back to what I was saying, my son does not need riches or prestige. Nor does he desire political influence. He needs a family. D'you think Lily and I've haven't been monitoring him? The Weasley girl has history with him. You have nothing."

"Silence." The insult "vermin" had been at the tip of his tongue, but he held himself back from unleashing it. He had to remind himself that this was to be his father-in-law. Antagonistic he might be, but he had to impress upon him a favorable attitude. "This Hari has expressed his desire to this Sesshomaru for companionship and guidance. He does not need the attentions of a soft fawning female."

The apparition whistled, a sharp and clear sound as if he were impressed by that remark. "Incredibly sexist aside, you're mistaken. It was not about you. Listen, he might not like Ginevra now, but it's not hard to rekindle what once was. Sometimes persistence works. You stand little chance."

He stopped directly behind Sesshomaru. Coldness seemed to seep into Sesshomaru's bones from their proximity.

In a low rumble, Pottā murmured, "Harry needs someone who'll understand him. She knows his likes and dislikes. You can't even pronounce my son's name right."
Hari was capable of making his own choices. His father did not need his interference. Sesshomaru whirled around, feeling his nape prickling from Hari's Sire's intense surveillance. Meeting his gaze squarely, he stated, "This Sesshomaru can guarantee his safety. Everything you'd listed, this Sesshomaru has. Anything lacking can be easily remedied through time."

Lord Pottā appeared unconvinced. "You can't promise that. If he settles with you, his life will be fraught with peril and scrutiny. No offense, marriage with a magical creature is never simple for our people."

"This Sesshomaru hates repeating myself. Any thought of Mating is premature at this stage." He canted his head, tucking the fair hair which spilled over his shoulder back over a pointed ear. "But this Sesshomaru shall allow this: you are to be commended for your pedigree. Most families trample over each other to offer their children's hand to this Sesshomaru."

"Well, not Har—"

"As you are deceased, you have no hold over the living."

The specter fell disconcertingly quiet.

"Yet this Sesshomaru is not insulted; you may be at peace. You and this Hari do not seem to prioritize Mating into a worthy household. You also do not consider lineage or power as boons. You and your son's disinterest to courtship is a refreshing wonder. This Sesshomaru wonders why this Pottā is against a union of our Houses when your lineage only stands to gain."

"As the adage goes…like father, like son." His eyes downcast, Lord Pottā admitted, "It's true; he's the last of my line. I'd be sad if Harry didn't end up marrying a witch…or at least a Muggle or someone he loves, to pass on the name. Still. It's not like you can provide him with a son or daughter. Not naturally."

"This Sesshomaru seem to recall otherwise."

Lord Pottā stared uncomprehendingly at him, before his mouth started stretching from ear to ear. "Right. Y'wish…to make…my son…pregnant. My son—Head Auror, lord of three Noble and Most Ancient Houses, Boy-Who-Lived?" His shoulders started shaking. "My son, who'd rather chase after Death Eaters than man up and romantically chase after someone?"

He doubled over, slapping his thigh. Wheezes and shortests quietly filled the air.

Watching the farce of humor, Sesshomaru sneered. He could feel the rise of displeasure rearing within him like a two-headed dragon.

It wasn't that Sesshomaru hadn't given it the briefest of thoughts before.

Despite the revelation that this foreign society was in the process of developing an extraordinary potion, it was difficult to envision the sorcerer round with litter. Sesshomaru's brain couldn't fit that image with the lean, strong-willed man he interacted with daily.

There was also no telling the side-effects of such an unnatural union. Any child they sired should be mixed in blood, regardless of whatever origins Hari truly had running through his veins. But the pup should not be another Inuyasha. They would not be hanyou in the strictest sense of the word should their heirs take after their Sires—with all the benefits their heritages granted them.

The sheer notion, while outlandish, did not entirely displease him. It was hard to imagine, nonetheless he was slowly coming to terms with the possibility.
The specter was wiping a nonexistent tear from his eye. Just as Sesshomaru was considering running the spirit through with Tenseiga to make his soul cross over, he heard Lord Pottā divulge, "My son's not stupid."

Sesshomaru could only return an assenting, thoughtful sound beneath closed lips.

"He's really not. He's just too irritatingly considerate." His smile dimmed. "That's what they've made him. I don't approve that he had to grow up so fast."

Before Sesshomaru could ask, Lord Pottā straightened his back, scratching at the scruff on his jaw. He'd leaned against the railing, although the awkward movement suggested it had been more for appearance's sake than for actual support. "Forget it. It's just old resentments. Y'know what? You nearly changed my mind. I mean, the hilarity I'd get seeing you try to tell my son you want him to conceive your children…Merlin's balls, that'd almost be worth it to see the look on his face."

"There will be no—" Sesshomaru began, but Lord Pottā cut him off.

"You…ah, this beats jinxing Snivellus to face-plant on his ugly hooked nose. You actually think you could force my son to ingest that male pregnancy potion."

"That is nonsense—"

"Besides that being the most entitled, arrogant delusion I've heard, I pity you." His hazel eyes were directed at the room downstairs. He seemed to be straining his ears. "It's a long, painful process. My wife threatened to castrate me when she was in labor. And women are born with the equipment. Y'think Harry would abide by having someone not only ignoring his consent but also interfering with his line of duty?"

Sesshomaru followed his line of sight.

"He thinks of his work as his life. You'd be better off fancying someone else. You're a fine-looking bloke. I can't imagine it'd be that difficult. From a man to another man, believe me when I say you should cut your losses right here and now. You're only setting yourself up for disappointment."

What the specter was saying wasn't unwise.

There was a hushed conversation happening behind closed doors, out of their earshot. A few seconds went by, before both men could overhear something. It was faint, but it not an unfriendly sound. It was laughter from a man that chortled heartily, and another who followed hesitantly but sounded nonetheless pleased.

The apparition's posture loosened a tad. "I know my son. Distractions from what he considers his tasks are intolerable. Harry's exceptionally goal-oriented, don't you think?"

The specter's Adam's apple bobbing, he turned his head to stare at Sesshomaru from a side profile. "It's not the end of the world if Lily and I won't have grandchildren. It bums me out that my line would fade, but not at the cost of his happiness. You will not make my son happy."

Sesshomaru raised an eyebrow. The manner of speech the specter had adopted was inconsistent, almost petty and malicious at times. It was obviously not vernacular Hari had gotten from his Sire. At times, the patriarch slipped back into casualness, forgetting respect and formality—as if it was an ability that had rusted over the years or it was a skill he was unused to.

It would be a simple matter to put his suspicions to the test. Masking his apprehension, Sesshomaru stated, "You claim clairvoyance?"
"You must've gained clairvoyance in the Netherworld," Sesshomaru repeated. "Surely that's the reason why you'd deter me from courting your heir and from taking him for myself. Surely that's the reason you wish your son to Mate that whelp when, to any onlookers, this Hari is avoiding his third cousin."

"He told you?" Lord Pottā whispered. "He told you about...see, marrying your third cousin isn't illegal. No one exactly...cares—*wizards* don't care. I mean, within wizarding society, I haven't heard..."  

"With your species' dependency on magic, the inability to exercise the mind doesn't astound me. Idleness will be this Hari's downfall, should he follow in their footsteps."

"You," Lord Pottā paused, his expression contorting from an ambiguous emotion, "you're a piece of work."

"This Sesshomaru has cut vulgar tongues from curs before," he said pleasantly. "Surely the reason why you'd desire for this Hari to inbreed with the bitch is because you think very little of your son's prospects. 'His happiness?' Surely, for you to resort to that bitch, there has to be a grand vision that outweighs your son's obvious opposition. It's a shame that you cannot write your heir a marriage contract. Nor will the whelp's family be able to provide a sufficient dowry when this Hari's packmate is pupped. Your son will have to unwillingly part with his family fortunes to his cousin's kinfolk."

Lord Pottā was performing an impressive imitation of a trout out of water.

"Furthermore, surely if you're clairvoyant, you would understand that this Sesshomaru humbly rejects this Hari's Honorable Father's offer for he has chosen to cast a blind eye over what this Sesshomaru can provide in return for your son's hand."

"I know your type," Lord Pottā spat, heat rising to his all-too-pale face. "You cannot provide for my son. Ginevra—!"

"Absolutely not. The whelp is young, sensitive, and inexperienced. She will hold your son back thusly from what you understand to be his priorities. Unlike the bitch whom this Hari's Honorable Father favors, this Sesshomaru and this Hari need not to downgrade in status for the Mating rites to proceed. We travel in the same political spheres."

The expression on the patriarch twisted.

Under the influence of the conversation he was having with the Lord Pottā, he envisioned himself in his Sire's place at the elaborate ceremony between the Inu no Taishō—Tōga, his *Chichi-Ue*—and Sesshomaru's Lady Mother—Inukimi, his *Haha-Ue*. He'd heard grand tales of their romance—from their courting, to the wedding, and the eventual Mating ritual.

Sesshomaru couldn't exactly picture Hari in the same ceremonial dress *Haha-Ue* had worn—multilayers of expensive silk and heavy finery—but he could imagine Hari on the dais with him, both of them perhaps in decorated military attire. He heard himself say, "Your son values results and directness. He commands respect. He is an efficient general...and caretaker. He has found what he wishes to protect. What he lacks is discipline and following through with strength."

His Mate would be gazing at him. Sesshomaru would only see resolve and determination in those eyes that reminded him so much of jade. It might be arrogant for him to think such, but the late Inu no Taishō might have approved of his choice.
Lost in thought, Sesshomaru finished, "This Sesshomaru can teach him. He will want for naught."

"...I still don't approve of your intentions."

That streak of stubbornness was also inherited, Sesshomaru nearly smiled up at the ceiling from that revelation. He tucked his hands into his sleeves. "And a pity that your approval does not surmount your son's."

The vibrations by the side of his leg was increasing, dragging him back to reality. Golden eyes being lured down to the sheathed Tenseiga, Sesshomaru felt a frown emerge from his face.

Although unable to speak, the fang he'd inherited from his father always had a penchant of doing whatever it liked. It would draw attention to what had captured its attention and it would be up to Sesshomaru to interpret the meaning behind its behavior. Ever since he'd arrived into the future, Tenseiga had been unusually active.

"There is a strange connection," he murmured. "This Sesshomaru can no longer deny its manifestation and the bizarre events that tie us together."

"This 'connection' means nothing if you leave it alone. Harry will leave you alone. He's doing his best to keep it professional. You are both blokes."

"Indeed. And you have answers."

He was looking at Sesshomaru oddly. There seemed to be weariness to that stance now. "Hey. Don't make this decision because you don't like being told what you can't have. He's not a shiny new sword for you to own. I want you to think about this rationally."

"It's amusing that your concern isn't that we hail from different eras."

Lord Pottā froze, wide-eyed.

"This Sesshomaru shall allay what seems to be your greatest fear—this Sesshomaru will not force this Hari to bear my heirs. It is offensive you would think that of me." Seeing the spirit about to retort, he declared, "My concern is finding the path of conquest. Rest assured, if that is his wish, he will only do so of his own free will."

"I don't care that much about...back up. That's the second time you said...what do you mean by that? Are you...is it his magical core that attracts you? I can't imagine you want him for his looks. Do you even understand what you're getting yourself into—?"

"You are undeserving of my answer with your continual slights, but you are this Hari's Sire. It is because of your blood relation that this Sesshomaru is even granting you audience."

"I don't get it. You're certain you want my son?" His hazel eyes were disbelieving. "You could have anyone you want."

"It is as this Hari's Honorable Father says."

"...I really don't get it." He exhaled noisily through his mouth. "You're right. You two don't live in the same eras. You're from the past. He's from the future. You two are...you're not meant to be together. Do you really understand what you're asking for?"

Lord Pottā was raking his hands through his hair once more, clearly agitated.
Sesshomaru made another noncommittal noise. He was starting to tire of this drivel.

"If you start courting him, it'll give him ideas. I've seen the way you both look at each other when you think the other person's not looking. Emotions and feelings are on a dangerous turf I'm not even sure you both want. You'll be playing with each other's heart."

His claws dropped from his kimono. He parroted, "This Hari has been appraising this Sesshomaru?"

He'd seen Hari's considering glances—felt the weight of them—but he hadn't assumed it held a more intimate interest. Glee sung in his veins. There was an unbearable lightness in the chest.

While not a rejection, Hari's hesitance had stung his pride. Many would have thrown themselves at the opportunity, taking advantage of his rare attention in the hopes of kindling something more. Hari had regarded his proposition with caution and an insultingly lack of appreciation. It was like a responsibility he would accept out of duty, adapting to the newest inconvenience in his life.

"Of course he's been looking at you, with you shamelessly flirting with him." Lord Pottā's eyes narrowed. "Stop. That wasn't said to give you optimism."

"James, denying the Lord of the West will only make him want to pursue him even more."

Both men tensed. Their heads swiveled to stare down at a pale slender woman at the bottom of the stairs. From that distance, they should not have been able to hear her. Yet her volume was clear, as if she were standing there with them.

Sesshomaru squinted, sniffing the air.

She, too, bore no scent. There weren't any indications of demonic markings anywhere on her skin as well. Like the male specter, the colors that made up the female's existence were faded. Beyond the shadowy coloration of her hair, he could discern a trace of what must have been a vibrant shade of red.

Parted around her forehead, her mane fell in thick waves down her shoulders. The tilt of her almond eyes was more pronounced, but she seemed to have the same green eyes as the sorcerer.

Spotting the affectionate glance the patriarch tossed her way, if this were to follow a pattern, Sesshomaru could surmise that she was either the spirit's Mate or perhaps another close blood relation of Hari's.

Instead of introducing herself as tradition indicated, her lips had quirked into a sly smile. "You can't tell me you don't see the resemblance. He's like how you were. You have to find humor in that irony."

Lord Pottā's dark brows knitted. He protested, "I was not like that."

"True. You were more immature." Her smile spread. "Don't try to belittle Lord Sesshomaru's intelligence, dear. He's not slow."

Sesshomaru demanded, "What do you want?" just as the specter spluttered, "I beg your pardon?"

Both men exchanged looks. Engrossed by their glaring contest, they did not see when the female spirit remanifested nearby. She stood beside her husband.

She coughed into her fist, drawing their attention.
"What I mean to say," Lady Pottā explained patiently, "is he's simply too polite to point out the discrepancies. You've been calling Ginny by her formal name. I know your archaic Pureblood ways, James. As the patriarch, you could've explicitly said 'no;' yet you only gave him your disapproval. Anyone with half a brain would pick it up."

"I admire your restraint, Lord Sesshomaru." She was beaming swimmingly up at Sesshomaru. "I am Evans Lily, wife of Lord Potter and the mother of Lord Potter Harry. I have to thank you for your restraint. Anyone else would've hexed—sorry, cursed out my husband by now."

She had not introduced herself by rank; Sesshomaru could assume that she was their social inferior.

Lord Pottā made odd, indignant sounds in his throat.

"James, stop trying to drive him away. Of everyone else, no one else has his qualifications. We're not going to get anyone better than him. He's perfect."

Sesshomaru felt his lips pull into a reluctantly approving smile as he gazed down at the headstrong female. So he was not the only parent that Hari had inherited his strong personality from.

Objections spilled forth Lord Pottā's lips.

Her smile faltered, and then melted into a frown. When he was done, she admonished, "He's been conversing with you, has he not? If he wasn't such a considerate boy, he would've ignored you. You've seen how he behaves around people other than Harry."

"Disrespectful. Patronizing. Appalling."

"Quiet. Serious. Judicious. With good reason, James. How would you act if you were brought to a foreign country far into the future? Don't judge a person before you've gotten to know what they stand for. You're blinded by your overprotectiveness."

"Y'know what he is, Lily," Lord Pottā rasped, crossing his arms. His tall frame was leaning against his Mate, resting his forehead against her shoulder. He was becoming more transparent.

It seemed that show of strength he'd presented Sesshomaru earlier had been a farce.

Sesshomaru frowned. That display of weakness was unsightly. It seemed the fool had overexerted himself.

The female specter was whispering something into her husband's ear.

"He's my son, Lily. It doesn't sit well with me."

Lady Pottā shushed him. Peering up at Sesshomaru, her gaze suggested that she would be the one to take over their conversation. "Lord Sesshomaru, you aren't giving him the right incentives."

He had to repress a smirk. So he had a champion in this Hari's mother. It would behoove him to maintain her favorable attitude towards him.

"This Sesshomaru would be grateful," he stated cordially, "if clarification or aid is provided."

"Ah." It seemed his answer had satisfied her. "Harry…my baby boy has tunnel-vision. But he honors his promises. You will return home, rest assured. So the way I see it, you only have two choices here…if you have the patience. You seem interested in him."

Lord Pottā's knees buckled under him, and Lady Pottā was the only one holding him up. Without
casting a look in his direction, she continued, "One, you go home, weigh your choices, and wait another five hundred years. It's the choice James would have you make, before he got distracted. He was supposed to make it clear to you that there's no telling whether this interest you have could've been induced by the stress of your situation. Or by misplaced gratitude. Someone else might've caught your fancy back in your era."

"It is a likelihood," Sesshomaru agreed, his expression a perfect mask of serenity and calmness. "Not that this Sesshomaru wishes to know, but this Hari's Honorable Mother proposes an alternative."

Her eyes rooted him to his spot. He had heard this was the female that had sacrificed her life to save her son, much like how Inu no Taishō had bravely given his to protect his human mistress and his hanyou son Inuyasha. Her gentle loving expression had changed into that of a battle-hardened woman.

"Our society does not tolerate unfaithfulness, Lord Sesshomaru. Don't waste your time if this is only a fleeting fancy. If you think you can handle monogamy, if you think you can change his mind and take him away from this toxic environment, then James and I give you our blessings. He's only...he hasn't found the right one yet. I'm sure you can draw your conclusions from there."

"...This Hari does not desire to seek an intimate relationship for himself," Sesshomaru murmured, his tone speculative as comprehension dawned, "not when he's so focused on immediate distractions."

"When Potter men fall in love, they love fiercely—possessively. It's coded in their DNA. Harry is no different. We're not certain...if you're ready for that. When you're introducing something as deep and complex and tricky as feelings...I hope you know you cannot back out once Harry decides that yes, he'll want a relationship with a magical creature. Permanently."

"If this Hari Mates with this Sesshomaru, it can only be permanent. That is all."

Her gaze was steady, scrutinizing any shift in his attitude. Her almond-shaped eyes contained an emotion he didn't like to see directed at himself. "I heard otherwise," she murmured. Her following words were said at a sedate pace: "I heard your father fell in love with a Muggle, before he passed over."

When she saw him freeze, she continued blithely, "We discovered your...Sire when you were brought to this era. He's been watching over you this whole time. He's proud of his sons. Most of all, he's proud that his eldest has matured into a respectable, compassionate lord...worthy of his 'title and breeding.'"

Sesshomaru was silent. Swallowing, eventually he echoed, "Chichi-Ue is...proud...of this Sesshomaru? This Hari's Honorable Mother has met...?"

A trace of teenage insecurity had slipped into his deep baritone.

Her solemnity thawed. Under a much softer tone, she said, "Distance, time, and language hold no weight with those that are no longer part of the living. Your...Sire is glad that you've finally found someone to protect. And that you've finally stopped blaming your brother for your father's oversight. You've grown into such a strong, regal demon. He is so proud."

Her attention slid past Sesshomaru's shoulder, as if there was someone standing there behind him. "And he wants you to know, if you truly desire to court the Master of Death, your union has his blessings."

In that moment, a ripple seemed to run through the air. It was as though raw emotion had been
transformed into a shockwave, which washed over them. Sesshomaru's breath stilled.

