Royal Ward

by Catstaff

Summary

Based on "Hatal Fart Attack" by Corwalch, "Royal Ward" follows the changes in Harry's life after he gains the personal attention of the Queen, an event which causes Vernon to die of a heart attack. My thanks to Corwalch for permission to write a sequel. Reading "Hatal Fart Attack" first is recommended, but not absolutely required. Please note that this story begins in 1989, shortly before Harry's 9th birthday and several years before Prince Charles and Princess Diana divorced. Warnings may change as the story progresses.

- Inspired by Hatal Fart Attack by Corwalch
Harry sat on the bed in what had been Dudley’s second bedroom, trying to make sense of everything that had happened in the last week. He wasn’t yet sure what it all meant for him, but he hoped it would be something good. He looked once more at the papers decreeing him to be a Royal Ward with all the rights and privileges thereof, and thought back on the day which brought about so many changes.

The day had started out ordinarily enough, at least for him. Aunt Petunia woke him early as usual to cook breakfast for the family. She had been in a much better mood than usual, though, and hustled both Dudley and Uncle Vernon through the meal and back upstairs to shower and dress up for their special trip. That allowed him to eat the whole of the single slice of toast they permitted him for breakfast, because Dudley wasn’t lingering in the kitchen to try to take it from him or make him drop it so he could step on it or otherwise render it inedible. He’d expected to be sent over to old Mrs. Figg’s house, since he knew they’d never take him anywhere if they could avoid it, let alone anywhere special. But then the crazy old cat lady telephoned to say that one of her precious darlings had been attacked by a neighbor’s new dog and she had to bring it to the veterinarian and therefore couldn’t take Harry for the day after all.

And so he’d found himself locked in his cupboard again, flung there by Vernon with a few clouts to the head and shoulders as a reminder that a freak like him wasn’t fit to have run of the house without proper supervision. He’d expected to be there for the entire day, but it was scarcely two hours before Aunt Petunia and a man with a rather stern face were pulling him out and taking him outside to the fanciest car he’d ever seen. The man permitted him to sit up front with the driver, while he and Aunt Petunia sat in the back with sour expressions. He’d hoped at first that she was finally sending him to an orphanage as she’d often threatened, but instead, he found himself in what he now knew was Windsor Castle, bowing to the Queen and the Princess of Wales. For a terrifying moment he’d thought perhaps his aunt had brought him there to be locked in the dungeon, but then the Queen said he’d actually been brought there so she could thank him. That Dudley had hit Prince William and knocked him down in the schoolyard, when Princess Diana and the Princes had paid their school a visit since one of the Princess’ friends worked there, and that when Dudley had gone after little Prince Harry after that, Harry had stepped in and taken the blow meant for the younger boy.

Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon protested, of course, unwilling to believe that their precious Dudley was a bully, insisting instead that the Princes must have mistaken his actions, and that Dudley was just a boisterous little boy who perhaps played a bit roughly but certainly didn’t mean any harm. There was some discussion that he didn’t fully understand, but which seemed to frighten Aunt Petunia and enrage Uncle Vernon, and then the Queen gave him the envelope full of papers and declared him to be a Royal Ward. Less than five minutes later, Uncle Vernon collapsed and died of a massive heart attack. While he hadn’t necessarily wanted anything bad to happen to the man, Harry couldn’t help but feel grateful that his uncle couldn’t ever hurt him again.

The days that followed were a bit of a blur, filled with neighbors offering their sympathies to Aunt
Petunia, and various solicitors coming and going with things for her to sign. Dudley spent most of his time stuffing his face with the shepherd’s pies and other foods the neighbors all seemed to bring along when they paid their condolence calls, while he’d made a point of doing his chores and retreating to his cupboard before anyone could take notice of him. The few times Aunt Petunia spoke to him, she ended up blaming him for Uncle Vernon’s death, saying that if it hadn’t been for him, they never would have been summoned to meet the Queen and Vernon never would have had that heart attack.

But two days ago, a youngish looking man in a suit came to the house and asked to see him. When he came out of the cupboard, the man had directed a very stern frown at Aunt Petunia, who flushed uncomfortably. As soon as the man left, with a promise that he’d return in two days, she told him to bring his things up to Dudley’s second bedroom, and that he’d be sleeping there from now on. So now he was here, sitting on Dudley’s old bed with the sagging mattress, and trying to figure out why things were changing so quickly.

“Get down here, boy!” Petunia’s strident tones interrupted his reverie.

Harry hastily folded up the papers and stuffed them back into their envelope, which he then tucked in the pocket of his oversized trousers. He didn’t like the idea of leaving it where Dudley might get his hands on it. Making a rather futile attempt to bring some order to his hair, he hurried down the stairs. “Yes, Aunt Petunia?”

That same youngish looking man was back, standing beside her. He squatted down so as to speak to the child on his own level. “We weren’t properly introduced when I was first here the other day,” he said in a pleasant tone. “My name is Stephen Coyner, and I’m pleased to meet you, Harry. Her Majesty the Queen has asked me to be something of a tutor to you, if you’ll have me.”

Harry tilted his head, noticing that Aunt Petunia went a sort of angry pale when the man said that he was to be his tutor. She never hurt him quite as badly as Vernon had, but she didn’t hesitate to strike him when she felt the need. “I’m… not supposed to do better than Dudley in school,” he murmured, not quite looking Mr. Coyner in the eye.

Stephen’s mouth tightened a bit at that. “Well, Harry, this isn’t so much about school, as about those gifts you’ve inherited from your parents. Your aunt was supposed to tell you something about them, but after your meeting with the Queen, it became obvious that she didn’t.”

“I want no part of such freakishness,” Petunia muttered, turning and stalking into the kitchen.

“Also, there’s the matter of getting you properly outfitted,” Stephen continued, ignoring the interruption. “As a Royal Ward, you receive a stipend for your clothing and other needs each year. I’m to help you learn to shop wisely and otherwise manage your funds among other things.”

Harry considered this for a moment, then nodded. “All right,” he said with a shy smile. “I’d like to learn all that.”

Stephen stood with a smile, holding his hand out to Harry. “Shall we be off, then? I imagine you’d like having clothes that fit you and not a baby whale for a change.”

Harry couldn’t stifle a giggle at that, as his new tutor led him out to a small car. “May I ask a question?” he ventured once they were both in the vehicle.

“You just did,” Stephen joked, attempting to put the boy a little more at ease. “Go ahead.”

“How come you got picked to be my tutor?”
He smiled at that question. As far as the wizarding world knew, he was just another Muggleborn who had gone back to the Muggle world when he couldn’t get a decent position in the wizarding world due to a lack of connections. It was partly true. He’d entered Hogwarts at the height of the war with Voldemort, a first year when this boy’s parents were in seventh year, sorted into Hufflepuff despite some decidedly Slytherin tendencies because it simply wasn’t safe for a Muggleborn to be in the house of the snake at the time. Careful observation of wizarding politics left him disgusted; too many of the old pureblood families used bribery to pass legislation favorable to themselves at the expense of the Muggleborns. And while Headmaster Dumbledore said all the right things about inclusiveness and integration, Stephen noticed that he didn’t actually do anything in his Wizengamot duties to try to prevent the bribery or to get laws passed to give Muggleborns better opportunities. So while he was more than happy to complete his magical education, he decided to set himself a home study course over the summers with his older sister’s books and class materials. He’d passed his GCSEs with flying colors and gone on to earn a total of four A-levels as well. He was currently halfway through university, working towards a degree in economics and spending the summer as an intern with his MP, with the eventual goal of entering the diplomatic corps.

When word got around that there was some sort of special assignment being offered to ‘anyone in Her Majesty’s government who graduated from the Hogwarts School’ he was intrigued enough to apply. It surprised him to know that the muggle government, or at least some parts of it, knew about the wizarding world. He’d been even more astonished to find himself being interviewed by the Queen, who handpicked him for the assignment because he was the youngest of the three applicants, and she hoped he’d be able to become friends with young Harry and perhaps even develop something of an older-brother relationship with him. Since he’d still been at school at the time, he was well aware that Dumbledore had placed the Boy-Who-Lived with Muggle relatives, and was a keen enough observer to have noticed that Professor McGonagall had protested such a placement. Having watched the headmaster’s manipulations from the relative obscurity of Hufflepuff House, Stephen couldn’t help but think there was something more behind the man’s actions in leaving Harry Potter with the Muggles and never checking on his welfare. According to Her Majesty during the interview, her sources at the Ministry of Magic had said something to the effect of Dumbledore said there was some sort of protective blood wards around the house so long as the boy considered it his home, because of his mother’s death to save him and the fact that his aunt was his mother’s sister. Supposedly this was to keep him safe from any Death Eaters out for revenge. But given the abuse, did the child even think of his dwelling place as home? And if he didn’t, what did that say about the so-called protection there? This whole situation simply reeked of the old wizard’s manipulations, and quite frankly, Stephen was more than happy to both help the boy and do what he could to foul up Dumbledore’s plans for Harry Potter, whatever they might be. He thought about how best to answer the boy’s question.

“Well, Harry,” he said carefully, “that’s because I have the same gifts as your parents did, and as you do. Tell me, has anything odd ever happened around you, or to you? Things that you just couldn’t find an explanation for?”

Harry nodded, looking scared. “One time when Dudley and his gang were after me, I went to jump over the rubbish bins behind the school, thinking maybe I could hide behind them. But I ended up on the roof instead. And when Aunt Petunia cut off all my hair but the fringe, it grew back overnight.”

Stephen nodded with a smile. “That, Harry, is because you’re magical. So were your parents. So am I. Your aunt should have told you this years ago.”

Harry blinked. “But… but they said… they said magic doesn’t exist!” he protested.
Stephen pulled into a nearby shopping centre’s car park and turned to look at the boy. “They lied,” he said bluntly. “Watch this.” He pulled a slender stick of wood from under his sleeve and pointed it at the briefcase resting on the back seat. Giving the stick a little swish and a flick, he said, “Wingardium leviosa!” and the briefcase rose steadily off the seat to float just below the roof of the car.

Harry blinked again, unbuckling his seat belt to turn and stare at the floating briefcase. “That’s… but… why would they lie to me like that?” he asked plaintively, turning back to face Stephen.

“I don’t know,” the wizard replied honestly. “My guess… and this is only a guess… is that your aunt fears anything that doesn’t fit her definition of normal. And that she hoped by keeping you from learning about magic, that you would never develop it. Another possibility is that she was jealous of your mother for having a talent that she didn’t, so jealous that any love she had for her sister turned into hatred and that hatred carried over to you. Or some combination of the two.” He paused, and then asked quietly, “Does your aunt mistreat you, Harry?”

Harry slumped down in the seat. “I don’t know… maybe?” he answered softly. “She… she doesn’t treat me the same as she does Dudley and never has. I don’t get a lot of food and I always have a lot of chores to do around the house and he never has to do anything. Sometimes she’ll hit me when she says I’ve done something wrong, but she never beat me like Uncle Vernon and Dudley either. And she did move me from the cupboard to Dudley’s second bedroom after you came the other day.” He risked a glance over and flinched when he saw Stephen’s angry face.

Stephen quickly realized he’d scared the boy and smiled. “I’m not upset with you, Harry, but with your aunt. I’ve got to ask, do you know how your parents died?”

“They told me it was a car crash. That my dad was driving drunk and smashed up the car, killing himself and my mum and leaving me with this stupid scar,” Harry answered, poking at the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead.

“So they lied about that, too,” Stephen muttered. “I shouldn’t be so surprised, given everything else. Tell you what, we’re here at a Debenham’s, so let’s get you some clothes that fit properly to start with, and afterwards, we’ll get a takeaway lunch and go somewhere quiet so I can start telling you all the things you should have grown up knowing. Beginning with what really happened to your parents.”

Harry nodded. “All right, Mr. Coyner.” He pushed his glasses up on his nose, giving the Sellotape holding them together in the middle a pinch to tighten it again.

Stephen took note of the gesture. “When’s the last time you had new glasses?” he asked.

“Er… never,” Harry confessed. “When I started primary school and the people at the school said I needed glasses, Uncle Vernon gave me these to use. He said they used to belong to his cousin and I should use them because he wasn’t spending good money to fix a freak.”

The older wizard growled to himself, wishing the man was still alive so he could teach him just who the freak really was. “All right, then, Debenham’s has a Vision Centre within it… they usually take walk-in appointments. We’ll stop in there first thing and have them check your eyes… you likely need different glasses by now, and if we do that straightaway, they’ll have them ready for you by next weekend at the latest.” He smiled. “And we’ll get a spare pair or two as well, so that if something happens to one, you won’t have to resort to taping them together.”

He escorted Harry into the huge department store and into the Vision Centre. As he watched the oculist examine the boy, he was privately amazed that Harry was able to see anything with his old
glasses... they’d turned out to be nothing more than an old pair of non-prescription reading glasses
such as could be purchased off the rack at any chemists’ shop. Once the oculist finished up, they
selected a set of lightweight silver metal frames which suited his face much better than the old
round black frames, and he ordered three pairs made. After that, they went to the boys’ clothing
department, where he bought Harry an entire wardrobe from the skin out. He wanted to kill the
Dursleys when he realized that they even gave him his fat cousin’s old y-fronts to wear... the poor
child had to tie a string around them to keep them from falling off.

For his part, Harry was overwhelmed, but in a good way. He knew his eyesight wasn’t the best, but
he couldn’t believe how sharp things looked when peering through the oculist’s diagnostic device
at the letter chart at the end of the room. He couldn’t wait for his new glasses to be ready. And to
have not one, but three pairs? It seemed a miracle. And then the clothing. Mr. Coyner insisted on
getting what seemed like an incredible amount. New pants that actually stayed up on his hips
without help, socks that weren’t all stretched out and holey, jeans and shorts and t-shirts for casual
wear and smart trousers and button-down shirts for school. A pair of new trainers as well as a pair
of nice shoes for school. When he tried to protest, Mr. Coyner just shook his head and told him that
every child deserved a proper wardrobe, and didn’t his cousin have as much if not more in the way
of new clothing on a regular basis? Since Dudley did, in fact, have more new clothes than this,
which Harry knew since Aunt Petunia always had him do the wash, he stopped protesting.

Stephen had Harry change into one of his new outfits before they went back out to the car and
stowed the rest of their purchases in the boot. “Time for lunch,” he said cheerfully. “What’s your
favorite? Burgers, fish and chips, or something else? We can go anywhere you’d like.”

Harry’s eyes grew wide. “I don’t know,” he murmured. “I’m not usually allowed...” He looked
down, then looked back up again. So far, Mr. Coyner hadn’t hit him, or even yelled at him. “I get
one piece of toast for breakfast, and an apple for lunch. And a lot of times Dudley takes it or ruins
it before I can eat it all. At dinner, I’m allowed to have the scraps after they’ve eaten. They said
that’s all a freak like me needs. But sometimes I get so hungry I pick scraps out of the neighbours’
d bins,” he confessed.

“I don’t blame you,” the man said, looking angry again. “For one thing, you’re not a freak, you’re
a growing boy. One slice of bread and an apple and whatever scraps they leave isn’t nearly enough
food for anyone, let alone a child of your age. No wonder you’re so much smaller than your cousin
even though he’s only a couple months older than you.” He grinned a bit, then, ruffling Harry’s
hair. “Not that you’d want to be as big as Dudley, would you?” he teased lightly. “I’m surprised he
can manage to walk. As fat as he is, I should think he’d have an easier time rolling about
everywhere, don’t you?”

Harry couldn’t help but giggle shyly at the mental image of his cousin rolling through the halls at
school. “He’d knock more kids down at a time if he did.”

Stephen laughed at that. “Let’s not give him any ideas then. How about we go to a McDonald’s for
lunch? Since they haven’t given you a whole lot to eat, you’ll be better off with smaller meals for
the moment so you don’t make yourself sick. McDonald’s has special small-sized meals for kids,
while most fish and chips places just load you down. Granted, you could bring home the leftovers,
but I don’t fancy the thought of your pig of a cousin eating food I bought especially for you.”

“All right,” Harry agreed, buckling himself into the passenger seat of the car. He stayed quiet as
they approached a McDonald’s with a drive-up window, only nodding when Mr. Coyner asked if
he’d like to try a cheeseburger with chips and a Coke. His eyes widened when the man handed him
a cardboard box covered with brightly coloured cartoon characters and containing not only the
expected cheeseburger and chips, but a small toy car as well. He’d never in his life had a toy that
hadn’t belonged to Dudley and been broken first.

Stephen set the two drink cups into the cupholders between the front seats and balanced the bag containing his meal between the cups and himself. “I thought we’d eat in the park and enjoy the sunshine,” he said as he pulled back out onto the road. “And it will be quieter there, so I can start telling you all those things you should have grown up knowing.” It was less than a five minute drive to the park, where he stopped the car and led Harry down to a picnic table near a brook, well away from the swings and other playground equipment.

Harry looked around with wide eyes as they sat and ate. The cheeseburger and chips were incredibly tasty, and the Coke surprised him by being fizzy. It tickled his nose and mouth and he hiccupped after the first sip, which made Mr. Coyner laugh. But it was a nice laugh, Harry decided, and not a mean laugh. When he’d finished the meal and most of his drink, he looked up at the man. “Will you tell me about my parents now?” he asked quietly.

Stephen nodded. “Right. I never met them to speak to, you understand, but they were in their seventh year at Hogwart’s School when I was in my first. They were Gryffindors while I was put into Hufflepuff.”

Harry just looked confused.

Stephen sighed. Maybe an outline of the Wizarding world and the school first, then onto the child’s history, he thought. So he started over. “Okay, well, we’ve already been over how magic really does exist, right? So anyway, there are actually thousands of witches and wizards in Britain and all over the world. But for the most part, they don’t like much contact with what they call the Muggle world… this one, what your aunt would call normal. And Hogwarts is Britain’s best school for magic. It starts at age eleven, like any other secondary school, since it’s a boarding school and that’s the age most people consider that kids are old enough to go away from home. The school was founded by four friends, called Godric Gryffindor, Salazar Slytherin, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Helga Hufflepuff. As each of them looked for different qualities in their personal students back then, certain personality traits became associated with the names, and with what would eventually become the houses of the school. Gryffindors are usually the courageous types who end up as aurors… that’s the wizard equivalent of policemen… or other jobs of that nature. Slytherins are known for being ambitious and careful in how they make their plans to reach their goals. Ravenclaws are most often the brainiacs of the lot… not swots so much as kids that truly love to learn. Swots are the ones in any house who’ll study all night only so they can brag about their marks, you see the difference? And Hufflepuffs are the quiet types who aren’t afraid of hard work.”

The child nodded slowly. “So my parents were policemen?” he asked.

“Your father joined the aurors after graduating Hogwart’s,” Stephen nodded. “I’m not quite sure if your mother worked outside the home or if she was studying for a mastery or what. They got married right after they graduated, you see, and she fell pregnant with you not long after. But it was difficult times, then. A dark wizard had risen up and gathered up the bigots of the wizarding world and had started a civil war. You’ll find that wizards don’t much care what color your skin is or whether you fall in love with people of the same or opposite gender as you. But quite a lot care about what they call blood purity… if your family is an old one or not. They think it makes a difference if you’ve got Muggle blood in you. And naturally, the majority of the bigots are from the old families, the ones with lots of money. So they use their influence to keep the Muggleborn wizards down, by bribery within the Ministry of Magic to prevent laws from passing that would give Muggleborns a fair chance. I’m a Muggleborn myself, and a big part of the reason I’m in a position to have been chosen as a tutor for you, is because I saw that I wouldn’t get a decent job in
the Ministry of Magic even though I’ve always wanted to go into the government. So I studied up over the summers to keep up with my Muggle education and now I’m in uni and I landed a summer job with my MP. Imagine my surprise when a memo came through asking for ‘anyone who was a graduate of the Hogwart’s School to please report to Her Majesty’s personal assistant for a possible special assignment.’ I didn’t know that any part of the Muggle government was aware of the wizarding world until then.”

Harry laughed. “That’s funny. But you said there was a war?”

Stephen nodded. “Yes. This dark wizard… he called himself Lord Voldemort, but most people just refer to him as You Know Who or He Who Must Not Be Named… and his bigoted followers, known as Death Eaters, decided that Muggleborns and their Muggle families ought to be killed off for the good of the wizarding world. While your father was from an old pureblood family, your mother was a Muggleborn. Between that and your dad being an auror, they became targets. They went into hiding, but someone betrayed their whereabouts to You Know Who and he attacked. He killed both your parents and tried to kill you, too. But for some reason, the killing spell rebounded off you, leaving you just with that scar of yours, and he hasn’t been seen or heard from since then. Most people think he’s dead, others believe he was just terribly weakened and went into hiding. But either way, you’re considered a hero in the wizarding world, because something about you turned that spell back on the caster. No one ever survived the killing spell before.”

Harry froze. I’d always believed that maybe my parents hadn’t been driving drunk, he thought, that maybe my aunt and uncle had got it wrong and it was someone else who’d been drinking and crashed into them. But this… this was… this was… He gulped and looked up at Mr. Coyner. “They were murdered?” he whispered. “How did I live? Why me?”

Stephen hesitated, then pulled the little boy into his lap. “I don’t know, Harry,” he murmured. “I really don’t. The headmaster of Hogwarts thinks it’s because your mother sacrificed herself to try to keep you alive. That’s why you have to stay with your aunt. Because she’s of your mother’s blood, and your mother did what she did to protect you, he could put up wards to keep the Death Eaters from finding you to try to get revenge for their master. But I don’t know more than that, and it’s only by chance I know that much. I was still a student at Hogwarts when it happened, and I overheard Professor Dumbledore speaking of it to one of the other teachers.” He rubbed the child’s thin back gently, if a little awkwardly, trying to offer whatever comfort he could.

Harry stiffened for a moment, but then relaxed as Mr. Coyner did nothing to hurt him. “If this Professor Dumbledore is the one who decided I had to stay with my aunt, how come he never checked up on me?” he whispered. “How come no one would help me before?”

“What do you mean, Harry?” Stephen asked, his heart dropping with dread in anticipation of the boy’s answer.

“Well, there was a girl in my class two years ago who was also an orphan, living with what she called a foster family. Every month, someone from Child Welfare Services would come round to see how she was doing in school, and from what she said, they’d check on her foster family too, making sure everyone was getting along reasonably,” Harry said. “And twice since I’ve started school, there’s been a teacher who noticed all the bruises on me and notified Child Welfare Services. Both times, inside of a week, that teacher was fired, and no one from Child Welfare Services ever came to talk to me and take me away from the Dursleys like those teachers said they would.”

Stephen was horrified. This was beyond simple manipulation. Harry’s description of what happened each time someone tried to notify Child Welfare Services about the abuse he’d suffered
meant that someone in the wizarding world had at least an inkling of what was happening, and was making sure nothing changed. Child Welfare Services might be overworked and overwhelmed at times, but they never just ignored an allegation of abuse. This smacked of obliviation; of someone deliberately tampering with people’s memories to make them forget that Harry Potter had ever been brought to their attention. That meant Dumbledore, as he’d even kept Harry’s exact whereabouts a secret from the Ministry of Magic, supposedly to keep any former Death Eaters from gaining that information through Ministry contacts.

“I wish I could answer that question, Harry,” Stephen said gently. “I have some suspicions, but even if I’m correct as to who is behind getting Child Welfare Services to forget you were mentioned to them, I have no idea why it was done. My best guess is that whoever it is, wants you to be completely ignorant of the wizarding world until it’s time for you to go to Hogwarts, so that he or she can set himself up as your mentor in all things wizarding and make you dependent on him for whatever reason. It could be money… the Potters, as I said, were an old pureblood and very wealthy family. It could be political connections… with you considered a hero, you’ll be regarded as something like a rock star within the wizarding world, so when you’re done with school, you’ll be considered someone with influence. It could also be magical… since you survived the killing curse, it’s presumed that you’ll grow up to be an exceptionally powerful wizard. But these are just guesses, I don’t know for sure.”

Harry looked up at him, his emerald eyes far too old for the face of a child just approaching his ninth birthday. “It’s the headmaster, isn’t it?” he asked softly. “Professor Dumbledore. You said he’s the one who sent me to the Dursleys. So he’d most likely be the one.”

“I think so,” Stephen admitted. “I don’t know for sure, you understand. But I do think so. Headmaster Dumbledore is a very powerful wizard, and he’s also considered a hero for defeating the Dark Lord Grindelwald way back in 1945. Grindelwald was helping Hitler and the Nazis in World War Two, so what Dumbledore did helped end the war, too. But ever since then, a lot of people have treated him like he’s the second coming of Merlin. Whatever he does, must be for the good of all, just because he’s Dumbledore. But I’ll be honest; the man talks the talk, but doesn’t always walk the walk. He’s head of the Wizengamot… that’s sort of like the wizarding version of Parliament… but I notice for all he spouts off about equality for Muggleborns, he never does anything to actually pass laws to grant that equality, or even to block the richest purebloods from bribing officials into proposing laws to make it difficult for Muggleborns to better themselves within the wizarding world. As it sits right now, the only way a Muggleborn can get ahead, is to marry into an old wizarding family. Unfortunately, more than half of them are the bigots who would never consider sullying their family name by marrying a Muggleborn.”

Harry sighed. “It’s all very confusing,” he said.

Stephen nodded. “I’m not surprised you’re confused. I’ve thrown an awful lot at you today, haven’t I?”

“You have,” Harry agreed. “But it is stuff I should already know, isn’t it?”

“A lot of it is, yes,” Stephen nodded again. “Tell you what, let’s stop off and pick up a notebook and some pens. This way you can write down all the questions I’m sure you still have… or will think of… over the next week. I’ll be coming by again next Saturday to see you and take you to pick up your new glasses, and we can talk more then.”

“Ohkay,” Harry said with a small smile.

They stopped at a small stationery shop and Stephen bought a spiral notebook and a package of pens. They returned to Privet Drive, and Stephen popped the lid of the boot so Harry could grab his
bags of clothing. “I hope your aunt and cousin take it easy on you this week,” he said. “She
probably will, but I doubt that bully of hers will. Be as safe as you can, Harry, and I’ll see you
Saturday next, 10 am, all right?”

Harry smiled. “All right. See you then, Mr. Coyner!” He darted into the house and reappeared a
few moments later, leaning out of one of the upstairs windows and waving.

Stephen waved back and drove off, a thoughtful expression on his face as he contemplated how
best to handle his new responsibility.
And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

When Stephen returned to Privet Drive the following weekend, he was greeted by the sight of Harry wrestling with a weed whacker that was taller than he was, trimming the grass along the edges of the flower beds. From the looks of things, he’d already mowed the lawn and pruned the hedges this morning. Stephen parked the car and climbed out with a smile. “Hello, Harry,” he called over the buzz of the weed whacker.

“Hello, Mr. Coyner,” the child called back. “I’m almost finished.”

“Take your time, Harry,” Stephen answered. “We’re not on any sort of schedule.” He perched on the boot of his car, watching the boy. It was clear that Harry was well-versed in the art of lawn and garden care despite his young age. He couldn’t help but wonder what other work the Dursleys foisted off on Harry since they took custody of him… and why Dumbledore wanted him raised in an abusive situation.

Once he reached the end of the flower bed, Harry shut off the weed whacker and hurried around back to stow it in the garden shed. He brushed off the bits of grass and weeds that still clung to his legs before rapping on the back door.

“Is the lawn finished?” Petunia demanded, coming to the screen door.

“Yes, Aunt Petunia,” he replied. “And Mr. Coyner is here.”

Her lips thinned in a disapproving frown. “Fine. You two freaks get out of here. I don’t want him in the house any more than absolutely necessary. I don’t want him contaminating my Dudders.”

“Yes, Aunt Petunia,” Harry said again. He darted around the house once more, hearing Dudley and his friend Piers Polkiss cheering the action on Dudley’s new video game console in the sitting room. He smiled at Mr. Coyner. “All done, Mr. Coyner. Are we really going to go pick up my new glasses?”

“Absolutely,” Stephen smiled back. “Hop in. Also, you can call me Stephen. Mister makes me feel old.”

“Oh, my notebook!” Harry exclaimed. He dashed over to the front steps, where he pulled the notebook from under the doormat. “I didn’t want Dudley or Aunt Petunia finding it, so I brought it out with me when she sent me out to do the yard this morning,” he explained as he climbed into the passenger seat of Stephen’s little car.

What would likely happen if they found it?” Stephen asked.

Harry shrugged a little. “Aunt Petunia would probably burn it, because there’s questions about magic in it. Dudley would rip it up or something, just because it’s mine.”

Stephen nodded. “So your aunt just has a problem with magic, while your cousin is a bully, yes?”

“I think so,” Harry agreed.
“How would you like self-defense lessons?” Stephen asked as they drove. “Martial arts, and maybe fencing as well. I know of a few places that teach martial arts, and the roommate I had last year at uni is on the fencing team there. I bet I could talk him into giving you some lessons, if you’d like.”

Harry brightened. “I’d like that a lot, Mr… uh, Stephen. But would I be able to do those things with glasses on?”

“Sure thing,” Stephen told him. “You can have a special pair made that have unbreakable lenses and that strap on so they can’t be knocked off. Your stipend will cover it, no problem.”

Harry gave a little bounce of excitement. “I can’t wait! I always wanted to do some kind of activities like Dudley gets to do. But they’d never pay for me to do anything.”

“No need to worry about that now,” Stephen assured the boy. “Mind, you won’t be able to do everything and anything. But even when I go back to uni come fall, I’ll be coming by every Saturday to see you. That way, you won’t have to count on your aunt to take you to your activities.” He turned the car into the Debenham’s car park and circled until he found an empty space. “Let’s go get your glasses and put the order in for the sports pair.”

Harry smiled all the way into the Vision Centre and through the adjustments to make sure all three of his new pairs of glasses fitted comfortably. He even managed to sit still while the technician measured the size of his head and around his eyebrows and cheekbones for the sports glasses. He happily chucked his old round glasses in the bin and put on one of the new pairs, peering all around in awe at how clear everything looked now. “This is brilliant!” he exclaimed happily. “I can read all the signs now!”

Stephen laughed. “Let’s go, Harry, and you can read all the signs you want as we drive.”

He did just that, reading aloud every directional and exit sign they passed on the motorway as they headed towards London. After noting that they were taking the exit for Charing Cross Road, he asked, “Where are we going and what are we doing today, anyway?”

Stephen laughed again. “I’m going to disguise you with a glamour spell, so that you won’t get mobbed, and I’m going to give you your first look at Diagon Alley. It’s where the wizards shop in London. I might not be able to give you a proper wizarding upbringing, but I can at least give you some background and experiences so that you’re not as lost as I was when I first went to Hogwarts. I’m also going to buy you a magical trunk. As far as your aunt and cousin will be able to tell, it’ll be an ordinary storage chest. But inside, it will have several compartments that only you will be able to open, and one of them will be a magical version of a refrigerator. It’s the best idea I could come up with, to make sure you get enough to eat. You’ll be able to keep fruits and cheese and sliced meats for sandwiches in that compartment, so that even if your cousin decides to ruin your meals for his own amusement, you’ll be able to go to your room and eat as much as you like.”

At the mention of food, Harry’s stomach gave an audible growl and he blushed. “That sounds amazing,” he murmured.

Stephen pulled into a parking garage and found a vacant spot far from any other vehicles. Glancing around to make sure they were alone, he pulled out his wand. “Ready to look different? We’ll have some lunch at the Leaky Cauldron… it’s the pub that hides the entrance to Diagon Alley from Muggles… and then we’ll shop.”

“Okay,” Harry replied, looking torn between nervousness and excitement.

With a few waves of his wand, Stephen gave Harry brown eyes and sandy brown hair. He also
pulled out a bottle of muggle foundation and grinned. “My sister has just about the same skin tone that you do. And by using makeup on your scar, a mis-aimed Finite… a cancellation spell… won’t accidentally reveal your identity.

Harry giggled as Stephen daubed the foundation onto his forehead and blended it in with a little sponge. “Do I need to be called by a different name?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” Stephen shook his head. “After You-Know-Who disappeared, a lot of boys were named Harry in your honor. You look younger than you are thanks to the Dursleys’ near-starving of you, so you look like you’re of an appropriate age to be one of the many namesakes of Harry Potter.”

“Okay,” Harry nodded. “Are we ready?”