He whirled around, his heart was hammering against his ribcage. It was as loud as a thousand war drums, yearning for a glimpse of the ghost of his most Honorable Father.

Mokomoko-sama fell limp on his shoulder when he saw no one there. Nothing was out of the ordinary. His hopes were dashed.

He could only feel the spirits' eyes studying his back.

"I'm sorry you won't be able to see him," the female was the one to say apologetically. "Only Harry would be able to summon us from eternal rest. Temporarily. He doesn't know about your father. The fact that you can see us now is because he's only called us here. So, by extension, you can see us."

"This Sesshomaru has heard this Hari being referred to as the Master of Death," he rumbled deep in his throat. His voice was contemplative. It was not a title Sesshomaru had heard of prior to this night.

"Then there is a ring of truth. It is not an insubstantial title."

"So Harry has told you…"

Hari had not touched on its significance or the intricate details of its correlation to him. It was evident that not all have been shared with the dog demon, even with all the questions that'd been answered. Sesshomaru remained silent.

"Perhaps I should share an English legend with you. Your culture shares the same fondness for follores, I heard. I am especially interested in the 'Tale of the Bamboo Cutter' your Sire has told us…the very notion of the legends Asia has…but I digress. Forgive me."

The pallor of her face was becoming shallower, not unlike that of a waxing moon.

Taking a deep breath, she recited, "Long time ago, there were three brothers—of the Peverell line. Yes, that is one of Harry's titles; it is an old Pureblood House. Essentially, the brothers were geniuses of their own right. As the story goes, 'Death spoke to them. He was angry that he had been cheated out of three new victims, for travelers usually drowned in the river. But Death was cunning. He pretended to congratulate the three brothers upon their magic, and said that each had earned a prize for having been clever enough to evade him.'"

"Being the gifted wizards they were, the brothers aimed high. They wanted to see if they could control an unexplored branch of Old Magic—'Death Magic.' But their ambitions were naturally lofty. It is an unspoken rule that we wizards must not touch that has been forbidden.

"So the brothers were cursed. Only Ignotus—he was James' and Harry's ancestor—had lived long enough to outsmart Death, passing his cloak to his son and to the Potter descendants as a family treasure. So the legend goes of the Three Deathly Hallows."

The cloak must be the one that Hari had shown Sesshomaru. From the anecdote he had just heard, he could only assume that the sorcerer was brazen in its usage. Hari's situation seemed similar to Sesshomaru's, both having inherited a powerful heirloom from their respective Honorable Fathers. However, unlike Sesshomaru, from the manner Hari spoke and relied on it, he was proud of his birthright.

Turning back around, Sesshomaru spoke slowly, "…Your words indicate it is regarded as an old wives' tale."

"A lot of us do." The gravity of her tone lightened up. "If anything, the reality of James' prodigal
Peverell ancestor and of the two equally prodigal brothers was not as grand as the legend lionizes. Three artefacts were invented, that alone is true.

It would only stand to reason, to Sesshomaru, that being this Master of Death was merely a title borne of hearsay and not an actual authority the young alpha wielded. It should be outside the realm of option for the sorcerer to control anything as grand as death, or being able to influence a person's fate outside of mortal jurisdiction.

"The Master of Death can be likened," she resumed, "to nothing more than a coined term for someone who accepts death is inevitable to all those that live. There are worse things than dying, after all."

There was wisdom in those words. Unable to help himself, the memory of Kagura materialized in his mind. Sesshomaru remembered seeing her gratitude when she spotted his approach, miasma being forced from her wounds in a billowing purple smoke.

His feelings about the wind demon—one of the castaways of Naraku—had been complicated. He didn't quite loathe her with the same intensity he had for Naraku, nor had he been exactly fond of her. Begrudging admiration perhaps came the closest to the regard he held for his opponent and his acknowledgement of her romantic interest in him.

Troublesome as Kagura was for foiling his efforts in the battlefield, they'd shared a common hatred for the spider demon that was Naraku.

Hence he remembered the small dissatisfaction he'd felt when Tenseiga refused to resurrect her that day in the meadow.

In her last dying breaths, she had closed her eyes to him, accepting her fate. A blissful smile had been directed up at him when her body disintegrated. The winds had scattered her ashes into the sky. White petals from the flowers beneath his feet had flown into the air, as if nature itself was commemorating Kagura's freedom with a dance of its own.

"Yet we live in a world where there is magic," he heard Lady Pottā say. "Magic that gives power to a wizard or witch the more people start to fear them…or know of their reputation. When people start believing in an ideal, the buildup of such concentrated faith and conviction becomes certainties."

Sesshomaru's eyes flickered back to hers, reading the shrewd and calculating scrutiny behind that gaze.

"This is just my opinion, but I don't believe the Hallows were intended to grant immortality. There are those that believe possessing all three could grant them an unspeakable blessing…beyond our wildest imaginations." Lady Pottā's sight shifted into a loaded, meaningful look.

Then both of her brows rose. "What do you think that is? It is the reason why being the 'Master of Death' is a coveted title…."

Under a reverent tone, he breathed, "To master Death…it would be true immortality…but how…?"

Delight melted into her face when Sesshomaru put the pieces together.

"The potential for immortality," Lady Pottā corrected. "Harry…my son is gifted with the potential to extend his life. It is the Peverell curse that runs through his veins. It was activated when Harry was exposed to all the magic he has experienced…and when he came back to life. But like all gifts that are given…if he does not appreciate or have use of it, nothing will happen. Knowing his personality…"
She gave him another piercing stare. "My son wishes to live a normal life. Live a normal marriage and die like a normal man. He does not realize, however brief it'd been, Harry cannot live a normal life when both his blood and now his magical core have been tainted. One cannot return from the dead without being fundamentally changed. Even you are not exempt from that."

Unease gripped Sesshomaru's heart.

Even those with the longest lifespans—those who may claim to be eternal—were bound by the laws of mortality. One could not expect to extend their life without making an exchange, to keep a balance of natural order. Although he'd occasionally heard of yōkai offering to extend the life of the human they possessed, all they were doing was borrowing the yōkai's long life expectancy.

Even then Sesshomaru had not heard of a being that had lived forever. Only those who wandered the celestial realm could achieve such heights, like the Heavens they roamed. Immortality belonged to gods and goddesses.

It would seem the sorcerer truly had perished once. That would mean were any tragedy to befall upon him, his soul would be unable to be resurrected by Tenseiga.

"How freely you share this information with me," he murmured.

This was all absurd.

But the dead spoke no falsehoods. They had no reason to. For her to inform him of such intelligence, it seemed the departed soul of Evans Lily truly wanted the Lord of the West as a son-in-law.

Lady Pottā tilted her head, her hair following the movement. A hand was brought to her chin and the other hand went to support the elbow. She somehow managed to balance the shift of movement while bracing her husband's weight.

Sans the specter she supported, it was a meditative pose Sesshomaru had seen the sorcerer slipping into occasionally when he was deep in thought.

Lord Pottā had been quiet during their exchange, as if taking the duration to muster the strength to regain speech. "You've been to the Netherworld," he at last spoke. Compared to before, his tone was fainter in volume.

"We know that you see pallbearers and that you've slain them to resurrect the dead." Like a fog, the edges of the nobleman's body were hazy. It seemed Lord Pottā had expanded a great amount of energy to maintain his semi-corporeal form. Even so, his eyes were steely. "If you haven't experienced what you have, if you haven't been touched by death and escaped many times…we never would've considered letting you have our son."

Lady Pottā's smile was warm—maternal—as she gazed upon Sesshomaru. "You remind us very much of our son, uncanny as it is. Both of you are incomplete. But the potential is there. That might be why you're so drawn to his orbital, and he to yours. He's like a catalyst for a chemical reaction to happen. You are his moon."

"Lord Sesshomaru of the West," Lord Pottā interjected, nearly startling Sesshomaru who had been reflecting on her latest puzzling words.

"Lord Sesshomaru of the West," Lord Pottā interjected, nearly startling Sesshomaru who had been reflecting on her latest puzzling words.

It was the first time he'd heard the specter referring to him with his title.

Straightening himself, Lord Pottā announced with the last of his power in his voice: "Consider this a formal inquiry into your intentions. Do you really seek to court my heir, Lord Harry James Potter
Black Peverell?"

What Sesshomaru wanted did not concern the spirit; that should be the reply they would receive. And yet...he couldn't deny it was becoming more of a likelihood with each night that passed in his company.

Swallowing the lump lodged in his throat, he acknowledged, "Sometimes one must throw a stone into stagnant waters for there to be any development. He repulses me less than everyone else."

Hearing his answer, Lord Pottā closed his eyes. He collapsed against his wife as if his strings were cut.

"Shh, James. You can rest now." Lady Pottā stroked his matted hair. Removing her sight from her fading husband, she turned once more to Sesshomaru. "He hears your resolve, and we will honor it."

"...This Sesshomaru is pleased."

"I know it might seem like a lot of pressure is being pushed on you." Her tone was considerate, soothing. "As if...if you refuse to go through with it, it's a sign of failure. It's not. There's nothing to be ashamed of. You won't be offending anyone, dear. I'm sure Harry will still like you as a friend nonetheless. It's a tale you could tell your ward and your descendants, of your adventure meeting a new civilization five hundred years into the future."

Sesshomaru remained soundless. If he was brought here into the future, to have the fortune of chancing upon his Mate, it could only be a fated meeting. This was his prerogative.

Blood was rushing through his ears. He had no tolerance of waiting five centuries for his Mate to be born and courted when he could have him now. No one else would come close to him.

His clawtips tingled from the excitement of a possible hunt. Perhaps it was spurred by his imagination, but it was almost as if his markings—the crescent moon on his forehead, and the stripes on his cheeks and limbs—were becoming more sensitive.

Sesshomaru didn't need to make his thoughts known. It was written on his face and in the way mokomoko-sama undulated eagerly on his shoulder.

Lord Pottā's features were filled with despair. In contradiction, Lady Pottā was nobly composed and at ease with Sesshomaru's decision.

"Then consider this exchange of information my blessing," she said softly. Her voice had been as quiet as an autumn breeze. "In our country, we have magical creatures called Dementors. They feed on human memories and even consume souls; that is how they've survived. Similarly...."

"You are a dog demon. If you want him to live as long as you, he must make the tradeoffs." The faded color in her eyes were concentrated on the crescent moon marking on his forehead. "His existing morals will not let him. If you desire my son...if you don't wish to part from him, you must have him consent. He must accept the gift the curse allots him."

"You'll have to convince him to kill in order to stay alive."

Chapter End Notes
This last scene had been planned since the first few chapters were written, and the one I had been looking the most forward to writing for nearly three years. This is my interpretation of Harry being the MOD; if you read between the lines, I'm certain the pieces are falling into place. But our boy Sesshomaru has officially "met the in-laws," hurrah!

As a heads-up, I'd planned G&G to be a 60+ epic, split into two arcs: the first half in modern Great Britain and the remaining half in pseudo-historically accurate feudal Japan. Because I'm that masochistic. Gah. I'll see if I can make it shorter. But we're finally halfway there to the midway point!

Next chapter: Trials and Tribulations. We will begin Umbridge's trial…and a moment of vulnerability once Sesshomaru discovers what lies beneath those mysterious leather gloves.
Her breath plumed out, then broke apart on her moving face as she spoke, "Neh, Inuyasha?"

The forest was quiet and chilly, her voice unusually loud over the song of crickets and the grass crunching beneath their feet. The forest floor was a maze of roots, fallen logs, and rocks encrusted with moss. Kagome could barely see what was in front of her. She glanced up. Only a sliver of the night sky was visible through the thick canopy. The trees grew so closely together they even seemed to block the wind.

At the sound of his name, Inuyasha peered over his shoulder, hands tucked behind his long unruly mane. His nose was crinkled from the forest's scent of rot and decay. "What is it?"

His voice had always been a little gruff. Yet those low and throaty tones had never failed to elicit a shiver. Her mouth opened to reply, but a yawn slipped out. Feeling the weight of Inuyasha's gaze, Kagome covered her mouth, her cheeks feeling hot. She was still tired.

But with the recent revelation, time was of the essence.

Forcing herself to regain composure, she jerked her chin to the pair traveling onwards. When he looked, she sidled closer to him, her hand hovering above her mouth. "I'm...sure that's not a wild
dog," Kagome whispered, hushed, meant for Inuyasha's ears only. Her eyes had yet to unglue from the pair ahead of them. "But he doesn't seem to be one of Koga's wolves."

Huge as the canine was, there was something about his face and muzzle that had been too thin and elongated for him to be either subspecies. His body was spindly, she wasn't certain if it was malnourishment or if it was the lean musculature his breed generally grew into. The ears were longer triangular points, alert and twitching—assuming the canine's other senses were heightened to make up for the lack of sight.

"...This again?" Inuyasha was focused on the gnarled roots, trying to ascertain if the roots had a life of their own or if any of his traveling companions were in danger of tripping.

As the only capable fighters in a party of four, it had been a unanimous decision that they would monitor from the rear, ready to launch forward if a bandit deemed them easy prey. There was a reason they'd avoided the open road and took to the woods instead, even with the risk of encountering a hostile demon. It was the best tactical plan they'd established on a short notice. They could only hope that strategy would be effective in hindsight—especially with a defenseless child in their midst.

Instead of answering, he questioned, "What's really on your mind?"

Kagome hesitated. Twigs were snapping beneath their feet when she sought fit to ask, "Inuyasha, don't you think Rin will grow up to be a lovely young woman?"

She wasn't certain how exactly it'd happened, but Rin seemed to have befriended the canine. Instead of holding Kagome's hand as expected, she'd politely declined and ran ahead to join her new furry friend. She could see the girl was still in her own little world, enthusiastically coming up with alternative names and seeing which one got the best reaction. (Inuyasha's favorite name out of all of them had him snickering every time, that Kagome suspected Inuyasha's reaction might have to do with Rin eventually changing her mind.)

Inuyasha was saying something but the majority of his words was drowned out by Kagome's scrutiny. She was taking in the quality of Rin's kimono with its simple geometric pattern, before her eyes honed in on Rin's toes. The girl's bare feet—like Inuyasha's—were pattering over twigs and slippery rocks, leaving small indents in the uneven ground.

A frown warped Kagome's features as she felt her lethargy fade, as she re-evaluated what she knew about this girl.

It would remain to be seen if the child would blossom into a striking Japanese beauty, but the potential was there. While there will always be a little wildness to her appearance, the expressions Rin made sparkled with life and vivacity. There was a quality about her that could somehow even crack individuals with stone hearts like Inuyasha's formidable older half-brother, as…unorthodox as their relationship was.

She released a weary sigh at the thought of him.

In the entire history of their interactions with Sesshomaru, Kagome had run through the entire gamut of human emotions: from bewilderment and anger, to apathy and indifference, and now to a sort of begrudging respect and acknowledgement. She felt like it was telling of the mutual regard they held for each other now that their interactions seemed to be muddled with exasperation every time they would cross paths. After what'd happened in their final battle with Naraku, she felt like any hostilities remaining between them amounted to nothing more than an act of pretense between former adversaries.
As they'd discussed with Rin, they had no way of telling what could have befallen her lord without further investigation. Yet Inuyasha had claimed he would've sensed it if the older dog demon had perished, no matter where Sesshomaru was on the continent. Kagome couldn't grasp how he could feel so confident making that assertion, but supposedly even his diluted bloodline would make him attuned to powerful energies that were familiar to him—demonic or spiritual.

"Everything about them is shrouded in mystery," Kagome muttered to herself. Her mind couldn't help but conjure the memory of when they'd first encountered the mysterious girl—a living contradiction to whom her lord and his retainer had proclaimed to scorn. To this day, she still didn't know how Sesshomaru came across Rin and didn't slaughter her upon sight.

Inuyasha's older brother was sort of ephemeral, just like a ripple on the surface of a pond. Aside from shades of emotion like anger or disgust, his face can be devoid of feeling and serene.

She remembered the first time she'd met Sesshomaru. Her first impression of the man had been terrible; he had a high opinion of himself; he'd helped orchestrate an underhanded trick of having a demon masquerade as his sibling's late mother, he'd demeaned Inuyasha for his so-called inferior mixed blood, and he would've nearly killed Inuyasha if Inuyasha hadn't gotten lucky. Those uncanny golden eyes gazed at the world coldly—and with superiority.

A line appeared between her brows. There were other incidents in the past that had fouled Kagome's opinion of Sesshomaru and made her think he might've deserved his comeuppance when Inuyasha had severed his arm in self-defense. Back then, she'd sensed Sesshomaru wouldn't have shied away from fratricide: the act of killing a sibling. He'd harbored malice all those centuries for something that had been out of Inuyasha's control.

She mumbled, "Maybe Kohaku-kun will like her. It would be cute. Or maybe Shippo…."  

Inuyasha made a derisive noise, his claws falling from his head. "Not a chance...not if Sesshomaru has anything to say about her future suitors. You know that, right?"

A giggle bubbled out of her, but there was a nervous edge. A pit of worry had lodged itself in her throat. She glanced down at her shoes, her knuckles whitening on the grip of her longbow.

When the silence was maintained, he couldn't help but sneak another look at her. Despite holding his attention, her gaze had remained downcast, her long fringe shadowing her eyes from his sight.

Cocking his head, he inquired, "Kagome?"

A storm was brewing in her thoughts. After a brief moment, she spoke stiltedly to the ground, "You don't think...your brother might be...saving her...for himself?" She'd nearly crashed into his broad back when he stopped short. The woodsy fragrance she'd been inhaling had been replaced by a sort of masculine musk. Kagome staggered back with a warm face, protesting, "Inuyasha!"

He was staring at her as if she'd just sprouted two heads.

Kagome ducked her head. "Don't blame me for wondering about ulterior motives," she hissed. Her eyes launched sideways, before they returned to meet his piercing stare. Her chin lifted and her hands went to her hips. She challenged, "Rin is the only human he actually cares about. And she idolizes him. In a matter of time, she will be considered an adult. You said a human's lifespan is nothing compared to a demon's."

It took a while for Inuyasha to parse the extent of her insinuation. When comprehension dawned, his expression contorted into proportions that Kagome hadn't known was humanly possible.
A loud fleshy sound captured their attention.

Ahead of them, Rin had clapped her hands together above her chest. Beaming at the canine, she was speaking to him, "What about 'Tsukiyo?'" Spreading her arms out wide over her head, she spun in a circle. "Like Tsukuyomi from stories, but it means 'moonlit night.' Because your fur is pretty like tonight's sky. You like that one, Tsukiyo?"

Much to Rin's disappointment, while the canine had turned his head towards her, he seemed disinterested. His nose returned to the ground, sniffing the soil as he ambled forth in search of something, passing her by.

"Her ideas are becoming wilder with each one," Kagome heard Inuyasha mutter beneath his breath. When she glanced back, she resisted the urge to take a step back. His attention had been focused entirely on her.

Butterflies were flitting about in her stomach. Her shoulders beginning to shrink in despite herself, her voice flustered, she asked, "W-what is it, Inuyasha?"

There was a queer interval of silence where he was just searching her expression. When he finally seemed to find whatever it was he had been looking for, he said, "Listen, while you know I will always think poorly of him…." His voice was brittle as the first ice of autumn, the topic being a sore spot from many years of old hurts. "To answer your question, I doubt that bastard will. It isn't any of our business what he wants to do with that pipsqueak anyhow."

Silvery strands drifted in the air as his head jerked sideways. "Call it a hunch. I don't know what goes on in his head, but it isn't like him to wait—no less groom a human child. He's not that crafty."

When she continued to look skeptical, he demanded, "What brought this up?" He shoved his arms into his sleeves. "You're thinking too much. So what if he took in a stray? Keh, she was only lucky to be at the right place at the right time. She's young, Kagome. And it'll serve him right if he does fall for a ningen..."

There was merit to what she was hearing. Her shoulders slumping, she admitted, "He does...somewhat treat her like an adopted daughter."

"They say loneliness is a curse." The way he'd answered her made him sound like he was having his teeth pulled. "She's his ward. I don't know the reasons why, but Sesshomaru's made her into his pack." He had his face turned away, scowling into the distance.

Understanding dawned on her. "Inuyasha…." Her voice trailed off. She didn't know what to say. The implications were there. Her heart twisted for him, for the scar she didn't think would ever mend fully.

Eventually she said, "You know, we also have a saying where I come from." Reaching forward, Kagome attempted to console him with a smile, managing to pry one hand away from him. She didn't know why she felt emboldened. But standing on her toes and threading her hand with his, she whispered up into a furry ear, "'Fatherhood can change a man.'"

His eyes widened. And he became slack-jawed.

Lost in the moment, they didn't hear the footsteps that'd been plodding toward them. They both leapt apart when they heard a meek, "Pardon me…?"

Dark brown eyes were peering up at them unreservedly, her tiny face oval like a melon seed. Having
wandered over Rin was looking back and forth between them. At the end of their attention, poking her index fingers together, she said, "This Rin came to ask, because you've been walking behind us all this time…. Does this mean I need to make myself 'scarce and give the adults time to themselves' again?"

Both Kagome and Inuyasha gawked down at her.

Having seized the mood in the air, Rin began to bow at the waist, her hair falling into her face like a long brown veil. Unbeknownst to them, a glimpse of a smile ghosted over her face. "I'm sorry to have bothered you and Kagome-sama—"

Surprisingly, Inuyasha had been the first to act. He crouched down, sharp claws settling on her shoulders. He blurted, "No, we were talking about you, kid!"

Against the chilly night air, with how hot his face and ears burned, he was certain he must've appeared aglow. He refused to look up at Kagome whose face was a colorful match to his.

"…You were speaking about me?" Rin sounded astonished. Then her head tilted. "About what?"

His mouth fumbled uselessly.

Before that abrasive, social ineptitude of his caused another upset, Kagome came to his aid. "Rin-chan." She'd crouched down beside him, mustering a warm smile despite her flushed cheeks. She now had the child's complete attention. "If I may ask, has Sesshomaru ever...shared his plans for what he intends to do with you?"

"What does milord 'intend to do' with me?" Rin repeated slowly, her brows dipped in rumination. She glanced down at her toes, the melancholy unbefitting her youthful visage. Rin seemed to give it intense thought before answering, "Whatever milord wants, this Rin is happy to follow him."

"Ahhh…. That…. I mean…."

"Kagome," Inuyasha cut in, "wants to ask, just what is your relationship with Sesshomaru?" He could tell the insinuation had escaped comprehension when Rin only stared at him, a lackluster reaction to what he would expect if the girl hadn't been so innocent and naive. "Why would you follow somebody like him?"

She remained riveted on his face. There was an intensity emanating from those dark eyes, one that made him think the child was seeing someone else in his position. He had the feeling, had he not redirected them from the skeletons and corpses left behind in this well-known forest, she would regard them with curiosity or a somberness—dim and musing—that few girls her age would show. It'd be equally likely she'd put on a show to disguise any vague reaction, normal only to those who had become numbed to such sights.

Inuyasha had a flash of insight. He couldn't imagine this girl being normal. Humans can be cruel, especially to those who were different—or to those who had been orphaned. In the past, this girl, too, might've been ostracized. If she had been a vagrant like him…. He fought the urge to grimace.

After a while, Rin relaxed. Her voice was soft: "Neh, y'know?" Her cheeks becoming rosy, she held her hands over her chest, aiming a gap-toothed grin heavenward. She shared, "Traveling beside milord, with Jaken-sama and A-Un, makes me feel warm and safe, like being washed in sunlight…. Sesshomaru-sama is noble and smart, great and mighty. So even if my place exists only in his memory or to admire him from afar like the stars, while time is still on my side...to be beside him as long as I can, that is my wish..."
The radiance of her joy stirred something in Inuyasha. He'd began to feel like a tree whose roots had at last broken into the rich, wet soil deep beneath the surface. In that moment, he thought he might've understood her situation.

There were people who had suffered greatly and wanted to cling to a powerful being in order to heal the lingering emotional trauma in their souls. The weak either sought or resented the strong; that was something only those who lived in these tumultuous times would understand. Finding solidarity in others was not a foreign concept to him, especially with civil unrest spread amongst all the warring provinces.

There was no denying her utmost trust in the daiyōkai; Sesshomaru must've done something extraordinary to have secured the child's unshakable devotion, for her to sing his praises, and for her to make that face.

Even so, there was only the question about what the girl truly felt for an individual half a millennium older, whether it be platonic or familial—or something else entirely. Much as Inuyasha hated it, demons and mortals truly walked different paths. Even a hanyou like him was no stranger to the fragility of humankind.

Just as he was about to unleash his question, there was a nudge to his ribs. Inuyasha and Kagome exchanged looks. He saw her raising a finger to her lips as she shook her head at him.

His ears flattened. When she remained stalwart despite his hard-pressed look, he jerked his head. He stood up, the subjugation beads clacking from the movement.

Being given the reins, Kagome had replaced his position before her. "One last question we have. I'm sorry if it's a sensitive subject…." She hesitated for a few seconds, before reaching out to clasp those small hands. She wore a kindly look. "There is no polite way to put this. But where are your parents? Your family?"

At that, Rin's smile dimmed. She slowly shook her head, squeezing Kagome's hands.

Kagome felt her stomach plummet.

Inuyasha had been resting against a tree, feeling the rough bark against his skin and keeping watch. Fiddling with the string of beads, it was then that he picked up something that even his acute hearing could not fully make out. His nose soon creased as well. Beneath the forest scents and the scent of death, he'd gotten a whiff of something that stirred traces of familiarity. His eyes narrowed.

"Something stinks."

For some reason, the smell made him irritated on the instinctual level. And he couldn't quite understand why.

From his peripheral vision, he caught Kagome tensing. Both girls had glanced toward him. Seriousness had transformed Kagome's oval face when she met his sight. In a moment of weakness, he'd faltered.

There was a trace of Kikyo's mature beauty in those eerily similar features.

He felt his chest tighten. The grief may have ebbed in the three years, but the feeling of guilt would never fully vanish. He still remembered cradling Kikyo that night in the fields, his companions respectfully keeping quiet throughout. Her tears had flowed when he'd pressed his lips against hers, with him feeling the weight of her lighten in his arms until her clay body dissipated into beautiful spheres of white, the long white sinuous forms of her soul collectors vanishing with the fragment of
her soul they'd been sustaining all that time.

The image of her content expression would forever be etched into his heart. *Her soul's finally at rest now, you fool,* he reminded himself.

Even with their uncanny similarities, Kagome was her own person. She was not, and never will be, Kikyo—her supposed future reincarnation or not. Looking at her now, seeing past the physical similarities, even with the resemblances in their gifts and in their kindness, he should know the woman in the forest with him was uniquely and unforgivably Higurashi Kagome.

**His Kagome.**

Pride burst from his chest like wildfire. She had come far from the witless woman who'd first stepped into his world, inexperienced and soft and as brash as him—but undeniably brave and clever. He'd once believed her only redeeming feature to have been her diligence. But now Kagome was someone he had come to have faith in—with all the security, strength, and fulfillment he didn't know he'd sought in a partner.

She was the third human in two hundred years of painful memories who'd accepted him, all of him, even his yōkai heritage. She didn't ask to be born as Kikyo's reincarnation—born with the mystical jewel in her. She didn't have to aspire to be a *miko,* even with her immense spiritual potential. Even so, she chose to.

She chose to stay in the past, even when she'd been presented with the option to return to a normal life.

She chose this life.

She chose to love him.

Her decision still never ceased to amaze him; such knowledge inspired a feeling of contentment which welled up inside him, spilling over and making him feel like he was floating. He inhaled several times, his lungs filling with cool air. While spring was close, when the cherry trees would be in blossom once again, one could still feel the last of winter lingering. Again, what was that scent…?

He peered at their surroundings, seeing nothing but a sea of trees.

"Wan wan-san?" Rin suddenly exclaimed, her body turned sideways. "Where do you think you're going?"

At the sound of her voice, across the distance the massive black form seemed to have paused mid-activity, his snout lifting up from the soil. His head and ears swiveled in her direction. With a keen bark, he vanished into the dense forest. The last thing they saw of him was his bushy tail.

Rin began tugging her wrists, desperately trying to free herself. Kagome's grip constricted. After a few seconds of hesitation, it was only when she didn't sense any malevolent energies within their vicinity and Inuyasha didn't warn them of any immediate threat, that Kagome finally released Rin.

Two pairs of eyes beheld them—one a warm dark color and one an otherworldly set of gold—as the girl scuttled away. Inuyasha had already joined Kagome when the priestess started straightening to her feet. Able to read her much like an open book, he saw just how rigid her shoulders were. There was internal conflict playing on her face.

Kagome was still brimming with questions.
A strangled noise escaped her when she felt a hard **smack** against her shoulder blades. Being shoved forward, she twisted around to glare at Inuyasha.

He looked unrepentant, lowering his palm. "C'mon, worrywart. You won't stop fretting until we hand her over to Sesshomaru or to that stupid **kappa** of his." Inuyasha was still awful at it, but he had gotten better at distracting her whenever she seemed lost at sea, adrift with nothing to hold on. He'd learned what could tide her over.

While his claws were usually a constant weight on the hilt of his father's sword—a superfluous gesture in reality, but it soothed his nerves—he shifted Rin's rucksack onto a safer position over his shoulder. Bracing himself to be slammed into the dirt, he told her dryly, "Stop being so indecisive. We're going to lose her at this rate."

"I know that!"

Despite having caused her annoyance, he was surprised when Kagome didn't activate the beads of subjugation. **(And she'll never remove those accursed beads off you,** his subconscious whispered—the side of him that he was ashamed of. There was no residual anger left in him, the one emotion that'd never failed to make him feel less helpless, cresting in wake of that train of thought. It was only resignation. **Y'know she knows better than to....)**

Lost in his thoughts, he'd nearly recoiled when she smooshed his cheeks and she brought her face closer to his, standing on her tiptoes to meet his height. He couldn't help but to take in a big whiff.

His nose had always been sensitive. That was why, in his memories, he remembered the astringent, pungent stench Kagome had worn when they'd first met—**chemicals** so cloyingly sweet and fruity, they'd dulled all other smells. Back then he could track her from a distance, even when she climbed out of the Bone Eater's Well. He'd only noticed a change in her odor sometime later in their earlier adventures—one far subtler and pleasant to his nose.

Although it'd been sometime since she'd returned to stay with him in the past, that faint sweet fragrance—flowers of some sort—remained in her hair. He inhaled the scent, holding it in his lungs.

"You're terrible," she breathed, bumping her forehead against his. The corners of her mouth lifted. "I know I told you that I wanted to be a pillar of your strength, yet you're always looking out for me. Thank you, Inuyasha...."

He could feel their breaths mingling. There was a coarse texture to two of her slender fingers, formed from improper archery without a glove, when he felt her hand brushing his hair away from his warming face. Fingertips trailed down his jaw, across the side of his neck—stilling over the purple beads—and then she squeezed his shoulder briefly, before drawing away.

Her eyes were fixated on his chest, as though she were embarrassed to see if the brief display of affection had affected him. She had heard that back in the past, the feeling a Japanese man could have upon seeing a woman's throat and neck was similar as how a man in the West might feel about seeing a woman's legs and ankles. If that was true, even Inuyasha should not be an exception to that rule. Kagome's cheeks were flushed with color, and she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"L-let's go," Kagome forced herself to say. She felt her pulse both in her throat and under the tight grip of his hand that he likely didn't realize was holding onto hers.

After giving her a heated look, he went ahead first, tugging her along with him. They both sprinted. Together.
Several hundred years of browned leaves lay on the forest floor, carpeting the trail. It cushioned their soles and absorbed the sounds of their footsteps.

The trunks grew so closely together; it was easy to envision how travelers could feel disoriented wandering the Forest of Illusion—or what Kagome knew to be the future's infamous Suicide Forest. It was fortunate they were with Inuyasha, who guided them safely over the treacherous roots threading through the forest floor. Trees organically twisted and turned. Because its location was at the base of a mountain, the ground was rocky and uneven, concealing hundreds of caves.

Abruptly Kagome recalled the instance where she'd come face-to-face with the celestial maiden from one of Japan's famous folktales here at this site. She shivered, feeling a phantom twinge below her shoulder blade where the arrow had once pierced through her.

In the end, with Inuyasha's enhanced senses, it wasn't that difficult tracking the canine's pawprints. The closer they approached the destination, they thought they heard voices as soft and murmurous as wings. Judging by the deep, calm cadence of the person speaking quietly, it didn't seem like it was yurei—vengeful, mournful spirits known to manifest around these parts—who had lured Rin over.

Inuyasha was the first to realize who the individual was. His claws began to unclench from the hilt of his father's fang.

Gently, hardly daring to breathe, Kagome whispered, "Hold on, isn't that—?" Her words trailed off once she saw the back of a figure knelt beside the girl.

Both the stranger and Rin were in a small clearing, facing the base of an old tree. Sitting back on their haunches, their shapes blocked sight of whatever that had them so bewitched.

Although it was still dark outside, whatever the pair were using as a light source had illuminated a little of the monk's attire. The dyes were bolder than the outfits sewn together by the humble acolytes of the Buddhist faith. His robes resembled that of a thirteenth-century Sôtô priest with the toga-like purple wrap called kesa draped over his left shoulder, tucked into the front of his black long-sleeved koromo.

The only other signs of his vanity were the hair that had been tied back into a small ponytail and the golden hooped earrings. He was absentmindedly petting the head of the large beast wedged between them, docile and eyes still shut.

The canine's ears perked up when Kagome exclaimed, bewildered: "Miroku-sama!"

"...Yes?" Hearing his name, the man turned around. When recognition struck, his expression lit up, handsome and pleased.

The canine whined when the hand that'd been petting him retreated.

Gripping the wooden handle of the shakujō ritual staff to support his weight, Miroku rose up to his feet, the rings rattling against the metal finial from the momentum. "Oya, Kagome-sama, Inuyasha? What a fortuitous surprise. I didn't know you were accompanying this fine young lady." His voice was like melting honey.

Rin giggled.

"Aren't you a kept man now, 'hōshi-sama?'" Kagome remarked dryly, feeling her hand being relinquished by Inuyasha. Her brows dipped, and she scanned their surroundings. Neither the demon slayer nor her nekotama—a two-tailed demon cat—were anywhere in sight. She asked, "Where is
Sango-chan? And Kirara? They're not here with you?"

The last time they'd seen the newlyweds was when Inuyasha and Kagome had been ready to depart. Kaede—Kikyo's surviving younger sister, now the village priestess and midwife—had been tasked to watch over the new family while Kagome and Inuyasha went on their journey.

Kaede's village in the Musashi Province—which would later be split into modern-day Tokyo, most of the Saitama Prefecture, and part of the Kanagawa Prefecture—was at least two-to-three days' worth of travel on foot. The village was a lynchpin to all the extraordinary events that brought the lives of three humans, one half-demon, and two demons onto a collision course. Each had their own goals and motivations, but eventually they'd all agreed to work together to collect the Shikon Jewel shards before the mythical jewel fell into the wrong hands.

"What are you doing out here so late?" Inuyasha blurted, folding his arms. "Don't tell me two brats are too much for you."

Miroku cast an eye shrewdly on them. "Contrary to what you may think sometimes, I'm no degenerate," he answered slowly. His expression turned a bit rueful when he gazed down at his feet. "No, I'm on a different pilgrimage of a sort, for a peace of mind."

"...Eh?"

"Perhaps you and Kagome-sama would like to see?" He was still pleasant to them, but they could tell from the strain in his voice that he had something else on his mind. Shuffling away several steps, he revealed what had him and Rin so enthralled.

"Waaa!" Kagome exclaimed, awestruck. She'd clapped her palms together. "How cute!"

Staring up at them were thirteen sprites, each dyed a rich green and glowing. No bigger than her palm, they all wore chipped lacquered bowls for hats. Vaguely humanoid in appearance, they reminded Kagome of bobbleheads—but with sunken holes for eyes and a mouth. The sprites stood atop a miniature shrine the size of a dollhouse, with the stone surface encrusted over with moss.

Every one of them that carried a sprig of leaves immediately pointed them up at Kagome, waving the stems animatedly. They seem to be driven to excitement when she crouched down to take a closer look at them. One had even tripped.

"They're kodama," Miroku divulged with a trace of amusement. "These tree spirits supposedly help guide the lost and can grant wishes. So long as you don't mistreat them or destroy their home, you won't be cursed. I'm surprised you haven't heard of them."

"I have, but only in mov—folklore," she quickly corrected herself, aware that the topic of movies—another product of modern technology—would only confuse everyone around her. Kagome then noticed the paper talisman and the offering of a sweet-rice cake left on the altar. She deduced, "Did you come this far...to make a wish, Miroku-sama?"

Before Miroku could answer, Inuyasha spoke up from behind them. "What do you even need to make a wish for?" He was looking at Miroku's palm, where the dark void once resided. Inuyasha looked puzzled. "Naraku's dead. Your Wind Tunnel has been sealed. You no longer have to worry."

Miroku's hand clenched. He remarked casually, "Oh? Didn't you know...? We're expecting our third child."

Kagome gawked at him. "Sango-chan is pregnant? Again?" She'd really wanted to ask, You were actually serious about that?
In their travels, Kagome remembered the man had expressed once that he wanted ten or twenty children, but she had taken his words for granted. Women used to think poorly of the traveling monk; his tendency was to approach every attractive female and ask them to bear him a son. Even when he'd met Sango, his lecherous habits persevered. It wasn't until later they realized what he'd been asking for all that time. Miroku was determined to leave behind a legacy—proof that he'd existed—before he fell to the same fate as his father: being consumed by the curse, leaving nothing of himself behind except a crater in the ground.

His grin stretched ear-to-ear. In a dreamy tone, he confirmed, "She is. We hope it's a boy this time."

Despite herself, Kagome could feel her expression softening.

"Unfortunately," Miroku resumed, "there's not much I can do for her otherwise in terms of alleviating discomfort…. As Sango's husband, I sought to acquire blessings for another safe delivery."

"Um, didn't Kaede baa-chan prepare her herbal remedies? From last time?"

"That she has. However…." Something seemed to occur to him in that moment and he lapsed into a queer silence, searching the miniature shrine for something—or for someone. When he came up short, he immediately shifted priorities.

Eyeing the child, he gestured for Kagome and Inuyasha to follow. Without checking to see if they understood, he turned on the soles of his feet and marched off.

Kagome and Inuyasha exchanged looks, before they moved to follow. Rin had looked over curiously when Inuyasha returned the rucksack to her. Kagome made sure to have Rin promise to stay where she was, informing her that they were coming back. When they got her to promise, they hurried off.

All three adults eventually traveled enough distance where they couldn't be overheard, but they remained close enough so the child had them within sight.

Finally, Miroku stopped walking. Leaning against the bark of a tree, with his staff tucked between his sleeves, he whispered to them, "Why is it that I find you two traveling with that girl?"