“We are,” Stephen smiled. “It’s only about a block to the Leaky Cauldron. Fish and chips sound good to you?” He laughed when Harry’s reply was another stomach-growl and a red-faced nod. He led the boy down the block and into the wizarding pub, taking a booth near the back. “Two orders of fish and chips, a pint of dark, and a glass of pumpkin juice,” he told the server who appeared a moment later.

When the food arrived, Harry dug in with a blissful expression. “This is brilliant!” He took a drink of the juice, licking his lips. “Mm. A little odd, but good.”

“It’s the most popular drink at Hogwarts,” Stephen told him. “Most meals, you’ll have a choice of pumpkin juice or water or tea. There’s usually orange juice at breakfast as well.”

Harry nodded, took another bite, then picked up his notebook. “Can we talk in here?” he asked softly.

“General questions only, but yes.”

“Why don’t more Muggles know about magic?”

“There’s a law called the Statute of Secrecy,” Stephen explained. “People in general fear anything they can’t explain. And hundreds of years ago, when most people didn’t have much, if any, education, they’d react a lot more violently to things they couldn’t explain. So if they saw a wizard flying on a broomstick, or a witch using her wand to sweep the floor while she cooked supper, they would freak out. It didn’t help that the leaders of the early Christian church would call such things the work of devils or demons, and would take the lead in torturing and even killing those witches or wizards who were noticed, with the idea that they were driving the devils out of them. Since very few wizards can do magic without a wand, once the Muggles caught them, they couldn’t save themselves. So the wizards started hiding from the Muggles.” He smiled. “Mind, this is just the simple explanation. We can pick up some books that deal with the history if you’d like. But anyway, as the Statute works today, no magic may be performed in front of Muggles, unless they’re the immediate family of a Muggleborn. The family has to know at least a little, after all, in order for the child to get a magical education. Not to mention, they’ve likely seen a few instances of accidental magic as the child was growing up… like when your hair grew back after your aunt gave you that really horrid haircut. The only exceptions I know of are the Queen and the Prime Minister. There might be a few others high up in the government, but I don’t know for sure.”

Harry laughed. “That makes sense, I guess. And I would like to learn the history, please. When we covered the witch trials in school, the teacher said that most of the time the trials were based on greed or personal feuds… that someone who wanted to add to his property would accuse the owner of the next fields over of putting spells on him, so that when the accused got arrested and his
property taken, the first person would be the first in line to buy the taken property.”

Stephen nodded. “That happened a lot, too,” he said. “In all honesty, more than accusations against real witches and wizards. But mostly because wizards did make a point of hiding away from the Muggles.”

“What about kids born in the wizarding world? Do they get to do magic openly before starting school?”

“Yes, and no,” Stephen replied. “On the one hand, there’s a law against the use of underage magic… you’re not supposed to use magic outside of school until you’re seventeen. On the other hand, as you can see just looking around the pub, there’s no electricity or other modern conveniences in the wizarding world, because it’s all done with magic. So most kids learn some housekeeping charms from their parents at the very least… little things that let them tidy up their rooms in a hurry, or mend a cup they accidentally broke. Some of the wealthier families hire tutors for their children, which lets them practice magic as long as they’re in the company of that tutor.”

Harry looked hopeful. “So, since you’re my tutor, you could show me some spells?”

The question caught Stephen by surprise. But then again, he reflected, I should have known. If I’d learned I was a wizard before getting my Hogwarts letter, I’d have wanted to start learning magic right away, too. He looked thoughtful. “Yes,” he decided, “But. This is not the time or place to discuss such things. Any other general questions?”

Harry beamed. “Umm… are there any books on customs and traditions?” he asked. “The things a wizard-raised kid would know automatically, like how a Muggle kid knows to look both ways before crossing the street or to bow to the Queen.”

“I never looked,” Stephen admitted. “We can check it out while we’re looking for those other books, though. Ready to shop?”

“Ready!” Harry jumped eagerly to his feet.

Stephen took the boy’s hand and led him through the back door of the pub after leaving some odd-looking coins on the table. He pulled out his wand, then gave Harry a look. “Make sure you stick close. I really shouldn’t be bringing you here yet, but I think you need to learn as much as you can now, so that you won’t be dependent on Dumbledore or anyone else once you officially return to the wizarding world.” He smiled. “And here’s how to get into Diagon Alley from Muggle London.”

The rubbish bin was sitting in the back of the pub’s tiny courtyard, up against a brick wall. Harry watched in fascination as Stephen counted three bricks up and two over from the top of the bin and tapped the brick in question with his wand. The brick started to wiggle, followed by the rest of the bricks. In a moment, the bricks all curled back, forming an archway leading to a twisty cobblestone street.

Stephen smiled at Harry’s wide-eyed expression. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

“Brilliant,” Harry breathed, gazing at a shop displaying all sorts of cauldrons and then looking past that one to another with telescopes and lunar charts in the window.

Stephen chuckled. “You’ll get to see all of them eventually. Come on, let’s get that trunk, and a bunch of books to store in it.”

For a moment, Harry looked worried. “Er… will my stipend cover all this?” he asked. “We never
did talk about how much it was and how to spend it appropriately last week. We just bought bunches of clothes and my new glasses.”

“It will,” Stephen said firmly. “Her Majesty knew you would need to be kitted out completely, so she added some extra to this first year’s allotment. Even allowing for how fast boys can grow, you won’t likely have to replace everything all at once again. And your stipend includes some pocket money as well, so that you can treat yourself now and again if you see something you like, whether that something is a book, a t-shirt with a clever saying on it, or a candy bar. No need to worry.” Harry relaxed again. “Okay,” he nodded. “Which way do we go?”

“Right this way,” Stephen directed, guiding the boy to a small and unremarkable-seeming shop.

To Harry’s amazement, the shop appeared far larger inside than it had from the outside. Several craftsmen were hard at work, sawing, sanding, or fitting pieces of wood together into all sorts of boxes and chests. Even more fascinating was the obvious magic being used in the work… sanding blocks moving themselves over boards and paintbrushes applying finishes unaided by human hands.

An older man wearing a sawdust-covered apron approached them. “How can we help you folks today?” he asked.

“We need a trunk with at least four compartments,” Stephen said. “Three of them should be set to open only to the owner’s magical signature, and one of those compartments needs to be enchanted as a cold storage box.”

“Muggle-style camping?” the shopkeeper asked. “We’ve got just the thing. It won’t take but a few minutes to set the cold enchantment and the security features.” He vanished through a door in the back, reappearing a few moments later with a brass-banded oak chest about the size of a military footlocker. “This will give you plenty of room for your gear and your food besides.”

“Perfect,” Stephen nodded. “It’s for young Harry, here, so you’ll need him to set the security features.” Looking down at the child, he smiled. “Just do what he tells you. Since the security spell is to keep the hidden compartments from opening for anyone but you, you’ll have to be touching it while he does the spellwork.”

Harry nodded, watching as the shopkeeper set the trunk on the floor before them and lifted the lid. The inside seemed as nicely finished as the outside, with a pair of adjustable separators so that he could section off the trunk as he liked, perhaps to keep anything fragile he might need to keep in it from accidentally getting smashed by a heavier item. He smiled. “It’s very nice,” he said softly.

The shopkeeper chuckled. “And you haven’t seen the rest yet, lad. Let me show you how to get into the rest of it.” He reached into the trunk and put his hand against one end, then pushed. A space opened up on the other end. The man then took hold of the part dividing the new space from the edge of the trunk and smoothly pushed it until it melded with the side he’d originally pushed. This section was of a slightly different color wood than the first. “This is a four-wood trunk. Oak for the outside, for strength. Ash… this compartment… for knowledge. When you start schooling, this would be the place to store your books.” He slid the ash compartment back, then pressed the other end of the oak one to reveal another hidden section of yet another wood. “This is hawthorn, for protection.” He returned that one to its place and with the same technique, pulled one more compartment from the back of the trunk. “And hazel, for healing. This is the one I’d recommend to make into your food keeper. The healing properties of the wood will aid in keeping things fresh for you. And once you’re off to school, you’ll be most popular when your dorm mates discover that you’ve got all the supplies for a party ready at hand,” he added with a laugh.
Harry laughed as well, unable to imagine himself being popular. But he supposed anything would be possible if Dudley wasn’t around beating up anyone who tried to talk to him. “All right,” he agreed after a glance at Stephen. “If that’s the one you say should be the cold compartment, I’ll take your recommendation, sir.”

“Nice polite lad you’ve got there,” the shopkeeper commented to Stephen as he pulled out his wand. Drawing the wand along the inner edges of the hazel compartment, he spoke the incantation, “Facere perpetuam frigus intra!”* A bluish-white shimmer appeared to fill the compartment for a moment before sinking into the wood. “Put your hand inside there, lad,” the man said with a smile.

Harry did so and blinked. It was now as cold within the compartment as inside the Dursley’s refrigerator. “Wow… I can’t wait until I learn how to do things like that!”

Both men laughed at his enthusiasm. “All right, let’s get the security set up now and you’ll be all set,” the shopkeeper said. He pushed the hazel compartment back into hiding, leaving the oak visible. “I’ll have to repeat this spell three times, one for each of the hidden compartments. Put your hand against one of the inside walls of the trunk where you have to push to open the hidden ones while I say the incantation. You’ll feel a little tingle when I do… that’s the magic of the trunk learning your magical signature, so it will recognize you and only open for you from now on.” Harry nodded and placed his hand where the man indicated.

This time, the wizard moved his wand in a sort of a figure-8 pattern while pointing it at Harry’s hand as he said, “Aperiam tactus solus.”*

Harry blinked as a cool tingle, then a rush of warmth flooded through his hand and up his arm through his entire body. The same thing happened twice more as the shopkeeper applied the security charm to the other two hidden compartments. “It feels like the trunk likes me,” he said shyly, half-expecting the men to laugh. “I felt the tingle like you said, but I felt all warm, too. And not just in my hand, the feelings went all the way through me.”

Both men smiled. “It very well might like you,” Stephen said as he paid for the trunk. “Magical items often react to people in one way or another. I remember one of my year-mates talking about a deerskin rug her grandmother had, that would yank itself out from under children younger than age three or so. She figured so many toddlers must have wet on it over the years that it took a dislike to them.”

Harry and the shopkeeper both laughed at that. The shopkeeper tapped the trunk with his wand, causing it to shrink to the size of a box of matches, and handed it to Harry. “Enjoy your trunk, lad, and stock up wisely for those parties,” he said with a wink and a grin.

Harry smiled back shyly. “Thank you, sir,” he said softly. He put the shrunken trunk into his pocket and slipped his hand back into Stephen’s as they exited the shop back into the bustle of Diagon Alley.

They proceeded to Flourish and Blotts, where they picked up a couple of books on history, one on wizarding customs and etiquette, and one on meditation techniques that Harry thought looked interesting. Stephen added Quiddich Through the Ages and The Tales of Beedle the Bard to the pile, figuring it would be a good idea to expose Harry to both wizarding sport and fiction. After that, they stopped in at Florean Fortescue’s for big bowls of chocolate orange swirl ice cream before heading back out through the Leaky Cauldron into Muggle London.

Once they were back in the car, Stephen took the glamours off of Harry and enlarged the trunk once more, stowing it in the back seat. “I don’t want to forget to do that for you before we get back to your aunt’s house,” he explained. “Since she’s got such a problem with magic, I don’t want to
give her any excuse not to let you come with me on weekends.”

Harry smiled in relief. “Thank you,” he said softly. “Are we going back there now?”

Stephen caught the reluctance in the boy’s tone. “No, we’re not. I thought we could either head to a library, or back to that park, and go over exactly how your stipend works and how to budget it. After that, we’ll swing by Sainsbury’s or Tesco and stock up your trunk’s cold box.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Harry nodded as they pulled out of the car park and back into the London traffic.

An increasingly cloudy sky made them decide on the library over the park. They drove to the Little Whinging branch library and dashed inside just as the rain began to fall. Harry looked around with interest, having never been there before. It wasn’t a large building, but it did appear cozy, with a smallish hearth area complete with comfortable chairs and lamps for sitting and reading in the middle of the main room’s longest wall.

Stephen spoke with the librarian for a moment, who smiled and ushered them to a room in the lower level that was furnished with a table and several office-style chairs. She left and returned a moment later with a pitcher of ice water and two glasses. “We’re open until six, so there’s no rush,” she told them, closing the door behind herself as she left.

Stephen smiled at Harry. “Which would you like to do first, your stipend and budget, or questions from your notebook?”

Harry considered, looking into the notebook for a moment. “I think visiting Diagon Alley answered a lot of the questions I wrote down. So let’s do the stipend and budget first, please.”

“Fair enough,” Stephen nodded. “All right, Her Majesty had an account set up for you at Barclay’s, with me as trustee to oversee it until you’re sixteen, at which point you’ll take over control although I’ll still act as your advisor. That’s to keep your aunt from getting her hands on your money. Your stipend is five thousand pounds a year until you’re eighteen, for your clothing and incidentals… that would be things like your glasses, or activities like martial arts. However, since you needed to be completely outfitted thanks to your relatives’ selfishness, the initial deposit was for eight thousand.”

Harry’s eyes grew wide. “That much?”

Stephen chuckled. “It’s really not a huge amount. Five thousand a year wouldn’t even rent you your own one-bedroom flat in a decent neighbourhood in London, let alone pay the utilities as well. But as you have a home and Petunia Dursley is your legal guardian, you don’t need to worry about rent. Anyway, we’ve only spent about fifteen hundred so far, as you seem to be a rather frugal shopper. And that includes what I exchanged over to wizarding money for today’s expedition. Would you care to see what we’ve spent and where so far?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, please. I like doing Maths at school, because I can count pebbles or whatever to get the numbers right. But with reading and writing, it’s not always as easy to know what the teacher is looking for. Although maybe I’ll do better now that I can see properly.”

“I’m sure you will,” Stephen said. “Also, do yourself a favor and do your best in school, even if it means getting better grades than Dudley. Whether you choose to stay in the wizarding world or return to the Muggle world, education and knowledge are the keys to success. Mind, I’m not saying you should force yourself into becoming a bookworm if you aren’t one. But you’re only hurting yourself in the long run if you skive off all the time and neglect your schooling just because your
aunt doesn’t like it when you prove yourself smarter than her lump of a son.” He pulled out the initial deposit slip from Barclay’s as well as the receipts from Debenham’s and the Vision Centre, laying them on the table for Harry to see.

For his part, Harry nodded thoughtfully. “Maybe it won’t be as bad now anyway, if I do get better marks. Aunt Petunia hits me sometimes, but Uncle Vernon was the one who really hurt me. Well, Dudley does too sometimes, with his gang, but only if they catch me. And if I’m to go off with you on Saturdays from now on, that will give them less chances to catch me.” He bent over the receipts, frowning a bit in concentration as he added up the numbers. “So the trunk and the books we bought in Diagon Alley came to three hundred twenty-five pounds?” he asked after a moment.

Stephen nodded. “Yes. I converted five hundred pounds to wizarding money before picking you up this morning, knowing we’d be going to Diagon Alley.” He pulled out a pouch and spilled out the odd-looking coins that he’d used to pay in the Leaky Cauldron and the other wizarding establishments. “Right now, the exchange rate is five pounds to a galleon… that’s the gold coin. The silver coin is a sickle, and the bronze one is called a knut. They’ve got slightly odd ratios to each other; it’s twenty-nine knuts to a sickle, and seventeen sickles to a galleon. So we started out with a hundred galleons this morning, and spent sixty-five of them. I’m not sure when we’ll go back to Diagon Alley, but you’ve still got thirty-five galleons to spend there out of this initial withdrawal.”

Harry nodded. “All right. As long as you think I’ve done well so far. About how much do you think martial arts lessons should cost?”

“I’m not entirely sure. There are different sorts, and I’m sure different costs. How about we use the computers here to see what’s available nearby? Then next week we can tour them all and see where you think you’d be happiest.”

“Okay,” Harry nodded, blinking a little at the thought of being offered a choice. On the few occasions the Dursleys had been forced by circumstance to spend money on something for him, they always went with the cheapest option available. He’d certainly never been consulted as to his wishes. He tilted his head, considering. “So I should figure on about a thousand a year for clothes and glasses? Is that right?”

“It’s a fair guess. You might need to adjust it some as you hit your growth spurts. When I was fourteen or so, I shot up nearly a foot that year. I needed new shirts and trousers every few months as my wrists and ankles would start hanging out,” Stephen said with a grin. “On the other hand, you’ll be at Hogwarts by then, so you’ll be spending less on things like martial arts or other activities. That’ll balance things out a bit. Anyway, you’ll want to figure another fifteen to sixteen hundred on your food and personals each year… that’s about thirty pounds a week, and chances are you’ll spend less anyway. I don’t imagine you’ll need to buy your own loo roll, after all.”

Harry laughed. “No, that’s one thing Aunt Petunia doesn’t complain about my using. Budgeting is fun. It’s like solving a word problem in Maths. So, after allowing for food and clothes, I still have almost two thousand left.” He thought for a moment. “If I guess a thousand for activities, what do I do with the rest?”

Stephen smiled, growling inwardly at the notion that any child as young as Harry would consider what they were doing to be fun. “Well, some of it… two hundred sixty, to be precise, is your weekly pocket money. Five pounds a week, and since I forgot to give it to you last week, here’s a tenner for last week and this.” He pulled a ten-pound note from his wallet and handed it to the boy. “As to the rest, I’d leave it alone. That gives you a small cushion if we’ve miscalculated anything, or it can be used for occasional expenses, such as school field trips.”
Harry nodded again. “And if I don’t need it, it’s better to leave it in the bank, right?” He looked in awe at the ten-pound note in his hand. “And I really get five pounds every week? I don’t have to account for what I do with it?”

“That’s right, Harry,” Stephen assured him. “You can spend it or save it or spend some and save some, just as you wish. Now, any other questions before we go get your food?”

Harry bit his lip nervously. “Er… since we’re alone here… this is probably better… when will you teach me some magic?” he managed to get out.

Stephen’s warm chuckle filled the room. “I should have known,” he smiled. “If I’d learned I was a wizard earlier than I did, I’d have been eager to learn magic, too. How about next week? I’ll have to take you to my place for that. Since Dumbledore placed you with your aunt, I suspect he’s got some sort of alerts placed on the house, and possibly even the neighbourhood, to let him know if you perform any accidental magic that might require fixing. I’d rather not risk getting anyone’s attention, his or the Ministry’s. So we’ll go outside of Surrey and to a place where no one will be looking for you before I let you try anything, okay?”

“Okay,” Harry agreed with a bright and relieved smile.

The pair left the library and headed to the local Tesco. They loaded up with bread, granola bars, peanut butter, raspberry jam, a pot of mustard, hummus, snack-size bags of baby carrots and celery sticks, lettuce, tomatoes, a bag of mixed apples and oranges, and several varieties of sliced meats and cheese from the deli, along with the deli’s tuna salad, egg salad, and three-bean salad. After a moment of thought, Stephen added a package of paper plates and one of plastic forks to their trolley, along with a single all-purpose kitchen knife so that Harry could slice the tomatoes for sandwiches. Harry sorted the food into the cold compartment of his trunk once they returned to the car, and put his books and the plates and utensils into the oak section.

Back at #4 Privet Drive, Stephen helped Harry carry the trunk up to his room. As they walked back downstairs, Harry smiled. “Stephen, thank you so much for everything you’re doing. I had a lot of fun today.”

Stephen smiled back as he opened the door. “So did I. And, Harry, you know your birthday is coming up in a little over two weeks. You’ll be nine. You’ll have to let me know next week, what sort of things you like, so I’ll be able to find just the right birthday present for you. See you next Saturday!” He walked out the door, leaving a stunned Harry gaping after him.

* Facere perpetuam frigus intra - Make lasting cold within.
* Aperiam tactus solus - Open to this touch alone.
The next day, Petunia intercepted Harry as he was about to start cooking breakfast as usual. “You… needn’t cook for us anymore,” she told him, rather stiffly. “Nor do the housecleaning, except for keeping your own room tidy. But I would appreciate it if you would continue to care for the garden. I don’t know how to operate the mower or weed trimmer.”

Harry looked puzzled, but nodded. “All right, Aunt Petunia. Shall I go back to my room for now, then?”

“No, have a seat. You might as well have your breakfast before I call Duddikins down to eat.” She paused to drop some bread in the toaster and place a skillet of bacon on the cooker, and said, “Your tutor bought you a trunk. Have you got a padlock for it?”

He shook his head. “No, just the lock on the trunk itself. Why?”

Her lips tightened. “He told you about your parents, I take it?”

Harry looked torn between confusion at her behavior, and anger at the lies he’d been told all his life. “Yes, he did.”

“We didn’t want you to know. We’d hoped there was a slim chance you’d grow up to be normal and you’d never have to know. But since you are one of those freaks… well.” Petunia dropped a plate in front of him, containing two pieces of toast and a single rasher of bacon. “A few days after you were left here, a box containing whatever was salvaged from their house after it happened was delivered. I was going to burn it, but it refused to catch fire. So I put it up in the attic. I’d rather not have any of that freakishness in the house, but… you might as well have whatever it contains. Go get it while Dudley and I are at church, and make sure whatever is in it gets packed away in your trunk before we’re home. I don’t want him seeing whatever might be in it. The box is fairly small, so if it contains anything you wish to discuss with your tutor, you can put it in your schoolbag and take it with you next Saturday.”

Harry nearly choked on his toast. *Aunt Petunia was giving him things that had belonged to his parents?* He swallowed, and then nodded. “Thank you, Aunt Petunia.”

“Just be sure anything freakish remains out of sight,” she snapped. “And since I understand you get pocket money now, go buy a padlock for your trunk first thing tomorrow. I remember your mother showing off her freakishness to our parents once, making the teacups grow legs and run races round the table. I want to be sure nothing they left behind might grow hands and unlatch your trunk by itself and escape.” She swept out of the kitchen towards the stairs. “Diddydums,” she called. “Mummy has breakfast waiting, precious darling.”

Harry hastily crammed the last bit of his breakfast into his mouth. For whatever reason, he’d been granted extra food this morning, and he certainly wasn’t going to give his cousin a chance to ruin any of it. He carefully rinsed his plate and put it in the dishwasher before exiting the kitchen, and managed to escape back upstairs with only one halfhearted smack to his arm from Dudley as they passed each other in the hall. He rounded out his meal with a snack pack of baby carrots with
hummus for dipping while his aunt and cousin had their breakfast, and then settled on his bed to start reading the book on meditation techniques.

Petunia opened his door a short time later. “We’re off to church,” she told him. “Remember what I told you.” She turned and headed downstairs without another word.

Harry darted to the window, scarcely able to breathe with his excitement. He was about to see something that had belonged to his parents! But to be on the safe side, he waited until he actually saw the car backing out onto the road before leaving his room and getting the stepstool so he could reach the pull-cord to open the hatch to the attic. He grinned to himself when he realized just how small the hatch was. No wonder Aunt Petunia hid the box up here when she couldn’t burn it; Uncle Vernon would have been too fat to get through the opening, and once the box was out of sight, he would have assumed it had been destroyed. Finding it was no problem, either, as it was the only object there. He hurried to carry it down to his room and took the time to close the hatch properly and return the stepstool to its place before returning to his room. Taking a deep breath, Harry opened the box.

Lying on the top was a hinged picture frame containing two photographs. To his astonishment, the figures in them were moving! The first appeared to be a wedding picture, of a young man with oblong glasses and messy black hair like his own, embracing a petite woman with fiery dark red hair and emerald green eyes like his. They both turned to look and smile and wave when he first opened the frame. The other photo was of the same couple proudly showing off a newborn baby with a tuft of black hair. His parents!

But mindful of his aunt’s stipulation that everything be hidden in his trunk before her return, he couldn’t pause to study them for as long as he would have liked. There were more things in the box. Next thing he pulled out was a tiny velvet pouch containing three rings: a man’s wedding band in heavy gold and a matching woman’s band, both engraved inside with ‘JP & LE, 21 June 1979’ and an absolutely exquisite antique-looking gold filigree ring set with seven stones… a diamond, emerald, amethyst, ruby, emerald, sapphire, and topaz. His parents’ wedding rings, obviously, and his mother must have also been wearing the other one when they died. He wondered if there was anything special about that one, but put the question aside for now, in favor of digging deeper into the box. Another tiny velvet pouch held a single, very thick and heavy man’s ring of red gold with a round flat top with a design carved into it. The design was of a dragonish-looking creature with two outstretched wings and only two legs. Harry thought he recognized it as a signet ring; perhaps it was the Potter family crest? He’d noted on yesterday’s visit to Diagon Alley that the wizarding world still used quills and parchment and even sealing wax, so the idea didn’t seem too far-fetched. He slipped the rings back into their respective pouches and moved on.

The next item was a photo album with a gash ripped into the leather cover. He set it aside for the time being. At the bottom of the box lay two items wrapped in layers of newspaper and a relatively long and narrow wooden box. He picked up the first of the paper bundles, unwrapping the layers of old newprint to reveal a lily flower delicately carved from pearly white moonstone and a stag, complete with branching antlers, carved from tiger eye. The other contained a wolf of shiny iron-grey hematite, and a hound of glossy jet.

Knowing he didn’t have much time before Aunt Petunia returned from church, Harry turned his attention to the narrow box. He opened it, and his breath caught. There in a bed of silk lay two wands. The longer of the two he recognized as being mahogany, the same dark reddish-brown wood as the chairs and table in the formal dining room downstairs. He wasn’t sure what the other was made of; a warm beige-white wood of some kind. He ached to touch them, to take them out of their box and try to feel a connection to his parents. But mindful of Stephen’s warning about
possible monitoring spells on the house, he closed his eyes and shut the lid of the box once more. He didn’t want to accidentally use one of them to do magic and attract unwanted attention, after all. These would definitely come with him next week when Stephen picked him up, though. Carefully, almost reverently, he packed everything into his trunk. Maybe he’d bring the photo album as well as the wands with him next weekend.

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

When Stephen pulled up on the following Saturday, Harry was ready and waiting. He dashed out to the car, clutching an old World War Two-era backpack in his hands. “Hi, Stephen,” he said as he clambered into the car.

“Hello, Harry,” Stephen smiled. Then he took a good look at the boy and frowned. “How did you get that black eye?” he asked.

Harry shrugged. “Dudley decided it was my fault that Aunt Petunia’s only buying one kind of ice cream at a time now. Because if the Queen hadn’t thanked me and made me a Royal Ward, Uncle Vernon wouldn’t have had a heart attack and died, and then Aunt Petunia wouldn’t be on a budget.” Harry snorts. “As if he even knows what a budget is. Oh, and it’s also my fault he didn’t have a birthday party with at least twenty-five presents this year, since Uncle Vernon died right before his birthday. The funny thing is that I don’t think Dudley even misses his father. He only misses what Uncle Vernon always gave him.”

“Mm. I suppose that can happen, when parents only express their love through material objects,” Stephen said as neutrally as he could manage. “Children don’t always associate the emotions with the gifts, and come to expect the gifts as their due. Well, aside from Dudley giving you that black eye, how was your week?”

“Amazing,” Harry said. “It’s like Aunt Petunia turned into someone else. She told me I don’t have to cook and clean the house anymore, except for keeping my room tidy. But that she would appreciate it if I would keep tending the garden because she doesn’t know how to run the machines… but the way she said it, it almost sounded like she was giving me a choice! Also, she’s giving me more food now, too! Still not as much as Dudley gets, but more than double what I used to get. I still eat the food in my cold box, though, because Dudley’s quick at stealing food off my plate when I have to be at the table with him. And the most amazing thing of all, Stephen, she gave me a box with some things that used to belong to my parents! Including their wands!”

Stephen blinked. He’d figured Petunia would start treating Harry at least a little better given that she knew he could and would report her behavior towards the boy to Her Majesty. He’d been willing to give her a few weeks to do so, given that old habits are hard to break and she did have rather a lot on her plate what with losing her husband so suddenly. He had trouble picturing them as a true love match, but whether she had been fond of the man or merely the position in life he was able to give her, his death had quite obviously been a shock. And then too, she would have to adjust to her changed circumstances and reduced income. But that she actually thought to give Harry his parents’ things boded well for the future.

“That’s wonderful, Harry,” he said. “Did you bring them with you? Is that what’s in the backpack?”

“Yes,” the boy replied. “I brought it all, in case you could tell me anything about any of it. Are we going right to your place today? Or were we going to look for activities first?”

“Actually, there’s a healer coming to my place to see you first thing… that’s a wizarding doctor,” Stephen said. “Remember I told you my roommate at uni was on the fencing team? I talked to him
a bit about getting you started and he reminded me that no one should start a new sport without getting a physical done first. I’m just sorry I didn’t think of it myself. I should have, given that you’ve been denied proper food for so long. I’m taking you to a healer rather than a Muggle doctor, because there are potions that can correct most medical problems, if it turns out you have any.”

“Does that mean I have to wear the makeup again?” Harry asked with a laugh.

Stephen chuckled. “No, I’m just going to have him give an oath not to tell anyone he’s treated you. I don’t want anyone finding out you’ve been in the wizarding world, even on short visits. Just in case.”

Harry nodded. “I understand.”

“Jason… Healer Abbott… is an old House-mate of mine from Hogwarts. He was two years ahead of me in Hufflepuff, but he was very much a mentor to the younger students, especially to us Muggleborns who came in very confused about the wizarding world in general. He’s starting a two-week holiday today, but he agreed to see you before he left as a favor to me.” Stephen pulled into an alley that separated the back gardens of two sets of row houses, and turned into a small gravel drive behind one. “I’ve got the upstairs flat with my own entrance.” He led Harry up the sturdy wooden staircase to the small deck and unlocked the door. “Welcome to my place.”

Harry stepped inside and looked around. For the most part, it looked like a typical young man’s flat from any programme on the telly. But as he looked around, he saw a few things that made it different… a broom in one corner, photos that moved and a stack of parchment and some quills on the desk. He jumped when there was a sudden loud crack and a person in a robe with a little black satchel in hand appeared out of nowhere.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Stephen said. “I forgot to warn you that apparition makes a noise. Anyway, I’d like you to meet my friend, Healer Jason Abbott. Jase, this is Harry Potter, which is why I warned you that you’d need to give me your Wizard’s Oath that you won’t tell anyone who you treated here today.”

The other man blinked a few times, staring at Harry for a long moment before shaking himself out of his shock. “Pleased to meet you, Harry,” he said.

“Pleased to meet you as well, sir,” Harry said shyly, hanging back and looking uncomfortable. The healer frowned to himself as he looked the boy over; even without pulling his wand it was obvious to him that this child had been neglected and abused. “You’ve never seen a healer before, have you, Harry?” he asked.

Harry shook his head. “No, sir,” he murmured.

“Well, what I do is easy enough,” Jason told him. “I’m going to have you take off your shoes and stretch out on Stephen’s couch, then I’m going to point my wand at you and move it along the length of your body from a few inches away. And if I need to, I’ll pull out a few potions and have you drink them.” He grinned a bit. “And if you need to drink any potions, I’ll go into Stephen’s kitchen and nick one of his Cokes for you to drink after… most potions taste horrible.”

“No kidding,” Stephen put in with a grin of his own.

Harry glanced over at Stephen for reassurance, and then bent over to untie his trainers. Lying on the couch, he watched the healer working with a mixture of wariness and curiosity. The man did exactly as promised, holding his wand out a few inches from Harry’s body and moving it from
head to foot while muttering something that Harry couldn’t quite make out. The tip of the wand
glowed with different colours at times, apparently in response to the muttered words.

After a few minutes, Jason nodded to himself. “All right, Harry, you can sit up now. The good
news is, you’re in reasonably good health. The bad news is, I do need you to take some potions, not
just today, but every day for a week.”

“What for?” Harry asked nervously.

“Well, you’ve had a few cracked ribs in the past, and while they’ve healed well, they’re still
weaker than they should be due to you being so underweight,” the healer explained. “I understand
food is no longer a problem, so what I want you to take will strengthen your bones and help you
catch up to where you ought to be in growth.” He reached into his satchel and pulled out a seven
little vials filled with sage green liquid and handed one to Harry.

Stephen went and got a Coke from his kitchen, passing it to Harry as soon as the boy downed the
potion. “What about sports, Jase? He’s had some trouble with bullies so I was hoping to get him
started in self defense classes.”

The healer shook his head. “No quiddich for at least a month and two would be better. I don’t
know much about Muggle self defense, but if it involves contact, not for at least a month if not
two. Something to tone muscles and increase flexibility wouldn’t be amiss, though. The potion I’m
giving him will trigger a growth spurt in the next month or thereabouts, so something that will help
him adjust to the growth and keep him from having a clumsy stage. What’s the name of that
exercise that does the funny poses with animal names? You know, Stephen, that thing that Carla
Fortran was always doing in the corner of the common room… I mostly remember the ‘down dog’
pose because she had such a nice arse.” He laughed and looked at Harry. “And you didn’t hear that
last bit, right?”

Harry laughed shyly. “Right.”

“Oh, yoga,” Stephen nodded. “Sure. Does that sound okay to you, Harry? Doing yoga will actually
help once you’re able to start with the self defense, too.”

“I’m willing,” Harry nodded. “I never heard of it before, but it sounds like it could be fun.”

The healer smiled. “Right, then, we’re all done here. But I need you to do me one small favor now,
Harry. Pop into the loo and don’t come back out until Stephen calls you. I’m going to have him
make me forget I ever saw you today and the spell will take better if you’re out of my sight.”

Harry obediently slipped into the loo as Stephen blinked. “Why not just take a Wizard’s Oath?” he
asked his friend.

“Because while I don’t know how it happened you met him, you obviously don’t want any wizards
knowing you’re in contact with the Boy Who Lived,” Jason replied. “I don’t know what your
reasons are, but I trust that you have them and that they’re good ones. And while a Wizard’s Oath
would keep me from voluntarily telling anyone I’ve seen and treated him, it can’t stop someone
from finding out through legilimancy or some similar means.” He walked over to the bookshelves
and picked out a couple of slim novels from the Brother Cadfael series. “I’m off on holiday, and
I’ve come round to borrow some of your Muggle books to read while I’m away. That’s all I’m to
remember about today’s visit here. After all, I did enjoy the first one of these you let me read,” he
added with a grin.

Stephen nodded and pulled his wand out from under his sleeve, pointing it at his friend.
“Obliviate!” he said. “You came to borrow some books for your holiday. Here are the ones you said you wanted.” He handed Jason the two books in question.

Jason blinked, a blank expression on his face for a moment. Then he shook his head and accepted the books from Stephen. “Thanks loads, Stephen,” he said. “I’ll see you back again to return these once I’m off holiday. Got to run now, or I’ll miss my portkey.” He disapparated with another crack.

“Come on out now, Harry,” Stephen called. “Now you can show me what you brought.”

Harry smiled as he returned to the sitting room and opened his old backpack. He pulled out the box of wands, the photo frame and album, and the stone figurines, setting them all on the coffee table. Next he dug in the inside pocket and took out the ring bags. “I know you said you didn’t really know my parents, but I thought maybe you could tell me something about these things anyway,” he said. “And if you can’t, no matter. I haven’t looked through the photo album yet; I saw the pictures in the frames were moving and Aunt Petunia told me to keep anything ‘freakish’ locked up during the week so Dudley won’t see it by accident.”

“All right, how about you sit next to me and we can look at the album together. If I recognize anyone, I can tell you their names,” Stephen suggested.

Harry did so, and they spent about an hour flipping through the pages of pictures, which seemed to date back through his parents’ first or second year at Hogwarts. To Harry’s amusement, his mother was making rude gestures at his father and three other boys in one of the earlier pictures, while another boy stood with his arm around her waist. “Who are they, do you know?” Harry asked.

Stephen peered at the photo. “That looks like Professor Snape with your mother… Severus Snape. He’s the youngest Potions Master in history, and he started teaching at Hogwarts in the autumn of 1981. There are rumors that he was a Death Eater, but also rumors that he was one only because he was a spy among them. Not that anyone was going to ask. He’s a fairly harsh instructor, although I think some of that is that he’s had to be. He was barely twenty-one when he started teaching, and well over half the students he had to teach, had known him while he was still a student himself. So I can see where it would have been hard on him to gain the respect and the control of the classes that teachers need. And potions is a tricky subject; any little mistake can literally make a cauldron explode. So it’s not a class in which any amount of shenanigans can be tolerated.”

“Did Professor Snape and my mother go out?”

“If they did, it was before I came to Hogwarts. I never heard anything suggesting they dated. But then again, I was just an ickle firstie when they were seventh years, so I wasn’t exactly up on all the gossip. I do know that your parents were quite the item by Christmas that year,” Stephen said. “Your dad was good friend with these three, apparently all through his Hogwarts years. This one with the aristocratic bearing is Sirius Black, the tired-looking one is Remus Lupin, and the pudgy one is Peter Pettigrew.”

Harry looked at the pictures for a bit longer. He noticed that a little over halfway through, when they were in their mid-teens, Severus Snape stopped appearing in pictures with his mother, but Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew continued to appear either as a group or individually with his father. “If these people were friends with my parents, how come none of them ever came to see me?” Harry wondered. “Did they die in the war or something?”

Stephen had hoped to avoid this question, but decided honesty would be best. “Sirius Black is your godfather. But, he’s also the one who betrayed your parents to You Know Who. He also killed Peter Pettigrew not long after that. He’s in Azkaban, the wizarding prison. I don’t know where
Remus Lupin is or what he’s doing now, but I suspect he’s either not been told where you are, or else he’s been forbidden to visit you until you’re ‘officially’ back in the wizarding world.”

Harry looked stunned. “Why… why would Sirius Black do that?” he whispered.

“I don’t know, Harry,” Stephen said. “I really don’t. I never saw anything about his trial, so it must have been a closed one. If you’d like, I can make some inquiries for you.”

Harry nodded. “Please. I need to know. If he did it because he was being threatened somehow… it would still hurt, but I could forgive that and still look at these pictures. But if he did it for his own gain, I don’t know if I could forgive that.” He closed the album, determined to think of something less upsetting. “Do you know anything about rings like these?” he asked, shaking the jeweled ring and the signet ring out of their bags. “These were in the box, along with my parents’ wedding rings.”

Stephen whistled as he looked at the signet ring. “I’ve heard of these. It’s not just a signet ring with the family crest, it’s magical. It symbolizes the lordship of a family, sort of a sign of office. It’ll self-adjust to fit the finger of the lord… or lady, as the case may be… but it will refuse to go onto the finger of anyone who isn’t entitled to wear it. Some will even give the person who shouldn’t be wearing it a shock if they try to put it on.”

Harry grinned at that. “Cool. So I’m a lord in the wizarding world? Or at least, I will be when I grow up? What about this ring?” He handed the jeweled ring over in exchange for the signet ring. He was tempted to put it on, but decided he’d better wait until he was older. He’d attract far too much attention wearing something that big.

“Yes,” Stephen confirmed. “And this other ring…” He whistled, impressed. “It looks like an engagement ring from the mid-1800s,” he said. “These became known as ‘DEAREST’ rings, partly because a man would give it to the woman dearest to him when he proposed, but also, look at the order the stones are set in.” He picked up his wand and summoned a piece of parchment and an inked quill from the desk and wrote on it.

Diamond
Emerald
Amethyst
Ruby
Emerald
Sapphire
Topaz

“See? The first letter of each stone, in the order the stones are lined up, spells out the word dearest,” Stephen explained. “If I had to guess, it was probably your Potter grandmother’s or even great-grandmother’s engagement ring, and then passed to your father who gave it to your mother as her engagement ring.”

“That’s so cool,” Harry said. “If I ever get married, I’ll give it to the girl I’m asking to marry me.”

“That’s a wonderful idea, Harry. What else have you got here?”

“These stone animals. Are they magic? Do they mean anything?”

Stephen looked at the figurines carefully. “They’re not magic, as far as I can tell, although they probably were transfigured to look like the animals and the lily flower. Most if not all of these stones are too hard to carve with this degree of detail. Maybe your mother simply collected little
figurines like this, and these four were the only ones to survive the destruction of the house?”

Harry nodded. “That sounds reasonable. Will you tell Aunt Petunia with me that there’s no magic on these? So maybe she’ll let me keep them out where I can see them?”

“Sure thing. What’s left?” Stephen asked.

Harry beamed. “Their wands!” He opened the box almost reverently.

“Mahogany, and willow,” Stephen said when he looked at them.

“How do you know it’s willow?” Harry asked. “I recognized the mahogany one from furniture.”

“My wand is willow,” Stephen smiled, “with a tail hair from a pegasus as the core.”

“Good reason,” Harry grinned back. “Do you think I’d be able to use one of them? You did say you’d show me some spells.”

“Well, pick one of them up and give it a little swish. If it reacts at all, you should be able to use it, even if it’s not a perfect match for you.”

After some consideration, Harry picked up the mahogany wand and gave it a swish. He felt a slight tingle in his hand and a few purple sparks shot from the end. He put it down and tried the willow wand. This time the tingle was greater, and a small shower of orange sparks flew out of it. “I think this one will work better,” he said, returning the mahogany wand to the box.

Stephen nodded. “All right. We’re going to start with a simple mending spell that most wizarding children know by the time they start at Hogwarts.” He grins. “It’s not only useful, it’s fun to teach, because it means we get to break a few teacups on purpose.”

Harry laughed.

Stephen went into the kitchen and returned with two teacups. “Now, this spell only works on non-magical objects. But there are plenty of those even in the wizarding world… especially dishes!” he laughed. Then he hit one of the cups against the edge of the coffee table, breaking a large chunk off the lip. Setting the cup back on the table, he pointed his wand at it and said, “Reparo.” The broken-off piece of the cup flew back into place and the cup showed no sign of ever having been broken. “When you say the incantation, you have to concentrate on the item you’re fixing being whole once more. Go ahead, break a cup and try it.”

Harry bit his lip, reached out, and took a cup, then hit it against the table. He instinctively flinched back when it broke, years of experience leading him to expect a blow if not a beating in retribution. But when Stephen only reacted with an encouraging smile he took a deep breath and lifted the willow wand. “Reparo!” he said, pointing it at the cup. The broken pieces flew back into place, but the cup resembled a jigsaw puzzle; all the pieces were simply sitting where they belonged and when Stephen lifted the cup they all fell off again.

Harry frowned.

“That’s excellent for a first try, especially with a wand that isn’t necessarily your best match,” Stephen said. “It took me a lot longer to make it work at all, and that was after I’d already learned several other spells during my first year.”

“Really?” Harry asked, looking a little happier. “I’m going to try again.” He stared at the cup for a long moment before lifting the wand and saying, “Reparo,” once more. This time, the cup mended
itself properly.

Stephen applauded. “Wonderful, Harry. We’re absolutely going to make sure you have some time to practice at least every other week from now on. If you keep picking things up this quickly, you’ll have learned half of your first year curriculum before you start Hogwarts.”

“May I try another spell?” Harry asked eagerly.

“One more,” Stephen laughed. “The levitation charm.” He moved the teacups back to the kitchen, then indicated the quill still sitting on the coffee table. “I’ll have you start with the quill, so that if you drop it and it hits one of us, we won’t get hurt. This one’s got a specific wand movement to go with the incantation, which is ‘wingardium leviosa’. The wand movement is a little swish and flick, like this.” He demonstrated the motion, letting Harry copy his movements until the boy had it down. “Okay, give it a try.”

Harry swished and flicked. “Wingardium leviosa!” he said. The quill shivered and slid a few inches down the table, but didn’t lift into the air.

“Give it another try, with a good strong ‘AR’ sound in wingardium,” Stephen suggested.

“Wingardium leviosa!” Harry tried again. This time the quill lifted up about six inches before dropping back to the table. “Stephen, I did it!”

“Way to go!” Stephen congratulated him. “I think that calls for a celebration. Pick some sort of food you’ve wanted to try and we’ll go have some. Curry, sushi, Italian, Chinese, anything.”

“Really?” Harry bounced, thinking. “May we go for Italian, please? I’ve had spaghetti before, but that’s all. I heard Aunt Petunia talking about something called fet-tah-chee-nee al-fray-to that she was raving about to one of the neighbours. I’d like to try that.”

“Fettucini alfredo,” Stephen corrected Harry’s pronunciation with a grin. “Sure, pack up and we’ll go out for an early dinner. There’s a wonderful little place just a few blocks from here that I eat at often.”

Harry carefully placed the willow wand back in the box with the mahogany one, and then packed everything back into his backpack. “All set!”

They headed out to the restaurant, where Harry savored his introduction to veal scallopini and fettucini alfredo. Afterwards, Stephen looked up a yoga studio close to Little Whinging and they stopped in there to register Harry for a beginners’ class that took place on Saturday mornings. Following a quick trip to Tesco so Harry could replenish his cold box supplies, they returned to Privet Drive. Following a brief conversation between Stephen and Petunia, Harry ran up to his room smiling, to put most of his things back in his trunk. But as he went to bed that night, the last thing he saw before closing his eyes was the moonstone lily flower on his nightstand along with the stag, wolf, and dog, shimmering softly in the moonlight.
After leaving his workplace on Monday, Stephen headed for the Leaky Cauldron for a quick meal before entering Diagon Alley. Thankful that unlike Muggle banks, Gringotts was open all the time, he headed in and asked to speak with one of the account managers. He settled into a seat to wait, secure in the knowledge that all bank managers, wizarding or Muggle, always let people cool their heels for a while before seeing them without an appointment. Nearly half an hour later, a teller escorted him into one of the small offices.

“I am Garnok, manager of accounts here at Gringotts,” the goblin behind the desk stated. “How may I help you this evening?”

Stephen bowed, causing Garnok’s eyes to widen slightly in surprise. Very few wizards aside from those employed by the bank bothered to show even the slightest degree of politeness toward goblins. “I am Stephen Coyner, and I thank you for agreeing to see me, Garnok, as I need help with some very sensitive matters. I’ve chosen to come here, as firmly believe that goblins will keep any secrets I need kept as long as doing so will not tarnish their honor.”

Garnok bowed his head slightly. “You are correct in that belief, Stephen Coyner. So what are these matters which require such secrecy?”

“Both matters relate to Harry Potter,” Stephen said.

“It is said he is secure in the Muggle world,” Garnok replied. “He resides with his only living family closer than third cousins; according to Dumbledore living with his mother’s sister grants him powerful protection against any stray Death Eaters who might wish revenge against him for the fall of their master.”

“It is true that he lives in the Muggle world,” Stephen agreed. “But his life there has been far from secure. He has suffered abuse and neglect at the hands of his relatives. However, a schoolyard incident involving him, his cousin, and Prince William and Prince Harry who were visiting the school with their mother Princess Diana, brought him to the attention of the Queen. Her Majesty’s wizarding advisors cautioned her against removing the boy from his relatives due to Dumbledore’s protections, but she did have an audience with the family during which she made it clear that she was taking a personal interest in the boy, and decreed him a Royal Ward. This is where I became involved. As a Muggleborn, I chose to return to the Muggle world after Hogwarts because I didn’t have the connections necessary to fulfill my ambitions in the wizarding world. I am attending university, and took a summer internship as an assistant to a Member of Parliament, which put me in a position to respond when a notice went around that Her Majesty wished to speak with graduates of Hogwarts. She selected me to act as a tutor to Harry. I have met with him on several occasions, and while I can’t prove it, I have reason to suspect that Dumbledore may well have allowed the abuse to continue. He also seems to have wanted the boy brought up in complete ignorance of the wizarding world.”

Garnok frowned. “What makes you say this?” he asked sharply.

“According to Harry himself, two separate teachers reported their belief that he was being abused. Both times, the teachers were removed from the school, and Child Welfare Services never
investigated. Please understand, by Muggle law, all reports of suspected abuse MUST be investigated. That reports of suspected abuse against a child were ignored twice suggests to me that someone, or several someones, were made to forget such allegations had been made. Since Dumbledore is supposedly the only one who knows exactly where Harry lives…”

“I see,” Garnok said thoughtfully. “So what is it you wish us here at Gringotts to help you with?”

Stephen gave a small smile. “For one, I would like to see a copy of the Potters’ will, and to know who was the executor. I find it hard to believe that a couple going into hiding because they were being specifically targeted by You Know Who, and who had a young baby, would have failed to make provisions for their child’s future. I’d like to know if they intended for him to go to his aunt, or if they’d named someone else as guardian. I would also like to know who is currently holding the keys to the Potter vaults as Harry’s regent, as I know for a fact his aunt believes her sister and brother in law died penniless. A quiet audit of the Potter vaults might also be in order.”

At the suggestion that an unauthorized person might have access to the Potter vaults, Garnok scowled. “One moment while I have someone retrieve our copy of the will from our files, and start a search of the records of the Potter account.” He touched a small box on his desk and barked out several things in Gobbledygook. A voice coming from the box responded in the same tongue and Garnok sat back again. “Nodgrim should be along in a few minutes with the will and the information as to who holds the Potter vaults’ keys,” he informed Stephen. “Is there anything else you needed from us?”

“Actually, yes,” Stephen nodded. “Now that I am seeing Harry on a weekly basis, and reporting on his well-being to Her Majesty, his aunt is treating him better. It helps that her husband, who was the one administering the actual physical abuse to the boy, died of a heart attack brought on by his own temper. She gave young Harry a box of his parents’ belongings, salvaged following the attack at Godric Hollow. A photo album was included, and he asked me to look at the photos with him when I saw him the other day and if possible, to identify the people in them. His godfather, Sirius Black, was featured rather prominently.” He sighed. “While I disliked telling him that the man is in prison for betraying his parents, I felt it was better he knew the truth, when he asked why none of his parents’ friends ever came to visit him. His relatives told him enough lies already, making him believe his father was an alcoholic who killed himself and his mother and injured his own child by driving while drunk. Anyway, Harry wants to know why Sirius Black would do such a thing. I believe his words were, ‘if he did it because he was being threatened somehow, it would still hurt but I could forgive that and look at these pictures again. But if he did it for his own gain, I don’t know if I could forgive that.’ Harry wants to see the transcripts of the man’s trial, in hopes that the reasons why he did it would have come to light. I’m assuming it was a closed trial, as I don’t recall ever seeing anything about it in the Daily Prophet, and of course I have no connections in the Ministry of Magic who might be able to quietly get me a copy of the transcripts. Is there any way that it could be done through Gringotts? And it needs to be done with the utmost discretion, as I wish to avoid Dumbledore learning that Harry is in regular contact with a wizard.”

Garnok looked thoughtful. “I believe it can be done, but it may take some time. I will have to start by seeing who now holds the Black account, or if it has been put in trust for an heir. I will need to get back to you on this matter; are you able to receive owls, since you are living in the Muggle world?”

“I can receive owls at my home,” Stephen nodded. “Any post owls you send will have to be directed to my home, and not to come seeking me out. But it’s easy enough for me to leave a window open so that if one arrives while I am at work or in classes, it can enter and wait for my return.”
“That’s easy enough,” Garnok agreed. A knock sounded on the office door and he called, “Come.”

Another goblin opened the door and entered. “The Potters’ will, sir,” he said, putting several pieces of parchment onto Garnok’s desk. “Albus Dumbledore was executor, and he also holds the keys to the Potter vaults.”

Stephen picked up the will and quietly scanned it over as the two goblins talked.

Garnok frowned. “Nodgrim, have any transactions been made to or from the Potter vaults since the payout of any bequests?”

Nodgrim shuffled through several other pieces of parchment still in his hand. “Quarterly deposits from various business holdings… those vary, of course, but on average amount to 10,000 galleons each quarter. And monthly withdrawals of 1,000 galleons, for Harry Potter’s support and expenses, authorized by Albus Dumbledore. All from the main vaults, of course; the Hogwarts trust vault doesn’t mature until 1991 and neither does young Harry’s personal trust vault.”

“Dumbledore broke the terms of the Potters’ will,” Stephen said quietly.


“Sirius Black was named Harry’s guardian,” Stephen explains. “And in the event Sirius couldn’t take physical custody of the boy for any reason, the Potters wished him placed with either the Longbottoms, the Diggorys, the Abbots, the Bones, or the Weasleys, in that order of preference. The will also states quite clearly that ‘under no circumstances is Harry to be placed with Lily’s sister Petunia Dursley, as both the woman and her husband hate magic and we believe they would be cruel to him at best, abusive at worst.’ Oh, and this is rather interesting as well… their bequest to Peter Pettigrew refers to him as their Secret-Keeper.” He looks up at the two goblins. “Which would mean that Sirius Black wasn’t the one to betray them after all. And Dumbledore knew it. What’s more, I don’t believe any of those monthly withdrawals for Harry’s support and expenses have gone to his aunt.”

Garnok snarled. “Nodgrim, begin a complete audit and inventory of the Potter account and vaults. Find out where those monthly withdrawals are going, and see if any of the small items in the vaults have been removed.”

Nodgrimnodded once and vanished.

“Stephen Coyner, on behalf of Gringotts, I would like to thank you for bringing this matter to our attention,” Garnok said. “Is it possible for you to bring young Harry Potter to Gringotts? While we can do the audits and such on our own authority, Dumbledore’s position in the wizarding world is too secure for us to be able to bring him down on our own. Even in the matter of custody… you admit you cannot prove the abuse, and without such proof, you know the Ministry will accept Dumbledore’s word that the protections gained by keeping the boy with his mother’s blood kin outweighed the fact that he was placed with Muggles who hate magic.”

Stephen nodded. “I can bring him Saturday afternoon, if that is good for you,” he said.

“Yes, that is acceptable,” Garnok nodded. “At half past one?”

“Harry and I will see you then,” Stephen replied. “I’ll bring him in under a glamour, of course, but I have no problem removing it once we are here in your private office.”

“In that case, I believe we have done all we can for today,” Garnok said, standing up. “May your vaults always be filled with gold.”
Stephen stood and bowed. Garnok’s final words sounded like a ritual farewell but he had no idea what the proper response might be. He settled for replying with, “May you always bring much honor to your clan,” in hopes that it would not offend even though it probably wasn’t the correct thing to say, and departed.

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

That same evening, anyone peeping into the kitchen windows of Mrs. Figg’s house on Wisteria Walk might have seen a strange sight indeed. Fortunately, none of the neighbors ever paid much mind to the batty old cat lady, so no one happened to see her kneeling before the fireplace and speaking with the head of an elderly gentleman with a long white beard which sat in the middle of bright green flames.

“…of course, I haven’t been asked to mind the boy since Vernon Dursley passed on,” Mrs. Figg informed her fireplace visitor. “But really, Albus, that’s to be expected. It’s barely been a month, and I don’t imagine Petunia can afford as many excursions now. I did see the boy out weeding the garden the other day when I was coming back from the market. He looks fine.”

Albus Dumbledore nodded slowly. As long as Petunia was still treating Harry as an unpaid servant rather than family, it would most likely keep him cowed enough to be malleable once he started Hogwarts. “Has anything else changed over there that you know of, Arabella?” he asked.

“There’s some university lad who’s been coming round on the weekends,” Mrs. Figg reported. “Word in the neighbourhood is that he’s doing some sort of summer project for one of his courses and that he was assigned the Dursleys due to Vernon’s death. Grief-counseling, they call it; it’s a Muggle form of mind healing that they can do without legilimancy,” the Squib woman explained.

Dumbledore dismissed his agent’s report as unimportant. After all, how much damage could a Muggle university student do to his long-term plans for the Potter child? “All right,” he said. “Don’t worry about that, then. Just do your best to check on the boy as you pass by, and make sure Petunia knows you’re still available to mind him when necessary. And I do appreciate your help, Arabella. I’ll check in again in a few months, unless you call before then to say that something’s wrong.”

“You know I’m always glad to help keep the dear child safe,” she responded. “You take care, Albus.” She straightened up and got creakily to her feet with the help of one of the kitchen chairs as Dumbledore’s head vanished and the flames turned orange and yellow once more.

Up in his tower office in Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore smiled in satisfaction. Vernon Dursley’s death wasn’t going to be as much of an obstacle to his plans for making Harry Potter into the ultimate weapon against Voldemort as he’d first feared. Everything was going to be just fine.

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

That Saturday, Stephen picked Harry up fairly early in the morning, to take him to his yoga class. He sat in the lobby area of the little studio, watching as the instructor welcomed Harry and introduced him to the rest of the class. She made a point of explaining to Harry that he wasn’t to worry that he wasn’t doing things right, that what counted in yoga was simply that he try his best, relax, and have fun. By the time class was dismissed, Stephen decided to sign himself up into Harry’s class; between his desk job and his studies he’d already noticed that he could stand some toning up around the middle! He smiled as the boy came bouncing over to him with a big grin on his elfin face. “Well, Harry, that looked like loads of fun. Was it?”

“It was brilliant!” Harry enthused. “I liked standing like a tree and posing like a cat and a dog!”
Stephen chuckled. “Would it embarrass you too much if I was to join your class? I’m getting out of shape and this does look like something I’d enjoy. But I won’t join if you don’t want me to.”

Harry shook his head. “Of course I don’t mind if you join! You’re my friend!”

“Thank you, Harry,” Stephen murmured, giving the child a brief hug. “I’m glad you think of me as a friend.” He took a few minutes to get himself signed up for the class before ushering Harry back out to the car.

“We’re going to Diagon Alley again today,” he told the boy once they were seated and on the road. “I went to Gringotts… the wizarding bank… to start making those inquiries I promised you I would. And we found out more than expected. The account manager I spoke with wants to meet with you in person, I think because of what we discovered. So, makeup on the scar, glamour on your hair and eyes, lunch at the Leaky Cauldron, then on to meet with the goblins.”

Harry blinked. “What did you find out? And… goblins?”

Stephen reached over to squeeze the boy’s shoulder reassuringly. “Well, for one thing, Sirius Black may not have been the one to betray your parents after all. If that’s the case, he’s been wrongly imprisoned all these years and we’ll need to find a way to get him out again.” He paused, sighed, and then said, “Also, you never should have gone to live with the Dursleys. Your parents’ will had very explicit instructions about that. Sirius Black was supposed to be your guardian, and in the event he couldn’t take you for some reason, they included a list of other families they felt would give you a good home. By placing you with your aunt, protections or no, Dumbledore as executor broke the terms of the will. He was legally tasked with carrying out your parents’ final wishes. He failed to do so. He may also be stealing from you. And to answer your other question, Gringotts is run by goblins.”

“That’s a lot to think about,” Harry said softly.

“I know,” Stephen said sympathetically. “No nine-year-old should have to deal with any of this. But unlike in Muggle fairy tales, no wizard can just wave his wand and make things different for you. Believe me, I wish I could.”

Harry sighed. “I know you do. It feels nice, knowing that someone cares about me. What do you think I should do about all of it?”

Stephen pulled into the car park near the Leaky Cauldron. “Honestly? I think you should relax a little and enjoy your lunch, then listen to what the goblins have found out.” He pulled out the bottle of makeup and started daubing it onto Harry’s forehead as he spoke. “While I don’t like the idea of anyone getting away with theft, it might be to your advantage to leave things alone until you start at Hogwarts.”

“Because Dumbledore doesn’t know that I’m already learning about the wizarding world,” Harry said thoughtfully. “By letting whatever is going on, continue going on at least until I’m at Hogwarts, he’ll believe that I’m ignorant and easily manipulated. He’ll expect me to be dependent on him. But I won’t be.”

Stephen nodded. “Sounds like you’ve a fair bit of Slytherin cunning in you… which is no bad thing, despite what you might hear. Unfortunately, You Know Who had been in Slytherin when he was at Hogwarts decades ago, so of course he recruited a lot of his followers from among his house-mates, which then gained the house a bad reputation, or should I say a worse reputation than it already had. But despite what some people say, not all Slytherins are his followers, and I know of at least five former Ravenclaws and a couple of Hufflepuffs that did follow him.” He drew his
wand and cast the glamours to give Harry brown eyes and sandy brown hair.

“It sounds like there’s a lot of prejudice in the wizarding world, and not just against Muggleborns,” Harry observed as they set out towards the Leaky Cauldron. “Why did Slytherin have a bad reputation even before the war?”

“There is,” Stephen agreed. “Pureblood against Muggleborn, human against pretty much anything non-human… goblins, house-elves, centaurs, werewolves, you name it. And of course, the eternal Slytherin against the other three houses. As for the reputation thing, all that’s known for certain is that at some point after Hogwarts was established, Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin had a falling out with each other. Supposedly, it was because Gryffindor was all for admitting Muggleborns to Hogwarts while Slytherin was against it. Personally, I figure it had to be more involved than that, but since no one’s ever found any journals or such written by either of them, there’s no way of knowing for sure. But over time, people began to equate Salazar Slytherin and by extension, his house, as being pro-pureblood and anti-Muggleborn. Add to that, the fact that plenty of the wealthy purebloods are cunning and ambitious… they’ve got all the money they could possibly need, so what’s left to want but power, right? So they’re the ones getting sorted into Slytherin, and a bunch of them do have that prejudice against Muggleborns, and so the stereotype just keeps feeding itself.”

Harry grinned impishly as they entered the Leaky Cauldron. “I wonder which house I’ll end up in?”

Stephen laughed. “I could see you in any of the houses, actually. You’ll be a hard one to sort.” He grinned. “And no, I can’t tell you how the sorting is done. But I can reassure you that it isn’t anything that will hurt.” He checked the daily menu board. “Bangers and mash for the special today, does that sound good? Or would you rather have the fish and chips again, or something else entirely?”

“Bangers and mash, please, I haven’t tried bangers yet,” Harry said.

It took a few minutes for Stephen to find a table, as they were coming in near the beginning of the noontime rush. But the service was quick and efficient, so that by one they were finished and strolling down Diagon Alley. Stephen let Harry do a bit of window shopping, as they had half an hour before needing to be at Gringotts. He smiled when the boy turned into the Magical Menagerie, darting from species to species with delight. Harry spent a few minutes petting some kittens that gamboled around a small pen, giggled at several sleek black rats that were skipping rope with their tails, and gazed in fascination at several varieties of snakes. He probably would have spent more time there, but Stephen saw that it was time they headed to the bank and gently tugged him out of the shop with a promise to return another time.

At twenty-five past one, they mounted the steps of the impressive marble edifice and passed through the outer bronze doors. Harry paused to read the inscription engraved on the silver inner doors.

Enter stranger, but take heed
Of what awaits the sin of greed,
For those who take, but do not earn,
Must pay most dearly in their turn.
So if you seek beneath our floors
A treasure that was never yours,
Thief, you have been warned, beware,
Of finding more than treasure there.
“I guess they take their security very seriously,” Harry said.

“They do indeed,” Stephen replied. He approached one of the tellers and said, “We have an appointment with Garnok.”

“One moment,” the goblin answered. He left his spot at the counter to touch a box mounted on the wall behind him and said something in a language Harry didn’t recognize. A different voice made some sort of reply through the box. The goblin came around the counter and escorted them into an office deeper within the bank.

As they walked, Harry whispered, “What was he saying, when he talked into the box?”

“He spoke in the goblins’ language, Gobbledygook,” Stephen answered. “I don’t speak it myself, but I would guess he was confirming our appointment.”

“Indeed I was,” the goblin put in.

“Oh… well, thank you, sir,” Harry said politely and a little shyly as they approached a closed door.

The goblin bowed his head in acknowledgement of the courtesy as he rapped once and opened the door. “Your clients, Garnok,” he announced before turning back the way he came.

Stephen drew Harry into the office and closed the door before bowing to the goblin behind the desk. He smiled when Harry bowed as well. “Good afternoon, Garnok,” he said politely. “And may I introduce Harry Potter to you.” He cast a quick finite to end the glamours and pulled out a packaged wet-wipe saved from a fast-food restaurant to remove the makeup from the boy’s forehead.

Harry gave a shy smile once Stephen finished cleaning his face. “Good afternoon, sir,” he said softly.

Garnok inclined his head politely. “Good afternoon to you as well, Stephen Coyner and Harry Potter. Please, be seated.” He waited for them to settle themselves into the chairs in front of his desk before he spoke again, addressing himself to Harry. “I trust you have been informed of what was discovered?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied.

“The dishonourable and dishonoured goblin who arranged for the regular withdrawals from your vaults has been executed,” Garnok stated flatly. “We confirmed that the monthly withdrawals have gone to Dumbledore’s vault and not to a Muggle bank for your guardian to use for your upkeep.”