"Sesshomaru's disappeared," Kagome whispered back, watching his brows leap up. "We just found her—alone. With that big canine. It wouldn't be right to leave her alone. Inuyasha and I promised to escort her back to...to Jaken, I suppose."

"Yes...that canine... Now that you mention it...." Miroku peered at the black mass across the distance. He was muttering to himself, amongst other things, about it at least not being a black village dog.

"Come again?"

He waved the both of them off. "As long as it doesn't hurt anyone, it seems to be of little concern. Do be at ease." He'd folded his arms again, the sleeves falling down to cover his hands. "I consider it fortunate that you two are here. I wish to draw upon your wisdom. Have you and Inuyasha noticed the lack of bandits lately?"

"Um, I attributed that to our stroke of good fortune?" She withdrew an amulet from beneath the folds of her outfit. The careful brushstrokes of the sutra on the fabric of the bag was meant to bless the wearer with safe travels. Her smile was shy. "Thanks to your gift, we've somehow managed to avoid the more dangerous paths."
The older man returned her smile. He reached for her hand, gently pressing it down. "I am glad you still have it in possession, Kagome-sama. I'd thought Inuyasha would've tossed it by now."

Almost immediately, Inuyasha made a noise of indignation.

"Calm, Inuyasha. I say that in jest." His good humor faded, and a somberness had replaced it. "Listen. Strange things are afoot. On my way here, I'd even stumbled upon a deserted village. According to the nearby village elder, those peasants seemed to have taken all grains of rice with them and fled to neighboring villages or to the mountains."

"Why? Is it because of the war?"

"I'd initially thought as much. But it's not just that." He was looking down at the soil, his brows furrowed. "I've also heard word of an...interesting superstition, spreading across the provinces. The villagers I spoke to describe a wraith—the spirit of a masked foreigner. He comes bearing gifts to those in his favor, and brings misfortune to those who are not. Whether that is falsehood or not, it might not bode well for the future of the Ashikaga shogunate and the Oda clan if he roams—"

"Wait, the Oda clan? As in, Oda Nobunaga, the famous warlord from history?" Kagome interrupted, beaming, her voice rising a pitch higher with each word expressed. She could feel Inuyasha eyeing her incredulously. "The real one that will become the most feared overlord in all of—?"

She abruptly bit her tongue, her hands flying to the lower half of her face.

Miroku was now staring at her. "Lord Oda Nobunaga will be the most feared? The 'Big Fool of Owari'?" According to hearsay, Oda Nobunaga had been notorious for having been a brash and altogether rude fellow, acting out sometimes with borderline disgraceful behavior. It'd taken the recent suicide of Nobunaga's retainer to startle the young heir into taking his obligations seriously. He speculated, "He's going to become a celebrated warlord?"

When the top half of Kagome's face contorted into a sheepish expression, Miroku shook his head, dispelling the thought. He glanced up at the forest canopy.

There were only a few instances where his friend would forget her surroundings and accidentally reveal her knowledge of the future.

He remembered Kagome had been forthright in the beginning of their friendship, eager to share what she knew with others. Her knowledge of the future had its advantages and disadvantages. But over the years, certain incidents had clammed her up.

While he was curious as to the future accomplishments that'd write Nobunaga into the annals of history, he knew better than to pry. Miroku continued, "If we are speaking of the same person, then yes. But that is not important. What's significant is it's part of a series of coincidences that's given the people I've spoken to a cause to worry."

"...Do you think it's another demon?"

"Hn? The foreigner? ...Well, some claim he's the spirit of a pirate who's practiced the black arts; some say he's an otherworldly visitor—among other rumors that I care not to repeat. It's even likely for a powerful human to have been possessed. He could've been a ronin without a master. Or a nanban-jin; those southern barbarians have been exporting metals and textiles to us, and their strange weapons...." His frown deepening, Miroku mimed hefting a long heavy contraption, taking aim, and then pretending to stagger back upon firing at an invisible target.

"But, Miroku-sama." Her expression grew dubious. In her experience, villagers had a tendency to
exaggerate—blaming curses, ghosts, or yōkai when they didn't have any answers. Only a handful of those cases were actually supernatural in nature. "Surely there must be someone who has heard of what this wraith looks like beneath the mask."

"You will be cursed if you are unfortunate enough to catch a glimpse." His hands dropped back down, this time beside his thighs. "He is an omen, appearing whenever there is impending danger. Seeing the wraith can be a precursor to one's death. There are even unexplained disappearances. I imagine he's not someone I would want as an enemy."

"You make him sound like shinigami," Kagome ventured, faltering a bit when she only got puzzled stares. Hesitant for several seconds, she said, "Sorry, I thought I mentioned that in a few centuries, ideas from the, um, the Far West overseas will influence our country's beliefs...to an extent. This...um, phrase...is one of them?"

"Truly? 'A god of death,' and not Buddhas and bodhisattvas?" The monk had set his mouth into a disapproving line, but his next words were thoughtful: that she did warn them about the imminent cultural, political, and social changes in the future. It was just disconcerting for him to even fathom. Sensing that he was about to lapse into deep thought, Kagome pleaded, "Forget it, please. Just, answer me this: can we believe these rumors?" She resisted the urge to peek at Inuyasha. "Or do you believe it to be another local superstition?"

"Truth be told, I don't know what to think," Miroku admitted. "I've been told a guardian spirit has been seen accompanying him. That makes me inclined to believe there is more substance to those rumors than mere hearsay...."

"Well, shall we exorcise them?"

He took in a deep breath, but ended up saying nothing. Whatever he'd been about to say had been cut off when Inuyasha bolted upright from his poor posture, his palm slapped sharply against his own neck. The tiniest mote of something drifted down from the point of impact, thin as confetti paper. Before touching the ground, it'd ballooned out. Shaking its head, it sprang up onto Inuyasha's awaiting palm. Upon closer inspection, the speck was a plump elderly man—scarcely bigger than a mite and as round as a nut. The elderly man had a strange appearance, almost as if he were a caricature. He'd worn a traditional, straight-sleeved brown cotton coat tied shut at the hip and a pair of peasant trousers. What remained on his head were sideburns so wizened and straw-like, they were nearly fossilized. "You taste delicious as always, Lord Inuyasha."

One of his four hands was rubbing the dab of red away from his chin. He had two whiskers for facial hair and a proboscis for a mouth. Even so, he gave off the impression that he was smiling at them sheepishly after he'd bowed down at the waist.

"Myoga-jiji...." There was an undertone of exasperation beneath Inuyasha's hissed words.

While Myoga's allegiance seemed to be with the youngest sibling, Inuyasha still had the faintest of misgivings toward him. But just like draining water from a bucket, they were cleared from his mind. He lacked the desire to externalize them aloud, not when the flea demon seemed determined to atone for his absence two hundred years ago in the young lord's life—a time where Inuyasha would've desperately welcomed guidance for how to survive as an aberration not accepted by either demon or human society.
Inuyasha scoffed. "'Bout time you showed up. Don't tell me you were eavesdropping on us this whole time."

"Is that how you speak to your elders?" Myoga admonished in his creaky voice. One of his fists was raised. "Why, I never. How impertinent!"

Before they descended into their usual squabbling, Kagome greeted, "It's wonderful seeing you again, Myoga-jichan." She'd bent a little at the knees so she could hear him better, mindful to lower her voice, remembering the elder complaining to them that they sounded like ogres shouting at him. Nostalgia had twisted her smile. "It's been three years."

She could see the reflection of herself in his pale bulbous eyes when Myoga squinted up at her, as though he were trying to match her features with the fifteen-year old girl he'd met years prior.

One of the things Kagome appreciated about Myoga was that he had counted among the demons with more progressive opinions than their peers. It might've been due to his cowardly nature, but to her knowledge Myoga rarely rebuked Kagome or Sango whenever they'd been insubordinate such as raising their voices at the men in their party or having memorably slapped them for preservation of their modesty.

His leniency might've been due to their young age—or the fact that he didn't think it proper of himself meddling in human affairs. It might've also been because they had both been unattached girls at the time—although in feudal times, they would be considered young women—acting more boyish than the revered feminine ideal.

Contemporary Japan was far from perfect, with different burdens placed on the average man and woman living in the country, with the modern gender disparity as a result of those expected cultural norms. But even so, it could not be compared to the expectations in the feudal age of Japanese history.

The separation of rank and gender had first shocked Kagome upon landing in Sengoku Jidai—the Warring States period. While Japanese women were educated and actually had influence in the day-to-day lives of everyone, there was still the expectation to be docile, humble, and submissive—particularly to her future husband.

Kagome also remembered having observed the distinction between a noblewoman and a village girl. The amount of rights and freedom a person enjoyed seemed to depend on social class, especially marital status. In some ways, low ranking women had more liberties than those in higher status. The few noblewomen Kagome encountered were refined in manners and elegant, but behaved far too demurely and timidly for her to comprehend. They held different priorities. She'd recalled the formal atmosphere around them being stifling, strict and uncomfortable.

In the end, Kagome could only be glad she'd ended up in feudal Japan instead of medieval Europe, where she'd remembered from her history lessons as being a lot worse. At least here, it was not unusual that she knew how to read and write.

"And it pleases this old man greatly to see you returned to our time, Kagome-sama," he finally replied. "But just now, you'd asked a very foolish question."

"Eh?"

Myoga struck a finger up in the direction of her face, declaring, "In our troubled times, it's said nigitama are born from the light of human faith and belief. Are we to interfere with the natural cycle of rebirth—of life and death? The world of the living perches atop this delicate balance
between light and dark. The monk understands. Explain it to her."

"It is just as you say." Miroku adopted a practiced smile when everyone glanced over at him. He imparted patiently, "If the rumor of the guardian spirit is true, we should exercise caution. Defying the will of guardian spirits is akin to defying kami."

"Like defying the gods?" Kagome echoed, slightly aghast that the topic was beginning to sound like her grandfather's lectures.

She abruptly felt a pang in her heart; tiresome as her grandfather's eccentricities sometimes were, she'd missed his tall tales. Homesickness was a painful sort of awareness. She'd even missed the knickknacks he'd make to show off to his two grandchildren for approval, before he sold those trinkets on the sacred grounds of the Higurashi family shrine.

Past the sudden lump in her throat, she managed to ask, "H-how so?"

"Kagome-sama is a sensible girl. So it is no fault of yours that you are unaware. But even you must understand, *nigitama* are not...fiends born from the darkness of human grudge and hatred. You cannot find one unless they wish to be found; they only present themselves to those who bear a noble spirit or a grand vision—needing a vessel to carry out their will. Their will is akin to divine providence."

Both her and Inuyasha's faces were going through the most remarkable series of changes, but they did their best to keep quiet.

"That is what a guardian spirit is," Miroku finished for him. "If it is their decree, we shalln't interfere whenever they manifest."

"You and Inuyasha-sama," Myoga suddenly brought up, huffing, "are not in the habit of having your ears stuck to the ground and walls like I am. Really! What is the matter with you? Even yōkai are not exempt from being spirited away by—!"

"Then what do you make of this personally?" Inuyasha finally snapped. "It's irritating when you two keep talking in circles. Do we investigate this or do we pay these rumors no heed?"

Being confronted the way that he had, Myoga choked on his words.

"Well? Answer me, Myoga-jiji. Do you also think it's the work of 'divine providence,' or do you think it's the work of a corrupt yōkai who is indiscriminate between demons and humans? Why are you even telling us this?"

Instead of Myoga answering, Miroku said, "Inuyasha, at the village we've been residing temporarily, the village elder asked me to pray over a merchant they've just recovered." His hand was brought to his chin. He was glancing at the canopy thoughtfully, reminiscing. "He also asked me to look into the disappearances. If it's truly the result of divinity, I will investigate no further. But on the possibility it is something else...we do have a measure of skill in dealing with yōkai and monsters. It is good that you two are here."

There were layers of protection when they moved as a group. They'd achieved more with—compact and trusted—numbers than a single individual alone, however skilled that person was.

"The human merchant was one of their civilians thought to be missing," Myoga finally said, finding his voice. He was looking directly at Kagome now. "This village practices *Ubasute*. They take their sick and ailing and the disabled into this forest, and leave them here."
How horrible, was the fleeting thought, but Kagome forced herself to repress her enmity. She was grateful he was mindful to explain the concept for her sake. Her face grew increasingly vigilant.

"I'm sure I don't need to spell out their fates after that. Now you might be wondering how the disappearances tie into the mysterious foreigner and his nigaiama? ...I honestly wouldn't know. It was merely one of the many possibilities the monk was looking into. I'd thought a priestess like you should be made aware. The same as you, Lord Inuyasha! In fact—!"

Kagome and Inuyasha had been glaring daggers at the flea demon the longer he rambled on.

"There is one more matter that we must discuss," Miroku cut in when they were about to berate Myoga. Grasping his staff, he was about to use the end of it to draw in the dirt when he heard barking. Happy barking.

It was accompanied by a wave of girlish laughter.

The merriment washed over the forest like fresh morning sunlight after hours of dawn, chasing the shadows away. All that remained was a feeling of lightness, where a person floundering in the dark couldn't help but be naturally captivated by the sudden warmth.

They strained every muscle in their eyes and ears. Even Inuyasha's furry ears had perked up, although he seemed confused by what he was hearing.

Oblivious to their attention, Rin was playing a game, chasing after the canine with her hands outstretched. The kodama glowing on the altar appeared like tiny green lanterns bobbing in a hazy night sky.

"Kuro, Kuro," Rin sung, "the black canine in the cage... When, oh when will it come out? In the evening of the dawn...the crane and turtle slipped. Who is behind you now?" Every time she would come close to grasping the wagging tail, the canine would dart over and lick the underside of her cheeks and chin, making her tumble down in delight.

Kagome recognized the famous nursery rhyme, despite the "kagome"—meaning "caged bird"—verse having been changed. It belonged to a game where children would link hands and walk in a circle, where the blindfolded child—the oni, also known as the ogre—would have to accurately guess who was directly behind them when the chant ended. However much Kagome personally didn't care for the lyrics—she had horrible childhood memories of her friends trapping her in a circle, forcing her to play because of her name—she had taught it to Rin since the child liked the concept.

Judging by the yips, the canine seemed to like his new name. Anything was better than Sesshomaru-sama no Inu at least—or Pochi.

"How inauspicious," she heard Myoga mumble. He was staring at the sight that the human child and canine made, with a queer expression that pulled the skin tautly over his face.

Before any of them got the chance to ask Myoga what he'd meant, they saw Inuyasha jerk his head sideways, sniffing the air. His nose was scrunched up as though he'd detected a particularly foul odor.

"Inuyasha?"

They'd heard first, rather than saw.

"Riiiiiiiiiiiiin!" That shrill voice embodied every discordant violin screech Kagome had ever heard.
A long shadow passed over them, as big as a storehouse, with what sounded like heavy leathery wings flapping, sending the tree canopies into cacophony. Soaring above them was a familiar two-headed dragon, with scales that shone like bronze against the starry sky.

If one squinted, they would be able to see Sesshomaru's retainer perched on the dragon's saddle, wearing the Shinto priest attire with a high black hat strapped to his head. Those wide eyes were a pair of yellow moons in the dark. If not for the physical characteristics of his species such as the green reptilian skin and webbed appendages, the kappa could have passed as a short, pruny holy man if one only saw him from the back.

"Oh, thank goodness!" he yelled over the wind. There wasn't any indication he'd noticed the group with her. Tugging the reins, he rebuked, "Rin, you foolish, foolish girl!"

"Jaken-sama!" Rin shouted, shooting to her feet. Kuro had scampered behind her, stabilizing her balance. She was beaming. "You found me!"

A translucent dome had been erected over the shrine, with the talisman having been activated. If it hadn't been for the barrier shielding them, the kodama would've flown backwards, with some of them clinging desperately to the stone while others would've rolled elsewhere. Even so, their eerie voices as loud as mouse squeaks, they tried to make their surprise known when the two-headed dragon descended.

"I was searching all over for you!" he wailed. "Why did you run away?"

The group took that as a signal to sprint back.

"This Rin didn't run away!" she exclaimed, standing her ground. Her grin plummeting, there was intense concentration on her face. Combing one hand through Kuro's thick fur, Rin asked loudly, "Didn't you see the directions I left for you and A-Un?"

"You did not leave us directions—!" Yanking the reins, Jaken hopped off their back. He rushed over. Thrusting his staff in the direction of the beast behind her, his panic rising, he cried, "Get away from her, you mangy cur!"

Rin flung out her arms, ready to protect Kuro. "No, please don't—!"

A voice bellowed, "Hijin Tessō!"

Jaken froze when crescent-shaped blades of energy whistled past him. Without a target, they'd smashed into a tree and pulverized the ground faraway. Chunks of bark and grass flew into the air. When the glowing red yōki dispersed like water, he was left boggling at the set of claw marks that now marred the stump of a tree trunk.

Feeling the sweat pooling down his back, Jaken clenched the wooden staff in a white-knuckled grip. He spun around when he heard a crunch.

Emerging from the bushes, Inuyasha was licking the blood from his palm. His companions were still catching up to him in the nearby distance. Those familiar eyes were filled with contempt as he gazed upon Jaken's trembling form.

His beak hung open. "Y-you!" Jaken quavered, pointing in his direction.

"Yes, me," Inuyasha retorted. When the last of the wounds healed, he dropped his claws from his face. His hands were balled into fists. "We're all happy to see you too, you pesky toad."
"I am not a toad!" Jaken fumed. He did not hear the child emit a sigh of relief behind him, her tenseness unwinding. She'd wrapped her arms around the canine's neck, when Jaken slammed the end of his staff into the dirt. "You could've killed me or the girl!"

"Stay very still and maybe I'll manage this time."

"Inuyasha!" a female voice called out, stern, and Jaken's face soured even more upon catching a glimpse of the rest. Darting around the dragon, Kagome touched Inuyasha's back, fingers light enough to send goosebumps down his spine, as soon as she'd reached them. She turned to peer down at Jaken, staring at him for a bit. Finally, she said, "Sorry, you know Inuyasha's always cranky. I'm sure he doesn't mean it. He actually likes Rin."

It was as neutral of a response Kagome could come up with.

"Inuyasha...likes Rin?" they heard her chime in, sounding awed. When they turned, Rin was peeking at them from the black fur. Under the weight of their combined stares, she just as quickly ducked her head, uncharacteristically shy.

"...Keh."

The more that Inuyasha inspected their traveling gear, with the subtle finery woven into the saddle and bags, in their clothes even, the bigger his suspicion was that these fools were eventually going to be targeted. Just looking at these four—the child, the kappa retainer, the dragon, and now the canine—did not exactly impart an impression of a decent fighting force, not without someone like Sesshomaru to protect them.

Inuyasha jerked when Kagome pinched his skin. "What?" he hissed. When Kagome said nothing, only giving him a glare, he felt himself wilting under her unspoken chastisement. "Close enough," he allowed gruffly, looking anywhere but at Rin.

There was that determined set to Kagome's mouth. And Miroku was not that far away, marching on over to them, wearing an expression Inuyasha knew to be of craftiness. Already anticipating the ordeal they were about to undertake, with either trying to persuade each other or descending into arguments, Inuyasha soon fixed his sight on the miniature shrine. And he felt his brows beginning to rise.

Having lost interest in them, the tree spirits were tidying up the altar. Occasionally they would study them from behind the barrier that was fading away. But none of those were what had taken him aback.

Atop the altar, joining the talisman and sweet-rice cake, was a small offering of berries.