“Uncle Vernon wouldn’t have used it for me anyway,” Harry said flatly. “So I’d be out the money in any case. Aunt Petunia’s treating me a little better since he died, but I still wouldn’t trust her with knowing I have money. Because I’m a minor, she’d have to be the one to instigate an investigation, wouldn’t she? But I’d bet Dumbledore already told everyone that she authorized him to speak for her in the wizarding world since she’s a Muggle.”

Garnok looked at the boy with surprise and respect. “You show intelligence, for one so young,” he said. “That is indeed the case.”

Harry frowned thoughtfully. “Does the Ministry of Magic answer to the Queen?” he asked after a moment. “Since she appointed Stephen as my advisor, could he legally speak for me?”

“Not without the Ministry making a big fuss over the matter,” Garnok admitted. “Since the
enactment of the Statute of Secrecy, the government of the wizarding world keeps only the most
tenuous of ties with the Muggle government. As far as the Ministry is concerned, they feel that
they have final say over any legal issues connected to the wizarding world.” He paused, and added,
“However, the Goblin Nation did not ratify the Statute of Secrecy.”

“Which means you’re willing to let Stephen speak for me, at least for anything you can do that
won’t go counter to Ministry law,” Harry said, quick to see the implications.

Stephen looked impressed at Harry’s deduction even as Garnok nodded. “Indeed. As a minor, you
cannot request to see your parents’ will, for example. But as Stephen Coyner is your government-
chosen magical guardian, he can. Or he can authorize a cancellation of those monthly
withdrawals.”

“Actually, we discussed that already,” Harry said. “I don’t like it, but from what I understand, the
amount being taken isn’t enough to truly hurt me financially, correct? As long as that’s the case, I
think I would prefer to leave matters as they are for the time being. I don’t know what sort of game
Dumbledore is playing, but he seems to be trying to set things up so that I’ll be dependent on him
for my information about the wizarding world. Stephen and I discussed it already, and we figure
he’s after my presumed magical or political power as well as my money. I want to spend the next
two years before I start Hogwarts learning everything I can about the wizarding world, but I don’t
want him knowing I’m learning. If anything changes here at the bank, he’ll know something is
wrong.”

“However,” Stephen put in, “I would like to see a copy of the Potters’ will, please.”

Having anticipated that Stephen would wish to let the boy see the will, Garnok merely nodded and
pulled the small stack of parchment from a drawer. “Here you are.”

Stephen passed the stack to Harry, giving him a few minutes to peruse the contents. When the boy
looked up again, he asked, “Do you have any questions about anything there?”

“What’s a Secret-Keeper?” Harry asked. “They refer to Peter Pettigrew as their Secret-Keeper.”

Garnok answered before Stephen could. “A Secret-Keeper is the holder of a particular piece of
knowledge,” he said. “When something or someplace is hidden under the Fidelius Charm, only the
Secret-Keeper can reveal the whereabouts. Even when the Secret-Keeper tells the secret to another,
that person is unable to pass that knowledge along to anyone else.” He waited to see if the boy
would figure this out as quickly as he had everything else so far today.

Harry met the goblin’s expectations. “But that means Sirius Black couldn’t have been the one to
betray my parents!” he exclaimed. “But he’s in prison for it anyway when I should have been
living with him!” His eyes flashed angrily and various objects on Garnok’s desk started to shake.

“Whoa, easy there, Harry… Garnok’s quills and ink bottles aren’t to blame,” Stephen said, trying
to get the boy’s attention and calm him down before his magic accidentally destroyed something in
the office. “We’re already looking into this, Harry. The wizarding world has a potion called
Veritaserum, which forces people to tell the truth. We’re going to find out why it wasn’t used at
Black’s trial, and get him a new one with Veritaserum used so the whole world will know he’s
innocent.” He gave a silent sigh of relief as Harry relaxed slightly and the contents of the desktop
stilled.

“How?” the boy asked.

“We here at Gringotts turned up some potentially useful information just this morning,” Garnok
said. “I would have owled but that you two were coming in today,” he added with a glance at Stephen. “Sirius Black is still on record as holding the Black account. As he filed a will with us naming his godson as his heir, if he had been found guilty, the Black account would have been placed in trust for Harry. This is done automatically whenever the Wizengamot hands down a life sentence or the Kiss; if there is a will on file it is executed as if the person in question had died, and if there is no will, the estate is divided with the Ministry gaining half and any blood relatives to third cousins dividing the remaining half.”

Harry paled and Stephen hastily threw a shield over Garnok’s desk as the boy’s fists clenched and his magic began to manifest visibly around his hands and head in his outrage. “They threw him in prison WITHOUT A TRIAL?” Harry bellowed. A flash of red light left his hands and ricocheted off Stephen’s shield to hit the wall with another flash and puff of smoke, leaving a small scorch mark behind. That terrified him out of his rage and he flinched, hunching in on himself as though in anticipation of blows. “I’m sorry, really I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to, I’m so sorry,” he babbled.

Garnok tapped the box on his desk and spoke in English. “Ignore the alert for my office. Accidental magic. No harm done.”

Stephen dropped to his knees beside Harry’s chair, putting his arm over the child’s shoulders. “It’s all right, see?” he soothed. “Garnok knows you didn’t mean it. The wall can be cleaned up. It’s okay, Harry, you’re not in trouble. I promise.”

“Really?” Harry finally whispered, looking like the child he was, rather than the self-possessed young man of a little earlier.

Garnok nodded. “Really. You have no schooling in magic yet, so how can you hope to control it? And the news you have received here today would be enough to shake the composure of most adults, let alone a young man of your age. What happened is understandable, and no harm was done.”

Harry nodded, some of the tension leaving his shoulders although he remained in a somewhat defensive posture. “How can we get Sirius Black out of prison without Dumbledore interfering?” he asked softly. “Stephen told me Dumbledore was in charge of carrying out the terms of my parents’ will, so he had to have known that Sirius couldn’t have betrayed them. It had to be Peter Pettigrew.”

Stephen looked at Garnok. “I’m rather wondering the same thing myself. Since Dumbledore had to have known the truth, yet as head of the Wizengamot overlooked the fact that Black never got a trial, I can’t help but think he wants to keep the man away from Harry. Probably to further insure Harry’s future dependence on him, or so I’d wager. We need to get Black out of Azkaban as soon as possible, obviously, but how do we keep Dumbledore from preventing it somehow?”

Garnok tapped his chin thoughtfully. “At the moment, the only way I can think of is to get the involvement of someone else related to Sirius Black. I would imagine he’d be willing to give up one or two of the family heirlooms upon his release. However, the only one I know of who is neither disowned nor imprisoned is Narcissa Black Malfoy. I would absolutely not trust her with the knowledge of Harry’s identity, as her husband was reputed to be one of the Dark Lord’s staunchest followers who escaped imprisonment through bribery to ‘convince’ officials that he’d been acting under the Imperius Curse.”

“Perhaps you could set up a meeting between the lady and myself?” Stephen asked. “Would she know that his heir is Harry Potter? If not, all that needs to be said is that I am his heir’s agent, and that his heir is requesting her aid in this matter due to his wish for anonymity. I would think that she would see the advantage of having Lord Black owing her a favor, and at least give me a
hearing.”

When Harry nodded his assent, Garnok nodded as well.

“Obviously, I cannot guarantee Lady Malfoy’s reactions. But I can and will get you heard by her, Mr. Coyner. I presume an evening meeting is better for you?”

“Yes,” Stephen said.

“Very well, I’ll owl you when the meeting is set,” Garnok said. “May your vaults always be filled with gold.”

“May you always do much honor for your clan,” Stephen responded. He quickly applied Harry’s glamours and makeup before the goblin could open the door.

Harry peered around Stephen at Garnok, while the older wizard covered his scar. “May you always do much honor for your clan,” he echoed his mentor. “And thank you for everything you’ve done for me today, sir,” he added.

Once they were back outside the bank, Stephen looked down. “I’m sorry. I knew the meeting wouldn’t be easy on you, but I didn’t expect it to be quite that hard. I wish they’d come up with that surprise information sooner, I’d have tried to prepare you a little better.”

Harry looked up at him, that too-old expression back in his eyes. “It’s not your fault they didn’t find out in time to tell you ahead. I’ll be okay.” He took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. “What do we do now?”

“After that, I think we deserve huge sundaes from Fortescue’s, does that sound good? And then we can go do something fun before I have to bring you home. Have you ever been to the cinema?”

“No,” Harry replied.

“Then it’s high time you went,” Stephen declared. “Let’s go get that ice cream, then we’ll head back to Muggle London and pick up a paper to see what’s playing and pick a film that sounds good.”

Harry smiled for the first time since hearing that Sirius Black was not only most probably innocent, but had been imprisoned without a trial. “I’d like that a lot.”

It was a happy and tired Harry that climbed out of the car back at Privet Drive that evening. Ice cream, a film, and dinner at a Chinese buffet restaurant had done much to restore his temper following the early afternoon’s emotional rollercoaster. As he shut the door, though, he leaned in the window. “You’ll let me know how everything goes?” he asked hopefully. “With Lady Malfoy and all that. Even if you don’t get to meet with her before next Saturday, at least let me know that much? I don’t ever want to not hear the truth, even if I don’t like it.”

“I promise, Harry. I won’t ever lie to you. If I don’t know something, I’ll tell you so, and if you ever happen to ask a personal question that I’m not comfortable answering, I’ll tell you that. But I won’t ever lie,” Stephen promised.

“Thank you,” Harry smiled. “See you next week!” He trudged up the walk to the house, reflexively ducking a rock that came sailing from the shrubs along the fence.

Stephen waited for a moment and was rewarded by the sight of Dudley Dursley and three or four other boys of about the same age spilling out from behind the shrubs. He pulled away quietly, his
thoughts racing between what he would say to Lady Malfoy to hopefully interest her in starting an inquiry into Sirius Black’s status, and how he could better help Harry protect himself from his bullying cousin.
Meetings With Malfoys

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

On Sunday morning, the Malfoy family sat out on the terrace behind the manor house, enjoying the pleasant summer weather along with Sunday brunch when an owl came winging out of the sky to glide to a graceful landing before Narcissa.

“Oh, no!” Draco exclaimed. At nine, he had not yet perfected the ability to remain outwardly undisturbed in the face of disappointment. “Mother, you promised I could go to the Falcons’ match against Puddlemere United today with Father! Please tell me I don’t have to go to tea at the Parkinson’s with you!”

“This isn’t one of the Parkinsons’ owls,” Narcissa replied, as she turned the envelope over in her hands. The back bore the seal of Gringotts, but she did not recognize the writing which addressed it. “Lucius, if you would, please?” She held the envelope out to her husband, noting that the owl merely retreated to the back of an unoccupied chair. Apparently a reply was expected.

Lucius raised a brow, but obligingly took the envelope and scanned it for any hexes or other nasty surprises within. “I can’t imagine who would be writing you through Gringotts or why,” he drawled, “but whoever it is doesn’t seem to mean you any harm. It appears safe enough.” He handed it back to his wife, knowing that if the sender wished the letter to remain private, it would appear either blank, or as gibberish to his eyes.

Narcissa opened the envelope and withdrew the single page of parchment from within. “Circe!” she exclaimed. “How on earth did that happen?”

“Mother?” “Cissa?” Draco and Lucius spoke at the same time.

“This person… a Stephen Coyner… claims to have discovered that my cousin Sirius Black is not only innocent, but never received a trial before being put in Azkaban!” Her eyes were wide with shock. “He is acting on behalf of my cousin’s heir… I have to assume this heir is a minor… and wishes to meet with me in hopes that I would be willing to help get Sirius released.”

“That blood traitor?” Lucius sniffed. “Why would you? Wasn’t he part of that… group… of Dumbledore lackeys? Besides, wasn’t he disowned?”

Narcissa shook her head. “No, he wasn’t disowned. Aunt Walburga wanted to disown him, but Uncle Orion refused to do it in case anything happened to Regulus. He said that sooner or later something would happen to show his idiot Gryffindor son the error of his ways, so she contented herself with blasting him off the family tree tapestry.” She smirked at her husband, a glint of amusement in her eyes. “I imagine if he’s still even remotely sane after all this time, he’ll have seen the error of his ways. Besides, if we get him out of Azkaban and offer him a place to rest and recuperate, he might be persuaded to alter his will, don’t you think? Draco could benefit.”

Lucius pondered this for a few moments. “It is possible, I suppose. Do you have any idea who this heir might be? I would think he… or his agent… would have a vested interest in keeping the will as it stands.”

“There is that,” Narcissa mused. “Well, I still don’t see how it could hurt to have Sirius or his heir
in our debt. And I’ve no idea who his heir might be. As I recall, he was a very charming young man, and a bit of a rake besides. I can see where a young woman of a lesser family might have either succumbed to his charms or perhaps even sought to better herself by entrapping him into marriage, only to see him put in Azkaban instead. But from what I do know of him, if he was aware of a child of his blood, he would have made provision for that child, regardless of its legitimacy or lack thereof.”

Lucius nodded. “When does this Mr. Coyner wish to meet with you?” he asked.

Narcissa checked the letter again. “Any weekday between six and nine in the evening, he says, or anytime on a Sunday. The meeting is to be at Gringotts, to assure us of our privacy as well as my safety. I certainly give this man credit for his precautions. And I suppose I can understand why the unknown heir should remain anonymous. When the Prophet learns that Sirius was incarcerated without a trial, they’ll trumpet the story from the rooftops. Could you imagine a horde of reporters and photographers swarming Draco wherever he went?”

Lucius shuddered. The media required proper handling at all times. Photographs taken at Ministry events or charitable functions were to be encouraged. But even the most well-bred children had lapses in their behavior from time to time, and most reporters and photographers being rather obnoxious, sooner or later their presence would drive any child to distraction. Naturally, the resulting tantrum would end up on the front page, along with an opinion piece calling the parents terrible people to have raised such a horrid child. “Merlin. You’re right as always, my dear. When will you meet with Mr. Coyner?”

“Dobby!” Narcissa called. When the elf popped out to the terrace, she told him, “Fetch my appointment book, my writing case, and an owl treat.” As the little creature vanished again, she looked back to her husband. “As soon as possible. Tomorrow, if my schedule is free and you don’t mind eating alone. After all, the sooner we can start the process to get Sirius free, or at least get him a trial and let the truth come out with the aid of Veritaserum, the better the chance is that he’ll have a mind left.”

“Very true,” Lucius nodded. “Well, I always prefer your presence at meals, but this is a matter of your family after all. By all means, meet with the man at the earliest opportunity.”

Dobby popped back in just then with the writing case, appointment book, and owl treat. Draco got up and took the treat from the elf, bringing it to the owl and petting the large bird as he fed it the treat. Narcissa checked her appointment book and quickly penned a reply to send back with the waiting owl. “I’ve set the meeting for half past seven tomorrow,” she told her husband with a smile. “If we eat early, you can still be graced with my presence at the table and I can go to Gringotts right afterward.” She sealed her envelope and passed it over to her son, who tied it to the owl’s leg and gave the soft feathers one last stroke. It hooted at him softly before taking off once more.

Draco, who’d remained quiet throughout his parents’ discussion, looked Lucius. “How soon do we leave for the quidditch game, Father?”

Narcissa laughed as Lucius checked his watch. “Our portkey leaves in an hour. Sit down and finish eating.”

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

Stephen waited in one of Gringotts’ small conference rooms, having arrived at the bank at seven. As he had requested the meeting, he knew it was important for him to be there when Lady Malfoy arrived. As the clock chimed the half hour, he rose to his feet just in time for the door to open and
the aristocratic woman to enter. He bowed politely. “Lady Malfoy, I thank you for your willingness to speak with me,” he said politely.

Narcissa entered wearing her usual disdainful expression and looked the young man over critically. While he obviously didn’t know the etiquette practiced by the old and noble houses, he at least showed a proper amount of courtesy and respect. She inclined her head in return. “Mr. Coyner,” she greeted him. “I understand from your letter that you believe you’ve found evidence which would free my cousin?”

“Yes, my lady, I have. However, the evidence I have cannot be used at this time without creating many more problems than it would solve,” Stephen said. “And before we continue further, I must ask that you swear upon your magic that you will not reveal exactly what this evidence is to anyone. The only way to free Lord Black without interference is to say that your husband discovered the curious fact that Lord Black never actually got a trial. Once Lord Black is questioned under Veritaserum, I believe he will give the same information that I have received, which will exonerate him of his alleged crimes. And I’m sure Minister Fudge will be thrilled at the chance to boost his standing by correcting the mistake made by his predecessor; don’t you think so? Otherwise, when the truth does eventually come out, he’ll be the one with the tarnished image.”

"And exactly what do you gain from this?” Narcissa asked. “I doubt you are my cousin’s heir, unless he was out procreating before entering Hogwarts.”

Stephen had to suppress a grin at that mental image. “No, I am not Lord Black’s heir. However, I cannot properly explain what I gain in the matter… aside from presumably making a potentially influential contact that would see me in a favorable light… unless you swear that oath. There is too much at stake and I am unwilling to risk the safety of Lord Black’s heir. Please understand, Lady Malfoy, this is not any sort of personal distrust or I wouldn’t have asked you here. You could be Minister Fudge, Dumbledore, or an Unspeakable, and I would still be insisting on the oath.”

Narcissa leaned back in her chair for a long moment, studying the man before her. “You intrigue me,” she said at last. “You can’t have been in Slytherin, or Severus would have mentioned you at some point. You’re obviously young enough to have still been in school when he started teaching. But you certainly act like a Slytherin. Very well, I’ll take the oath.” She drew her wand, holding it across her upraised palms and declared, “I, Narcissa Black Malfoy, do solemnly swear upon my magic that I will not reveal any information I learn from Stephen Coyner during this meeting to anyone, without his express permission to do so. So mote it be!” A brief flash of white light enveloped her and vanished.

“Thank you,” Stephen said with a touch of relief as well as sincerity in his voice.

Narcissa permitted herself a small smile. “So, as I admit to a slight weakness for gossip, will you tell me who my cousin’s heir is? My best guess is that some foolish little social-climbing harlot sought to entrap him into marriage only to see him imprisoned before the wedding.”

Stephen shook his head. “No, his heir is his godson; an orphaned boy whom it appears is being controlled by Dumbledore.”

“What?” Narcissa couldn’t believe her ears. “What do you mean, controlled?”

“The boy was placed with a Muggle family whose hatred of magic is as well-known as your own family’s feelings towards Muggleborns,” Stephen said quietly. “This child has been beaten, starved, forced to work like a house-elf, and regularly locked in a cupboard, for the ‘crime’ of being a wizard, while being repeatedly told that magic doesn’t exist. Whenever someone noticed
the signs of the abuse and reported it to the authorities, that person was promptly removed from contact with the boy and the authorities themselves have apparently been obliviated as there are no records indicating that they’ve ever heard of him.”

Narcissa was appalled. *The child had to at least be a half blood, if her cousin was his godfather. And really, even Mudblood children didn’t deserve to be abused.* Her thoughts raced as she tried to recall Sirius’ close friends and her eyes widened. *It couldn’t be! But what other orphaned child was placed with a Muggle family… the family of his Muggleborn mother? And specifically placed there by Dumbledore! “You’re speaking of Harry Potter, aren’t you?”* she asked.

Stephen nodded. “I am, yes,” he said gravely. “How I came to be in contact with him is a rather convoluted tale and of no great importance. What matters is that Dumbledore remains unaware for the moment that the boy is not only being treated much better due to the primary abuser’s death, but that I am in regular contact with him and teaching him about the wizarding world to the best of my ability. Furthermore, the goblins have granted me limited access to information regarding the Potter accounts and the Potters’ will. Dumbledore was executor, which means he knew the contents of the will, which states quite clearly that Peter Pettigrew was the Potters’ Secret-Keeper. As you well know, that means there is no way Lord Black could possibly have been the one to betray them.” Unsure of whether she was an actual follower of Voldemort or just a sympathizer, Stephen chose to avoid a direct reference to him. “As Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Dumbledore has an obligation to make certain that anyone accused of a crime receives a proper trial. So why, when he had evidence pointing to Lord Black’s innocence, did he not demand both a trial and the use of Veritaserum?”

Narcissa shook her head slowly. “Because he wanted Sirius out of the way,” she murmured thoughtfully.

Stephen nodded. “Yes, that and more. The Potters’ will granted custody first to your cousin as godfather, then listed off several families with whom they felt their son would have a good home in the event Lord Black was unable to take him for any reason. The will also explicitly stated that Harry was under no circumstances to go to Lily Potter’s Muggle sister. Dumbledore broke the terms of the will by sending him there. I believe Dumbledore wants Harry to be both abused and ignorant of the wizarding world so that he can gain the boy’s instant trust and affection by swooping in to save him from his horrible relatives with his Hogwarts letter. I think he also hopes to make the boy dependent on him for information about the wizarding world in general. After all, Harry will likely be quite magically powerful one day as well as politically powerful. Dumbledore’s said often enough that he doesn’t wish to be Minister of Magic, but I suspect he might want to be the power behind the throne instead, from the way he seems to be grooming Harry to be his puppet.”

She tilted her head. “And so you can’t be the one to bring up the evidence of the Potters’ will, because Dumbledore will just obliviate you and keep you from messing with his plans, yes, I see that. But he’ll have a much harder time stopping the process if my husband sets things in motion, as the trial will be a fait accompli by the time he hears about it. I trust you do not object to my volunteering to give my cousin a place to rest and recover from his imprisonment?”

“Of course not,” Stephen said. “I understand you would wish to take the opportunity to re-acquaint yourself with your cousin… especially if he has changed his opinion with regards to Dumbledore after all this time, which I suspect he has.”

Narcissa rose gracefully to her feet, noting that Stephen stood politely when she did. A slight, but genuine smile graced her features as she held out one delicate hand to him. “You impress me, Mr. Coyner. I do believe you are one of the few exceptions to the rule when it comes to those of your…
Stephen bowed over her hand, his lips just grazing the back of it. “I do try,” he said dryly. “And if I might be so bold, Lady Malfoy, I believe most of that trampling of tradition stems from ignorance and not contempt for tradition. At the age of eleven, we are suddenly thrust into this world of which we know nothing and are told only that Hogwarts will teach us what we need to know. But it doesn’t. There are no wizarding studies classes for Muggleborns and Muggle-raised. We don’t even know enough about wizarding traditions to know what questions to ask or how to ask them without being offensive. And it doesn’t help that the ones who could teach us the most, are so often the ones who refuse to associate with us. Imagine how lost your son would be, if when he turned eleven, he was suddenly told he would be attending a Muggle school. He would be faced with taking lessons which he didn’t have the background to understand. You couldn’t do anything to help him adapt, because you know little to nothing of the Muggle world. He would be expected to hold certain beliefs which he may or may not have even heard of and was not raised with. And because most of the other students were raised with those beliefs and given the background needed for the lessons to make sense, they would look down upon him whenever he made a mistake, because they thought he was trampling their traditions.”

Narcissa raised a brow. “Hmm,” she said. “Perhaps you do raise a valid point. I shall have to think on it. But for now, farewell, Mr. Coyner. I will have Lucius ‘discover’ the lack of a trial record tomorrow.”

“Farewell, Lady Malfoy, and thank you once again.” Stephen politely held the door for her, breathing a sigh of relief once she was gone. That went far better than he’d hoped; he’d been worried that she would walk out if or when she realized she was speaking with a Muggleborn. He could tolerate a little contempt if it would help Harry.

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Back at Malfoy Manor, a rather smug-looking Narcissa joined her husband in their private sitting room. “Lucius, darling, you absolutely must make some excuse to dig into the trial transcripts from just after the Dark Lord’s disappearance tomorrow. We absolutely must get my cousin a trial.”

Lucius quirked a brow, giving her a questioning glance. “I know you were at least somewhat in favor of helping already, but what has you so enthused about the idea all of a sudden?”

“I’m not at liberty to say just now,” she told him. “Mr. Coyner asked me to swear on my magic not to reveal his information without permission, as it could risk a child’s safety… or his own, if the wrong people overheard it. But I believe at least parts of it will come to light once Sirius is questioned with Veritaserum.”

“Interesting.” Lucius mused. “And I take it you believe both what he told you and that we will benefit from helping your cousin?”

Narcissa smiled. “My darling, if I am correct, we will benefit in more ways than one. Both from helping Sirius, and from something else he told me after we’d concluded our business. Tell me, Lucius, given the sheer numbers of Muggleborns and half bloods, do you truly believe killing them all off as the Dark Lord wished is the correct way of dealing with them?”

Lucius frowned. “Well, it certainly doesn’t stop others from being born, and I don’t believe in killing children. But it’s terrible, the way those Mudbloods strut around as though they think they are our equals, while ignoring hundreds of years of tradition!”
“Oh, I agree,” Narcissa nodded. “But Mr. Coyner brought up a rather valid point. Where do we learn to respect our traditions?”

"Within the family, of course,” Lucius said. “Where else would one learn tradition? School?”

“Perhaps the Muggleborns should, because Muggle traditions are different from ours,” Narcissa said. “How did he put it… oh yes, that they are suddenly informed that magic exists and brought into this world they know nothing about, and are told they will learn what they need in school. However, without a course in wizarding culture, or something of the sort, they aren’t being taught all that they need. They don’t know enough about our traditions to even know what questions they should be asking. For the most part, when they offend, it’s out of ignorance rather than malice.”

A calculating gleam came into Lucius’ eyes. “Really?” he said thoughtfully. “You know, that does make an odd kind of sense.”

She nodded. “I agree. He asked me to imagine how it would feel to Draco if at the last moment he was told he had to go to a Muggle school instead of Hogwarts… we as his family couldn’t help him adapt at all, he would have no background for most of the classes he’d have to take, and he’d very likely do or say something offensive because he doesn’t know anything about Muggle traditions.”

Lucius snorted softly. “Do Muggles even have traditions?”

“Of course they do. That doddering fool Dumbledore panders to them… celebrating Christmas instead of Solstice, referring to Samhain as Halloween, and ignoring the Equinoxes and Imbolc and Beltane altogether. Is it any wonder the Muggleborns don’t even realize that wizarding traditions are not the same as what they grew up with?”

“Are you sure this Coyner person wasn’t in Slytherin?”

Narcissa laughed. “He’d surely have been a force to be reckoned with if he had been. No, he didn’t say which house he was in but despite his Slytherin tendencies, I doubt he was there. He is Muggleborn after all, and if I’ve guessed his age correctly, the Dark Lord would have been just about at the height of his power when he started Hogwarts. No Muggleborn would have survived his first year in Slytherin back then.”

“I suppose,” Lucius shrugged and studied his wife for a moment. “You seem as though you actually like this man, despite his origins.”

“In a way, I do,” she admitted, shocking her husband to the core. “Oh, don’t look at me like that! I’m hardly suggesting we sponsor him into society or anything like that. But surely one can have some admiration for someone beneath them, when that someone is both intelligent and respectful. And I will give him that; he might not know the proper forms, but he was quite sincere in the respect he showed me. Perhaps he’s the exception that proves the rule, but perhaps it’s a sign that they can be taught if given the opportunity to learn.”

So you agree with his assessment that Muggleborns should be offered, or even required to take some sort of class on wizarding ways?”

“Yes. I think it should be required for all Muggleborns, Muggle-raised, and half bloods, and optional for purebloods. You know as well as I do that some families don’t put nearly as much effort into keeping up the traditions as they should.” Narcissa paused to think for a moment. “In fact, perhaps it should be mandatory for everyone. I realize that means the properly raised children will be bored, but surely it won’t be any worse than History of Magic with Binns… and what’s
more, they’ll be able to provide examples for the others to follow. Plus that way when you propose it at the Governors’ meeting, no one can accuse you of trying to impose an extra workload on the Muggleborns or something equally ridiculous.”

Lucius nodded. “Well, I have a week before the next meeting, so I have time to write up a proper proposal. For now, I think I’ll turn in, especially since you want me up early tomorrow so I can go poking around in the Ministry’s trial transcript files.” He leaned in to kiss her lightly before standing.

Narcissa got up as well. “I’ll join you in a few minutes. I just want to check on Draco, make sure he didn’t fall asleep over a book with his candle still burning.” She caressed his cheek with a soft smile and hurried off down the hall while Lucius proceeded into the bedroom.

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Just before ten on Tuesday morning, Lucius Malfoy entered the offices of the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, carrying a very thin file. He spoke coolly although not rudely to the secretary whose desk blocked entry to the inner office. “Please tell Minister Fudge I am here to speak with him at his earliest possible convenience, on a matter of some urgency.”

The woman behind the desk nodded. “He’s currently in a meeting with the new head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Lord Malfoy, and has given instructions that they are not to be disturbed for anything short of an attack upon the Ministry. However, I do believe they will be done soon if you care to wait.”

Lucius nodded. “That would be Madam Amelia Bones, correct? Yes, I believe I’ll wait. I believe she’ll also have an interest in this matter.”

Very well, Lord Malfoy,” the secretary nodded once more. “Have a seat.”

He chose to remain standing, studying the new paintings up on the walls, and thinking to himself that if Fudge intended to impress visitors, he really should have left the portraits of former Ministers on the walls. On the other hand, it was possible that the man simply brought in artwork that he personally liked, with no thought whatsoever of taste. And considering the man’s usual wardrobe choices, the latter was the more likely of the two options. Really, what was the man thinking, wearing lime green pinstriped robes and a matching bowler hat?

He looked over as the inner office door opened. “Ah, Minister Fudge, Madam Bones… if you have a few moments, I have something about which I need to speak with you both.”

Madam Bones glanced at her watch. “Yes, I have some time before my next meeting,” she said, and stepped back into the office.

Lucius followed, shutting the door behind him. “This is what I wish to show you both. I was looking through the old files earlier this morning on behalf of Madam Bitwell, who is considering an appeal on behalf of her husband, when I noticed how very thin this file was compared with the rest in that section. It further caught my interest, as this is the file of my cousin by marriage, Sirius Black.”

“Black is right where he belongs,” Fudge blustered. “Why are you pestering us with his file? Everyone knows he was the Potters’ Secret-Keeper.”

“Be that as it may,” Lucius said, directing a frown towards the Minister for the interruption, “If you look in the file, there is only one single sheet of parchment within, bearing only two words:
Trial Pending. As far as I am aware, ALL alleged criminals are to receive a proper and speedy trial, according to law. Has something changed while I was unaware of it? His trial should have taken place no more than four to six months after his arrest, and what’s more, he should have been held in a Ministry detention cell until the time of his trial, not in Azkaban.”

Madam Bones picked up the parchment and studied it briefly, then murmured a few incantations over it. “Hmm,” she said. “Lord Malfoy, would you be willing to answer under Veritaserum that you did not tamper with this file in any way before bringing it to us?”

“I am,” he answered without hesitation. “If you have any with you, I’ll take it right now. Or I can follow you to your office if you wish.”

She nodded. “I’ll take you up on that offer, once we explain to Minister Fudge why it’s such a good idea to give Black a proper trial.”

“Waste of time and resources, if you ask me,” Fudge grumbled. “Man’s as guilty as sin.”

Amelia Bones shook her head, wondering how in Merlin’s name this bungler ever managed to get elected. “Cornelius, think… Lord Malfoy found the file. Who’s to say someone else might not have found it and sold it to the Prophet, instead of bringing it to our attention. The Ministry, and you, would be ripped to shreds in public opinion for failure to follow our own laws, and never mind that it was your predecessor and mine that apparently allowed this lapse to happen. This way, when the story gets out, we’ll be looked upon with favor because we’re doing our best to correct old mistakes.”

“Oh…” Fudge blinked a few times. “Well… carry on, then. Get it done as quickly as possible, so he can be returned to Azkaban where he belongs.” He retreated behind his desk and began shuffling papers on it, clearly hoping the other two would leave.

Amelia obliged. “Come on, Lord Malfoy. Your willingness to take Veritaserum inclines me to believe you, but I’m going to administer it all the same just to cover myself… I’m sure you understand.”

“Indeed I do, Madam Bones,” Lucius said graciously. “I would be doing the same if our positions were reversed. And while we’re on the subject, may I suggest that when Sirius Black is given his trial, you personally make sure he also is administered Veritaserum? While he is a Black, and I know from my wife that he would have been taught certain mental exercises that would most likely help against the Dementors, he’s surely been affected after so long. I would hate to see a farce of a trial in which he was declared guilty and shipped back to prison without ever truly having had a chance to defend himself. I know that Veritaserum will force the truth even out of the mad, no matter what delusional drivel might spill from their lips otherwise. For the sake of my wife, I want this trial done strictly by the book.”

They turned into the DMLE section of the Ministry and entered the head’s office. “I agree completely, Lord Malfoy. I’m not fool enough to think you aren’t gaining something out of all this, but I agree anyway, because the law should be the law for everyone,” Amelia said. She rummaged in a cabinet behind her desk and pulled out a vial of colorless potion. “Open up.”

Lucius dropped into a chair and opened his mouth so that the shorter woman wouldn’t need to stretch to administer the potion. “It’s always amazed me how truly vile most healing potions are, yet this one has almost no taste whatsoever,” he remarked idly as she watched him for the signs that it had taken effect.

She chuckled. “I think anyone who’s had to take Veritaserum for any reason thinks the same
“Yes,” he replied. “Even though her solicitor has advised against it.”

Well, she thought, bemused. He really was in the files for a legitimate reason. “When you opened the Sirius Black file, what did it contain?”

“A single sheet of parchment bearing the words Trial Pending.”

“Did you add or remove anything from the Black file, or alter the contents in any way?”

“No.”

Amelia nodded. “Thank you for your cooperation. Here’s the antidote.” She administered the second potion and offered the man a glass of water.

“Thank you,” Lucius said, sipping the water.

Amelia returned the Veritaserum and its antidote to the potions cabinet and sat down at her desk. “I’m having Black removed from Azkaban immediately, to be held in the Ministry holding cells until I can arrange a trial. That will take at least a week given that the summer holidays have just started so many of the Wizengamot members might be away. We don’t need the full Wizengamot for it to be legal, but we must have a quorum present as you know.”

Lucius nodded. “Indeed. May I ask who is currently voting proxy for Lord Black? I’m just curious, as he must be excluded from the proceedings due to a conflict of interests.”

“Good point, and there are so many proxies held at the moment, I’m not sure who is holding which votes.” Madam Bones pulled out a log book of sorts and ran her finger down a page full of names. “Ah, here it is… Dumbledore is currently holding the Black vote, as no will was ever read.”

“No will was read, because Black was never officially declared guilty by the court,” Lucius reminded her. “So Dumbledore’s assumption of the Black vote would be quasi-legal at best. However, I’ll not press the point, as long as he’s not in the courtroom for Black’s trial. Am I correct in thinking you’d prefer to handle this entire affair as quietly as possible?”

She nodded. “Yes. Not that it won’t turn into a circus eventually, but if at all possible, I’d like to avoid publicity until the day of the actual trial.”

“I understand. If it would be permitted, I’d like to help a little with that, by engaging a barrister* on his behalf,” Lucius said. “My solicitor knows that anyone he recommends to me understands discretion, which is more than I can say for the public defenders that the Ministry supplies to the indigent. And also, as a personal favor on my wife’s behalf, I’d also like to send my family Healer to look him over once he’s here at the Ministry.”

Amelia raised a brow. “Now I know you’re gaining something from all this, although damned if I can tell what. However, prisoners awaiting trial are not to be denied access to medical attention, and they certainly are permitted a barrister. If you wish to spend the galleons on the man’s behalf, they’re your galleons to spend; besides which I freely admit I’d rather have your tight-lipped associates handling the situation instead of the Ministry blabbermouths.”

Lucius smirked as he stood and bowed. “Madam Bones, it’s refreshing to see someone with a modicum of intelligence in a position of power. I suspect you and I will either become the best of allies or else kill one another over the next few years. I’ll be off to contact my solicitor and my
Healer; about when would you expect you Aurors to return with Black?"

She checked her watch once more. “It’s nearly half-tenth, if I get the orders off by eleven, then they should return no later than three.”

“I’ll return at three with my Healer, then,” he said, leaving the office.

She watched him go, shaking her head. Then she wrote out the orders sending a pair of Aurors to Azkaban to remove Sirius Black from the remote prison and bring him back to the highest-security holding cell available in the Ministry of Magic. She actually figured the round trip would only take three hours and not four, but she wanted to leave herself the extra time which she was sure she would need to convince the Aurors that she had not gone crazy, nor was she a Death Eater polyjuiced to look like herself in order to break the man out of prison.

*In Britain, a solicitor handles basic legal matters such as contracts and negotiations. A barrister is the one who prosecutes or defends in a courtroom.*
Siriusly Confused, But It's Harry's Birthday!

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

Two Aurors apparated to the guard shack by the shore of the North Sea. After a brief conference with the guard, he led them to the small boat tethered to the dock there. With a word from the taller of the pair, the boat silently glided away from the wharf and picked up speed as it headed into the open waters. “I still don’t get what Madam Bones thinks she’s going to get out of Black,” he grumbled to his smaller companion. “Man’s been almost eight years in Azkaban. She’ll be lucky if he can string three words together coherently.”

“I agree,” the other Auror shrugged. “But orders are orders, and she’s the boss after all.”

The pair fell silent again until the little boat pulled up alongside the dock at Azkaban. As they disembarked, a guard popped out of the building by the dock to check their credentials. He satisfied himself that they were who they appeared to be, and then asked for their orders.

The taller of the pair produced the written order from Madam Bones for them to retrieve Sirius Black and bring him to a Ministry holding cell. “Before you ask,” he said sourly, “We already checked Madam Bones over. No polyjuice, no sign of imperius curse or madness or anything else. Damned if I know why, but these orders are for real.”

The guard shook his head in disbelief. “Seems like a big mistake to me, but orders are orders. He’s kept isolated-like, for his own protection.” He snorted in amusement. “Seems the rest of the Death Eaters we got locked up blame his arse for what happened to You Know Who. They figure if Black hadn’t tried to suck up by telling him where to find the Potters, You Know Who would still be alive and they’d still be free. So much for loyalty among allies, eh?”

The Aurors smirked. “ Couldn’t happen to a nicer person, I’m sure,” the shorter one said.

The guard stuck his head in the door and called to someone within that he was escorting Aurors in to retrieve a prisoner for further questioning. When he turned back to the Aurors, he tapped a small amulet he wore around his neck and it started to glow with a silvery light. “This’ll keep the Dementors at a safe distance,” he explained. “You’ll still feel ‘em, but they won’t be able to get close enough to overwhelm you.” He led the way into the forbidding prison building.

In an isolation cell on the lower level, a huge if rather underweight shaggy black dog sprawled on the pallet which served as bed for the prisoners lifted his head in alarm. Unknown to anyone, Sirius Black spent most of his time in his animagus form, which protected him from the worst of the effects of the Dementors. He’d learned the routines of the prison quickly, and his dog hearing was keen enough to pick up on footsteps entering his corridor in plenty of time to transform back to himself. Something was off today, though. The guard had already been through with the slop they laughingly called lunch, and judging by the light still shining through the tiny barred window, it wasn’t even close to time for dinner. Also, if he wasn’t mistaken, there was more than one person approaching. Quickly, he shifted to human form, taking care to keep his expression blank and his face slack. He didn’t want anyone wondering why the Dementors didn’t seem to bother him.

The guard and a pair of Aurors stopped at his cell. “Well, here he is, for all the good I expect he’ll do,” the guard said as he unlocked the door of the cell. “Come on, Black, pretend you’re still alive.
These two have orders to take you to the Ministry for some reason or other.”

Sirius looked up slowly, keeping to his Dementor-dulled persona for the moment. Then he grabbed the bars of the open cell door to help haul himself to his feet. He shuffled forward, half-expecting to be stunned or worse as he left the cell so that the Ministry could proclaim he’d been killed while making an escape attempt. But all that happened was that one of the Aurors attached magic-suppressing shackles to his wrists and ankles, then each of them grabbed an arm and marched him out of the prison and into the small boat he recognized from when he’d been sent here. He couldn’t prevent a spark of life from appearing in his eyes as he took deep breaths of the clean, ocean-scented wind, so different from the stale and often foul air within the prison. He remained docile as the Aurors levitated him into the boat and joined him there, then started the little craft speeding back to the shore of Britain.

A second pair of Aurors awaited them at the dock. Sirius supposed that whichever Ministry authority decided to remove him from Azkaban must have also figured he’d be more likely to try to escape once he was back on British soil. He had no intention of making a break for it, however. Years in prison had taught him the patience he once lacked, as well as the folly of rushing off half-cocked. As much as he wanted to go find his godson, he was going to bide his time for a while longer. He figured that someone must want to know something or he never would have been removed from Azkaban. If they’d simply wanted him dealt with quietly, it would have been easier to have him Kissed while still at the prison. With any luck, he’d be able to convince whoever wanted to speak with him that he’d never received a trial and they’d be in a position to do something about it. He’d only do a runner if it looked as though they were going to try to send him back without giving him a chance to tell the truth about what really happened to the Potters and to that stinking rat Pettigrew. He waited quietly as they levitated him off the boat and draped a scarf around his neck. His guess that the scarf was likely a portkey proved correct when all four took hold of the ends and a moment later he felt the unmistakable tugging sensation behind his navel.

Sirius recognized the booking office which led into the Ministry’s holding cells from his days as a rookie Auror, and so was unsurprised when he was escorted through them and into the actual holding area. He was thrust into a cell and left to wonder just what was going on. The cells here were positively luxurious compared with those in Azkaban; he had a small plain table and a chair in addition to a bunk with a pillow and two blankets. He settled into the chair, feeling rather grimy from his long incarceration with only one ten minute long icy cold shower each week, and not wanting to dirty the bed from the ragged prison uniform that was all he had to wear. He wondered if he might be permitted a warm-water shower if he asked, and something else to wear. The uniform he had on was the one of the two he’d been given upon his arrival to Azkaban eight years earlier.

He heard footsteps in the corridor a moment before one of the Aurors who removed him from Azkaban, Lucius Malfoy, and another man he didn’t recognize came into view. The other man was wearing Healers’ robes and carrying a satchel. Lucius sneered at him while the healer tsked and shook his head. “This won’t do at all. I can’t even examine him properly with those suppressors on, they’ll interfere with my diagnostics. And he absolutely must be washed before those scrapes on his feet become infected.”

The Auror started to protest, but the healer cut him off. “Leave the suppressors on while he showers if you must, but I need them removed in order to examine him. Need I remind you that prisoners within the Ministry are not to be denied access to medical attention?”

Sirius stood and cleared his throat. It had been some months since the last time he’d actually spoken aloud. “They snapped my wand,” he croaked out, his voice rough and hoarse from disuse, “but I swear by my magic… I won’t try escaping the Ministry. So mote it be.” He coughed as a
brief flash of white light enveloped him and vanished again.

Lucius smirked. An oath wasn’t exactly magic in and of itself, so it took despite the suppressors. He wondered if the Auror noted that Black only swore not to try escaping from the Ministry, but said nothing about making an attempt should they bring him out of it… such as taking him back to Azkaban. Perhaps Cissa was right and Black might have seen the error of his ways.

The Auror hid his shock that Black was coherent enough to even swear that oath, but merely frowned and removed the wrist and ankle cuffs. “Come along, then. It seems you’re to be given spa treatment while you’re here.” Turning his attention to Lord Malfoy and the healer, he said, “Regulations state I cannot leave him alone at any time when he’s not in his cell. Therefore you can go back out to the desk and get a fresh uniform from Stores; the rags he’s wearing now likely won’t survive laundering.” He reached out and took Black’s upper arm, marching him down to the washroom.

Sirius hid a smirk of his own at the expression on Lucius’ face when the Auror ordered the aristocrat to run an errand for him. But then he was brought to the washroom and forgot anything else for twenty luxurious minutes under hot water and with actual shower gel, shampoo, and even hair conditioner available for his use. Feeling truly clean for the first time since being thrown in Azkaban, he toweled off and dressed in the olive-drab holding block robe and bedroom slippers provided. When the Auror handed him a comb, he stared for a moment before taking it with a scratchy-sounding, “Thank you,” as the man led him back to his new cell.

Once there, the healer was quick to run diagnostic spells over him. “Malnutrition, that’s not surprising. Some irritation of the throat and those scrapes on his feet are easy enough to deal with.” He pulled several potions vials from his satchel along with a healing salve which he proceeded to rub into Sirius’ feet while explaining the potions. “You’ve got three days’ worth of nutrient potion there to take once a day; that’s the green one. The reddish purple is for your throat; twice a day for two days. You should be fine in no time.” He left the cell and the Auror locked it behind him.

“Fine for what?” Sirius finally asked. The Auror vanished as soon as he’d finished locking the cell door, so it was just the healer and Malfoy standing in the corridor.

“For your trial, of course,” Lucius drawled. “I was in the files this morning looking for the pertinent transcripts of some older trials since an acquaintance of mine is considering an appeal, when I happened across your file. Being rather curious, I decided to look into it. Imagine my surprise when it only contained a single page stating that your trial was still pending. I brought the matter to the attention of Minister Fudge and DMLE Head Madam Bones, who promptly took action to rectify the mistake made by their predecessors.”

“Why?” Sirius was even more bewildered now than he had been when first dragged from his cell in Azkaban. “Why are you helping me? Why didn’t Dumbledore make them give me a trial? He’s Chief Warlock… did he die? Is that why he didn’t help me?”

Lucius examined his nails with a bored expression. “I’m helping because you’re my wife’s cousin. You’re a blood traitor and I don’t particularly like you; at least, I didn’t like your actions towards certain of your yearmates at Hogwarts. But you’re still family. As to that senile old fart Dumbledore, I have no idea why he didn’t make sure you received a trial… unless perhaps the absentmindedness of old age was already affecting him back then and he merely overlooked it somehow.”

Sirius sat on his bunk, trying to make sense of it all. Dumbledore overlooked him? Or worse, ignored him? Lucius Malfoy helping him? He shook his head. He was tempted to ask where his godson was, but at the same time, he didn’t trust his cousin’s husband enough to want the man to
know of the relationship. “Will they let me have a newspaper?” he asked instead, unsure of exactly what Lucius’ role at the Ministry might be.

“I can ask,” the other man shrugged. “Madam Bones thinks it won’t be more than a week until she can call in enough of the Wizengamot to give you a trial. And just so you know, Dumbledore took proxy over the Black vote, so he won’t be there due to conflict of interest.” With that parting tidbit, the blond turned and swept out of the cell block corridor, followed by the healer.

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

On Wednesday, 31 July, the Auror bringing Sirius his breakfast tray also brought a copy of the Daily Prophet. “Thought you might like to read about your failure,” he sneered at the prisoner.

Sirius said nothing, having learned at Azkaban he wouldn’t be believed anyway. He could only pray that when this coming trial happened, he’d be given Veritaserum so they would know he was telling the truth. As far as he was aware, not even Remus or Dumbledore had known that James and Lily had decided to do a double-shuffle with their choice of Secret-Keeper when they went into hiding, loudly asking him if he’d be the one in public, while quietly giving the task to Pettigrew instead. He read the paper eagerly, glad to see Dumbledore’s report that Harry was happy and healthy, given everything he could possibly want or need.

He was just sorry that the report did not mention the family name of whoever was raising his godson, but as Dumbledore pointed out in the article, it was better that no one know where Harry was living, to protect him and his guardians.

Reading the article a second time, he gave a soft chuckle under his breath. He knew one thing for certain: Harry wasn’t with the Weasley family. Not if he was being given everything he could possibly want or need. Sure, he’d be happy and healthy if he was growing up with Molly Weasley’s brand of mothering: a good mix of love and affection, a bit of discipline, and plenty of good home cooking. But with at least seven children of their own, the Weasleys wouldn’t be able to provide Harry with material spoiling unless they dipped into the Potter vaults to do so. Sirius was sure they would never do such a thing. Arthur Weasley might be eccentric, but he was one of the most honourable people he’d ever met.

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Meanwhile, when Stephen strode into his MP’s office ready for the day’s work, the man was speaking with Sir Thomas Marrow, Her Majesty’s personal secretary.

“You’re getting the day off, Coyner,” his MP told him with a smile. “Sir Thomas tells me that today is the ninth birthday of that lad you’re tutoring… and that Her Royal Highness was able to rearrange her schedule so that she could have the boy out to Highgrove to spend the day with the little Princes.”

“You’re to accompany him. When you pick him up, go to Fairoak Airfield where a helicopter will be waiting to bring you to Highgrove, and you’ll return to Fairoak at seven this evening,” Sir Thomas put in.

Stephen smiled. “All right.” He pulled a file folder from his briefcase and handed it to his MP. “There’s the information you requested about the proposed widening of the motorway through the district. If you’d like, I can either come in early or stay late tomorrow to make up for losing today, sir.”

The man waved him off with a smile. “No need. Sir Thomas was telling me a bit about your young
charge and how you came to be chosen as his tutor, since you went to the same school as his
deceased parents and so can tell him a bit about them and all. If sparing you for a day will help
give that boy his first truly happy birthday since he was orphaned, consider it my birthday gift to
him.” He grinned. “Besides, you’re so on top of the work that my permanent secretary is growing
lazy. Do her good to have to pick up her full duties for a day,” he laughed.

Sir Thomas and Stephen both laughed as well. “Thank you, sir, and I’ll see you tomorrow, then,”
Stephen said, turning to leave again.

Sir Thomas fell in beside him. “Her Royal Highness said to tell you that you might wish to dress
the boy casually, since he and the Princes are likely to go for a ride and play with the dogs during
the early part of the day, and perhaps even go wading in the stream. But bring a change for him as
you’ll all be having tea and birthday cake with her this afternoon.”

“Thank you for letting me know, Sir Thomas,” Stephen said.

“You’re quite welcome,” the Queen’s secretary said. “Her Majesty is pleased to hear that the
Dursley woman is treating her nephew better in recent weeks, too. It’s a pity she won’t rein in her
son as well, but I suppose one can’t hope for everything.” He turned and headed back into the
depths of the building before Stephen could respond.

On his way to Surrey, Stephen stopped off to pick up a birthday card, and tucked into it the gift
he’d planned on surprising Harry with on Saturday… a pair of tickets to a quidditch match between
the Holyhead Harpies and the Wimbourne Wasps. He’d wait and give it to the boy on their way
home, however, so that he didn’t accidentally say something about it to the Princes.

When he arrived at Privet Drive, he saw Harry dragging what appeared to be pieces of a bed frame
out to the bins. “Happy birthday, Harry,” he called as he climbed out of the car. “What on earth
happened here?”

“Dudley decided it would be fun to jump on beds today. Especially my bed,” the boy reported
matter-of-factly. “He broke it.”

Stephen shook his head. “The kid is heavy enough to break a bed, and his mum still insists he’s
just big-boned,” he muttered, causing Harry to laugh. “Well, this is the sort of occasional expense
your stipend will cover.” He hesitated, knowing that the helicopter was likely already waiting for
them and they’d not be returning until evening when furniture shops would be closed. “Is the
mattress still in one piece? Would you mind terribly sleeping on the mattress on the floor until
Saturday? Because there’s been an outing planned for you for today and I don’t want to keep
anyone waiting.”

Harry shrugged. When he lived in the cupboard, he’d only had a cot mattress on the floor for a bed.
At least this was a proper bed mattress that didn’t leave his feet dangling over the edge. “I don’t
mind,” he said. “Where are we going?”

“That’s a birthday surprise,” Stephen grinned. “Let’s go up to your room; if there are any more
pieces of bed frame to be removed, I’ll take care of them while you change into your nicest jeans
and t-shirt, plus pack up a school outfit for later on.”

As he bundled the last few broken boards for ease of carrying, Stephen took note of the state of the
wardrobe, desk, and nightstand in Harry’s room and sighed. He’d suggest purchasing a set of
furniture when they shopped, rather than just a bed. He also took note that the growth spurt which
Healer Abbot had predicted seemed to be happening; the jeans which were a little long for Harry
just three weeks ago were now at the perfect length.
“I’m ready,” Harry announced, clutching that old WWII backpack by the straps.

“Pop on out to the car, then, Harry, and I’ll be there as soon as I’ve binned the rubbish,” Stephen told him. He headed out to the side of the garage where the bins were, and grinned to himself at the sight of Petunia Dursley pretending to prune the roses while craning her neck to peer into the next-door neighbour’s garden.

She turned at the sound of the broken boards being dropped into the bins. “You!” she exclaimed. “Where’s the boy?”

“In my car,” Stephen said. “He’s been invited to celebrate his birthday with some people we know. I’ll have him back here about half-seven, barring traffic snarls.

“Good,” she responded. “That way I can take my Dudley out for a special excursion, without having to either drag him along to ruin Duddy’s good time or pay old Mrs. Figg to mind him.” She paused, then stiffly requested, “Would you stay with the boy until we return, in case we run late? I’ll leave the spare key under the mat. You seem to like the boy, but then again, you’re both freaks so why shouldn’t you get along.”

Stephen nodded. “Your nephew is a bright young man and I’m just sorry you can’t see past his difference to get to know him a little better.” He shrugged, and added, “And don’t worry about either of us doing anything ‘freakish’ within the house either. He and I will be shopping for a new bed come Saturday, so I’ll grab an advertising flyer or two while we’re out so he can look over what’s available.”

Petunia nodded. “I’ll hold you to that.” A pause, followed by a grudging, “And I hope the boy has a good time today.” She promptly turned her attention back to the garden next door, from whence some interesting noises were now emanating, her face taking on an expression of spiteful glee.

Stephen laughed to himself as he joined Harry in the car and pulled away. “I didn’t know your aunt was such a keen spy,” he said. “She certainly likes keeping tabs on the doings in the area.”

Harry laughed as well. “She was still looking over the fence? Aunt Petunia is convinced that the woman next door is doing something strange while her husband is at work, and keeps trying to catch her at it. Whatever ‘it’ might be.” He shrugged, not particularly interested in the behavior of the next-door neighbour when he was being taken on some sort of surprise trip. “Are you sure you can’t tell me where we’re going?” he asked again.

“We’re going to spend the day with some friends of yours,” Stephen hinted.

Harry looked puzzled. “I don’t have any friends,” he stated. “Any time any of the kids talk to me, Dudley and his lot gang up them until they leave me alone again. Everyone in school is afraid of him.”

They pulled into the Fairoak Airfield car park and Stephen motioned for Harry to get out of the car. “These friends don’t go to your school.” He could see the RAF helicopter waiting and gave a wave. The flight crew waved back and got to their feet from where they’d been sitting in the aircraft’s open doorway drinking from bottles of water or just relaxing.

Harry’s eyes widened as they approached the helicopter and one of the uniformed RAF people saluted them. “Welcome aboard, Mr. Coyner, Mr. Potter. You’ll be pleased to know all indications are for the best possible conditions. ETA to Highgrove is thirty minutes, and we hope you’ll enjoy your flight.” The officer helped them into the craft and showed them how to latch their safety harnesses before he climbed into the unoccupied front seat. He and the other officer said a few
brief words to each other that made no sense to Harry but obviously meant something to them, and then the engine spooled up with a whine, the rotors started to turn, and the helicopter lifted gently into the air.

Harry leaned in towards Stephen. “Isn’t Highgrove the private estate of the Prince and Princess of Wales?” he asked.

“Got it in one, Harry,” Stephen grinned. “Her Royal Highness arranged for you to come and play with the Princes for your birthday. And the school clothes we brought are because you three lads will be having your birthday tea with her before you and I return to Surrey tonight.”

“Brilliant!” Harry breathed. And then he grinned. “Of course, no one would ever believe it if I told them.”

Stephen shook his head. “You never know, some might. Surely more of the teachers at your school than just the one Princess Diana went to visit that day knew that she and the Princes were there. And the playground was full of children who saw you get between Dudley and Prince Harry; I bet some of them recognized the Princes even if you didn’t.”

Harry shrugged a little. “It doesn’t matter. I’ve only got two more years before I’ll be going away to school and I’ve got a lot I need to learn before then. I’ll be too busy to worry about playing much anyway.”

“Always make some time to play, Harry,” Stephen advised. “Even if your preferred way to play is to practice your yoga or read a book, you’ve got to remember to relax and enjoy, or else you’ll burn yourself out with stress. I know that you’ve been robbed of a proper childhood and in a lot of ways you’re much older than your years. But even old folks like me need our downtime to relax, so that goes double for you.”

Harry grinned, his expression brightening. “Do you think the Princes might like to try yoga?” he asked.


They landed at Highgrove not long after that, and were escorted to a limo to bring them from the helipad to the house. Princess Diana and the Princes were out front waiting when the car pulled up.

“Happy birthday, Harry!” they chorused as Harry and Stephen got out.

The two bowed to the Princess and the Princes. “Thank you, Your Royal Highnesses,” Harry said shyly.

The taller of the two Princes stepped forward. “Mummy says we don’t have to be super formal here at Highgrove. Call me Wills, and he’s also Harry.” He gestured to his younger brother. “Do you like puppies and ponies? There’s a new litter of corgis out back, and we picked out a pony for you to use so we can go for a ride.”

Harry shrugged a little, unused to being asked what he liked. “I never rode a pony. Is it hard to do?”

“Not at all,” Wills enthused. “And we picked a quiet pony for you. Mummy said you might not know how to ride. We can go slow at first. Come on!”

“Remember your helmets, boys,” Diana called, “And make sure you have the stablemen find one to fit Harry. And make sure that whatever you decide to do for the day, you’re back at the house in time to clean up for tea.”

“Yes, Mummy,” the Princes nodded. They each grabbed one of Harry’s hands and led him around
back, chattering about the puppies and the ponies.

Diana smiled at Stephen. “Won’t you come around back to the terrace and have a cuppa? Harry
looks so much better than when we first saw him a month ago at Windsor Castle. Will you tell me
all about how he’s doing?”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” he smiled in return, following her to the terrace overlooking an
informal garden and a wide swath of lawn beyond, with several outbuildings dotting the area. As
the Princess ordered tea brought out, Stephen watched the Princes and Harry lead a trio of shaggy
Welsh ponies from the stable. The Princes mounted up first, apparently showing Harry how to do
it, then his young charge swung himself clumsily into the saddle. With Wills leading the way, they
walked off into the distance.

The tea and sandwiches arrived, and Diana poured.

“So really, how is Harry doing?” she asked.

“Quite well,” Stephen answered. “I got him the proper glasses and new clothes right away. His
aunt took Her Majesty’s warning to heart and is treating him much better than before. Granted, she
still doesn’t spoil him the way she does her own great lump of a son, but… he told me he isn’t
required to cook and clean anymore beyond keeping his room tidy, and that while she asked him to
continue to do the garden work, she gave him the option of saying no. He’s no longer punished for
not completing the work by a set hour, either. She also gave him a few mementos of his parents
which she’d kept hidden from her husband all these years.”

Diana beamed. “Oh, that’s wonderful to hear! I’m so glad the Queen got through to that horrid
woman.”

Stephen nodded. “I think the death of her husband helped. It’s still quite obvious to me that she
doesn’t care tuppence for Harry, but she’s not the sort to be truly abusive on her own. The son is a
different story, unfortunately. He obviously learned from his father that it was acceptable to hurt
‘the freak’ as the man usually called Harry, and in fact, seems to be trying to take it to new levels
since his father’s death. He blames Harry for the death, you see, his logic being that if Harry
hadn’t protected your son, the family wouldn’t have been called to court, and his father wouldn’t
have had that heart attack.”

“Oh dear,” Diana frowned.

“Fortunately, Harry’s had quite a bit of practice at evading his cousin. I also plan to start him in
some sort of self defense course as soon as he’s medically cleared for contact sports. It seems he’s
had some fractured ribs in the past that didn’t heal quite properly due to the malnutrition he’d
suffered. But there’s no permanent damage done and he was given a supplement to strengthen his
bones. The doctor who saw him said to give it at least one if not two months of proper eating along
with the supplement, just to be on the safe side,” Stephen explained. “The doctor thinks he’ll not
have stunted growth or anything like that.”

Diana nodded. “Thank goodness for that,” she said. “Is he looking forward to the lessons?”

Stephen nodded with a smile. “He is, yes. And he’s also looking forward to school starting again.
He’s been enjoying the maths I’ve been doing with him to help him learn to budget his money, and
he’s also hoping his grades in other classes will improve now that he’s got the proper prescription
glasses and will be better able to keep up with the reading involved.”

“Oh, that’s always good to hear, a child looking forward to his education,” Diana enthused.

The two went on to chat of various things, keeping an eye out for the children. First they heard
laughter and war-whoops rising above the pounding of hooves, and laughed themselves to see the trio racing back into the stableyard. Not long afterwards, the boys came into view running amidst what appeared to be a dozen puppies that were yipping and tumbling and pouncing on dangling shoelaces. They helped themselves to sandwiches, Harry hesitating slightly until Wills nudged him and told him to grab some, and raced off with their lunch. Splashing sounds once they’d moved back out of sight indicated that they were playing in the brook.

A little before four, Diana dispatched a servant to round up the children and have them clean up and change for tea. Harry was amazed that he was shown to a bedroom with an attached en-suite so that he could shower and change without having to wait his turn. Wills and little Harry came to find him and lead him downstairs again. They brought him into a small dining room, where their mother and Stephen were already seated at an oval-shaped dining table. Diana smiled. “Harry and Harry, why don’t you two come sit on either side of me,” she said, “and Wills, you sit on your guest’s other side.”

The Princess kept the boys talking in a lively manner while they enjoyed a light meal of mini quiches, salad, and lemonade. Stephen admired Diana’s easy way with the children; it was easy to see that she loved children and would have been a wonderful primary school teacher had she not married Prince Charles. She managed to draw Harry out of his reflexive shyness around strangers much more quickly than he himself had done.

As the meal drew to a close, Di gave a signal to a waiting servant. The lights in the dining room dimmed, and four other servants entered; one bore a chocolate-frosted cake with light green decorative piping as well as ‘Happy Birthday Harry’ in the same light green and nine lit candles blazing on top, while the other three each carried a gaily wrapped package. Diana, Stephen, and the Princes started singing ‘Happy Birthday to You’ as the cake was set before Harry. His whole face lit up with astonished delight as they all coaxed him to blow out the candles and applauded when he got them all out in one try. At Di’s urging, he cut into the cake and served everyone a piece of the rich chocolate confection. Then he opened his gifts, marveling that he was even getting anything after the wonderful treat of the day here. Princess Diana gave him a beautifully illustrated copy of Grimm’s Fairy Tales, Prince William gave him several model airplane kits, and little Prince Harry gave him the paints and model glue to go with them.

Di read two of the tales from Harry’s new book aloud to the three young boys before it was time for Harry and Stephen to leave. Harry still had his backpack with his dirty play clothes from earlier inside, but now Stephen was carrying a large carton containing his birthday gifts and the wrapped-up remains of his first ever birthday cake. He chattered excitedly to Stephen about the fun he’d had and all the things he and the Princes had done throughout the day on the ride back to the helipad and during the flight back to Surrey.

Back in Stephen’s car, the young wizard handed Harry the card he’d bought earlier. “I was going to give you this on Saturday, but since I’m seeing you today…”

Harry opened the card and his eyes grew wide when the tickets dropped out. “A quidditch game? You’re going to take me to see a quidditch game? Thank you so much, Stephen, this is brilliant! I’ve never in my life had such an amazingly wonderful day!”
"words" = speech
::words:: = Parseltongue

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

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When Stephen arrived on Saturday morning, Harry was ready and waiting, the quidditch tickets tucked securely in his pocket. But Stephen wasn't ready to leave right away. “Let's go clear all the furniture out of your room,” he suggested. “That way you can get yourself a nice matched set like I bet your cousin has, when we're at the furniture shop. As long as your aunt will be home, they can deliver it and it will be ready and waiting for you to get home tonight.”

“Okay,” Harry nodded. He went up to his room and carried the rickety desk chair downstairs and out to the bins, while Stephen took the tiny nightstand. Then between the two of them, they moved the wardrobe, the desk, and the ratty old mattress out as well, leaving only his trunk behind.

Stephen let Petunia know to expect a delivery later that day. She frowned but didn't comment. They headed off to yoga class, where he had every bit as much fun as Harry did. After that, he and Harry set off for the closest furniture shop.

Harry was nearly overwhelmed by the choices there. He was rather drawn to a boys' bedroom set with a knights and castles theme to it, but Stephen cautioned him to think about the future as well as what he liked right now. He considered that for a few minutes. “I think I see. The knights and castles set is really cool, but in a year or two, I might not like that era in history anymore, or I might need more space than that fancy wardrobe has... but I probably won't be able to afford a whole new set of furniture. So I'm better off getting something plain, yes?”