It could be said that the Wizengamot was an integral part of the Ministry of Magic. It functioned as wizarding Britain's high court of law and parliament, with their courtrooms located on the tenth-floor—where the dungeons were—whilst its administrative headquarters were located in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Smaller disciplinary hearings were typically held in smaller settings—such as the Head Auror's office—which were dealt by a single investigator. A high-profile hearing, on the other hand, was an elaborate courtroom affair overseen by about fifty members of the Wizengamot.

In the days of the impending trial of Dolores Jane Umbridge, Harry could be seen frequenting his office. It was where Hermione had found him three days after another marriage counseling session, with her husband who she'd recommended for foreign assignment with absolute confidence in his
abilities. (She remembered Ron had been anxious at first, but she was impressed that he was mature enough to seek them the help they needed to begin to mend their marriage.) She’d walked in to see Harry—in an odd turn of events—hunched over his desk, poring over files and newspapers.

The door had locked itself behind her, canceling any outside noise, sealing themselves within a vacuum of space. Outside the perimeter of the enchanted tall windows, wizards and witches could be seen weaving through their cubicles when Harry declared to her, "I might be walking into a trap, Hermione...." He glanced up.

Hermione stared at him. She'd been shuffling back and forth between departments—particularly the Minister's Office, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and the Department of Mysteries—so it's been hours since Hermione actually stepped foot in his office. After a moment, she asked carefully, "How so?" Her footsteps were light and unsure as she slowly approached, watching him through cautious eyes. At his side, she was studying the papers which he'd laid out for her.

It was then that Harry informed Hermione of everything that had happened during her absence:

He'd said it'd been by happenstance when he, upon making his way back to his department, had stumbled upon the defending barrister of the case. He'd seen the stack—at least four-hundred pages worth of parchment—incoming, and he'd swerved out of the way before there was any collision. Unfortunately, the individual hadn't taken his fast reflexes into account, and had ended up crashing into him anyway. The sheaf of parchment had tumbled to the floor.

It was here where Harry told Hermione that he'd been ready to kneel, about to help, but the woman he'd bumped into seemed to have it handled without him. He'd ended up retrieving the woman's briefcase instead. About to hand it over, he had paused upon having a good look at her.

The woman had been a redhead, with her hair reminding Harry of a burnt orange sunset. She had been neither beautiful nor terrible in his opinion, but her Mediterranean roots were undeniable. She had a pear-shaped body and thin lips, dark slanted eyes—which made him suspect she might have at least a partial Asian background—and handsome eyebrows. He'd assumed she was at least ten years older than him, her dark billowy gown lending her a gravitas which didn't suit her.

"Terribly sorry about that," she had said to him. He'd remembered seeing her eyes landing on his gloved hand, before rocketing up to take in his face. She'd then addressed him by title, using a distinctly more formal tone after taking his extended limb.

"Miss Tulip Karasu. It's the first time we've met officially. But my parents have been Aurors for a long time. Perhaps they've mentioned me?" Adjusting the weight in her arms, she had been studying him with an indescribable expression when he'd handed her the briefcase. When he'd finally gave her a negative reply, she'd introduced herself as: "I'm a criminal barrister. I was on my way to hand the Chief Warlock these papers actually...."

"Ah, so you're one of the 'Silks,'" Harry had said then. It'd made sense to him. That'd explained why she wasn't wearing the plum-colored robes with the department's initials embroidered in silver thread. A barrister was a rarity in the Wizengamot, only appearing for the most significant of cases; it had been his mistaken assumption that no wizarding lawyer existed when he'd been improperly tried for underage magic.

"That I am," she'd said.

They'd begun to walk in unison. To his growing dismay, it had seemed that neither one of them were
in a particular hurry. They would be making polite conversation until either of them managed to extract themselves.

"...For which case, if I might ask?"

"I would say that depends on your answer, Lord Potter. I'm told you're contemplating your right to exercise diplomatic immunity. Is that true? I haven't read your statement, so I logically assumed you must've rejected the subpoena."

His shoulders had tensed, immediately on his guard.

Karasu must have sensed his unease back then, for she'd allowed the corners of her mouth to turn up. The smile had transformed her, as though the sternness she'd worn had been a mask and Harry was seeing her true face just then. She had stressed to him, "Understand, I'm only asking because I wouldn't want to improperly influence witness testimony."

"You said you were a criminal barrister," he had said slowly, trying to sift through his memories. There was only one case that'd stood out in his mind. His mouth had been set in a hard line. "Miss Karasu, if I could be frank, are you on the side of the prosecution or the defense for the Umbridge trial? ...I'm asking not as Lord Potter but as the Head Auror of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I would appreciate your transparency."

He remembered her having given him an inscrutable look. Glancing down at the parchments, she seemed to deliberate on whether or not to tell him. Finally, Karasu had offered him, "I'm not supposed to divulge my client's secrets to just anyone, not without my client's consent. Like it or not, there is a conflict of interest when it comes to you."

That was as transparent of an answer she could've given him during that time. Having forced himself to think more carefully about his words, Harry had asked as levelly as he could: "Why did you accept the case, Miss Karasu? Did you owe her a favor? Is that why?"

"Head Auror." Before they'd rounded the corner, Karasu had stopped in her tracks. "I know the challenges ahead of me."

"She is charged for cooperation with the Dark Lord's regime, and for the torture, imprisonment, and deaths of several individuals. Y'know Umbridge is guilty—beyond a shadow of a doubt."

"I know that while the line between ethical and unethical behavior may seem like a fine one, it is a line that we barristers walk every day on the job. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that my client is responsible for most of what she is being accused of."

"Yet you still took the case." Back then, he couldn't help the accusing tone his voice had taken. There had been something in Karasu's measuredness which hadn't sat well with Harry. Her self-confidence had to have originated from somewhere. He could've only assumed she'd known something that he didn't.

At one point, she'd even asked him if he had been a Gryffindor. He'd replied tersely what that question was supposed to have meant, but Karasu hadn't sought fit to answer him. She'd only looked smug.

"...Can you answer me this? My defendant tried to plead guilty. But you wouldn't let her." Having caught the surprise on his face, she'd chuckled. "It has your fingerprints all over it. My question is...why? I find it odd that you would have rejected the deal. She was willing to own up to her crimes."
His mind had been like an intersection with too much traffic in it. "She's only doing it to reduce her penalties," he'd answered her truthfully. According to what he'd known, the Wizengamot members presiding over the case could reduce punishments by up to a third had the accused plead guilty at the earliest opportunity. The moment Harry received word that Umbridge wanted to enter into a plea bargain, he'd assumed what her intentions were. "She's clever."

His response seemed to satisfy her. She'd nodded in agreement. "You want her to suffer," she'd observed. "I believe I'm starting to understand."

No, what he'd wanted was to give Umbridge the punishment she deserved—for what she'd inflicted on him and on her other victims. There had been a particular phrase Umbridge had used in the past, which Harry found apt for her situation currently. But that wasn't something he could've said to the barrister. Instead he'd told Karasu that he wanted her client to undergo the same court procedure that the others have underwent. Her client would be no exception.

There had been a sort of heightened awareness he had about Karasu—one that wasn't entirely pleasant. That wasn't to say that she hadn't acted courteously to him throughout, and she might've been friendly to her circle outside of work, but he'd sensed from the beginning that she may have disliked him for a reason unbeknownst to him.

At last, she'd said, "You asked me why I decided to take on the case. Well, you see, I'm quite capable at my job, Head Auror." She'd held his gaze, as though daring him to disagree. But Harry couldn't have disagreed. Even the way she'd walked, her head held high, spoke of an assurance in herself which could only stem from a history of success. She'd asserted, "I appreciate individuals for their merits alone, despite having problematic qualities or having a history of making wrongful life decisions. That is the philosophy that has won me cases. That is why I intend to prevail in this one just as well. Umbridge is no different."

"Then I wish you the best of luck."

His smart mouth had always been one of his bad habits—his defense mechanism, as their department shrink had put it—but in that moment he simply couldn't stop himself.

Having heard that, Karasu had given him a thin-lipped smile. When she'd reached her destination, she'd told him, "Thank you for the opportunity, Lord Potter. This had been...an illuminating talk."

"I...honestly wish I could say the same."

"Last chance. Are you or are you not serving as a character witness for the prosecution? Even if you are the Head Auror, I would think running away is awfully unexpected of you, aye?"

Her words had struck him like rocks. Harry had worn an expression that made him appear like a carved stone when he'd told her that she would unfortunately have to find out like the rest of the legal teams.

She'd given him another smile, bigger than the last. He still remembered Karasu's last words to him when she'd departed: "Remember, Head Auror. It is you who'd wanted this."

"Oh, she is a viper," Hermione breathed the moment Harry was done recounting his story.

"I honestly expected her to say, 'I'll give you a funeral fit for a king.'" Harry recalled the memorable incident where one wizard had sworn it to him—meant to intimidate him into backing off—although it'd only made Harry have a chuckle at the time. As though hearing himself in the distance, he murmured, "Something along those lines."
He was studying a crinkled article, where the photograph depicted a group of Hogwarts students staring solemnly at the camera. He'd propped his jaw on his palm.

Hermione grunted, her attention landing on what had him so captivated. Overlooking his shoulder, her eyes narrowed. "Is that…?"

"Did you know, in the years of 1984 to 1991, that there was a certain infamous incident involving Cursed Vaults? Tulip Karasu was one of those students involved. The Headmistress was kind enough to send me a copy of the school records." Although he'd worn gloves, his fingernail made a tapping noise on the surface of the tabloid. A corner of his mouth lifted. "Miss Karasu was quite the prankster. Honestly, she could've given the twins a run for their money for the most detentions Filch's given a student."

Hermione nibbled on her bottom lip. From that alone, she would not have figured a rule-breaker like Tulip Karasu would've set her sights on joining a legal profession after graduating Hogwarts. "She was a Ravenclaw," she read. "That already speaks of the kind of witch she is. They prize wit, learning, and wisdom, after all. ...Her parents work for us?"

"They do. They're your strict and rule-abiding citizens. Thicknesse spoke highly of them."

"…You seem a little tense, Harry."

"Do I?"

She pressed her lips together at the curtness. "She got under your skin."

"Is that what you think?"

"Harry," she said.

"Sorry," he muttered, looking a bit mortified himself. He ran his hand through his hair. Pushing his chair back from his desk, he straightened to his feet. He whacked the back of his hand sharply against the paper each time he spoke: "I've read up on her. Her two most notable cases were defending Merula Snyde and the surviving sibling of a reputable pureblood family. Karasu's also represented past Grindelwald and Death Eater sympathizers, can you believe that?"

"Hm, who is it? The sibling, I mean?"

"A Curse-Breaker, I believe. But that's beside the point. The point is Karasu's made herself known for representing a certain type of clients, and Umbridge fits right into that category. Karasu has a record of getting her clients reduced punishments. She's actually 'won' a few impossible cases. No wonder Umbridge's hired her. She knows the odds are against her."

Instead of inquiring further on that train of thought, Hermione glanced again at all the papers. Feeling her eyebrows knitting, she murmured to him disbelievingly, "You're worried. You're actually worried." She'd pressed a hand to the swell of her stomach.

"I'm not." He flung the tabloid blindly onto his desk, uncaring that the force behind his throw had made it careen off the edge. He declared to her grimly, "I will see Umbridge in court. And I will see her serving the maximum sentence in Azkaban. It's what she deserves."

"Are you going to be there?" When he didn't reply, only averting his gaze, she said, "Oh, Harry…. Why didn't you exercise your diplomatic immunity? You told me you wouldn't obsess over her case."
He'd clenched his jaw. For a while, she didn't think he would respond to her silly little query, but he eventually divulged through gritted teeth: "I'm not bloody thick. Hiding simply isn't the Gryffindor spirit." He was looking at the windows, glowering at nothing. His right hand kept clenching and unclenching, as though it'd pained him to keep it still.

Hermione said nothing. She'd been privy to the initial reason why he'd been reluctant to take the stand once more. For someone of Harry's status especially, while he did hold office in their Ministry, that didn't mean the young Head Auror didn't have his share of critics. The courtroom was a different environment. Whenever a public figure was involved, it was easy to tear an individual's reputation to shreds. It was something she and her husband had known all too well, having testified in trials just as Harry had in the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts. She still remembered Doge's counsel, prepping them for the questions meant to test their credibility as reliable witnesses.

He asked, "What about you? Did they give you the Wizengamot summons?"

"My memories have already been bottled and submitted." She hesitated for only a split second, before mentioning, "Y'know, our memories are admissible in court as evidence. You wouldn't have to testify in person. They could simply use the Ministry Pensieve. It's what Ron and I are doing. They can't coerce you."

"No one's coercing me." He looked at her. "Hermione, I...need to do this. We both know why Doge is so desperate to have me testify—why anyone wants me there in person, really. Isn't it a little funny, that?"

In lieu of a response, Hermione reached over to chase the edge of Harry's jaw, her fingers catching the ghost of a scruff. She was smiling at him—a smile with a twist—like the expression of someone who was fighting the impulse to grimace.

Harry took her hands into his, gripping them until the leather of his gloves creaked. "Hermione, I might need a favor." In a hush, he whispered, "It's about Sesshomaru...."

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Even if time passed, his spiritual encounter with Hari's deceased sire and dam still rang fresh in Sesshomaru's mind. It would've been difficult to forget anyhow when the following memory he had was flying down the flight of stairs to find Hari outside, staring down at a table splintered in half. Smoke had been drifting from the tip of the sorcerer's wand, with the wood of the table charred as black as the color of the Meidō Stone itself. The Deathly Hallow still intact, he remembered Hari pocketing his heirloom, muttering that at least he'd tried.

The more that Sesshomaru reflected on it, the more he felt it reasonable that there were external forces conspiring to bring him and the younger lord together. First had been that woman, next had been the spirits of Hari's most honorable parents…. It wasn't to say he'd entirely disapproved of their matchmaking, but the meddling did grate a little. Even now, Sesshomaru was still deliberating on how to pass their postmortem decree to their sole surviving heir.

Sesshomaru was a demon lord. A messenger for the dead, he was not.

He'd still found it a bit astounding to be reminded of the similarities between them once more. If they were back in his time, perhaps what they had would be called an en: a karmic bond lasting a lifetime, their meeting predetermined by a divine power. Like a piece of clay forever holding the fingerprints of those who have touched him, Hari's would be among those who have left a deep impression on this Sesshomaru.

In the landscape of his life, there was perhaps only a handful of individuals he'd seen who kept their
composure under times of duress. In the weeks following, in his dark moods Hari could be described as a hermit who retreated into his work. The rare interactions they had were curt and withdrawn—brisk to the point where those seeing them together for the first time would've assumed them to be strangers. Were Hari to find himself unavailable, his packmate would arrive in his stead to escort Sesshomaru from the Time Room back to Hari's residence. (He'd recalled the instance the other day where he'd been brought to her study, under instructions to wait for his sorcerer.) Although he'd known asking her directly would put her in a difficult position, the woman replied that it would be best not to disrupt Hari for he was dealing with a sensitive matter that an outsider like Sesshomaru should do his best not to interfere.

While he certainly had words to say about being dismissed so readily, intrigue had taken ahold of him. He could see the mysterious issue weighed heavily on Hari whenever they did cross paths. Sometimes, Hari would cast a contemplative look in his direction—as though sifting through the merits and demerits of involving him—but he'd never brought it up in their conversations. Instead, their discussions were carefully tailored around Sesshomaru's thoughts of the Unspeakables' progress.

He was also quick to address Sesshomaru's wants and desires in the meantime. Making due on one of his promises, Hari helped him establish correspondence with Luna Lovegood and had left them at that, although he'd warned them there will be the occasional surveillance here and there for reasons of formality. Once when it'd even crossed his mind to visit the younger lord in his barracks, to his pleasure—instead of refusal—Hari did mention offhandedly that he might bring Sesshomaru to a meeting. He hadn't expressed when, but Sesshomaru felt somewhat sated when Hari gave his word that he will soon follow through.

He was so immersed in his thoughts, he almost didn't hear the person who'd addressed him by title. His musings receded into the distance as Sesshomaru brought his face down from the ceiling and gazed at the individual who'd be so bold as to command his attention.

The pregnant female was back again, sketching a brief bow to him.

He uncrossed his arms from his sleeves. Striding away from the wall he'd been leaning against, he expected to be updated on her pack alpha's circumstances upon approaching. Instead, her expression seemed apprehensive as she managed to slowly straighten her back. She studied him with a discerning eye, her hand raised below her mouth.

Finally, she said, "You have magical creature blood."

Sesshomaru had given her a look that spoke measures of what he felt about her statement.

She'd given him an inscrutable look in return. "Lord Sesshomaru," she began, the cogs in her brain turning, "how would you like to accompany me to the Wizengamot? Ah, not the administrative branch...I mean the—it's like a courtroom. It would be an immense honor to have your austere presence beside me in the public gallery. I'd like to believe, that deep down inside, Harry might appreciate the moral support."

Her attempt at flattery was suspect. "This Hari will be there?" he repeated, dubious. "Is this to do with the same trial mentioned afore?"

"...You must've noticed his mood these days. I've told you the reason why. Today's the second day of the trial, and I have sources who have informed me that there's a good chance Harry will be occupying the witness box this time. Now, I won't say he'll be happy to see you per se...but I believe your attendance will have an impact on the person he's testifying against."
"This 'Um-bri-dge' woman."

"W-why, yes, Lord Sesshomaru. That's correct. I'm surprised that you—"

The sorcerer had reeked of that same old hanyou, the one they'd met before the tomb had been grave-robbed. But he said instead, "Her name has come up." His eyes narrowed. He declared, "This Sesshomaru is no fool. You have been under orders to keep me away from this trial. You would now break your word?"

Her expression crumpled in on itself. Hugging her rounded stomach, she was quiet for a moment, gazing at the tiny ornaments on her desk. "Sometimes…," she murmured haltingly, "Harry has...a protective streak. I believe he doesn't want to subject you to the mere presence of that witch. He wouldn't want you to hear…." Cutting herself off, she'd then raised her head, meeting his gaze despite her station. "She despises magical creatures. Seeing you there should shake her. Listen, if you don't really want to go, I can drop you off at Harry's place again."

It sounded to him that this female wanted to utilize this Sesshomaru as psychological warfare.

Overseeing a dispute wasn't a foreign concept to this Sesshomaru. It would be within a daiyōkai's responsibilities to handle court for matters that arose on the estate. In the glory days of his most honorable father, the Great Dog General would listen to his councillors present their quarrels over local and regional issues such as old misgivings, social conflicts, or territory disputes. As heir to the Western Lands, Sesshomaru had been privy to even the most exacting of punishments, many of those involving beheadings.

The issue was he didn't care much for the tedium of bureaucracy.

"You would have this Sesshomaru put on spectacle," he'd inferred.

"Well, I would hardly call it—"

"Say it properly. You are certain my attendance will benefit this Hari's cause."

"Erm, y-yes, I believe it would…?"

Her voice trailed off when he pivoted on his heels, heading outside in the direction of the contraption known to transport them to different levels in the Ministry. When he didn't hear footsteps echoing behind him, he'd glared over his shoulder. He demanded for her to bring them to the destination before she wasted anymore of his time.

He'd strode off before he could see the expression made at his generosity.

Sesshomaru only felt satisfied when she'd hurried after him, closing the golden grilles and jabbing the button to the tenth-floor. She opened her mouth and dutifully began to inform him of the history of their Wizengamot and what to expect.

It had been unfortunate though, in the time it took for them to reach the level, more hanyous managed to squeeze into the one they occupied—although many seemed far from pleased to see him.