“Not necessarily plain,” Stephen said, “but not themed, either. Something classic and elegant, that will suit your taste for the next eight or nine years.”

Harry nodded and turned his attention to the more timeless pieces. After another half an hour of deliberation, he picked out a sturdy set in golden oak that featured a sleigh bed and a nightstand with a single drawer and a small bookshelf underneath. The wardrobe featured three roomy drawers below the hanging rack, and the desk chair had a gracefully curved back that resembled the shape of the bedstead. The purchase also included the foundation and mattress, and he picked out a pillow as well. Finally, he chose a duvet with two covers, one cobalt blue and one forest green, and sheet sets of pale blue and green to coordinate.

Stephen took care of arranging for the set to be delivered and assembled that afternoon, and then led a smiling Harry from the shop.

“Where are we going now?” Harry asked eagerly. “Is it almost time to go to the quidditch game?”

“Almost,” Stephen chuckled. “You need makeup and glamours applied first, and I thought we might stop off for lunch somewhere before we head to the stadium. The stadium vendors only sell sweets and pasties, and the meat pasties aren’t very good. Warming charms or no, they’re never as warm as they should be.”

Harry nodded. “Okay,” he said agreeably. “Where are we going to eat today?”
“Lunch at McDonald’s again today, because they’re quick,” Stephen said. “We’ve got some time, but not that much that I want to risk being late for the match. We can decide on dinner afterwards.”

“I like McDonald’s,” Harry smiled. “Only this time I want to try that Big Mac thing you had the first time we went there.”

Stephen laughed and agreed. Over lunch, he told Harry that he’d met with Lady Malfoy and that she’d agreed to help. “She said she’d have her husband come up with an excuse to be in the old transcript files and ‘discover’ that your godfather never got a trial, then threaten to make a stink if the situation wasn’t corrected. I got a brief note from her on Wednesday evening, saying that he’d been removed from Azkaban and placed in a Ministry holding cell until his trial could be arranged, and that the trial will likely happen sometime next week. She also told me during our meeting that she’d be offering him a place to stay and recuperate from prison for a while, assuming that I was correct about his innocence.”

Harry beamed. “Thank you for telling me, Stephen. Will you know when the trial happens?”

“Probably not until afterwards,” Stephen admitted. “None of my wizard friends joined the Aurors or went into the Ministry in any sort of job that would likely bring them into contact with anyone who would know anything about upcoming trials. But I get the Daily Prophet… that’s the main wizarding newspaper… and even if the Ministry tries to keep quiet that they’re giving Black a trial, if he’s found innocent as we believe, it’s a guarantee that news will end up public.”

“I hope it all goes right,” Harry said.

Stephen nodded soberly. “Me too, Harry, me too.” They finished their food and headed out to the car, where Stephen applied the makeup to Harry’s scar and topped it off with the usual brown-hair-and-eyes glamour charms. After that, he drove to a cinema complex and pulled up behind the building, near the skips. “We can leave the car here all day without anyone getting suspicious,” he said. “Quidditch games can run long sometimes. We’re going to apparate there, I can take you side-along. It’s not the most comfortable way to travel, but it’s easier than going through the paperwork to get a portkey, and really, that’s not very comfortable either. They’re just uncomfortable in different ways. Hold tight to my arm and don’t let go no matter what until I say you can, okay?”

“Okay,” Harry nodded. He didn’t exactly like the sound of this, but from what he’d seen in Diagon Alley, he realized it was very possible they couldn’t drive to wherever the stadium was. He took a deep breath and held onto Stephen’s arm. Suddenly, he felt as though he were being sucked into a hoover while being turned inside out and then being forced back again. He shook his head, trying to clear it.

“We’re here, Harry, you can let go now,” Stephen said. “Are you all right?”

“I think so,” Harry answered, wiggling his toes and running a hand through his hair. “Will it feel like that when I learn to do it alone?”

“Yes,” Stephen said with a rueful nod. “But you’ll want to learn how anyway. Knowing how to apparate is dead useful for traveling in a hurry, or for going to places like quidditch stadiums or wizarding shopping districts without having to go through someplace like the Leaky Cauldron. Not all of them have such access points.”

Harry nodded. “That’s good to know. Is apparating something you can teach me?”

Stephen shook his head. “No, it’s not. You can’t get your license to apparate until you turn seventeen. The Ministry offers a course to the sixth year students each spring… sort of like driving lessons in the Muggle world. Then once you’ve passed your birthday, you can go to the Ministry to
take the test.” As they talked, he herded Harry into the large stadium and onto the moving staircase that would bring them to their seats.

Harry looked around with wide eyes as they sat down. It vaguely reminded him of some of the football stadiums he’d occasionally glimpsed on the telly, if his chores took him into the sitting room while Uncle Vernon was watching a game. Only here, the seats didn’t start until at least thirty feet off the ground, and instead of a net, each end of the field sported something that looked like three giant bubble wands. He cheered with the rest of the crowd as the two teams flew out from somewhere under the seating and spiraled up and around while an announcer identified them all.

Having read Quidditch Through the Ages, Harry had enough knowledge of the game to follow the action as the referee blew the whistle to start play. He gasped and cheered along with the rest of the crowd as the chasers passed the quaffle around and threw it towards the goal posts, either to score or to have it blocked and aimed back at the opposing team by the keeper. Both teams’ beaters walloped the bludgers back and forth with their stout bats, and the seekers engaged in a furious race whenever the snitch appeared. The game ended with a score of 360 to 210 in favor of the Harpies, after the Wasps’ seeker misjudged a dive and hit the ground, leaving the Harpies’ seeker aloft to make the capture.

Afterwards, Stephen side-along apparated Harry back to the car. Deciding it was too early for dinner just yet, he brought the boy back to his flat for a magic lesson. “Would you like to try brewing a potion today, Harry?” he asked. “It’s something I think you probably should study ahead, since Professor Snape holds such high standards.”

“Sure,” Harry nodded eagerly. “I’m a pretty good cook, so I bet I’ll be good at potions!”

Stephen laughed. “Don’t let Professor Snape hear you say that, or else he’ll feel compelled to make you look foolish. I think I told you once before, he’s probably the harshest teacher at Hogwarts. He and your father hated each other, and since you look like your father, it’s possible that he’ll take a dislike to you on that basis alone.”

Harry looked nervous. “Does… does that mean he’s like Uncle Vernon was?”

“Well… I know he’ll never hurt you physically,” Stephen said. “For whatever reason, most wizarding families only have one or two children, tops. So children are considered very precious, and child abuse is almost never seen in the wizarding world except among Muggleborns and half bloods with a Muggle parent. That said, he can be very mean and sarcastic. Sometimes I think he purposefully tries to scare the students into behaving, or even to push them into losing their own tempers so that he’s got a reason to deduct house points. I honestly don’t know why he’s teaching; he doesn’t seem to like children very much in general.”

Harry frowned. “Well, I guess I’ll just have to study hard, won’t I?” He brightened a little. “You know, I bet that book on meditation I bought will help, too. I read that one right off, and started doing the exercises in it before bed every night. They help me calm down and go to sleep, even if I’m upset because Dudley and his gang messed up the flower beds right after I finished weeding and mulching them or something. What potion are we going to make today?”

Stephen considered. “Well, the potion to cure boils is one of the easiest to make, so how about we start with that? One thing to remember, though, when it comes to potions, you have to follow the instructions exactly right, or they can be very dangerous. For example, if this one goes wrong, it can give you boils instead of cure them.”

“Yuck,” Harry said with a frown. “You’ll warn me if I’m about to do something wrong?”
“Of course,” Stephen nodded as he pulled out his old first-year potions book and turned to the boil cure brewing instructions. “Here, read this over while I get out the supplies we’ll need.”

Harry took the book and studied the instructions carefully. He frowned a little; while the instructions were simple enough, there was no explanation as to why things had to be done in that specific way. “Is there a book that tells the whys of making potions?” he asked. “Like, it says here to take the cauldron off the heat before adding the porcupine quills, but it doesn’t say why or what would happen.” He pointed to the next page in the potions book, and added, “But this potion for pimples has you add porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the heat. What makes them different?”

Stephen paused. “You know, I never really thought about it,” he admitted. “When it came to potions, I just followed the directions and didn't think too much beyond that.” He set everything on the coffee table and peered at the book over Harry’s shoulder. “I never even noticed that, back when I was in first year.” He thought for a moment. “You know, I’m going to write to Professor Snape at Hogwarts and ask if he can recommend a book with the sort of information you’re asking for in it. But for now, how about we get started on the potion?”

“Okay,” Harry agreed with a smile, turning back to the start of the instructions for the boil cure. “It says to weigh out the dried nettle and crush the snake fangs before stewing the horned slugs.” He looked over the ingredients and equipment Stephen laid out for him, deciding to start with the nettle. He couldn’t help grinning at the antique-looking balance scale with its collection of weights as he put the appropriate one into one pan and started gently shaking the dried nettle into the other. Next he dropped the needed amount of snake fangs into the mortar and awkwardly crushed them up with the pestle. He looked up at Stephen when he finished. “How do I heat the cauldron? Or do we move to the kitchen now?” he asked.

Stephen grinned. “No need to move. Behold the wonder of magic!” he said with a dramatic wave. Then he pulled out his wand and lit a blue fire under the cauldron; one which sat directly on the glass top of the coffee table and didn’t appear to have any visible fuel.

Harry giggled. “Brilliant!” he exclaimed before carefully dropping the correct number of horned slugs into the cauldron. He checked the book again, wanting to be sure they reached the proper consistency before adding the nettle and the snake fang. He gave the required stirs and smiled happily when it changed color as the book said. Sticking his hands into Stephen’s protective gloves, he lifted the cauldron off the fire and set it down away from the flames, and then dropped in the porcupine quills one by one. The potion gurgled and belched, then changed color once more and settled down. Harry looked up anxiously. “Did I get it right?”

“It looks good to me,” Stephen smiled as he extinguished the flames. “It didn’t explode, melt the cauldron, or give off nasty smoke, anyway. And I’m pretty sure that’s the correct shade of orange, although I freely admit I’m not a Potions Master. I don’t know if it would rate an Outstanding, but I’m pretty sure it would get an Exceeds Expectations if this was made for class.”

“Great!” Harry beamed. “Now what?”

“Now we bottle up the potion and scrub the cauldron out, clean up and go out to dinner,” Stephen said, producing an empty potion vial. He helped Harry pour the potion into the bottle and corked it, then pointed his wand at the cauldron and said, “Evanesco,” followed by, “Scourgify,” which made the last little bit of potion clinging to the sides vanish and the cauldron gleamed as brightly as when he’d first taken it out.

Harry watched in fascination. “I wish I could have done that to the dishes when they’d make me do the washing up after something like Christmas dinner,” he said wistfully. “It would have been lots
easier than scrubbing all the roasting pans and saucepots by hand.”

Stephen nodded. “I’m sure it would have,” he said. “On the other hand, at least you know how to clean up after yourself, right? So that when you’re a young man with your own flat one day, you’ll never be too embarrassed by the mess to bring friends home for drinks and takeaway, not like some of the blokes I know at uni.” He laughed, “I remember last autumn, this one bloke had saved all summer to buy a large-screen telly and a VCR for his flat, and then decided to throw a party to show it off and hopefully impress the girls. Rented some films he thought would appeal to everyone, laid in a good supply of popcorn and drinks, plus had a pizza delivery number posted by the phone. So we all went trooping over, but when we went inside, we got hit with the most disgusting stink that he didn’t seem to notice. One poor bird with a sensitive stomach actually got sick from the odor, and none of the girls stayed long enough to watch even one film. A few of us blokes stayed to help him find the source… turned out his idea of cleaning the place for the party meant he shoved all his dirty laundry and unwashed dishes under the furniture and into cupboards… and the smell was a combination of his dirty socks and a week-old half-eaten tuna sandwich!”

“Ewww!” Harry giggled even as he pulled a face at the thought. “No, I won’t ever let a flat of my own get that nasty. Do you need me to do anything else?”

“No, I think we’re about set. How about…” Stephen was interrupted by a tapping on the window. Harry looked fascinated as he opened it to admit a tawny owl with a small parcel tied to its leg. “Harry, there’s a container of owl treats in the cupboard between the cooker and the icebox, would you get it please?” Stephen requested as he relieved the owl of its burden. To the owl, he added, “And if you’re not in a rush, I need to send a letter of my own. Can you take it, or do you have to get straight back?”

The owl hoo-hooed softly and bobbed its head, perching comfortably on the back of the couch. Harry approached shyly with the container of treats. “May I get close?” he asked.

Stephen smiled. “Of course. This is Arwen, Healer Abbot’s owl; he sent her to return those books he borrowed that time he was here to look you over. She won’t hurt you. Go ahead and give her a couple of treats. I’m going to take advantage and use her to send that letter to Professor Snape so as to save myself a trip to the owl post office on Monday.”

Harry approached slowly, never having been so close to any bird before. He held out a treat and the owl sidled closer and delicately took it from his hand. “You’re beautiful, Arwen,” he said softly. He reached out and gently touched the soft feathers on her head. She gave a soft hoo-ah and leaned into his hand, quite obviously demanding more petting. Harry smiled and obliged.

Stephen headed for his desk and pulled out two sheets of parchment and ink. Jotting down brief notes, he smiled at Harry’s interactions with Arwen. He walked back over to the couch with the two envelopes. “Hey, girl,” he said to the owl, “the first one is to Professor Snape, then the other one goes back to Jason. You’re sure you don’t mind?”

Harry giggled as Arwen’s only reply was to hold out her leg for him to attach the letters. Once they were in place, she bobbed her head, gave another friendly-sounding hoo-ah, and took off out the open window.

“As I was saying when Arwen showed up, how about pizza before you have to be back to your aunt’s?” Stephen asked.

“Sounds good,” Harry nodded. They set off and enjoyed their pizza before Stephen brought Harry back to Privet Drive.
Harry was pleased to see his new bedroom furniture all ready and waiting for him, with the blue sheets and duvet cover already on the bed. Curiously enough, he also heard an unfamiliar and very soft voice grumbling from within the bed, although it appeared unoccupied. He peered suspiciously underneath first, wondering if Dudley or one of his gang was hiding there in an attempt to scare or even hurt him, but the space was empty. He moved the pillow and tugged the duvet back, revealing a reddish-brown snake with black markings, which immediately lifted its head to scent the air. Then he heard ::Fressshhh air at lasst! But I don’t know where to exssit thisss burrow before thisss little human triesss to hurt me:::

Harry blinked. ::I wouldn’t hurt you unlessss you tried to hurt me firssst. I’m not a bully like Dudley::: He didn’t realize he was no longer speaking English.

The snake flicked its tongue in surprise. ::You sspeak!::

::Of coursse I sspeak::: Harry retorted. ::You’re the sssnake, you’re the one who ssshhouldn’t be sspeaking:::

The snake gave a hissing laugh, shaking its head from side to side. ::You are sspeaking my language and not your own, little human, little wizzsard. You mussst be a wizzsard; there have been few who can sspeak it and all have had great magicss:::

Harry looked astonished. ::I didn’t know that. But yesss, I am a wizzsard, or ssso I’ve been learning::: He considered, and then asked, ::How did you get here anyway?::

::Ssseveneal little humansss found me where I wassss sssunning myssself and captured me, then put me into thisss ssstuffy thing::: the snake explained. ::They were bigger than you, one looked quite fat and jussssy, but they were not fully grown either:::

::Dudley and hisss gang::: Harry answered. ::They probably hoped you would ssscare me into ss screeming, ssso that I would be punisssshed for making noissse. Will you be all right ssstaying here in my room until morning? If I try to bring you outssside tonight, I’ll likely be punisssshed:::

The snake nodded. ::Yesss, jusssst pleasssse take me off thisss ssstuffy thing:::

Harry chuckled. ::Ssertainly. I would in any cassse. It issss called a bed, and that issss where humanssss sssleep. I wouldn’t want to ssshhhare the bed, for fear I would roll over and crussshhh you. I will assssk you to ssstay in thisss one room, though, ssso you don’t ssscare my aunt::: He held his arm out for the snake to slither onto. ::I’m called Harry. What issss your name?::

::Ssseren::: the snake replied as he coiled around Harry’s wrist. ::It issss good to meet you:::

Harry looked around and decided the bookshelf section of the nightstand would be the safest place for his new friend to spend the night, as he had not yet put anything there. He lowered Seren to the shelf. ::Thisss issss likely where you’ll be ssssafe::: he said.

::My thankssss, Harry::: Seren said as he slithered from the boy’s wrist to the shelf, where he promptly coiled up and went to sleep.

Harry just grinned as he changed into his pajamas and settled into bed to do his meditation exercises before sleeping. His last thought before beginning the exercise was that he couldn’t wait to tell Stephen about this!
That same evening, as Professor Severus Snape was relaxing in his rooms following a peaceful afternoon of brewing veritaserum for the Ministry, he was surprised by an owl gliding in through his private owl chute. As he was not expecting any correspondence, he looked it over carefully before taking the letter addressed to him. The owl made its way out again immediately, presumably to deliver the other letter as well. It was the middle of the summer holidays and it wasn’t a Howler, so he only gave it a perfunctory scan before opening it, figuring the odds of it being from an angry parent were low. It passed the scan, so he opened it.

**Professor Snape,**

My name is Stephen Coyner, and I was a student of yours in my fifth year at Hogwarts, your first year teaching. I’ve recently been put into contact with a youngster who will most likely be attending Hogwarts in the near future, and who has shown an interest in Potions. This child is already asking questions that I am not able to answer with regards to the preparation of ingredients and how they interact. Can you recommend a book or books that might help him learn the information he seeks? While I don’t know if his interest will last as he’s still young, even if he isn’t a potential Potions Master, I’m sure you’d appreciate having at least one student who is unlikely to blow up his cauldron when he starts Hogwarts.

Respectfully yours,

**Stephen Coyner**

Severus thought for a few minutes, but couldn’t place Mr. Coyner in his memory, which meant that he’d been neither an outstanding potions student nor an outstandingly terrible one. The man obviously hadn’t gone on to take NEWT-level potions, but at least he was smart enough to know when he didn’t know, and to seek assistance from someone who did.

He wrote out a brief reply, suggesting that Mr. Coyner should obtain *A Starters’ Guide to Ingredient Interactions* and *Beginners’ Brewing*, both by Tansy Galingale, as those were the books he always quietly suggested his first-year Slytherins send for as soon as school started each year. Of course, well over half of them already had the books, as they were the ones most likely to have had private tutors before starting Hogwarts. He also added his personal thanks to the man, for not simply allowing the child to experiment willy-nilly. He addressed the envelope and laid it on the box containing the veritaserum; he would have to leave Hogwarts on Monday in order to get to the Ministry to deliver the truth potion anyway, so he would just go to Hogsmeade and send it off from the owl post office there before flooing to the Ministry from The Three Broomsticks.

After that, Severus poured himself a brandy and settled into his favorite reading chair with a potions journal for a couple hours of reading before he retired for the night.
Trials and Discoveries

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

On Monday, just over half the members of the Wizengamot slowly assembled in Courtroom Three of the Ministry, summoned by Madam Bones. As they filed in and took their seats, they murmured together in surprise when Albus Dumbledore failed to appear. The murmuring increased when Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy arrived, but sat in the spectators’ gallery. Everyone wondered why Lord Malfoy was not taking his seat with them as usual.

Minister Fudge and Madam Bones entered together before anyone had a chance to ask the Malfoys any questions. Fudge looked rather impatient as he took his place, but Madam Bones’ expression was much harder to read. A court reporter hurried in behind them, followed by two Aurors escorting Sirius Black and an unfamiliar barrister, and the murmuring grew still louder.

For his part, Sirius had hope for the first time in nearly eight years. When the barrister turned up in the holding block for a consultation, he told the man the entire story. He’d half-expected to be sneered at, but the barrister merely nodded and told him that he would make sure veritaserum was used in his trial. He took a deep breath, trying to steady his nerves and turned his attention to Madam Bones, who had risen to speak.

“My Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, thank you for interrupting your holidays to meet here today. I called you here in order to correct a terrible mistake that could have been prevented with a little more care. It was brought to the attention of Minister Fudge and myself, that in the confusion following the fall of He Who Must Not Be Named and the sheer numbers of accused being processed through the Ministry, Sirius Black never actually received a trial,” Madam Bones announced. “Both Minister Fudge and I agree that as the law requires all alleged criminals be tried before the Wizengamot, we needed to correct this situation as quickly as possible, lest the Ministry be accused of ignoring its own laws for its own convenience. I ask you, my Lords and Ladies, to please judge this case as if the alleged crimes had taken place yesterday and not almost eight years ago.”

Madam Bones returned to her seat and Fudge gave a disinterested rap of a gavel on the table before him. “Let the proceedings begin,” he said with the air of a man who believes he has better things to do.

The court reporter stood. “Let the record show, 5 August 1989, Wizarding Britain vs. Sirius Black, for the crimes of betraying James and Lily Potter to You Know Who, and the murder of Peter Pettigrew and a dozen Muggles. Madam Amelia Bones of the DMLE represents wizarding Britain, and Mister Howard Cheatham stands for the accused. Chief Warlock Dumbledore is barred from judgment in this case due to a conflict of interest as he currently holds the proxy vote for Lord Black. Lord Malfoy is also excused by his own request as Lord Black is his wife’s cousin. Lord Geoffrey Aurifaber, as the most senior member present, will speak for the Wizengamot today.” He sat back down again.

Madam Bones stood. “My Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, when James and Lily Potter went into hiding in the autumn of 1981 after being targeted by You Know Who, they were heard in Diagon Alley asking Sirius Black to be their Secret-Keeper as their destination was going to be placed under Fidelius. As we all know, only the Secret-Keeper can reveal the location of a
residence under Fidelius; while another person may learn the secret from the Secret-Keeper, that person will be incapable of repeating that information to a third party. Therefore, Sirius Black is the only possible culprit to have given the location of the Potters’ hiding place to You Know Who. Furthermore, witnesses have given Pensieve testimony that Peter Pettigrew named Sirius Black as their betrayer and threatened to turn him in just before Black caused the explosion which claimed his life as well as that of a dozen Muggles in the area. It was pure luck that Black was caught in and stunned by the backlash of the explosion, enabling Ministry Aurors to take him into custody before he could escape.”

She looked at the group. “It is the opinion of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement that Sirius Black is a danger to the wizarding world, and as such, should be given the maximum sentence under the law.” She returned to her seat.

Barrister Cheatham stood. “My Lords and Ladies, Lord Sirius Black is innocent of all charges. I request that veritaserum be used on Lord Black, so that he cannot be accused of lying to the court. I further request that Madam Bones be the one to supply and administer the veritaserum, so that there can be no accusations that a substitute was used instead.” He led Sirius to the interrogation chair, where the enchanted shackles snapped closed around the man’s wrists and ankles.

Madam Bones nodded and approached the prisoner with the vial of veritaserum already in hand. Sirius opened his mouth to be dosed, eager to finally have his side of the story heard. She carefully administered the prescribed three drops and waited for the dose to take effect. When his eyes started to glaze over, she began the questioning. “Please state your name for the records,” she requested.

“Sirius Orion Black,” he answered.

“What was your profession prior to your arrest?” she continued, making sure he was fully under the potion’s influence before moving on to the important questions.

“I had recently finished Auror training,” Sirius replied, “and was working partnered with Alastor Moody on a six-month temporary partnership to gain experience before being given solo assignments.”

Madam Bones nodded. She’d looked up his records, and had asked that particular question as a way of confirming that the veritaserum was working properly. “When did the Potters make you their Secret-Keeper?” she asked next.

Sirius looked her straight in the eye. “Never,” he said. “I was never their Secret-Keeper.”


“I was not their Secret-Keeper,” Sirius reiterated. “James and I were best friends. So he, or maybe he and Lily together, decided that maybe using me was a little too obvious. He asked if I’d help them confuse the issue. That he’d ask me publicly to be the Secret-Keeper and I’d accept, but they’d really use someone else instead. That way, if You Know Who managed somehow to get his hands on me, I couldn’t give him the information. Meanwhile the real Secret-Keeper would remain unknown and hopefully safe from You Know Who.”

Murmurs broke out among the seated members of the Wizengamot as that bombshell dropped. Even Fudge was sitting up and staring at Sirius with his mouth hanging open. Madam Bones pulled herself together after a moment and came up with another question. “Who was the Potters’ Secret-Keeper, since it wasn’t you?”
“Peter Pettigrew,” Sirius stated flatly.

This time, the murmurs grew so loud that Madam Bones cast a silencing spell around Sirius until order was restored, so that the man wouldn’t be overwhelmed by the sheer number of questions being hurled by the members of the Wizengamot. Fudge eventually found his wits, picked up his gavel, and pounded for order. It took a few minutes, but the courtroom finally quieted.

Madam Bones canceled the silencing spell and considered her next move. “Is that why you killed Pettigrew?” she tried. “Were you trying to get vengeance for James?”

Sirius shook his head. “He’s not dead, as far as I know,” he told her. “I was trying to capture him when he caused that explosion.”

She had to cast another silencing spell as his words set off another storm of comments, questions, and exclamations from the seated Wizengamot members. When everyone calmed down and quieted once more, she asked, “How do you know he’s alive? All the Aurors found of him was one finger.”

“I saw him transform after he cut his own finger off,” Sirius said. “He cut off his finger while screaming that I’d betrayed James and Lily, then he cast an incendio at a muggle fuel tank and turned into his animagus form and scurried away. He’s a rat, his animagus shape, I mean.”

“He was not listed in the Animagus Registry,” Madam Bones said. “Do you know when he became an animagus?”

Sirius reddened at that question. “Fifth year. Me and him and James all became animagi that year. We, ah, we thought it was funny, not registering, because how many people would have believed that three kids who had yet to take their OWLs, let alone NEWTs, could have learned the animagus transformation?”

“Not many,” Madam Bones admitted with a slight twitch of her lips. “All right. Without going into too much detail, please give the court your version of the events starting with the night of 31 October 1981 and ending with your arrest.”

He took a deep breath. “I’d gotten off work and decided to floo over to see Peter. He’d been acting more and more nervous in the week or so that it had been since the Potters made him their Secret-Keeper, so I thought maybe he’d feel better if I came over for a while. But he wasn’t home, which was odd, because he practically never went out without me or James or Remus. I waited at least an hour, but he didn’t come home, so I figured maybe he’d gone over to visit the Potters. I didn’t want to barge in on them so close to dinner time, so I went home and made an early night of it. James had given me their family clock before they moved, so I could see for myself that they were okay because I couldn’t drop in every day anymore. The clock woke me up just after midnight, with the ‘mortal peril’ alarm going off. I threw clothes on and took my motorcycle to get there as fast as I could without apparating… I was that worried about them that I figured I’d splinch myself if I tried. Hagrid had gotten there just before me and got Harry out of the wreck of the cottage, but it was too late for James and Lily. Hagrid said he was going to take Harry to Dumbledore, that Dumbledore was going to ask Lily’s sister to look after her nephew for a few days until the Potters’ will was read, which would give me the time to make whatever arrangements I would need to do to take custody of Harry. I’m Harry’s godfather, and he’s also my heir since I don’t have children of my own, and James and Lily had told me they wanted me to take him in if anything happened to them. It didn’t surprise me that Dumbledore knew I was supposed to raise Harry. So I told Hagrid to take my bike to bring Harry to Dumbledore, to make the trip easier on him. After he left, I went inside and salvaged what I could from the house, which wasn’t much, and boxed it up, then I started trying to think like an Auror. I went back to Peter’s place and this time I looked around
carefully because I knew something had to be up with him. No one else could have betrayed the Potters, after all. Half his clothes were missing when I checked his wardrobe, but everything was neat and organized, so he hadn’t left in a hurry. I decided to try to find him by scent… my animagus form is a dog… and I spent a couple of days between getting ready to take custody of Harry and searching for Peter. Somewhere during that time, I dropped off the box of James’ and Lily’s things at Lily’s sister’s house, because I wanted to make sure Harry had his parents’ things in case anything happened to me when I confronted Peter. When I finally cornered him on that Muggle street, that’s when he cut off his finger, created that explosion, and escaped like the rat he is. I got knocked over in the explosion and hit my head pretty good. Next thing I knew, Aurors were arresting me, my wand was snapped, and I was taken straight to Azkaban.”

Madam Bones shook her head at that. “Didn’t anyone question you?”

“No,” Sirius answered. “Because of that double shuffle the Potters did, asking me loudly and publicly to be their Secret-Keeper, pretty much the whole DMLE ‘knew’ I was the guilty party. Especially since Peter yelled as much before making his escape. As far as I’m aware, not even Dumbledore knew we’d done that switch. I don’t think Remus knew either, unless James or Peter wrote to him and said so, because he was away when the Potters went into hiding. I’m sure if either of them had known I wasn’t really the Secret-Keeper, they’d have brought it to someone’s attention back then.”

Barrister Cheatham rose to his feet once more. “And so, my Lords and Ladies, as proven with veritaserum, Lord Sirius Black is innocent of all charges against him. An otherwise clever ploy intended to misdirect You Know Who backfired upon him and the Potters both, when the person in whom they all placed their trust turned traitor on them all. Meanwhile, the true betrayer, Peter Pettigrew, supposedly dead and the posthumous recipient of the Order of Merlin, First Class, may well still be alive and hiding, having gotten away with his crimes.”

Madam Bones administered the antidote to the veritaserum as the members of the Wizengamot spoke quietly among themselves. After several minutes, they fell silent once more.

“Has the Wizengamot reached a conclusion?” Fudge asked.

An elderly wizard rose to his feet. “We have, Minister,” Lord Aurifaber announced. “The Wizengamot hereby finds Lord Sirius Black innocent of the crimes of betraying the Potters to He Who Must Not Be Named, and of the killing of Peter Pettigrew and twelve Muggles. He is to be released immediately, with the full rights of any wizard, including the right to acquire a new wand. As he has admitted to being an unregistered animagus, for which the standard sentence is one month in Azkaban, he is to be compensated for seven years and seven months wrongful imprisonment out of the seven years and eight months served. Also, he is to be properly registered before leaving the Ministry today.”

Sirius bowed his head in acknowledgement. No money could truly compensate for the years lost, but he’d take it all the same. His old flat would be long gone, of course, so he’d have to find a new place to live, or perhaps see about cleaning up his ancestral home… the gods only knew what it looked like by now since his parents had passed on around the time he’d been imprisoned. He supposed he’d just get a room at the Leaky Cauldron for the next few days, while he figured out what he was going to do and who had custody of Harry since he obviously didn’t. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he didn’t notice the chair releasing him or his cousin approaching.

“Sirius?” Narcissa’s musical voice cut through his thoughts. “Lucius and I would like to invite you to stay with us for a few days, to give you time to get yourself sorted out. Once the story breaks about your innocence, you’ll be mobbed by reporters any time you’re in public, so I thought you
might prefer the peace of the Manor to the harassment you’ll get if you were to stay at the Leaky Cauldron or any such place."

Considering that it was Lucius who’d apparently discovered his lack of trial and brought it to the attention of Madam Bones, Sirius felt it would be ungracious to refuse. “Thank you, Narcissa,” he said quietly. “Would you mind if we went to Ollivander’s before going to the Manor? I’d like to pick up a new wand before the Prophet breaks the story. Even if they run a special edition, it will take a couple of hours to print, so if I go register as an animagus and head right to Ollivander’s, we should be done before it hits the streets.”

Narcissa gave a light chuckle. “Of course. Lucius? Do you have more business here this afternoon, or will you be accompanying me and Sirius to Ollivander’s and home again?”

Lucius, who was conferring with Barrister Cheatham, glanced over to his wife. “You and your cousin go on, my dear. I have a few people I need to speak with yet today, with regards to the proposal I plan to put forward at the Governors’ meeting this evening.”

“Very well, Lucius, we’ll see you at dinner,” Narcissa said. She gave a casual wave of her wand, transfiguring the holding cell robe Sirius wore into a plain dark blue casual robe that wouldn’t look out of place in public. Taking her cousin’s arm, she accompanied him to the Animagus Registration Office. She was impressed in spite of herself at the sheer size of the Grim-like dog he changed into, so the official registering him could note down any identifying markings and take a photograph of him for the records.