When the grilles opened, they spilled onto the floor like a swarm of black ants. Somehow the crowd had organized themselves into two lines, one for those who wished to attend the entire Court in session, and the other for those who wished to observe the trial only briefly or had reserved seats. He'd even managed to catch glimpses of those carrying the same inventions he'd remembered melting from the acid of his whip once, after the device had been flashed in his face.
Filing into the shorter line, the female eventually escorted him into a chamber that was stately and imposing.

His neck cricked when he gazed up at the numerous dark columns. With the exclusion of the flagstone walls, rivulets of white flowed across the smooth surfaces which made up the oblong interior. Only the few sitting areas above were backlit in a warm orange light whereas everywhere else was dyed in the cold hues of twilight.

It would be one of those sitting areas that he assumed he was being ushered towards, stepping higher and higher, his ears being filled with his footsteps and indistinguishable chatter. In his journey, he thought he'd caught a glimpse of the fair-haired woman he'd met before—the one that'd smelt of beetle.

While Hari's packmate was finding them seats with an unobstructed view below, the raised benches along the perimeter were slowly being filled up with prominent individuals dressed in black or plum-colored robes, the latter sitting in the front while the former sat at their back. Wearing hats whose tapered shape reminded Sesshomaru of large tea bowls, they faced the center of the chamber where two suns in interchanging colors of black, white, and yellow were tiled into an elaborate design on the floor. They sat in direct view of an ornamental chair raised on a small dais.

Placed beside the benches, raised atop a platform, was a wide and shallow basin inlaid with precious stones and carved with strange symbols. He could see the metal of the basin was filled with a mysterious black liquid. Before he could ponder its function, the female greeted, "Minister!"

Sesshomaru brought his attention back just as the Acting Minister had risen to his feet gracefully. Three plush chairs and one end table were all that made up the sparse interior. Painted on the wall behind them was the stylized caricature of a robed man peering down solemnly, the depiction washed from age and cracked. This sitting room was the highest out of the rest, above the three elevated benches with its center podium towering over its companions like an obsidian monolith.

Like before, a brisk act of courtesy was made by the dark-skinned individual and he motioned for them to take the seats behind his. All the movements he made had a sort of dignity that Sesshomaru couldn't help but to acknowledge. The Acting Minister did seem intrigued by Sesshomaru's attendance though, his gaze penetrating him. They had not seen each other since the night he'd interrogated Sesshomaru in his office.

When the female moved to take the left seat, the Acting Minister stopped her, redirecting her to take the seat behind him on his right. She'd initially been bewildered by the suggestion, but she did move to do what had been commanded of her.

"It used to be tradition," the Acting Minister explained, glancing back in time to see the female stroke the armrest before sitting down, "for these seats to be reserved for the Minister for Magic, for the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, and for the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Excluding himself, Sesshomaru only counted two heads. The redhead wasn't in attendance. He determined, "You do not have a Senior Undersecretary."

"I have a nomination in mind," the Acting Minister divulged, cryptic, "but I'm still deciding." Taking his presence into stride, he swept his arm in the direction of his right. "Please, take a seat. I can make an allowance for you just this once, Lord Sesshomaru—you being the Head Auror's special guest and high personage."

On impulse, a pair of molten gold flicked to the seat on the Acting Minister's right, the one the female
was occupying, before returning to the only empty chair remaining—*Hari's seat*. He'd indicated his consent by murmuring that he was in their care. When Sesshomaru sank down on the designated chair, he'd inhaled a whiff of the sorcerer—the faintest trace that he could detect—among the amalgamation of other scents seeped into the aged leather. Inhaling once more, he tried to draw the essence of Hari into his lungs.

"So what is your opinion of our Ministry so far?" The Acting Minister—whose name had all but been forgotten by Sesshomaru—seemed amused by his own query, glancing at him over the backrest. "Not at all what you expected, is it?"

Sesshomaru exhaled. In his opinion, this foreign governing body seemed both utilitarian and ostentatious, practical in some aspects yet purely aesthetical in others. It was obvious as to the hierarchy of those who wielded the most power. In fact, he had it whispered to his ear constantly that Hari was such a remarkable young general, with the careers of others dying on the branch while his was still blossoming, it was why this Ministry burdened him to the extent that it has. To his displeasure Sesshomaru had not yet borne witness to the reputed ruthlessness—which he'd only seen glimpses of, such as when the sorcerer decisively erased that male's memories, and even the two times where they've settled their wager. He wanted to peel away at the layers until he reached the center of what it was that made the man feared and well-respected.

"...It is inconsequential what this Sesshomaru thinks," he allowed graciously, diverting his attention back to the center of the courtroom. That black chair was still unoccupied.

They tried to engage him in idle chatter, but most of their words fell through one ear and out the other. The most he remembered were along the lines of:

"—the Wizengamot is equipped with the facts from their initial reading. They will listen to barristers present both sides of the case—"

"—now Chief Warlock, Tiberius Ogden, who'd come out of retirement after—"

"—the question is impartiality. The system trusts the Chief Warlock will exercise objectivity, no matter what they feel about the case or the enormous sympathy they have for the people affected. It is their duty to detach themselves—"

A sudden rise in commotion stole everyone's attention. Like others, Sesshomaru leaned over the railing for a better look.

And he immediately had to revise his thoughts of this country's version of Jaken.

Materializing from the entrance was an unremarkable lowborn woman, squat and mousy, wearing a thin drab garment of alternating white and grey stripes, faded in color. Although the weight loss was evident, there was little neck to her, with a trace of fat in her jowls. He could see that her eyes were protuberant, with pouches underneath, to the extent that he'd nearly assumed her sire to have copulated with a toad.

Even so, she appeared harmless—*utterly benign and unassuming*.

Despite being flanked on both sides by hooded escorts and manacled at the wrists, she smiled up rosidly at the individuals who were peering back at her stone-faced. The chains rattled as she'd thanked her escorts, her voice a simpering high-pitch as she took her place on the raised chair. As she was being bound, she managed to motion daintily for somebody to approach her.

From the bench to her left, hurried over a woman with red hair. Wearing a similar uniform to her
associates but in black, she was a quietly compelling person, visibly nervous, which seemed strange to the two companions beside Sesshomaru. Carrying her briefcase with her, the woman bent at the waist upon approaching Umbridge. Having listened to what was being whispered into her ear, she nodded, pulling away from her to stand nearby.

Umbridge seemed unfazed by the hundreds of eyes on her, by the tension swirling thickly in the air. Glancing around the chamber, she'd looked up toward the Minister's sitting room, still smiling…….

And she performed an immediate double-take upon catching sight of this Sesshomaru sitting behind him. Her eyes roved over the slitted pupils, the vibrant markings, the foreign attire, and the pointed tip of his ears. Her already pale complexion draining of its color, she'd opened her mouth.

"All rise."

Sesshomaru could feel her gaze boring into him when he reacted a fraction too slow.

From the benches, three figures passed by the reedy figure who had a wand hovering above his throat, situating themselves comfortably on the podiums.

It was only after the elderly sorcerer—a silver medallion hung below his chest, indicating his status—occupied the seat of power, that the order was given for everyone to take their seats again. "We reconvene on the second day for the trial of Dolores Jane Umbridge, formerly appointed as—but not limited to—Madam Undersecretary to the Minister, the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts, and the Head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission," the Chief Warlock boomed from his seat.

With the blustery voice of the Chief Warlock magically enhanced, Sesshomaru could see the snowy-white moustache bristling every time the man spoke.

A scribe on one of the lower podiums was seen transcribing the Chief Warlock's words onto parchment, one diligently being written by hand and the other by a self-writing quill.

When murmurs picked up upon his last statement, the Chief Warlock banged his gavel, calling for order. Picking up his quill, he declared, "The chair recognizes barristers Miss Tulip Karasu for the defense, and Mr Talbott Winger for the prosecution—with special counsel of Sir Elphias Doge's team as Special Advisor to the Wizengamot, as the interrogators. I would like to remind everyone the charges against the accused are the misuse of the position in the Ministry of Magic, brutality, mass genocide, and treason of the highest order by aiding and abetting……"

The last of her radiant smile she'd worn dissipated. Just as how darkness faded from a valley when the sun rose above it, her expression would become more strained and disingenuous as the proceedings commenced.

When it was time to call for witnesses, the prosecution—a dark-skinned barrister with maroon eyes and hawkish features—summoned a Rolf Scamander to the conjured witness box.

At the announcement, another swarthy-looking individual had emerged from the same entrance as the three prior. Plucking at the cuff of his shirt, he had tight dark curls, soft eyebrows like smudges on the skin, and a peculiar style of facial hair above a generous mouth. Apparently he was meant to serve as representative for voices unheard—whatever that'd meant; Sesshomaru hadn't really cared to listen.

He'd honestly been more distracted by the pungent cologne the beta wore, similar to the strange fair-haired woman from the hut. Sesshomaru could only be grateful for the distance, lest he be forced to choose between departing and breathing shallowly through his mouth.
Tuning out the long back-and-forth interrogation, he cast his attention to those in the room with him. In the same place where he'd kept the capsules entrusted to him, there was a matter that was burning a hole in his kimono. Breaking his silence, Sesshomaru remarked how no one seemed to be under the effects of this country's truth serum.

With the two of them engrossed by what was happening, only Hari's packmate managed to hear him. She'd glanced over, frowning at him. Biting her lower lip and tossing a look at the chair ahead of them, when there was no rebuke coming their way, she slowly leaned the upper half of her torso over the armrest. She revealed, "It's not that we haven't tried for the earlier trials, Lord Sesshomaru...but Veritaserum is inadmissible in court. It has the same fallacy as the Muggle lie detector. Some people are able to control their emotions and trick the machine. Consequently, anyone that's been administered the potion can still lie if they believe it to be true..."

In the background, the redheaded barrister could be heard articulating, "I only want this to be a fair trial, my lady. Improving perceptions of fairness and transparency should be at the heart of the Ministry's court reforms. Even if they are under oath, everybody should be held accountable."

"Those examples are the first criminal prosecutions of members of houses of prominence, Miss Karasu," a dour-looking alpha spoke from the panel. She continued, "Based on those members' dealing with the Ministry of Magic for their many years of service...."

There was an inkling of thought Sesshomaru harbored, growing more and more likely the longer he stared at this Rolf Scamander from his lofted sitting area.

There was a muted skrcch. From Sesshomaru's peripheral vision, he saw Hari's packmate sliding her chair closer to his. His brows snapped together when meager space was left between her and Sesshomaru.

"Why, yes," Scamander could be heard confiding, his voice modest, "I do, in fact, sympathize with the werewolves. You can believe the anti-werewolf legislation Madam Umbridge drafted in 1993 has unfairly restricted a significant portion of qualified...."

Shielding her mouth with her hand, Hari's packmate whispered to him, "The person in the witness box is Luna's husband. He's supposedly recruited to testify for the colony of centaurs Umbridge had provoked."

Sesshomaru stiffened in his seat, recalling the strange creatures he'd met in the forest.

"We saw a herd of centaurs carrying Umbridge away when she tried to stop us," she also revealed, looking a bit perturbed. "She'd been really nasty to them. They didn't take well to the racial slurs."

She'd quieted again when they heard Karasu speaking sedately from her upright position beside Umbridge: "As an acclaimed Magizoologist, you must be immensely informed about the magical creatures and beings you've dedicated your career to studying. It is safe to presume the proud centaurs should count among them, yes or no?"

"Yes...?" Scamander's expression had morphed into dread, as though he'd already been informed of what she would ask of him. He'd leaned back into the witness box as she levitated one of the parchments to his face.

From the side, where he couldn't see from the witness box, a misty smile had floated over Umbridge's face.

"I'm handing you Exhibit eight for identification." In the interest of time, Karasu reminded the
Wizengamot of all the exhibits that have been or were to be presented during her examination of the witnesses. Only after being approved, Karasu resumed, "Do you know what you are looking at?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. What is it?"

"It's...a note, signed in 1996...by Madam Pomfrey."

"Do you recognize her? Madam Pomfrey?"

"Yes."

"How did you come to know her?"

"She was the Matron at Hogwarts, before her later resignation."

"Would Madam Pomfrey, in your opinion, be a reliable and honest nurse whose words can be trusted?"

"Yes."

"And what does her note say, Mr Scamander? Please read the whole note."

His mouth had hardened, and his eyes shrank to about half their size as he recited, "It is my relief to find Madam Umbridge merely in a state of shock. She has developed a significant fear of centaurs, reacting violently at even the sound of hoofbeats. Although I've heard the mythology behind the centaurs' sexually deviant behavior, there appears to be no signs of sexual misconduct and sexual trauma on her physical or mental person. There is barely a scratch on her."

Hari’s packmate's forehead was creased when Sesshomaru turned to her for answers. When she felt the intensity of his gaze, she hissed that Umbridge had merely been threatened—at worst, imprisoned for a short while until someone had retrieved her from the woods. She claimed that it should be obvious that Karasu was attempting to cast Umbridge in a sympathetic light.

In the background, they heard: "Mr Scamander, I remind you are under oath to speak the truth. In your experience, if a petite witch like my client managed to enrage a centaur, would they naturally have wanted her to suffer?"

"I—"

"If you'd please answer the question, Mr Scamander. This is a yes or no question."

He had lowered his head. Through gritted teeth, he answered, "It is difficult to say definitely, sorry."

"A yes or no?"

"Maybe...yes...?"

In the disquiet, Hari's packmate was muttering renditions of "you evil, foul, manipulative cockroach" beneath her breath over and over, becoming seemingly more emotional just thinking about it. She was glaring at the chained woman, her lips thinning until they became a white line.

"Mr Winger," the Chief Warlock suddenly addressed, pausing from his own note-taking, "I'm surprised to hear no objections. If you'd please, I'm intrigued to hear what your position is on Miss Karasu's statement."
Winger had been seen consulting with Doge ever since Karasu had her turn at his witness. Hearing his name, he slowly rose to his feet. "M'lord, members of the Wizengamot," he spoke, "unfortunately my friend assumes facts not in evidence. We respectfully say it is inapt to describe that as factual. We would like to question the...motive behind introducing that note as evidence, when it does not relate to the case at all."

"...Miss Karasu? What was your intention behind introducing that evidence?"

"No one made an effort to save Madam Umbridge initially, my lord," Karasu replied, consulting her notes. "I'm simply making that clear. Left in the hands of another species, without a female centaur in sight, my client reasonably feared the possibility of being violated. As demonstrated by the note, Madam Umbridge has suffered psychologically. It even says here 'centaurs have been known for their brutal beatings, torture, and imprisonment.' I invite my friend to ask his witness to expand on that cultural fact Mr Scamander had published."

"Very well. M'lord, if I may question the witness?" After having been given approval, Winger asked, "Mr Scamander, same question, but if you would please provide the Wizengamot your insight, backed by your years of study on the species."

"In my studies," Scamander replied somewhat politely, "while I cannot vouch for every single colony...I do know when they hold court, they are a tribe known to pass judgement. Exile from the colony has been a popular punishment. However, they are civil and aren't as unkind as Miss Karasu would like to lead you to believe with that statement of mine. They aren't monsters."

"But you did write that? About the beatings and torture and the imprisonment?"

"Yes. But that was a quote taken from the part of my studies where I'd gone into nuance about the centaur history and how they've progressed. We are taught in our Hogwarts curriculum to avoid any centaurs and how to show respect if there so happened to be an encounter. Today, even with the danger, centaurs are rather harmless. It is—or should be—common knowledge that centaurs go out of their way to avoid us. They're more like territorial star gazers." He'd formed a faint smile, the kind of subdued pride men might feel gazing upon their own children. He'd lifted his shoulder in a half shrug.

Peering down at him, Sesshomaru vaguely remembered thinking that the centaurs he'd met hadn't been posturing.

Winger managed a smirk back. "...Mr Scamander, in your experience, do you find it credible that the accused was truly in the danger she'd believed she was?"

"No, that's ludicrous misinformation." His answer this time had been firm, his arms crossed in the space over his chest. Leaning forward, Scamander asserted, "Even if you cause anger, they simply shoot arrows at you or put on an aggressive show of force to chase you away. Furthermore, Madam Umbridge ought to have known these skittish creatures would sooner head off the edge of a cliff than consider Mating outside their species."

"...Could you please explain to the Wizengamot?"

Scamander blinked. His brows falling in a knot, he volunteered, "The equine genitalia of the average centaur cannot fit into any of Madam Umbridge's orifices without significant rupturing. It's common sense, yeah...?"

Silence spread like wildfire.
Realizing the unsettled reactions to his statement, he seemed to sigh, his shoulders sagging. He stated, almost nonplussed, "I'm terribly sorry to hear Madam Umbridge received a fright, but it sounds to me she didn't get a scratch; the Matron's note recorded nothing foul. I believe we should commend these centaurs for showing remarkable restraint despite Madam Umbridge's clear provocation."

As if on cue, glancing above to where the female sat beside Sesshomaru, after exchanging a look with Doge, Winger followed up with a grave: "Esteemed members of the Wizengamot, we would like to remind you of the evidence submitted by Deputy Head Auror Hermione Jean Granger—of her memories witnessing the accused openly provoking these magical creatures." Pretending to read his notes, he added, "We would also like to remind everyone of this wretched woman's malicious language including, and I quote: 'animal, creatures of near-human intelligence, filthy half-breed...'

Their voices began muddling together.

If an individual rubbed a fabric too often, it will quickly grow threadbare. Sesshomaru could feel his patience beginning to unravel the longer that the interrogation dragged on, with him thinking that perhaps the female next to him did not realize that his time was a valuable commodity. Sesshomaru pinched the hem of his kimono sleeve, mulling over the number of cherry blossom crests. He'd already served his purpose; aside from the few initial peeks, the Umbridge woman now went out of her way to avoid gazing up in his direction.

By now, a few had vacated the chamber, yet the rest remained riveted in their seats. In her eagerness to share knowledge, the pregnant packmate had also somehow misinterpreted Sesshomaru's stoicism for confusion. As though he did not understand the subtleties of their language, she began by giving him context of the court proceeding the day before.

Apparently somewhere in whichever hole Umbridge had hidden her peasant of a father, she'd dragged him out to testify on her behalf. The unremarkable man whinged to Wizengamot of his loveless union, of how the Muggle he'd married and their squib son discarded them, and how that trauma must've shaped his clever and ambitious daughter's beliefs. Never mind that Umbridge lied about her pureblood origins, it was revealed that Orford Umbridge had once been a low-level janitor in the Department of Magical Maintenance until his daughter persuaded him to retire on the condition of paying him a monthly stipend.

Other supporters, Hari's packmate claimed, had been brought in—"Umbridge made many charitable donations to her friends over bottles of sherry and managed to lift their careers with her when she climbed her way up"—to tout her many Ministry accomplishments during her tenure. Several of them had been discredited by the prosecution, but there existed kernels of truth. It'd also been revealed that while the hanyou failed to secure the affections of those in higher positions, she did manage to win the confidence of the Minister of then.

When Hari's packmate began whispering to him of how abnormally short wands usually indicated a stunted moral character, Sesshomaru could sense his mind beginning to disconnect. Back in his homeland, in his time, judgement was swift. In this courtroom, among the crowd, from the beginning there was a tension that one might feel had they walked across a frozen pond, knowing that at any moment the ice might crack.

Sesshomaru, on the other hand, held no such attachment to this case. He was unimpressed and unmoved by what seemed like pointless moralizing to him.

Dropping his sleeve, he tried to reevaluate his initial impression of this foreign hanyou. With her character being slandered, he'd been expecting her miasma to feel similar to Naraku's, dredged in thick muck. To reflect their mental state, very few yōkai were able to restrain their auras; even
humans with spiritual powers and hanyous had them. This far away he could only feel the faintest lick of yōki simmering over her skin.