When he was done at the registry, Sirius gave Narcissa a questioning glance. “Are we flooing to Diagon Alley, or are you going to side-along me?”

Narcissa considered the options. “Floo, I think. I would imagine you’re not yet feeling your best, and floo is slightly less uncomfortable, after all.” She led the way to the bank of outgoing-traffic public-access fireplaces in the Ministry atrium and tossed a pinch of floo powder into the nearest one. “Diagon Alley,” she said and stepped into the green flames.

Sirius followed immediately, stumbling a bit as he emerged from the large public transit hearth behind Fortescue’s. “I’d forgotten how disorienting that can be,” he muttered as he brushed himself off.

Narcissa chuckled. “I can imagine,” she said, sounding as if she sympathized. “Let’s go get your new wand and get home so you can relax, shall we?”

“I should get some clothes, too,” he said with a slight frown. “I don’t think your husband would appreciate me raiding his wardrobe, even if his clothes would fit me.”

She nodded. “All right, we can stop by Madam Malkin’s as well. She can get your measurements and if there’s nothing in stock, she can do the alterations and send things by owl later. If that’s all right with you?”

“That’s fine,” he said as they made their way into the old wandmaker’s shop. He wanted to question her as to her apparent change of heart towards him, but he knew that she would never answer such questions anywhere but at her home, if she would even answer them at all. First things first, then, a new wand, some new clothes, and hopefully then some answers.

Old Garrick Ollivander emerged from the back of the shop when they entered. “Lady Malfoy, ebony and mermaid hair, eleven inches. Sirius Black, rowan and dragon heartstring, eleven and a half inches. I take it you’re here for a replacement?”
Sirius nodded. “Yes, I am,” he said. It was spooky, how the old wandmaker could identify everyone who walked into the shop by name and wand. He watched as the man pulled down several boxes from the shelves, and sighed as Ollivander’s tape measure began measuring everything from the length of his wand arm to the distance from his earlobe to his shoulder.

“Stop that!” Ollivander ordered the tape measure as it started to encircle his head. The annoying tape measure dropped to the counter as Ollivander pulled the lid from the first box. “Ash and hippogriff feather, fourteen inches, nice and springy,” he said.

Sirius gave it a wave, only to have it snatched away again. He repeated the process at least a dozen more times before finding a new match. Made of hawthorn and phoenix feather, fifteen inches and flexible, the wand felt incredibly warm and welcoming to his touch. A quick wave produced a veritable fountain of green and gold sparks. He smiled as Narcissa quietly paid for the wand.

“Excellent,” Ollivander nodded. “Quite good for transfiguration and protection. It will serve you well. My congratulations on your exoneration and freedom, Lord Black.” He disappeared into the back room once more.

“Off to Madam Malkin’s, then?” Narcissa asked with a small smile. “Will you allow me to select the colors and styles for you? Fashions have changed somewhat since you’ve… last been in a position to worry about clothing. And since you’ll surely have to face the press sooner or later, you might as well look your best when you do.”

Sirius gave a short bark of laughter. “What is it with females and clothes shopping?” he asked the sky. “All right,” he told Narcissa. “Have fun dressing me up like some giant doll… as long as I see colors other than green, black, and silver.”

“Oh, but you’ll look so good in all three!” she exclaimed with a small pout.

He blinked. Was his cousin actually teasing him?

“Oh, fine,” she said with a smile. “You can have blues and purples and maybe even some dark reds, too.” She tugged him into the clothing shop, where they spent the better part of an hour. When they emerged again, Sirius was carrying two bags of shrunken packages. Six more bags were supposed to be delivered within a week. She led him back to the public transit fire and they flooed to Malfoy Manor.

Sirius looked around with a combination of awe and unease. The transport room alone was decorated opulently, but in a much lighter and airier style than that of his ancestral home. He had to admit it was more welcoming than forbidding, but at the same time, he still was more than a little confused and concerned by the possible motives behind the help his cousin and her husband were giving him. He decided he ought to at least be polite, so as she led him further into the manor house, he said with complete sincerity, “Your home is lovely.”

Narcissa smiled, pleased with the compliment. “Thank you,” she said, opening the door to a large and comfortable bedchamber. “I’ve had the elves prepare this room for your use. The washroom is just through that door there,” she gestured, “and the French doors open onto the terrace. I thought you might enjoy being able to walk outdoors whenever you wished.”

He nodded. Despite his fears, it seemed as though he really was going to be free to come and go as he wished. “Thank you,” he said gratefully. “Narcissa… I… why are you doing this?” he then blurted out. “I mean… the family… I never agreed… and with everything…”

“I’m sure you are rather confused, Sirius,” she replied serenely. “And I do expect to gain
something from helping you. However, at the moment, I am still under oath not to discuss certain things. I need to let someone know that you’ve been released, and that person will either give me permission to answer your questions myself, or else will make arrangements to meet with you to answer your questions. Quite frankly, I suspect you’ll be more inclined to believe everything coming from him anyway.”

Sirius raised a brow at that statement. “It’s that strange of a story?”

Narcissa chuckled. “It is. But for now… rest and relax. Dinner will be at six this evening, as Lucius has a meeting of the Hogwarts Board of Governors tonight. Until then, you’re welcome to do as you like. We usually have lunch brought to us… in our rooms, on the terrace, or in the library… on days when Lucius isn’t home for it. Let me call one of the elves, to be your guide… the manor is rather large, after all, and you’re unfamiliar with it. Tally!” she called.

A very small house-elf popped in. “Yous called Tally, mistress?” she squeaked.

“Tally, this is Master Sirius,” Narcissa said with a nod. “He is going to be staying with us for a time. You are to be his personal elf while he is here. Along with the usual duties, you’ll need to act as his guide, so he doesn’t get lost in the house.”

The elf’s eyes grew very big as she nodded vigourously. “Tally understands! Thank yous, Mistress, for giving Tally this chance!” The little elf turned to Sirius and asked, “Is there beings anythings Tally can be getting for yous, Master Sirees?”

He couldn’t help but smile at the tiny elf’s eagerness. “Lunch does sound good, actually,” he said. “I’d like a couple of ham and cheese sandwiches on rye if there’s any, and if not, whatever bread is available will do. Some crisps with that, and pumpkin juice to drink.”

“Tally bees right back, Master Sirees,” she announced, and popped out.

Narcissa smiled. “I’ll leave you to enjoy your lunch, then,” she said. “There’s a wireless by the bed if you’d like some music. Oh, the one thing I am going to ask of you, is that you not write to anyone just yet. I know you have friends with whom you’d like to share your good fortune, but I think you really need to speak with my acquaintance before you contact anyone.”

“All right,” Sirius nodded. He didn’t like not writing to Remus and Harry immediately, but since it was Narcissa and Lucius who’d gotten him a trial after all these years, he was willing to accede to her wishes in this matter.

“I’ll see you at dinner,” she said and left the room.

He restored the bags of clothes to their proper size and decided to explore the washroom. He freshened up and emerged in time to see Tally popping in with his requested lunch. He ate at the desk by the open window, enjoying the scents of the blooming flowers and the sounds of the wind and the birds twittering in the ornamental shrubs. At one point, he caught sight of a small figure on a broomstick whizzing by, presumably the young Malfoy. He wondered with a pang if his godson was as good a flyer, and if the boy had ever played quiddich. Hopefully he’d find out soon.

While Sirius ate, Tally busied herself with unpacking, magically pressing, and putting away his new clothing. When he finished, she hurried over to stack the used dishes back onto the tray. “Master Sirees’ clothes is all nice and neat,” she said. “Tally bees taking this to the kitchens now. But if Master Sirees is needing anythings, Master Sirees just call for Tally.”

“I will, Tally,” he said with another smile. She popped out with the tray and he yawned. Now that
the trial was over, the stress and confusion of the last week was catching up with him with a vengeance. As pleasant as a walk in the garden sounded, a nap sounded even better. He lay down on the most luxurious bed he’d felt since before he moved into his own flat, and quickly fell into an exhausted slumber.

Meanwhile Narcissa hurried to her own chambers and called for lunch. While she waited for it to be brought, she wrote a brief note to Stephen Coyner, letting him know that the trial had taken place and Sirius was exonerated as he’d expected. She also asked whether he wanted her to tell her cousin the full story, or if he would prefer to meet with Sirius for himself. After a moment of hesitation, she added that if he wished to meet Sirius, he’d be welcome to come to the Manor. Sealing the note and giving it to the elf that brought her meal with orders to take it right to the owlery and mail it off. If Lucius could get past the fact that Severus Snape was a half blood and become such good friends with the man as to make him their son’s godfather, then she could and would invite the Muggleborn Mr. Coyner over to meet with Sirius and Lucius would just have to live with it and be polite about it. Knowing that the young man worked, however, she didn’t expect a reply until much later, if not morning.

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Dinner at the Manor that evening was somewhat quieter than usual. Sirius felt horribly awkward, as it had been over a decade since he’d sat down at such a formal table. Even James and Lily’s wedding had been more casual than this.

For her part, Narcissa did her best to put her cousin at ease, by finding some fairly uncontroversial topics of conversation. “Out of curiosity, Sirius,” she asked, “What do you think of possibly instituting some sort of wizarding culture course at Hogwarts?”

He looked a little startled at that. “A wizarding culture course?” he repeated. “I’m not sure… it isn’t something I’ve thought about before. What sort of course exactly are you talking about?” He wondered if this was part of some sort of praise-the-purebloods agenda, given which side Lucius had been on during the war.

“Well, it was brought to my attention recently that most Muggleborns don’t act so offensively out of arrogance or spite, but out of ignorance,” Narcissa explained. “I was asked to imagine what it would be like for Draco to grow up pureblood and suddenly be told he had to go away to a Muggle school, even though he doesn’t know anything about Muggle culture and traditions. He’d probably have trouble keeping up with half his classes due to lacking the background to understand them, and he’d likely offend someone out of ignorance sooner or later.”

Draco gave a small but visible shudder at the idea. “Why would I want to go to a Muggle school anyway?” he asked.

Sirius answered that one. “What if something happened to make you lose your magic?” he asked in return. “I realize the chances of that happening are slim to none, but it has happened on occasion. If you suddenly couldn’t do magic, you wouldn’t be able to go to Hogwarts, would you? Nor would you be able to work at the Ministry or take your seat on the Wizengamot or anything. So you would either live on the fringes of wizarding society as a squib, always looked down upon by wizards, or you would need to get a Muggle education, because you’d be forced to live in the Muggle world.”

“I never thought of that,” Draco admitted.

“I should hope not,” Narcissa said. “But anyway, I’m told that’s what it’s like in reverse for Muggleborns. They’re suddenly told that magic exists and they’ll learn everything they’ll need to
know at Hogwarts. But most of them have a bit of a struggle, especially first year, because they
don’t have a magical background. They don’t know wizarding tradition at all, and thanks to
Dumbledore whose idea of integration is to follow Muggle traditions instead of wizarding ones to
make the Muggleborns more comfortable, they don’t even realize that wizarding traditions are
different from theirs. This person also pointed out that the people who tend to complain most
vociferously about the offensiveness of the Muggleborns also tend to be the people who could best
rectify the situation… except that the majority of them won’t bring themselves to socialize with the
Muggleborns.”

Sirius considered that for a moment. “That makes sense,” he admitted. “Especially since the
purebloods that are willing to socialize with Muggleborns are most often either rebels like me, who
deliberately ignore tradition to annoy our families; or else they’re the ones whose families have
been less than strict about tradition for several generations. So it just doesn’t occur to us to educate
our Muggleborn friends about wizarding traditions.”

Narcissa nodded. “Exactly. Anyway, I was very politely told that if purebloods were so upset about
Muggleborns’ offensive behavior, perhaps we ought to do something productive about it instead of
merely sneering at them for what we regard as their boorishness while never actually telling them
what we find so offensive. So, at the Governors’ meeting tonight, Lucius is going to propose the
introduction of a wizarding studies course, to be required of all first year Hogwarts students.”

“I decided to suggest it be required of all students,” Lucius put in, “so that those of wizarding
families who disregard many traditions will also have the chance to learn about them.”

“That sounds like something I would cautiously favor,” Sirius said after a moment’s reflection. “As
long as it didn’t turn into something preaching the superiority of purebloods, that is. That would
just cause even more resentment on both sides.”

Lucius tilted his head. “What do you mean, resentment on both sides?” he asked.

“I don’t pretend to be an expert on Muggleborns,” Sirius said, “but I was friends with a couple,
most notably Lily Evans Potter, once she and James started dating. From what she told me, in the
Muggle world, people are judged more on their talents than on their heritage. Margaret Thatcher,
for example, who was elected Muggle Prime Minister in 1979, not only was she the first woman
elected Prime Minister of Britain, she’s the daughter of a grocer. But she worked hard in school and
won scholarships to better schools than her family’s situation would otherwise have allowed her to
attend, and then when she was finished school she worked her way up the political ladder as well.
Muggle society is a little more flexible in general. It might be unusual, but it isn’t looked down
upon for a member of the nobility to marry a member of the working class.”

“Whereas in wizarding society, it was completely scandalous when James Potter married his
Muggleborn bride,” Lucius nodded, “and it would be equally as scandalous if you as Lord Black
were to marry the daughter of the driver of the Knight Bus.”

Sirius nodded. “That’s part of it, yes,” he confirmed. “But it’s also that Muggles teach their
children that very little is impossible to achieve, with hard work and a bit of luck. The kid wants to
grow up to be Prime Minister? Study hard, do well in school, and get active in local politics as soon
as possible. Then just keep moving up the ladder from the first local office. Maybe the child will
grow up and be Prime Minister and maybe he won’t manage to be elected, but the point is that no
one is going to tell that child he’s not allowed to try because he’s not got the proper bloodlines. So
the Muggleborns come into the wizarding world having heard their whole lives that they can be
whatever they wish when they grow up, and then discover that the wizarding world is… in their
opinion… at least a hundred years behind the times, stuck in an era when one’s birth regulated
one’s options and chances for advancement, and that they are the unfortunates stuck at the bottom of the heap. Is it any wonder so many of them become resentful towards the purebloods, when they see the purebloods acting as if they are worth barely more consideration than house-elves?”

Lucius looked thoughtful. “So you’re saying that what many of us see as arrogance, is merely the result of a more flexible society; one in which the only thing any given person cannot hope to achieve on their own is to become the heir to a title, is that correct? And that while we are busy resenting their attitude and their ignorance of, and apparent disrespect for, tradition, they end up resenting us because the wizarding world denies them the opportunities they’ve been brought up to expect, and they feel we treat them as little better than servants as a result.”

“That about sums it up, yes,” Sirius nodded.

“I still don’t particularly like your politics,” Lucius stated. “However, you do make some interesting points. I would like to continue this conversation at a later time, as I unfortunately must leave in the next ten minutes so that I’m not late to this evening’s meeting.” He stood up and gave a hint of a bow towards Sirius, kissed Narcissa on the cheek, and ruffled Draco’s hair as he exited the room. Draco excused himself and dashed out after him.

Sirius shook his head. “That was… unexpected,” he said. “I think I’m even more confused now than I was a week ago.”

Narcissa gave a sympathetic glance. “Things change,” she said quietly. “While my husband agreed with the Dark Lord’s ideals, I believe he found the man’s methods distasteful in the extreme. However, with me and Draco to think about, he wasn’t going to try to break away from the Dark Lord either. Not after seeing the example made of your brother.”

“What?!?” Sirius couldn’t believe his ears. “I thought Regulus died of injuries from one of the terror raids.”

Narcissa shook her head. “Aunt Walburga wanted to believe that, since she was proud of him for joining with the Dark Lord even before leaving Hogwarts. But something happened to change your brother’s mind along the way, and in the spring of 1979 he started telling people he thought might respond favorably that the Dark Lord was becoming mad and we should get out while we still could. Then in August, he vanished. Lucius came back from a meeting shortly afterwards and told me that the Dark Lord ‘extended his thanks to those of his loyal followers who had removed the black thorn in his side’ and it seemed fairly obvious he’d been talking about Regulus. Although Lucius did find it curious that no one came forward to claim the deed.”

Sirius bowed his head, silent for a long moment. “The poor kid,” he finally said. “I wish he would have come to me when he wanted out. I guess he thought I wouldn’t help, but I would have. I didn’t agree with him, but he was still my brother.”

Narcissa simply reached out and gave her cousin’s hand a light squeeze. “I know you would have,” she said. “Politics aside, you know the value of family. I just… I’m not excusing Lucius for joining the Dark Lord, you understand. But I am excusing him for not trying to walk away again, because he knew the Dark Lord would use me and Draco against him if he tried.”

Sirius nodded. “I do understand. I think Lucius was an idiot for listening to the man in the first place, but… well, it’s all water under the bridge now. I think we can manage to be reasonably civil while I’m here, anyway.” He sighed. Despite his earlier nap, he was still tired. Probably a side effect of being around the dementors for so long; his body craved sleep that wasn’t riddled with nightmares. “I think I’m going to go read for a little while, then turn in early,” he said. “Good night, Narcissa.”
“Good night, Sirius,” she replied.
After leaving the dinner table, Lucius spent a moment reassuring Draco that while his mother’s cousin was eccentric, he was harmless and might even have some valuable knowledge to share. That even some of the Malfoy fortune was invested in Muggle businesses these days, so it couldn’t hurt Draco to learn a little about Muggles, as there was always the small but real chance he might need to deal with one someday. Once his son was settled, he apparated out to the gates of Hogwarts and walked up to the castle.

The bulk of the meeting of the Board of Governors went quietly. Dumbledore presented the qualifications and background of his latest hire to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, but no one made any objections to the man. Lucius noted to his amusement that several of his colleagues on the Board were already making wagers as to what would cause this one to fail to return next year. He wondered once more if perhaps there really was a curse on the position, as no one had lasted more than a year in the post since before he’d started at Hogwarts. At this point in time, it seemed as though a good quarter of the Auror Corps had taken a sabbatical from their duties to spend a year teaching DADA. As to the non-Auror professors, their reasons for not returning ranged from family crises and health issues (a couple of the oldest ones had actually died) to legal problems including two who’d been caught in compromising positions with seventh year students.

Dumbledore rose when his new DADA teacher met with the approval of the Board, however halfhearted that approval might have been. “I do believe that takes care of everything on our agenda tonight, so if there is no new business, we can adjourn this meeting…”

“Actually, there is new business,” Lucius drawled, rising to his feet and enjoying the fleeting look of frustration in the old man’s eyes, before it was masked by the usual grandfatherly twinkle. “I would like to propose an addition to the current Hogwarts curriculum.”

That got a mixture of reactions, ranging from the encouraging nods of those he’d already spoken with regarding the possibilities of a wizarding culture course, to the astonishment and perplexity of those who were blindsided by his words. “What sort of addition?” one of the surprised members asked as Dumbledore sat back down.

Lucius looked around the table. “I would like to propose a class in wizarding culture and traditions, to be required of all incoming students. It was brought to my attention by a Muggleborn alumnus of Hogwarts that one of the larger barriers he and other of his heritage face, is a sheer lack of background in all things wizarding. They enter Hogwarts so ignorant, that they don’t even know what questions they should be asking. And while it’s nice that Hogwarts has started having feasts for certain Muggle holidays to help make the Muggleborns feel more comfortable, it does nothing to help them learn about wizarding holidays. In essence, gentlemen, I was challenged, challenged to stop complaining about the ignorance and start doing something to correct the problem. And as not all wizarding families follow all the traditions strictly anymore, I believe it would be beneficial for all students to take the course.”

“Wouldn’t that have the effect of coercing the students into following those traditions?” someone asked.
“No more than the current practice of a feast in honor of the Muggle Halloween forces those students who were raised with Samhain rites to give them up in favor of Muggle Halloween traditions,” Lucius said. “I used to believe that the teaching of tradition had no place in school; that tradition should be taught by the family. However, with the increasing number of Muggleborn students entering Hogwarts, I now believe that we need to teach wizarding tradition in school, in order to help them better fit into the wizarding world. And it certainly won’t hurt the wizarding children to learn as well, since not every family teaches the same things about the traditions. Some emphasize one holy day over another, for example, while some merely teach their children the proper responses to be made during ritual observances without going into any of the whys and wherefores behind the rituals.”

Dumbledore popped a lemon drop into his mouth. “Surely you’re not proposing that we encourage the children to engage in rituals different from those they’re raised with?” he questioned. “This sounds as though you’re trying to force the Muggleborns to change.”

Lucius shook his head, having expected some objections of this nature. “Not at all. If anything, I could ask the same of you, since it’s only been since you’ve become Headmaster that Hogwarts has started holding Halloween feasts and even Christmas feasts for those children who don’t go home for the winter holidays. Couldn’t that be construed as forcing wizarding children to engage in rituals different from those they’re raised with? I’m not asking that the rites be observed by the school as a whole, merely that all the students learn about them.”

The old Headmaster sat back again, hiding the unease he felt when several members of the board nodded their agreement with Lord Malfoy. He completely hadn’t seen this sort of proposal coming, especially considering the source. He rather liked his image as the champion of the Muggleborn, and being their main source of knowledge about all things wizarding. Still, perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad. From the sound of it, the proposed class wasn’t going to be overly in-depth, but more of an overview focusing mainly on the wizarding holy days. “It’s already August,” he said cautiously. “Surely you don’t expect us to create a curriculum and find a teacher, not to mention completely rearrange the teaching schedules in order to fit this proposed class in, all before the school year begins?”

Lucius shook his head. “No, I understand this is rather late notice to be able to organize the proposed course for this year. If my proposal passes, I would suggest that the members of the Board appoint a committee to work up a curriculum between now and, say, late January, which would then leave about eight months to find someone to teach the course and rearrange the schedules in order to fit it in for next year.”

More nods around the table told Dumbledore that the majority of the Board… all purebloods… agreed. Better to acquiesce quietly, he decided, so that when he had something he wanted to do, they’d be more likely to go along with him. With any luck, the class would fare poorly and be dropped again anyway. “In that case,” he said, “all in favor of Lord Malfoy’s proposal?” Ten hands out of twelve were raised. “The ayes have it,” the old Headmaster declared. “As this is Lord Malfoy’s proposal, he’ll head the curriculum committee, along with, hmm, Lord Beltren, Mr. Cavendish, and Mr. Traverton. And if there’s no other business, let us adjourn for the evening.”

Once the members of the Board filed out of the meeting room, most of them discussing the proposed class, Dumbledore headed up to his chambers. To his surprise, a special edition of the Daily Prophet had arrived at some point during dinner or the Board meeting. The headline, however, shocked him to no end, the more because he hadn’t had the slightest inkling that anything of this nature was going on. ‘Sirius Black Innocent!’ the main headline screamed, with a sub-heading of, ‘Imprisoned Without Trial; Previous Administration’s Failure Corrected’. With growing horror, Dumbledore read the entire article.
A member of the Wizengamot who wishes to remain anonymous had been seeking information in the court files and happened across the Black file during the search. Curious as to why the Black file was so much thinner than all the others in that section, he’d peeked into it to discover that the only official parchment within merely stated that the trial was still pending. He brought the matter to the attention of the new Minister, Cornelius Fudge, as well as the new DMLE head, Amelia Bones. The two promptly arranged for a proper trial to take place.

Black, surprisingly coherent despite nearly eight years in Azkaban, was questioned under veritaserum, at which time it was revealed that not only was he never the Potters’ Secret-Keeper, but that Peter Pettigrew was. The idea had been to make He Who Must Not Be Named think that Black was the Secret-Keeper, to give a bit of extra protection to both the Potters and Pettigrew. Unfortunately, unknown to any of them, Pettigrew was already in league with You Know Who. He also revealed that to evade justice, Pettigrew faked his own death while causing the explosion which also killed twelve Muggles, an act which was also blamed on Black. Further questioning revealed that Pettigrew is an unregistered animagus who amputated his own finger just prior to causing the explosion to provide evidence of his own demise, then transformed into his animagus form of a rat to escape.

While Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore was not present as he held the Black vote by proxy and so could not sit in judgment for Black’s trial, a quorum of the Wizengamot, headed by senior member Lord Geoffrey Aurifaber, quickly returned an innocent verdict and ordered that Black be compensated for his wrongful imprisonment. Black did not respond to any questions from the press, but left the courtroom quickly in the company of his cousin, Lady Narcissa Malfoy, who was heard making the offer to escort him to purchase a new wand and clothing. Lord Lucius Malfoy indicated after their departure that Black would issue a statement or perhaps even hold a press conference in a few days, after having a chance to rest and recover somewhat.

Madam Bones of the DMLE did offer a statement, saying, “While I’d believed Sirius Black to be guilty, I was not going to let the Ministry’s reputation be stained by ignoring the law in favor of expediency. It would have been very easy to say nothing and leave Black in Azkaban, but the right thing to do was to give Black his trial, however belatedly. Considering the results, I’m very grateful I chose to do the right thing. Considering the confusion of the time just after You Know Who’s disappearance, I intend to go through the records with a fine-toothed comb to make sure no other cases managed to slip through the cracks, and I also intend to put some safeguards into place to prevent it from happening again.”

The public is also asked to be on the lookout for a grey rat with a missing toe on one front foot, as there is a strong possibility that Peter Pettigrew is still alive and hiding in his animagus form.

Dumbledore sagged in his chair, running a hand over his face. Damn that nosy bastard, whoever he was, poking in the files like that. Now he had to come up with some way of convincing Sirius not to take custody of Harry, even though the man was legally the child’s guardian. Well, it had been almost eight years now, and Sirius had been exposed to Dementors all that time. He could probably convince the man that it would be better for Harry to remain with the family who’d loved him all this time, than to be torn away from them to live with a complete stranger whose mental state was likely not the best. He just hoped Sirius wouldn’t think to ask him why he hadn’t spoken up and
made sure to get him a trial back then.

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When Stephen got home from work that same night, he found the special edition of the Prophet waiting for him, along with a regal-looking eagle owl bearing a note sealed with the Malfoy crest. He exchanged an owl treat for the envelope, noting that the owl was waiting to take a reply back. He opened the message and read it over quickly.

Mr. Coyner,
I am pleased to tell you if you haven’t already seen the newspaper, that Sirius received his trial today and was found innocent. As you can imagine, he has lots of questions. Would you like me to answer what I can? Or would you prefer to meet with him for yourself? If the latter is the case, you’re welcome to join us for dinner tomorrow at the Manor. We eat at seven, which should give you plenty of time to get here after you’re done with work for the day. Please let me know if you’ll be joining us, so I can set the floo to accept your arrival.

Regards,
Narcissa, Lady Malfoy

He blinked and read the letter for a second time. “Wow,” he told the patiently waiting owl. “I wager I’m the first Muggleborn invited to pay a social call to Malfoy Manor.” He stepped over to his desk and penned a gracious acceptance to the invitation. Giving the eagle owl one more treat as he attached his reply, he smiled. “Thank you for waiting, friend.”

The huge bird gave a soft hurr and a bob of its head as Stephen opened the window as much as possible to give it more space as it took off to deliver his message. Once it was gone, he heated up some leftover takeaway for dinner and made sure his formal robes were clean and pressed for his visit to Malfoy Manor.

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The following morning at Malfoy Manor, Sirius awoke to warm sunlight and birdsong. Determined to relax and give his hosts a chance, especially after the conversation of the previous night, he dressed and took a short stroll around the garden before calling Tally to escort him to the breakfast room. “Good morning,” he said to Draco and Narcissa, who were already at the table when he got there.

“Good morning,” Narcissa replied with a smile. “I heard back from the person I’d like you to meet, and he’ll be coming to dinner this evening, Sirius. Once you’ve spoken to him, you can write to whomever you choose.”

Draco looked at his mother with wide eyes. “You invited a Muggleborn to dinner?”

She nodded. “Yes, Draco, I did. And I expect you to be polite. Mr. Coyner is the one who both uncovered the information that allowed us to get our cousin released from his illegal imprisonment, and gave me the idea for the new course your father just proposed to the Hogwarts Board of Governors last night.”

“Really?” Draco looked surprised. “How could a Muggleborn do all that?”

Sirius grinned at the child. “I’d like to know the same thing. Well, not about the class, about how he was the one to find out I’d never gotten a trial.”

Narcissa chuckled. “I’m sure he’ll have plenty to tell you, Sirius. As for the class, think about it,
Draco. Who better to understand what sort of lessons are needed, to let the Muggleborn fit into the wizarding world a little better?”

“Why should they need to?” Draco asked.

Narcissa shook her head just slightly as Sirius opened his mouth, so he sat back to let her answer her son. “Well, think about it this way. Is it better to teach them proper wizarding ways, or to let the proper wizarding ways vanish because so many people choose to ignore them in favor of new ways? For whatever reason, it seems more and more of them are being born and therefore being brought into the wizarding world to be educated at Hogwarts. Since there’s nothing to be done to stop that from happening, the next best thing is to teach them to fit in.”

“If I may, Narcissa?” Sirius interjected. At her nod, he continued. “It’s never a bad thing to teach someone else new things, you know. Now, for an example… the Black family home is actually hidden in Muggle London. The floos are down for some reason, but you need to get there from King’s Cross Station. You know it’s close enough to walk, but you don’t know which direction to go. You have to ask someone for directions. How do you know who is the most likely to be able to help you?”

Draco just looked blank and Narcissa laughed. “Even I’d be at a bit of a loss, if I couldn’t use a point-me spell,” she admitted. “How would you tell who might know as opposed to who likely wouldn’t?”

Sirius smiled. “Your best bet would be to find a Muggle policeman… that’s sort of like an Auror. According to Lily, one of their duties is to direct traffic around London, so they would be very likely to be able to tell you which way to go to get to any given street. And even if the one you find doesn’t know the street you’re asking about, they all carry communications devices that let them talk to one another while they’re on duty, so he can call and ask someone else.”

Draco looked skeptical. “Muggles can really do that?” he asked in disbelief.

“They can, and a whole lot more,” Sirius nodded. “If you’d like, perhaps you’d both come with me to see what state the house is in? I’m going to have to do something with it anyway, whether I decide to live there or sell. And we can take a stroll through Muggle London so that both of you… especially Draco… can see that Muggles are not the backwards children that many wizards still like to believe they are.” He grinned, “And I can show you how to recognize a Muggle policeman, in case you ever have need of one, too.”

Narcissa nodded slowly. “I hope you won’t sell the house,” she said. “I know Aunt Walburga let the place go a bit after your father died; I think she closed up half of it and transferred the bonds of most of her house-elves to me when she heard I was expecting Draco. But surely it can be refurbished. As for that tour you suggested, it might be interesting, but I’d want to discuss the possibility with Lucius before deciding.”

“What is it you’d like to discuss, Cissa?” Lucius asked as he stepped into the breakfast room. “Good morning, Draco, Sirius.”

“Good morning,” the two chorused.

“Sirius has asked me and Draco to accompany him to check on the state of the Black family mansion in London, and has also suggested he give us a brief tour of Muggle London. Among other things, he’s pointed out that it would be good for us to know how to recognize Muggle Aurors… polizemen?”
“Policemen,” Sirius interjected, correcting her pronunciation.

She nodded. “Policemen, then. The point being, if either of us was to somehow get lost in Muggle London, we could simply apparate home, or to a known destination. But Draco can’t do that. He would need to find his own way to the Leaky Cauldron or perhaps to the Black house if Sirius decides to live there. It’s rather like, oh, knowing the mending spell, for example. If you’re reasonably careful with your things, you probably won’t ever need to use it. But on the off chance an accident happens, it’s a very handy spell. Draco will probably never need to know how to find a policeman, of course, but it certainly won’t hurt for him to have that knowledge either.” Narcissa sipped her tea and then casually added, “Oh yes, Mr. Coyner will be joining us for dinner this evening, so that he and Sirius can get acquainted.”

Lucius frowned slightly. “I suppose I have no real objections to a foray into Muggle London,” he said finally. “I don’t entirely approve, but neither will I forbid it. I did tell Draco last night that Sirius might have some useful information to impart, and you are correct in saying that if the unthinkable happened and Draco somehow found himself lost in a Muggle area, it would be to his benefit to know how to recognize those who could best help him.” He took a bite of his eggs, a thoughtful look on his face, then suggested, “Perhaps you could ask Mr. Coyner to accompany you on your exploration of Muggle London? I mean no offense to you, Sirius, but you have been… away… for some time, and while you were friends with Lily Potter, she resided in the wizarding world once she married James Potter. So even back then, you weren’t making regular visits to the Muggle world, were you?”