If he had to describe her, she was watery rice gruel with lumps of potato. It was difficult for him to see the same woman they did—this crafty monster known for plotting and scheming. Had Sesshomaru not heard of the list of atrocities—negligence, incompetence, abuse of power, and so forth—that had been committed, he would not have guessed this woman had it in her to be a conniving shrew.

Even now, her expression seemed remorseful. Her eyes remained downcast as though they weighed as much as two lead balls. Other times her jaw would clench and she would peer up at the panel through her lashes, her eyes wet and gleaming with unshed tears.

It made him wonder, were he to draw close, pressing the tip of his claws to her skin and letting the acid seep through, if she would melt away like rice paper and reveal rotten insides.

As the darkness continued to settle over everyone, there finally did come moments when pinpoints of light shone through the haze. The brightest ray among them would be after Scamander had departed, with most attendees jerking to attention upon a voice bellowing out: "Last witness for the prosecution! Lord Harry James Potter Black Peverell!"

At the sight of the sorcerer finally emerging, mokomoko-sama stirred on Sesshomaru's shoulder.

It had only been a moment, but it was proof that his destiny and Hari's were doubtlessly entwined. Upon approaching, no doubt borne from habit of seeking out the Minister, in Hari's wandering attention Sesshomaru had felt the weight of those eyes land on his face—and stay there like a physical touch. An absurd feeling of pride was welling up in him by how stunned Hari looked.

The sorcerer's gaze lingered on him, before his eyes finally flickered away.

It was later that Sesshomaru felt like he understood the privilege of the sitting area they occupied. Besides keeping them warm and insulated like how an egg was held by its shell, rendering them bystanders, the unobstructed vantage had allowed them to see heads twisting like tidal waves, to see the expression Umbridge made as if a horrid smell had come drifting into her path, and to see Hari striding up into the witness box.

Hundreds of eyes were now riveted on the sorcerer, Umbridge included.

While the sorcerer didn't allow the discomfort to show on his face, the truth was evident in the yōki roiling around him. His dark hair slicked back into something close to subdued this time, wearing a dark grey attire and black gloves, Hari evoked a magnitude of presence as he swore to tell the truth in the witness box. Even when asked to confirm his role in certain incidents, he still managed to command attention as he recounted his side of the story for the prosecution:

"—on August the 2nd, 1995, the accused sent two Dementors to the Muggle town of Little Whinging, Surrey." he recounted. "I was forced to conjure a Patronus Charm in self-defense to save myself and my cousin from her Dementor attack."

"For the record, is it fair to state that you were living together with Mr Dudley Dursley and his Muggle parents at the time of the event?"

"Yes. But they—" About to say more, Hari had abruptly cut himself short. Taking a deep breath, resting his hands on the podium, he said instead, "Never mind. My...feelings aren't facts and are irrelevant to the case. Please, next question."
Upon being prompted, in a low voice Hari went into greater detail of what Umbridge was alleged to have done. His first encounter with the accused had been at his disciplinary hearing ten days later after the attack. In a rather detached tone, he reminisced about seeing Umbridge in the assigned Wizengamot courtroom. She’d been one of the few members who had voted in favor of his expulsion despite him being later cleared of all charges.

The barrister had to remind everyone of the political environment, stating the bias against Dumbledore—and by extension Hari—and then mentioning the Ministry's attempts to discredit them. Winger cited fear as the motivating factor, with Hari being the sole surviving eyewitness of the return of the Dark Lord on June the 24th, 1995—and Minister Cornelius Oswald Fudge's denial of the impending Second Wizarding War threat looming over their country.

"By my understanding, it was Minister Fudge's paranoia that sparked the whole thing. The accused is not innocent however; as established, she is an ambitious ladder climber. Whatever her reasons were in the end, she'd admitted to orchestrating events by her own initiative and abusing her powers."

"The accused admitted to being responsible for the crimes committed? Head Auror, just for the record, what would some of these incidents be?"

It was disclosed that it was Hari who led the resistance against Umbridge when she’d infiltrated his school as a Defense Against the Dark Arts professor—later as the Hogwarts High Inquisitor—under the authority to quell and censor other like-minded individuals like him. He remarked that aside from allegations of abuse, her reckless persecutions had made her unpopular among both the students and the staff. The unstable political situation escalated into her zealous contemplation of using the illicit Cruciatius Curse—"as everyone knows, it is a powerful curse resulting in intense, excruciating torture on its victims, to the point of being able to cause insanity"—on Hari the same night where he’d set out to thwart the Dark Lord's plot. After Umbridge had been dealt with, upon their arrival at the Ministry, it'd come into light that Hari had been telling the truth all along—when Hari and the allies he'd personally mentored were ambushed by the Dark Lord and his forces at the Department of Mysteries.

"And what was this conspiracy the accused believed in, that made the Ministry so afraid?"

"They believed the late Headmaster would encourage a coup d'etat against the Ministry, supposedly giving students the means and the skills to overthrow Minister Fudge. By wasting their time and resources, by teaching us basic defensive theory as opposed to real spells that should've prepared us for Voldemort..." Hari remained stalwart when a significant portion of the crowd flinched, "she and the corrupt Ministry of then had hoped to prevent a nonexistent conspiracy."

The last of the questioning revealed that instead of accepting defeat and giving in, Hari had resisted the new extremist regime. Of the retinue left loyal to him, a few had died honorably to give their young lord enough time to flee from capture and retreat into hiding. There was command in his voice as Hari described his own involvement. Sesshomaru had seen several individuals lowering their heads and staring at their hands for a long time.

Being outnumbered, as their last beacon of hope and with the rate of casualties climbing, he'd taken on the heavy responsibility of finding and destroying the five remaining magical vessels—Horcruxes—which contained the soul of the Dark Lord. Originally split into seven, the fragments made the tyrant immortal so long as even one had remained intact. With the severity of his words, Hari was at that moment every inch the Head Auror, the man who'd watched people die for him, who had been a one-man-army feared and respected for having executed the Dark Lord twice and dismantling his forces.
Hari continued, "We found out after interrogating Mundungus Fletcher that he'd sold Salazar Slytherin's locket to the accused. Naturally that meant we had to infiltrate the Ministry to retrieve it. On September the 2nd, 1997, disguised as a Ministry worker, I'd searched Umbridge's office and came across political propaganda pamphlets and a file on Mr Weasley."

"I submit, to the Wizengamot, Exhibit number nine and ten. Mudbloods and the Dangers They Pose to a Peaceful Pure-Blood Society, written by the accused. And this is a photograph of the accused's file on Mr Arthur Weasley."

After the Chief Warlock admitted them, several heads leaned forward to glance over the shoulder of the member who had been handed the evidence first. Reading the impatience on some of their faces, Hari explained to them, "The pamphlets should be self-explanatory. The file on Mr Weasley though, I remember, was supposed to be a written order for surveillance."

"And how did you recognize Exhibit ten?" Winger asked, tossing a glance at the scribe who had been focused on the task of transcribing everything into writing. "In your own words, Head Auror."

"There was only one file I saw, at the time," Hari answered him. Gloved fingers had steepled themselves like a pyramid. "Also, Mr Weasley is a known member of the Order of the Phoenix. And he was acquainted with me—'Undesirable No. 1.' It would make sense why he would be a target. He was known for having pro-Muggle leanings."

Hari finished by testifying that, with Umbridge willingly heading the new Muggle-Born Registration Commission, he'd stumbled upon her wearing the locket while she'd been ruling on a woman's impurity of blood. Upon being questioned by his disguised packmate, Umbridge lied about the locket belonging to the pureblood Selwyn family.

"In the end," Hari concluded, "we were able to retrieve the Horcrux by force. We all know how it went after that."

"Is there anything else you would like to tell the Wizengamot?"

"Yes." Much can be said in a glance. Making eye contact with the members of the court he had vision to, Hari stressed, "Don't let her appearance deceive you. Her background suggests a pattern of disturbing behavior. Her actions show deliberate intent and malice aforethought. Umbridge was not coerced. Everything she'd done was by her own volition. She violated her Oath of Office. Her victims deserve justice from her reign of terror."

"Thank you, Head Auror. That is all."

When Winger sat back down beside Doge, Karasu finally lifted her eyes from the parchment she'd been scribbling on, her hat sliding down her forehead until she'd pushed it back. Carrying a folder along with her, with an unnatural poise to her stride, she stayed her hand on Umbridge's shoulder—offering brief comfort—as she took her place beside her client.

The chains rattled as Umbridge reached up to pet Karasu's hand, turning her doughy pale face up to beam up at her.

Karasu did not smile back. Instead, eyes never wavering from Hari, her own expression appeared like a ceramic mask, seemingly unnatural on her face which seemed made for expressiveness. Changing her voice to be as soft as silk, she began, "Head Auror or Lord Potter, whichever you wish to be called…?"

Having sensed the danger, Hari immediately directed a knife-edged smile at the barrister's way. "It
does not matter."

Being assigned the roles they were given, they'd locked eyes in a wordless exchange of understanding.

"Much obliged." Tilting her head, she glanced through her notes. She read, "Now then, Lord Potter, in the years 1992 to 1996, were you not accused of being a chronic and habitual liar?"

From behind teeth, what burst from his lips teetered on the edge of a cackle. The curve of his mouth had begun to arch up handsomely before Hari managed to secret the full extent of his mirth, hovering his hand over his lower face.

In the meanwhile, Winger had shot to his feet, his palms slamming down. He was snarling that this was a clear case of improper characterization, citing how Hari's credibility had already been established.

Beneath his facial hair, the Chief Warlock's lips had been pursed like he'd been chewing on sour plums. He rested his chin in his palm, weighing the protest in his mind. "...Right so," he finally said, every word coming with a distinct effort. "You have to do better than that, Miss Karasu. I will not allow that question to be answered. Please keep your questions relevant to this case."

Karasu inclined her head, her expression speculative as she studied the Chief Warlock. "My lord, I withdraw the questioning entirely." It was only when the prosecution sat down that she returned her gaze to Hari. "Very well, Lord Potter. Let us proceed with the facts of this case."

The leather of the chair creaked. "They know he's got a temper," Sesshomaru heard Hari's packmate whisper. "She will push his buttons to shake him." A convulsive movement forward, he'd given her a look which was momentarily startled and narrowly suspicious, but just like the Acting Minister, she wasn't paying attention to him. She was gazing worriedly at her pack alpha, wringing her hands.

"—based on the overwhelming evidence against her, the answer is clear," Hari was answering matter-of-factly. "In the new regime, she conducted trials subjecting innocent Muggle-borns to the presence of Dementors. She'd sent them to Azkaban for supposedly stealing magic from 'real' witches and wizards. You cannot tell me those are the 'actions of somebody who has learned and is remorseful of her misdeeds.'"

"Your candor is refreshing," Karasu remarked, managing to restrain any frustration. Producing her wand, she held it down by her thigh. "Your answers are remarkably disciplined; you have been well-coached as a character witness. There's also no denying you sound remarkably sane and self-possessed. As the hero of wizarding Britain, it is clear your narratives come across as trustworthy…. Is that logic of reasoning flawed?"

"...No, it's quite sound of mind." At her flattery, caution had crept into Hari's tone for once. The cage of his fingers started to unlock. "Where are you going with this?"

"Let us not surmise; we shall keep ourselves confined to the facts." Swishing the wood, she had commanded a square piece to float over to him. Karasu seemed to look right through Hari and beyond as she said, "I am handing you a photograph. Do you recognize the content depicted?"

Sesshomaru could see Hari slowly shifting his eyes down, with those foreign English features soon morphing into that of wariness. The leather of his glove creaked as his fingers closed over it. "It seems to be a file—on me."

"Could you speak louder, Lord Potter? If you'd please tell the Wizengamot what Exhibit eleven is. In
"I assume it is a background check, Miss Karasu." He'd kept his voice light, yet there was an undercurrent—holding the weight of unspoken consequences.

"Yes, with physical records of your examinations and other written publications about you. Which I have here. I'll pass them out to the esteemed members of the Wizengamot." Handing them over to be distributed, she lowered her wand. Her fingernails dug into Umbridge's shoulder as Karasu read aloud from her notes, "Fact, the Muggles who acted as your legal guardians and housed you were not an impoverished household. Just a simple yes or no."

"...Yes."

"Fact, as the sole survivor of House Potter, you inherited the family Vaults with all the assets—including but not limited to the royalties from Linfred of Stinchcombe and Fleamont Potter. It's not an exaggeration to say, with that amount of wealth, someone can live comfortably off that alone."

"Yes."

"Yet you wore ill-fitted hand-me-downs from 1991 to 1997." Like a predator, she was quick to pounce. With defiant pride, she endeavored, "Fact, it is no secret you disliked living with your Muggle relatives. Fact, you have a history of rebelling against authority figures throughout your school career. I have your disciplinary records. Every year you've attended Hogwarts, you seem to be at the center of it. Fact, you were a faithful watchdog of the late Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. Also fact, my client was your Defense Against the Dark Arts professor from 1995 to 1996."

He took a deep breath. And then released it. "That is correct."

"It is your testimony that your initial impression of her was tainted from your hearing. In other words, is it not therefore likely that Madam Umbridge is an unfair target of a preconceived hatred?"

"Counselor." His expression became marginally more brittle. "I won't answer a counterfactual question."

"What is wrong with that analysis? Lord Potter, you are understandably antagonistic to my client."

"I'd rather you didn't put words in my mouth." The almond-shaped green eyes of his slitted in suspicion, a cold emotion boiling just beneath the surface, his voice growing only the slightest bit heated. "Nothing I've testified is hyperbole or dishonest. There are evidence and witnesses to corroborate my testimony."

Just as Karasu was about to reply, the Chief Warlock declared, "You've both exhausted the subject." The fire between them had been dampened. The Chief Warlock gestured impatiently with his quill. "Please move on with the cross-examination."

Even though he'd decreed so, it was evident that the Chief Warlock hardly noticed the seeds of doubt the woman was planting. Sesshomaru had been able to discern her strategy; and he could see that Hari must have understood—for his expression to be so grave and foreboding. It came to him like a flash of clairvoyance. While Hari seemed to wield considerable influence in court, the sorcerer's word was not impenetrable.

Although the woman kept being silenced or reined in, like a dam pushing against thick impregnable walls, her accusations formed cracks which were becoming more and more apparent to the crowd. There was suppressed eagerness among the visiting onlookers in the lofted areas.
"—on September of 1997, my client did lie about the origins of the locket, but it was to camouflage her ancestry from the close scrutiny of the regime. Madam Umbridge is not heartless. Nor is she evil. With little chance of the Chosen One's probability of winning, her mind was on survival." There was something in those dark depths which reflected a fierce, uncompromising intelligence. A smoldering passion to her voice, she'd unveiled, "Under the malign influence of the Dark Lord's Horcrux, she cannot be legally responsible for her actions due to her performance under orders of superior authority and being controlled by Dark magic—!"

Her voice was drowned out when the court exploded in buzzing uproar.

"Silence! I must have silence!" The gavel had to be banged several times for the murmurs to die down. "Miss Karasu...this is not at all what I imagined when you mentioned the defense had uncovered new evidence. I'm afraid—"

"My lord, her alleged crimes have not previously been defined as 'crimes under magical English law.' Therefore, any condemnation against my client violates the principle of justice prohibiting ex post facto punishments. I want to make certain these allegations against her are dealt by the correct law of Ministry and am prepared to submit to you a posteriori! We've had previous cases where the accused had been Imperio-ed and the Wizengamot pardoned—"

Hari seemed to have had enough.

"Fuck right off," he seethed. His jaw was a hard, structured line of anger. "A Horcrux is not the same as the Imperius Curse. The cases of those Death Eaters cannot be used as proof of innocence —"

He had to shut his mouth upon being sharply reprimanded.

Karasu glanced over, as though acknowledging Hari, before resuming her entreaty: "My lord, I've anticipated similar objections. A Horcrux is, by definition, an invention created to house a person's soul and to tether them to the world of the living. Its magical abilities include possession—including the ability to influence the wearer and those within their vicinity. Lord Potter himself has testified to being one of those Horcruxes in the past, meaning that—!"

"You may stop there, Miss Karasu," the Chief Warlock interjected again, holding his palm up. "Remember we are gathered here to deliberate on the sentencing of your client. You may, however, make a defense...for the Horcrux. I will...allow that."

"My lord is gracious, but—"

"I'm saying it's a point in your favor. Keep that in mind."

Karasu heaved a sigh. "I know. I understand that."

"...Miss Karasu, many witches and wizards have claimed they did You-Know-Who's bidding under the influence of the Imperius Curse," a Wizengamot member spoke up for the first time, frowning at her, "and only a portion of them were true. Can you prove without doubt that Madam Umbridge is not lying? We will not repeat our mistakes of the past."

"If she'd truly harbored evil intentions, she would not have been able to produce a Patronus." The corner of her mouth quirked up. "The fact was my client was afraid. The Dark Lord was a pure-blood supremacist. She'd known what he and his followers were capable of. There was immense pressure to assimilate."

"This is rather unprecedented," someone else spoke up. "Even if you claim her actions were
influenced by the Horcrux, Miss Karasu, it does not mean the accused did not commit the alleged crimes...."

"Oh, no, I never. My client has confessed to aiding and abetting. You can even make a case for high treason. But you cannot hold Madam Umbridge to a charge of genocide, especially when there is no evidence that any of it was premeditated." Turning sideways to look at Hari once more, Karasu declared, "Without the free will to make moral decisions, my client should be held to the same standards as previous hearings. If I may beg the court's indulgence for a moment, please allow me to direct your attention to such cases against Pius Thicknesse, the Malfoys, Corban Yaxley, Walden Macnair, Avery, Nott, Amycus and Alecto Carrow...."

"This is rubbish," Hari's packmate hissed, venom in her voice. It'd snagged Sesshomaru's attention momentarily. But she hadn't addressed it to him. She had been speaking to the Acting Minister, her hands moving in a frenzy.

The Acting Minister only murmured in reply, too quiet to be overheard. But it was clear in his body language that he, too, seemed to have been taken off-guard.

While Winger petitioned to dismantle the credence of the revelation which Karasu had painted for her client, a pair of golden eyes bore down silently at the proceedings.

From the sidelines, from Sesshomaru's perspective, it'd seemed like a foregone conclusion that Umbridge was guilty of everything she'd been accused of. The strong oppressing the weak was a natural sequence of events. That was why even individuals like Sesshomaru sought strength, wanting to wield absolute power. *Yet why were these hanyous entertaining her theory as though it bore significant weight?*

All of a sudden his eyebrows curled against each other, and he could feel himself wondering at the expression Hari was making.

He'd gotten the impression that Hari's sudden rise of taciturnity had been influenced by court protocol, quelling any further outbursts. Hari was bound—oppressed by the governing body to whom he had pledged his loyalty.

Sesshomaru felt himself leaning forward in his seat. While Hari managed to retain his senses, he must be feeling a complex blend of emotions for his yōki to bleed out through his skin, causing the air around him to thicken. Those gloved hands were nowhere in sight.

Hari seemed to have learnt from his lesson. He only spoke when he was spoken to. He'd continued to deliver his answers in a flat tone of voice, as though he were reciting from memory. Even when slighted, aside from a clenched jaw, he never once wavered.

"That will be all," Karasu finally said after having exhausted all her questions. "Thank you. You may stand down, Lord Potter."

For a moment, Hari merely looked at her. Then very deliberate in his actions, Hari stepped down from the witness box. Eyes followed after him as he set off. There wasn't even a trace of hesitation in his footsteps. His arms were tucked close to his sides. And his fists were clenched.

"...Harry might need to cool his head," the Acting Minister could be heard whispering to the female privately, although detected by Sesshomaru's keen senses. His face turned toward her, the Acting Minister's expression was grave as he murmured why it would be troublesome were his finest enforcer to lose his control here.
They heard someone pronouncing, "Before we head into the final address, there is only one person that can shed light on the truth. Members of the Wizengamot, the defense calls Dolores Jane Umbridge."

It had been an instant. Yet the blade that was his physical abilities was forged and honed to a sharp edge, allowing Sesshomaru to witness the cutting glare Hari had thrown at Umbridge—to see a heart plagued by vengeance.

Then Hari had disappeared.

Everyone's attention had now gone to the hanyou wreathed in iron chains.

By way of answering, Umbridge clenched her trembling lips together, and in a moment, tears began to pool at the edges of her lids, so much that her round eyes seemed to gaze up at them from two puddles. Upon being asked, Umbridge shook her head, her heavy cheeks flushed pink. As though the light of hope spilled out of her, her voice—strangely girlish and breathless—had perked upon addressing her audience.

*What an unpleasant voice,* was the thought that'd crossed Sesshomaru's head. He held no desire for her to avail herself of her goodwill. She was saying, "Words cannot begin to express my gratitude…"

Only the Wizengamot was quiet. So quiet as to make one uneasy. Their eyes were like glass beads. Only reacting.

The chair legs made a tiny *skrcch* against the paved floor as he surged to his feet.

"Lord Sesshomaru?" he heard Hari's packmate inquire. She struggled to stand, having to place one hand on the backrest to steady her balance. Even the Acting Minister was giving them a queer look.

She endeavored, "A moment please. The trial's not yet finished..." Realization dawned on her when she saw his expression. "...Are you going after him? Oh no, please, I'd rather you didn't—"

"This Sesshomaru did not ask for your counsel." He had no time for her. Prey were at their most vulnerable when they thought they'd escaped and lowered their guards.

By the time anyone could stop him, he had already taken his leave of them.

Harry had an intimate knowledge of his own temper. He was quick to take offence, and even quicker to spit vitriol. Like a maelstrom, it consumed him. He'd wreak havoc until he'd reduced his target to tears or forced them to defend themselves, his magic just as destructive. It was a shortcoming he had been working on controlling ever since he'd watched Voldemort's most loyal, Bellatrix Lestrange née Black, shoot a curse at Sirius Black—whom, despite the dangers, had come to his godson's rescue—sending the closest person to a parent Harry had known through the tattered black Veil, executing Sirius that night in the Department of Mysteries.

As Harry grew older, his temper manifested like lightning. He'd come to understand, until the storm passed, he would have to weather it out. His magic would have to be curtailed.

Already he'd felt his composure beginning to fray in the courtroom. A tightness in his chest, the world had begun to close in at the corners of his vision, with him feeling white-hot fire on the back of his hands as he had been about to snap.
He'd kept his replies stilted. British society, he found, was particularly good at discerning regional indicators of class and status. Unlike Hermione's, Harry's accent was unsophisticated by comparison. His was Estuary English—between cockney and received pronunciation—a dialect influenced by a childhood living with his Muggle relatives. Harry remembered having to memorize and diligently apply himself to mimic that posh accent—the Queen's English—which indicated a wealthy high class from the South East of England. Over time, it'd become easy to slip into, he hardly needed to concentrate.

The Wizengamot was one of the places where he had to keep up appearances. The previous testimonies were a lesson learnt. Be dignified, be articulate, and, most of all, be honest. Conform to the expectations. It was his role as a witness to tell his narrative and then to withstand the onslaught—the attacks on his character, his background, and his credibility….

Anger festered inside him like a disease. Having departed, the immediate thought had been to head outside, his aim to find privacy. He'd revised his option upon realizing that he might be sighted by Muggles wandering the street.

With nowhere else to turn to, he'd sought refuge in his office—his sanctuary and his domain, where very few dared to encroach. Relief had overwhelmed him when the passersby he'd met had been too awed or too cowed to approach him, with the black mood Harry must've been projecting etched into his own body language.

He dug the heels of his hands against his eyes, blotting out the light. The pain was a familiar burn, returning to him like an old unwanted colleague. Even now, he felt his hands throb, as though the skin had been rubbed raw against the supple leather of his gloves.

"Control, control yourself," he chanted like a mantra, the breath rushing out of him in forceful exhalations.

The ventilated air inside ghosted along his exposed skin, cool and dry. He breathed in the musty fragrance of wood, muddled from the scent of the gloves' hide. It was quiet, so quiet that he could hear the roar of blood in his ears and the steady thump, thump, thump of his heartbeat.

He slowly tented his fingers before his face, bending to rest his forehead against them. It took a bit of time for his eyes to adjust to the ambient light.

The cherrywood walls were nowhere in sight; if he chose to lift his head, Harry had vantage to each of the ten walls which hid him inside like his own tower. The divisions which made up the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was sparse in headcount today, with most either on assignment or attending the trial as spectators. Used to human conversation and the skrcech of sharp quill nibs being dragged across parchment, Harry thought his department to be eerily calm and quiet, with only a few bodies he knew to be working their shift.

In his office, he felt ridiculous in his bespoke three-piece suit and waistcoat.

The shadow of his forearms and torso was an exaggerated, elongated form stretched across the surface of his desk, reaching where he'd placed his ink pot and quill. His elbows were resting on sheaves of parchment. He found himself staring down at Umbridge's case file.

Paperclipped to the file was her mugshot, taken from the waist up. Holding up a number plate, the witch had still been wearing a knit cardigan coat in her favored shade of pink and twee accessories—including that tiny little pale lemon plastic bow perched like a fly in her hair—when she'd been arrested. The enchantment weaved into the Polaroid allowed him to see her tiny doppelgänger granting a brilliant smile to the invisible photographer, a rosy glow to her cheeks as a manifold of
creases emerged from her features.

He could feel his own facial muscles beginning to contort.

Harry slammed her folder shut, tossing it onto one of the red stacks.

His palm scrubbed over his face, finishing with a quick swipe down to his jaw. He'd felt his throat closing up. Clearing a small space on his desk, just as he was about to take the edge off with the firewhiskey he'd kept locked in a drawer or instead to perhaps begin signing off paperwork, he froze upon hearing the ding of the bell. Soon, the lift doors whooshed open.

With the metal rattle of footsteps stalking across the grating, sounds made by tight shoes with hard soles, even as his eyes launched in the direction of the mezzanine, Harry had known the identity of whom they'd belonged to.

It was the thought of being under the rapt attention of a magical creature that made Harry swallow. Green and gold had met unflinchingly. Through the enchanted two-way mirrors, it shot through his bones, boiling them into liquid.

Marching down the steps, Sesshomaru was now enroute to the Head Auror's office. In the back of his mind, Harry had discerned that for him to navigate through the department as confidently as he did, he must be using Harry's scent as his guide. There were the occasional onlookers glancing up in suspicion, but none of the Aurors went to stop the magical creature—or to guide him. Harry couldn't fault them for it. Outside these walls, they'd seen the ambassador with their Head Auror daily, much like a constant shadow. Presumption was a likely motive.

Fortunately, none of the more gruesome photographs and reports were on display. But his desk was in a state of half-organized clutter. Harry swiftly straightened the stuff on his desk, making sure everything was square and properly spaced. A cleaning charm was flung.

Abruptly Harry's eyes flew to the direction of the portraits. No one occupied their canvases. He felt a little tension draining from his shoulders. Whether they'd fled out of respect for him or out of a sense of self-preservation, he did not know. Their frames, left behind, depicted paintings of landscapes or empty study rooms.

By now, Sesshomaru had passed Hermione's desk, finally coming to a halt before one of the invisible doors making up the decagonal perimeter. He was inspecting the seemingly empty space, before cautiously stretching out his hand.

Harry found himself staring at an exposed forearm when the sleeve slid down, uncovering magenta stripes on a smooth wrist. Sense had slapped Harry across the face with the memory of that same hand glowing acid green, and he reared to his feet. His wand was already tracing the pattern in the air, the incantation for the spell spilling from his lips: "Alohomora!"

A click. The door swung open. Sesshomaru's hand fell. For a moment, they stood at an impasse, staring each other down.

Seeing those magical creature features up close made Harry recall his mixed feelings upon catching a glimpse of him at the Minister's Box. At the time, Harry had been preoccupied with keeping a level head, but he distinctly recalled flashes of astonishment and irritation.

He felt himself grapple with indecision. Assuming that the invasion hadn't to do with anything urgent, Harry's gut reaction was to deny him entry. Panic trembled under his skin. Many rejections were being overturned in Harry's head, each being less polite. One by one they had to be
Sinking back into his seat, Harry kneaded his pulsing temples. "Hermione was supposed to bring you to Grimmauld." His breath had rushed out like a sweltering furnace. He tried to imagine what he looked like, looking exhausted in his shirtsleeves, his coat draped over the backseat. He gesticulated erratically with his other hand—the one that stung less. "You might as well come in. If you close the door, no one will be able to see us. Or hear us."

As Sesshomaru strode past the doorway, the glass made a quiet rattling noise behind him as he took his advice.

He didn't have to look up. His presence filled Harry's office like a stormy night under a shrouded moon. With how sedate and slow the stride was—boots a muffled footfall across the carpet and the floorboards—Harry could take a gander at the thoughts running through the demon's mind. Besides a feeling of wonderment, there was an undeniably heightened sense of exposure within the large enchanted space. That had been Harry's impression, as well as any visitors, upon seeing the Head Auror's Office for the first time. The voyeuristic aspect of the spell took some getting used to.

Even if neither of them were in the mood for boiling tea, muscle memory had Harry waving his wand over the tea set. Then he paused.

Although the gesture was unnecessary and probably undeserved, out of consideration for his new guest, he'd soon slashed his wand in a different familiar pattern.

As the various ceramics and cutlery clinked in the background, once he'd managed to tear his face away from the safety of his gloved hand, he saw a flash of white. Sesshomaru had whipped his head around sharply at the wooden clack, clack, clack of panels magically unfolding over the two-way mirrors, eventually submerging the room in shadow. Harry had placed his wand down on his desk just as the green banker's lamp and the wall sconces slowly warmed in illumination.

Upon raising his head to peer at the tall historical figure, a vague sense of déjà vu flitted past Harry. It was in the brisk temperature, the dimness, and the isolation of the room where it was only the two of them—like a place out of time. He recalled how the hard the stones had felt against his back, how the cold had infused through the thin material of his suit—and how it'd differed from the warm heat of the solid body looming over him. It blurred his grasp on reality.

He saw how those golden eyes had stopped wandering over the furniture, transferring to him now, calm but expectant. Only the faintest vestige of disorientation lingered as Harry settled the jut of his jaw atop linked fingers, the sharp corners of the four rings straining against the leather.

"I'll be—" His throat convulsed in a swallow. To his embarrassment, Harry knew there was an unusual touch of colour on his cheeks, a low rasp to his voice and the dreaded glottal stop capable of imparting social information about him. He cleared his throat before trying again, regaining his crisp enunciation: "I'll level with you, Lord Sesshomaru. You weren't supposed to see the trial."

This conversation was inevitable. Behind his rib cage, a weight had settled in his chest. It was a tar-like substance which had melted through his body.

The aroma of English breakfast—a blend of black tea with dried floral undertones—encompassed the area. He held the scent in his lungs, treating it like a meal after a long spell of hunger. Sesshomaru was watching tendrils of steam rise from the ceramic cups as the teapot floated above, pouring a rivulet of hot liquid into each. Aware of the Asian inclination of taking their teas as natural as possible, Harry hadn't offered his guest milk or sugar.
For a while, Sesshomaru merely looked at him, his eyes trailing over his features, perhaps searching for something he had never seen before. Eventually he murmured, "This Sesshomaru has no intention of picking a fight… This Hari may dispense with the formalities."

Harry found himself focusing on the timbre of his voice, finding solace in that sedate, low octave. He gazed wordlessly as Sesshomaru took one of the two armchairs, adjusting his swords with him in his newfound position. The fragrance had wrapped around them like a blanket of comfort.

Sesshomaru was peering back at him. He remarked aloud, quizzical, "For want of touching darkness, your heart has not yet been devoured."

"...What?"

A small frown distorted his features as a cup was pushed toward him, a gloved hand retracting. "It is not like this Hari to be this maudlin." With Harry listening attentively to him, Sesshomaru clarified, "In the trial. Your yōki was at unrest."

At those strange words, Harry felt himself faltering. He'd managed to squeeze out a sound of acknowledgment, but the rest remained lodged in his throat.

He debated the merits and demerits of telling him. Harry had his reasons for not wanting the time traveler to see his minder in such a state. It was not something he wanted an outsider like Sesshomaru to be involved in.

When Harry remained recalcitrant, Sesshomaru affirmed, "This Hari needn't tell me if that is your wish. Do be at ease." Seeing his expression beggaring belief, he continued, "Your caution is admirable. But tired."

At that, Harry leaned against the backrest, unable to find the words. He was going to give a firm talking to his deputy later. Although he suspected he knew Hermione's motivation—to her credit, Umbridge was actually subdued this time as compared to the First Session, so Hermione's plan did have an effect—this situation he found himself in could have been avoided.

If he turned Sesshomaru away, there were certain implications. Their association was a delicate precipice they've just started climbing together, their trust in each other like flimsy tenuous threads being built upon with each gesture. But it wouldn't take much for that confidence to break. All it'd take was for someone to pull a thread, and the rest could soon come unraveling. A part of Harry felt grateful that Sesshomaru had taken his advice, seeking him out—the direct source—instead of relying on hearsay.

It wasn't like the history between him and Umbridge had been any secret. If Sesshomaru didn't get his answers from Harry, someone else might tell him or he might come across the information himself.

Time was like sand, slipping through his fingers. Yet he could sense Sesshomaru was content waiting for an answer, however long it'd take him.

"I…wonder how historians will look back on this," Harry began, his voice sounding faraway even to his own ears. He knew he was digressing but he needed to think about how to articulate a subject he'd considered shameful and somewhat sensitive. "She's not the first to get under my skin. But I find her detestable."

Sesshomaru's eyes lowered slightly in interest. He seemed to discern that he was being told the truth; but Harry managed to evade answering what he must have really wanted to know.
"I suspect this case will be considered trivial, compared to other cases." Removing his hands from under his chin, his fingers fused into steely clamps on the desk. He was gazing down at his gloves. The back of his hands throbbed at the memory. "...I want Umbridge sentenced to life imprisonment. Understandably, as you can tell."

The dog demon didn't say anything. His expression remained like stone.

As long as no one else saw…. In the distant parts of his mind, he realized the suspense might be building the reveal up to be something dreadful. He drew in a long breath; he was being foolhardy and senseless. Compared to the feudal punishments the dog demon had no doubt witnessed firsthand, Harry's experience should seem trivial by comparison. Skimming a thumb at the line between leather and his wrist, he hedged, "Do you remember what was said? About 1995 to 1996?"

He didn't know if Sesshomaru heard him. The warlord had his attention fixed on the sliver of skin exposed, as if he could divine the secrets of its master by willpower alone.

"I don't believe…I was her first victim." He'd needed to feel numb. He spoke as clinically as he could, "Regardless if it's a new spell or an enchanted object, she must have experimented on other test subjects. I remember her saying she'd invented the Black Quill in 1994 or something."

"The Black Quill?"

A tiny stab of pain sparked against the mist in his head. Unclenching his fist, Harry managed to answer levelly, "It was something she gave me when she'd assigned me detentions." Slipping his hands momentarily out of sight, he began removing the black leather, tugging them off finger by finger. A familiar emotion had begun to bubble in the pit of his stomach; before it could give rise and affect his physical surroundings, he lashed down on his magic. He confessed through his teeth, "I saw them as a battle of wills. I was stubborn. Young. And stupid."

When the last glove came off, he grimaced down at his own handwriting, seeing shining white scars running across otherwise healthy skin. The letters were whiter than he'd remembered. Memories tumbled down—of being handed an unfamiliar black quill, of seeing a red lipsticked smile when she told him what to write, of the searing blinding agony as repetitive strokes were carved into his skin again and again until they bled. He rubbed the sweat off on his trousers, feeling leaden.

In the illumination of his office, his hands appeared particularly pale and stark against the wood when Harry reached over to show him in slow motion.

Under the lamp light, gouged into the flesh was the sentence I must not tell lies; it was the same left hand which carried the weight of his three family signet rings and the Resurrection Stone. On the back of his right hand read I will not break rules. His shame stripped bare, Harry held his head high as Sesshomaru leaned in to inspect the scarred tissue.

"She branded you," he murmured, his low tones making Harry feel a shiver crawl down his spine.

He didn't object when Sesshomaru, instead of showing him scorn, had carefully taken his hands into his. It had been a shock of dry warmth between their point of contact. With the long hair falling into his face, Sesshomaru's expression was partially obscured.

Harry found himself taking a brief side-by-side comparison, noticing that they both wielded strong hands which did not show a genteel life. Through a haze, he murmured, "Like I said, the Ministry was convinced that I was a liar. Umbridge felt especially motivated to discredit me." His own voice sounded like a deep rumble to his ears. It was the same script he'd painstakingly crafted over several years.
Beneath watchful eyes, Sesshomaru's fingers were slender and pale, yet the palms were battered—the skin roughened by calluses. They must have been often used to swing swords in the past.

It was Harry's own fault—in combination with the touch—that he felt himself thawing. "And now you know." Harry kept his eyes averted from Sesshomaru's face. He felt heat travel from their hands, creeping up his neck and to his cheeks as he tried to keep his hands limp in that clawed grasp. "I don't like being asked about them."

"It is why this Hari wears gloves."

There was a strange undercurrent to his words. Upon the sight of those graceful marks serrating, darkening into a deep mauve color, Harry registered, dimly, the strong emotions Sesshomaru might be feeling—for another man on foreign land and in a foreign time. It stole his breath away.

There was beauty in submission, being unraveled and made less of an untouchable mystery. The realization made the corners of his mouth curl up into a humorless smile as he gazed at that bowed head. "Yeah…."

All other words failed him, failed to convey the gravity of what he felt. For a moment, they simply breathed in tandem.

Although he felt his anger subsiding, the world hadn't come back to Harry yet. He truly was rubbish with self-control. His eyelids had slid closed. He thought he heard himself, at some point, thanking Sesshomaru for listening. He might have imagined it, but he'd thought he felt the faintest constriction on his palms in reply.

Later, he would blame it on sentimentality and the lateness of the hour. But he felt featherlight strokes up the inside of his wrist, before claws threaded between his fingers, clasping his hand tightly, grounding him. In the incandescent darkness, Harry exhaled.

They sat like that for a long time, in silence, until Harry could open his eyes again.

That night, when they returned to Grimmauld Place, he gave Sesshomaru his answer.

It was settled. His tutelage was to begin in the early mornings.

Chapter End Notes

...Tadaa! A disclaimer: I did take two creative liberties, one being the Wizengamot and the other being the characterization of two characters. To my awareness, there is no wizarding barrister in canon. Or a public gallery, etc. Pfft! Do watch A Very Potter Sequel by Team StarKid. I cannot recommend it enough, along with Team StarKid's other musical parodies.

Next chapter: Gilded Cage. These next three chapters are among the heavier ones in tone of this first arc... While Umbridge's verdict is being deliberated, there will be a meeting about the investigation in wizarding America. Sesshomaru will also get a rare insight into Harry's upbringing. :)

To those who celebrate it, Happy Halloween! As always, look out for sneek peeks on my tumblr! (❍ᴥ❍第一章)
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!