Sirius nodded. “Well, that’s true,” he said. “And it’s not a bad idea at all. It’s worth asking him, anyway. I’d still like to go check the house today, though, if you’re willing, Narcissa. If I am going to keep it, I’m sure there will be loads to do. My mother wasn’t the best at keeping track of things such as the roof needing repair or chimneys needing to be cleaned. If she really was down to just a couple of house-elves, as long as her bedroom and the sitting room were clean and her meals arrived hot and on time, the whole rest of the place could have fallen down without her noticing.”

Narcissa nodded. “I believe I’m free this morning, although I’d need to be back by one. I’m meeting Cordelia Greengrass for a late lunch.”

“I don’t expect it will take overly long to look at the house,” Sirius nodded. “At this point, I just need to know exactly how bad it is and how much work it’s going to need before I can do anything.”

“All right, we can go as soon as we’re all done with breakfast. We should be able to floo over; Aunt Walburga never took herself off the network,” Narcissa said.

“Do I get to come as well, even if we’re not going into Muggle London today?” Draco asked. “Mother’s told me about some of the parties she attended there when she was a child, and I’d like to see it for myself.”

Sirius smiled. “I have no problem with that, if it’s all right with your mother,” he said. “Just remember, the place has been abandoned for years and I have no idea if any house-elves are still living there. It’s likely to be covered in dust at best. I’d suggest both of you wear something older, that you don’t mind getting dirty.”

Narcissa chuckled. “I’m not sure I have anything that fits that description,” she admitted, “but I’ll see what I can find. Draco, darling, once you’re done eating, go put on your quidditch shirt and trousers that you said were getting a little small. They need replacing anyway so it doesn’t matter how dirty they might become, and since we won’t be in public, an imperfect fit won’t matter either.”
Sirius grinned as the boy promptly excused himself from the table and hurried off to change clothes. “I hope my godson is as happy as your son, Narcissa.”

“I hope so too, for your sake and his,” she murmured before getting up to find something appropriate to wear on their errand. Sirius, already dressed in the most casual of his new clothing, simply poured himself another cup of tea while he waited.

Lucius looked at him. “I’ve often wondered,” he said carefully, “why it is you so violently rejected your family’s teachings.” His voice held no condemnation, merely curiosity.

Sirius thought about it for a minute. “I’m not entirely sure,” he said honestly. “I think part of it was that I had a hard time looking at someone like George Goyle and considering him superior to Snape, let alone Lily.” He belatedly remembered that Lucius had taken the young Snape under his wing, back in their first year and Lucius’ fifth at Hogwarts. “From what my family taught, Goyle as the pureblood should have been the smartest and the most powerful of the three. Yet he got held back twice during Hogwarts and ended up spending nine years there instead of seven before he finally managed to pass his NEWTs. Snape’s a half blood and while I never liked him, I can admit he’s very clever and powerful. Same with Lily and she was Muggleborn. So I just couldn’t spew the party line about pureblood superiority, when I had examples like them in front of me, especially once I was at Hogwarts myself.”

Lucius nodded thoughtfully. It was true, after all, that many of the pureblood families seemed to be producing children of less and less power over the years. “Is that the only reason?”

“It’s the main one. Although Lily said something interesting that I wonder if the wizarding world might want to consider,” Sirius said. “Apparently in a lot of the Muggle world, it’s been made illegal for first cousins to marry, and it’s discouraged when it’s second cousins, too. She said that as Muggle healers learned more advanced healing, they discovered that something about marrying cousins can weaken a family line. That at least among Muggles, certain medical conditions tend to run in families, and that cousins marrying makes it much more likely that they’ll produce children with those medical conditions. I don’t entirely understand what she was talking about, but… if it was applied to wizarding families, maybe that’s weakening the magic in some lines? I know the Goyles hardly ever married anyone but other Goyles, Bulstrodes, Parkinsons, and Crabbes, trying to keep the properties in the family. But you notice that of the four families, only the Parkinsons have any real magical strength left, and all of them are rather notable for being less than brilliant thinkers.” He shrugged a bit. “I can’t say the Blacks are completely free of such marriages, but at least we did spread it out a little more than that. Prewetts, other Blacks, Potters, Malfoys, and Rosiers, not to mention a few forays into France and Italy and Germany here and there.”

“That is… interesting, if rather disturbing,” Lucius said. “I think I’m going to have to ask Mr. Coyner if he can get me more information on the topic… I do realize you’re not an expert in the matter, and your information is second-hand as well as several years old. He might not have any more expertise than you do, but he would certainly know where to get the most up to date information.” He paused to study Sirius for a moment. “Tell me, are you planning to rejoin the Aurors?”

The abrupt change of topic caught the younger man by surprise. “I… don’t know. I hadn’t really thought about it yet. Your wife asked me not to write to anyone until after this Mr. Coyner talks to me, but really, the first thing I want to do is make sure Harry is all right, wherever he is. If it wasn’t that I’d end up back in Azkaban, I’d kill Peter for stealing these years from me!” He got up from the table, pacing in front of the windows. “That’s what hurts the most, you know. Maybe it would have turned out that I wasn’t able to raise Harry by myself, but I would have tried! And even if I couldn’t do it alone, even if I had to ask someone else
to take him, I still could have been there for him. I could have seen him, seen for myself that he was growing up loved and happy. But now… if he even knows my name, he probably knows me as the man who got his parents killed. How am I going to make that right again?"

Lucius took a deep breath, reminding himself that Sirius had been a Gryffindor and therefore couldn’t be expected to maintain a calm façade as a Slytherin would. “Surely the boy would see the story of your trial in the Prophet,” he reasoned. “That would show it wasn’t your fault you ended up in prison. You were doing the right thing at the time, were you not? Didn’t you say you’d let Dumbledore place the boy with his aunt for a few days in order to let you prepare to bring him into your home? And while doing so, you also continued your Auror duties by attempting to bring the true criminal to justice. I’m sure the boy will understand that you didn’t intentionally abandon him.”

Sirius sighed. “I hope you’re right, Lucius. I really hope you’re right.” He straightened his shoulders as Draco and Narcissa reappeared and he smiled at them. “Ready to go see just how black the Black mansion has become?” he attempted to joke.

Draco giggled, and both Lucius and Narcissa smiled. “We’re ready,” she said. “Lucius, don’t forget we’re having a guest for dinner tonight, so don’t get caught up in any late meetings.” She gave him a light kiss of farewell. “I’ll see you later, my dearest.”

Draco rolled his eyes at his parents’ display, and Sirius smothered a chuckle. “Give it a few years and you’ll understand,” he murmured to the child. “Theirs was an arranged marriage, but they got lucky and fell in love with each other. You’ll fall in love someday, too.”

“No I won’t,” Draco shook his head. “Girls are icky.”


All four of them headed to the transport room and Lucius apparated out to the Ministry while the other three picked up a pinch of floo powder. Sirius went first, stating clearly, “Number 12 Grimmauld Place,” as he tossed the powder into the flames. They turned green and he stepped in and vanished. Narcissa gave him a moment, then she and Draco followed together.

They emerged to the strident tones of an outraged house elf. “…no, no, NO! Master was a terrible son to my Mistress! Mistress says so every times she sees Kreacher!” The elf, a wizened and crazed-looking little being, stomped his foot. “Kreacher must do as Master says, but Kreacher does not have to likes it!”

“What is the problem?” Narcissa asked.

“It is being Lady Malfoy!” the house elf exclaimed. He moved away from Sirius to bow deeply to Narcissa and Draco. “Kreacher would much prefer to serves the beautiful niece of my Mistress, and her beautiful son, than to serves Master, yes, Kreacher would!”

Sirius noticed that Draco had to bite his lip to keep from laughing out loud, and even Narcissa’s lips twitched slightly. “He’s the last survivor of my mother’s elves,” he said, “and honestly, he’s been a little off for years. Ever since Regulus died. He resents having to serve me, because my mother wanted to disown me.”

Narcissa considered. She really had more elves than she needed, but then again, half a dozen of them had been given to her by Aunt Walburga. “Perhaps we could arrange a trade,” she said. “Quite frankly, one of our elves is something of a malcontent, but he’s not done anything so
horrible as to warrant clothes. If you are willing to take that one on, plus three others, I’ll accept this one into service at the Manor.”

Sirius blinked and smiled. “You’d do that for me? That’s wonderful! Especially with all the work that needs to be done around here to get the place even halfway livable.”

Draco, already exploring the room, yelped. “Eww! There are doxies in the curtains!”

Narcissa turned sharply. “Did you get bitten?”

“No, but that’s just gross!” the boy complained. “Why’d the elf let the place get this disgusting?”

“That is a good question,” Sirius grumbled.

“Kreacher cleans where Mistress sees, that was her orders,” the elf said proudly. “Kreacher will shows you.” He led them into the hallway. The landing at the top of the stairs, the stairs themselves, and the entryway of the house were all spotless.

“Why, Narcissa, what a surprise!” spoke the portrait of Walburga Black behind them. “This must be your son? What a lovely boy. Oh, and you’re here too, you wretched scum,” she added with a sniff in her son’s direction. “I’m surprised your cousin was willing to put up with your company, even to visit me.”

Narcissa coughed a little. “Actually, Aunt Walburga, Sirius has been giving Lucius and I quite valuable help in the last few days.”

“Hmmph!” the portrait snorted. “Maybe Orion was right about the boy after all.” She pointedly closed her eyes and feigned sleep.

Looking around, Sirius realized the clean zone covered the entire area his mother’s portrait could see. Perhaps Kreacher wasn’t entirely useless after all. His sanity might be questionable, but he apparently wasn’t useless. The three of them, trailed by Kreacher, looked through the rest of the house, with Sirius making notes as to what sort of infestations had taken up residence in the areas that Kreacher hadn’t tended in years. Those ranged from the doxies in the sitting room curtains, to a nest of puffskeins under a bed, to a boggart hiding in a desk in the library. Sirius sighed as they returned to the sitting room to floo back to Malfoy Manor. “This is going to take a while, I think,” he said. “Are you sure you don’t mind hosting me, Narcissa? I really don’t want to put you out at all.”

She smiled. “You’re no trouble at all, Sirius, and you’re family. You’re welcome to stay as long as it takes to get this place fixed up.”

He smiled back. “Thank you, Narcissa.” Turning to the elf still tagging along with the group, he ordered, “Go to Malfoy Manor and report to the head elf, Leender. Do whatever he tells you to, until Mistress Narcissa and I call for you to transfer your bond to the Malfoy family.”

The elf’s eyes grew wide. “Master is giving Kreacher to the Malfoy family? Kreacher will serves proper wizards again? Oh, thank you, Master, thank you!” He vanished with a loud pop.

Draco laughed. “What a weird elf. He’s even stranger than Dobby.”

Narcissa smiled a bit. “Dobby is the one I want to get rid of,” she told her cousin. “He’s obedient enough, but he’s one of those odd elves with ideas above his station. Since you’re, ah, more flexible than most purebloods, I thought perhaps you’d be better able to tolerate his… eccentricities… than Lucius does. Then if you like Tally, you’re welcome to her as well, and I
thought perhaps another male and another female as well, just to make sure everything is properly
cared for.

“I’m Tally’s first major assignment, aren’t I?” Sirius smiled. “She’s done well by me so far; I’d be
happy to accept her. And I’ll trust your judgment as to the other two.”

Narcissa nodded with a smile of her own. “I figure since Aunt Walburga gave me six of her elves
when she learned I was expecting Draco, I ought to give you a few back to help work on the house.
Merlin knows it needs it. As to Kreacher, well… the hallway proves he can work. Perhaps with
people to serve once more instead of a portrait, he’ll be better off.” She grabbed a pinch of floo
powder and tossed it into the hearth. “Malfoy Manor,” she said as she drew Draco along with her
into the green flames.

Sirius followed a moment later. When they were all back at the Manor, Narcissa sent Draco off
to clean up and then called for Dobby, Tally, Konder, and Lixy. Sirius called for Kreacher, and they
performed the ritual spell to transfer the bonds of the elves in question.

Narcissa sent Kreacher back to whatever tasks Leender had given him and swept off to get ready
for her luncheon with Lady Greengrass. Sirius looked at his new elves, feeling a little awkward. It
had been years since he’d dealt with any on a regular basis, after all. “Um, right,” he said. “Tally,
you might as well remain my personal elf and guide to Malfoy Manor since you already had the
assignment before Mistress Narcissa gave me your bond.”

The little elf squeaked happily, “Tally thanks you, Master!”

“As for you three, Dobby, Konder, and Lixy… tomorrow I’ll show you the house that will be your
primary responsibility. We’ll discuss what all needs doing to it then. For now, go to the head elf
here… Leender, is it?… and tell him you’re to help out where he needs you for the rest of the day
and evening.” He smiled wryly, “And get a good night’s sleep tonight. The house in question
hasn’t been properly cleaned in years, so it’s going to be an awful lot of work.”

All three elves perked up a little at that. “Thanks you, Master!” they chorused before popping out
once more. Sirius just shook his head as he headed to his room to wash up. He’d never understand
house elves.
And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

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At half past six that evening, Stephen apparated from his flat to the Leaky Cauldron, then stepped through the floo to Malfoy Manor. Narcissa met him in the transport room with a smile. “It’s good to see you, Mr. Coyner,” she said.

“It’s a pleasure to see you as well, Lady Malfoy, and please, call me Stephen,” he replied with a bow and a smile of his own.

“Then you must call me Narcissa,” she said, leading him through the manor to the dining room, where the rest of the family were already waiting with drinks. “Allow me to present my husband Lucius, my cousin Sirius, and my son Draco. Gentlemen, this is Stephen Coyner.”

Stephen bowed and said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

Narcissa directed Stephen to a seat beside Sirius and a house elf popped in to fill both his water goblet and his wine glass. There was a brief moment of silence, but Lucius spoke up before it had time to become awkward. “Mr. Coyner, Sirius mentioned this morning that it might be beneficial for Draco to make an excursion into Muggle London, if for no other reason than to learn to recognize a policeman, and perhaps also to become familiar with the most common hazards… just on the off chance he ever was to become lost in a Muggle area, you understand. However, as it’s been some years since he’s been there himself, I wondered if you would consent to accompany them sometime?”

Stephen smiled. “I’d be happy to, Lord Malfoy.” He looked from Sirius to Draco. “Perhaps a week from Saturday?”

Draco looked excited at the prospect and Sirius smiled. “I don’t see a problem with that,” he said. “As it happens, I have a house in London, although it’s been horribly neglected since my mother’s passing. But I’m determined to get it fixed back up once more. While I doubt it will be completely habitable in a week and a half, it would still make a good meeting place for us, so that you don’t have to floo over here and then all of us go back to the Leaky Cauldron or wherever.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Stephen nodded with a smile. “Did you have anything in particular you wanted to do or see? Other than making sure Draco knows what a uniformed policeman looks like, that is.”

Sirius looked eager. “I’d like to go to a music store. I’ll need to replace all my Led Zeppelin albums.”

Stephen was surprised into laughter. “Oh Merlin! I can see I’ll have to introduce you to some of the newer bands around, too. You’d probably like Def Leppard and Metallica.” He grinned at Draco. “You might like them too.”

Draco looked surprised at being directly included in the conversation. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard any modern Muggle music. Are these bands anything like the Weird Sisters?”

Lucius rolled his eyes. “Just what we need, more obnoxious noise coming from our son’s room,”
She laughed. “And our parents said the same about Celestina Warbeck,” she reminded him.

“A little bit,” Stephen told Draco, smothering a grin at Lucius’ reaction. “You’ll just have to hear for yourself on our London trip.”

The house elves popped in to serve dinner, and the meal proceeded amicably. Lucius brought up the approval given to the wizarding culture course idea by the Board of Governors, and asked Stephen and Sirius for suggestions. They both willingly offered ideas, and Stephen also agreed to speak with other Muggleborns to ask them what sort of help they wished had been offered to them on their introduction to the wizarding world.

As the meal drew to an end, Lucius stood with a wry smile on his face. “Mr. Coyner, as much as I’m surprising myself by saying this, I’ve actually enjoyed talking with you this evening. In fact, if you’d be willing, I’d like to continue this line of conversation another time, as I know you and Sirius need to have a private conversation tonight. And on that note, if the two of you will come with me?” He led them to a small office near the back entrance of the manor. A small window overlooked the drive leading down to the stable. “This is one of two rooms without any portraits, the other being my private study. As I understand you have some sensitive topics to discuss, I thought you might appreciate a place to talk without the worry that the portraits might gossip.”

“Thank you, Lucius,” Sirius said with a nod.

“You’ll find a bottle of firewhiskey in the cabinet, should you need it,” Lucius said as he left, closing the door behind himself.

Stephen looked at Sirius. “I expect you’re confused as hell as to what I have to do with you, aren’t you?” he asked.

Sirius nodded. “You could say that,” he agreed.

“Some of what I’m going to be telling you will be extremely upsetting,” Stephen warned him. “You need to do your best to not go flying off the handle. Doing so could easily cause harm to more than one person, most particularly to your godson.”

Grey eyes widened in shock as Sirius drew in a sharp breath. “You know Harry? Is something wrong? Who has him, anyway? The Prophet article on his birthday didn’t say, and while I have a fairly good idea as to who was on the Potters’ list of possible guardians if I couldn’t take him for some reason, Narcissa asked me not to write to anyone until I’d spoken with you.”

“There’s plenty wrong,” Stephen said grimly. “But Harry is no longer in any serious danger. Dumbledore placed him with his mother’s sister in the Muggle world.”

“What?!? Placed there, as in, permanently?” Sirius stared. “I know Hagrid said Dumbledore was going to ask Petunia to look after him for a few days, just until the will was read, to give me time to buy what I’d need to house a toddler. But then I got tossed into Azkaban…” He shook his head, looking bewildered. “But Lily always said she’d never even consider letting her sister raise her child, because Petunia hated magic.”

“She still hates magic,” Stephen said. “So did her husband, who fortunately died at the end of June. I hate to have to be the one to tell you this, but Harry was abused for years.”

Sirius flinched as though he’d been struck. After a moment, he got up and grabbed the bottle of firewhiskey along with a couple of glasses. He poured them each a drink, downed his in one go and
poured a second. “Explain,” he growled.

Stephen took a deep breath. “All right… I have to start with a little background here, so you understand how I got involved in the first place. I’m Muggleborn as you know, and I started Hogwarts during your seventh year. I discovered pretty early on that I wasn’t going to get the sort of opportunities I wanted in the wizarding world, so I completed my Muggle education by studying in the summers and I’m currently attending a Muggle university. As part of my studies, I’m interning this summer for my Member of Parliament… that’s sort of a short-term apprenticeship. Anyway, because of that internship, I was in a position to see and respond to a memo asking that anyone who’d graduated from Hogwarts please report to the Queen’s personal secretary. I did, and eventually was asked personally by Her Majesty to oversee the well-being of one Harry Potter. He came to her attention by stepping between her younger grandson and a bully, taking the blow aimed at the younger child. Investigation proved that the bully in question was Dudley Dursley, Harry’s cousin, and also made it rather clear that Harry was being neglected at best and almost certainly abused. However, her wizarding advisor told her not to remove the boy from the Dursley home, as Dumbledore had set up blood protections to keep Harry safe, protections that will only work if he’s living with his mother’s blood relatives. So after summoning the family to court to chastise them about their bully and to thank Harry for his kindness in protecting a smaller child even though he hadn’t known said child’s importance, the Queen made Harry a Royal Ward. That was the best way she could think of to make it clear to the family that she was taking a personal interest in Harry’s well-being. As I heard it, that’s what pushed the senior Dursley into such a temper that he had a fatal heart attack, right there in Windsor Castle. Anyway, I see Harry at least once a week, and I’m doing my best to teach him all those things he should have been learning as he grew up. The Dursleys had told him his parents died in a car crash and that magic doesn’t exist, and of course, punished him severely any time he did accidental magic… or any time he did anything better than his cousin, for that matter.”

Sirius growled again. “It’s a damn good thing Petunia’s husband is already dead.”

“Believe me, I felt the same way.” Stephen said. “Unfortunately, Dumbledore isn’t dead. I can only guess the man’s motives, but not only did he leave Harry with the Dursleys, he broke the terms of the Potters’ will in doing so. I have reason to think he knew about the abuse and made sure it continued. I also have reason to believe he purposely turned a blind eye when you were sent to Azkaban without a trial.”

“What?!!” Sirius roared. His glass shattered as his grip tightened, cutting his hand and spilling firewhiskey down the front of his robes. He absently repaired the glass and healed the cuts.

Stephen remained calm. “Since the Goblin Nation never ratified the Statute of Secrecy, the goblins at Gringotts accepted me as Harry’s government-appointed magical guardian, since unlike most wizards, they remember that the Ministry of Magic is not actually the highest level of government here in Britain. That loophole allowed me to get a look at the Potters’ will, not to mention Harry’s account statements. Dumbledore’s been holding the keys to Harry’s vaults, by the way; he let the Dursleys believe Harry’s parents died penniless, yet he authorized withdrawals from the Potter vaults of 1000 galleons a month supposedly to pay for Harry’s upkeep, but which went to his own vaults and not to Harry’s relatives. Anyway, the will did indeed give a list of families to which Harry should have gone if you had been unable to take him, and also explicitly stated that Harry was never under any circumstances to go to the Dursleys. Furthermore, the will specifically named Peter Pettigrew as their Secret-Keeper, and since Dumbledore was executor, that means he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that you couldn’t have betrayed them.”

Sirius sagged back in his chair, looking devastated. “Why would Dumbledore do anything like that? He was one of the good guys… he was leading the fight against You Know Who.”
“My best guess as to motive is that he wants Harry dependent on him for some reason,” Stephen said. “By putting Harry with a Muggle family that hates magic, he made sure the boy would be mistreated as well as ignorant of the wizarding world right up until he got his Hogwarts letter. Then Dumbledore could swoop in and ‘rescue’ Harry from said mistreatment, while at the same time introducing him to this strange new world that views him as a hero. It’s quite likely that Harry would look upon Dumbledore as his most trusted mentor under those circumstances, don’t you think? But of course, none of that could happen if you were free and raising the boy.” He decided to go ahead and drop the last of the bombs now. “Harry told me that two different schoolteachers made note of the bruises on him and reported him as a suspected abuse victim… and that both teachers got the sack within days of making the report and no one ever investigated the claims. Child Welfare Services might not be perfect, but they take allegations of abuse quite seriously. That the same child was named a possible victim twice but never was checked out is unheard of. Between that and the sacking of the teachers making those reports, I suspect obliviation going on, and since Dumbledore is supposedly the only wizard who knows where Harry is, he’d have to be the one doing the obliviating… because who else would even consider that The Boy Who Lived would be in an abusive home? Who would be looking for the name Harry Potter to turn up in the Child Welfare Services files? The surname Potter is common enough in Britain and there are plenty of first names that are frequently nicknamed Harry. So why are any files on this one child getting erased?”

“Dear Merlin,” Sirius whispered. “If only I’d never gone after Peter…”

Stephen shook his head. “Don’t think that way. If Dumbledore is willing to let a child be mistreated, who’s to say he wouldn’t have had you removed from Harry’s life in some other way?”

Sirius stared. “You don’t think he’d…” He shook his head, not wanting to voice the thought.

“I don’t know if he’d go quite that far,” Stephen said. “But I can easily see him manipulating your work situation… you were a junior Auror, correct? I could see Dumbledore talking with your superiors and hinting to them that you were more than good enough to be given more challenging assignments. Ones for which you’d have to be away from home for extended periods of time, and in which you would have to be extremely lucky to avoid getting hurt or killed.”

“And then he’d step in with offers to help me,” Sirius nodded. “Narcissa always did say Dumbledore was a manipulator as smooth as any Slytherin, but I wouldn’t have believed it until now. Hells, I still don’t want to believe it,” he admitted, “but everything you’ve said makes way too much sense.” He started to pour himself another drink, then shrugged and swigged straight from the bottle. “Tell me about my godson,” he demanded.

Stephen smiled. “Harry’s a bright and compassionate young man,” he said. “Well, you heard how he took the blow aimed for the little prince. Mind you, his cousin Dudley is his age and quite a bit bigger than he is… a little taller, and at least two stone heavier… and the little prince isn’t yet five. He’s also quite clever, good at maths and he’s hoping his other grades will improve now that he’s got the correct glasses, not to mention he no longer has to fear a beating if he outdoes his cousin in school. Since her husband died, Petunia’s thawed out a bit towards him. Not much, but she’s treating him marginally better. Dudley is still a bully and still likes to pick on his cousin, but Harry usually can get away from him without too much trouble. I had a healer look at him; he needed some potions to help him catch up to where he should be, growth-wise, but overall his health wasn’t bad. The healer did say to give it a couple of months before letting him do any sort of strenuous sports, so he’s currently enrolled in a yoga class… that’s a form of exercise that strengthens muscles and improves flexibility… and once he’s good for contact sports I’m going to get him signed up for a martial arts class so he’ll be better able to fight back if his cousin manages to corner him.”
Sirius gave a wistful smile. “Does he even know he has a godfather?”

“Yes,” Stephen nodded. “After her husband died, Petunia gave Harry a box of things that she said had been salvaged from his parents’ house, and that included a photo album. He asked me to identify anyone I could in the photos, and since I had been at Hogwarts during your final year, I recognized you and Pettigrew and Lupin… not to mention, Professor Snape.”

Sirius coughed and sputtered as a mouthful of firewhiskey went down the wrong way. “Professor Snape? Dear Merlin, Snivellus is teaching now?”

“He is,” Stephen didn’t elaborate. “More to the point, those photos started the chain of events that led to your freedom. Harry asked why none of his parents’ friends ever came to see him. At the time, I thought, along with the rest of the wizarding world, that you’d been found guilty in a trial, so I told him the story that was believed to be true. He told me he wanted to know why you did it, because if you’d been threatened somehow, he could forgive you, but not if you’d only done it to gain some sort of reward. I told him I’d see about getting a copy of the trial transcripts in hopes of finding out one way or another, and started my inquiry through Gringotts. That’s when they discovered that your vaults had not been either placed in trust for your heir or seized by the Ministry, which proved you’d never had a trial. That’s when I decided to involve the Malfoys. Sure, I had the Potters’ will naming Pettigrew as Secret-Keeper, but if Dumbledore got wind that I had access to both Harry and the Potter account information, I figured I’d be obliviated and prevented from being in contact with the boy ever again. But since Lady Malfoy is your cousin, and Lord Malfoy has business within the Ministry, I hoped I could talk them into ‘discovering’ that you’d never had a trial. And I managed it, too.”

“I certainly can’t thank you enough for that,” Sirius said with a nod. “But what I really want is to see Harry.”

Stephen nodded. “I figured you would. That’s why I suggested a week from Saturday for the London trip with Draco. So that you and Harry can get acquainted this coming Saturday.”

Sirius’ face lit up. “Really?”

“Really,” Stephen smiled. “I’ve been making a point of not doing any magic around the Dursley house, because I don’t want to send up any red flags to Dumbledore that Harry is in contact with another wizard. Even if he’s got watchers in the area, it’s unlikely that any of them would recognize me as a wizard, so I’m safe enough to be seen coming and going from that house.”

“But I wouldn’t be… I’m too easily recognized because of the publicity.”

“That’s worked around easily enough. Our yoga session ends at ten, and we can meet you anywhere you like by about half-past,” Stephen said. “As long as I know where ahead of time, so I can side-along apparate him there. And of course, he’ll come along too when we all go to Muggle London next week.”

“How can I ever thank you enough for all you’ve done for Harry?” Sirius asked quietly. “You’ve been acting like more of a godfather to him than I have.”

Stephen shook his head. “That’s hardly your fault. Remember, if I’m even close to being right in my suspicions, you’d have been prevented from getting close to Harry in one way or another.”

Sirius rubbed a hand over his face. “There is that,” he admitted. “I just… this is all so much to take in, you know? It seems so impossible, and yet it all makes such terrible sense.”
“I know. Believe me, I know,” Stephen said. “So let’s talk about something more cheerful for now. Is there anything you’d especially like to do with Harry come Saturday?”

“I want to buy him his second broomstick and teach him to fly properly,” Sirius said enthusiastically. “James was such a great flyer, and Harry was so adorable on the baby broomstick I gave him for his first birthday! It was charmed so that the child couldn’t go more than a couple feet up and it also had built-in cushioning charms in case he hit anything. But he took to that toy broom like a duck to water. I’d bet anything he’ll be a natural on a real broom.”

Stephen laughed. “That certainly sounds like an excellent plan, but where will you teach him? He lives in a Muggle neighbourhood, remember.”

“Oh… right,” Sirius said sheepishly. “Um… I’ll go to Gringotts this week and see which of the Black properties are isolated enough to work for flying over. My parents preferred living in town, but I know there was at least one country estate. We just never visited it. I imagine whatever house is there is a wreck, but as long as the weather isn’t too terrible, that shouldn’t matter. It’s not like we’ll be flying indoors, after all!”

“Right,” Stephen chuckled. “Owl me once you’ve settled on where we’ll be going, so you can let me know where we’ll be meeting you.”

“I’ll do that,” Sirius nodded with a smile. “But for now, I’ll let you get out of here. I know you have to work in the morning, so I expect you don’t want to make too late a night of it. Tally!” he called.

The little elf popped in with a big smile. “Yous called for Tally, Master Sirees?”

“Escort us to the transport room, Tally, and then once I’ve seen my guest off, I’ll be returning to my room,” Sirius said.

“Yes, Master Sirees,” Tally nodded enthusiastically. She led the two men through a maze of hallways to the transport room. Stephen made his farewells and vanished into the floo, and then Tally brought Sirius back to his room.

Once there, Sirius rummaged in the desk for parchment, quill, and ink. He dashed off a note to Hagrid, letting the half-giant know he’d been found innocent and asking if the man still had his motorcycle. He took a little longer over his note to Remus, expressing his hope that his old friend was doing all right and would be willing to meet soon as he thought they had a lot to discuss that would be better told in person than by letter. If possible, he said, he hoped they would be able to meet on Sunday for lunch. After he wrote his letters, he had Tally take them to the manor’s owlery and send them off. Only then did he collapse into bed, too weary to continue fighting back the tears which had been threatening since learning of his godson’s life to date.
A Siriusly Happy Day

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

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In the morning, Sirius flooed over to Grimmauld Place with Dobby, Konnder, and Lixy. All three cheerfully set about the enormous task of cleaning the old mansion. Ironically, the majority of the bedrooms were in fairly decent shape as they’d been closed off back when his mother was still living and still had several house elves. The furniture in those rooms had been swathed in dust sheets before the rooms themselves were closed up and anti-vermin charms applied. The public rooms and his mother’s bedroom, however, were in horrible shape. After about an hour of trying to take down his mother’s portrait while she ranted at him, he’d reached his breaking point.

“Reducto!” he yelled, pointing his wand at the portrait.

When the dust cleared, he had to laugh. His mother’s voice was muffled as her portrait lay face down on the floor with an enormous chunk of plaster and a few lathes still clinging to the back, while the wall now sported a new opening into the sitting room.

“This is an outrage!” the portrait’s muffled voice cried out. “Permanent sticking charms are supposed to be permanent!”

Sirius laughed. “They are, Mother,” he said as he lifted the frame upright. “There’s still a portrait-sized piece of wall sticking to your back. I decided to remodel the place, that’s all.” He leaned her against the opposite wall for the moment and called for Dobby.

The elf popped in a moment later. “What cans Dobby do for Master Sirees?” he asked.

“Wrap this portrait up in a dust sheet for the moment, until I decide what to do with it,” Sirius said. “Then you’ll come with me to Gringotts so I can set up the household shopping account.”

Dobby snapped his fingers, summoning a sheet and wrapping the portrait within it, heedless of Lady Black’s protests. He gently levitated it into the sitting room where it would be out of the way for the moment, then he looked up at Sirius. “Dobby is ready to go, Master Sirees.”

Sirius nodded. “Follow me to the steps of Gringotts,” he told Dobby, and apparated out. He reappeared at the bottom of the steps leading into the marble edifice, and Dobby popped in a moment later.

The two entered the bank, where Sirius asked to speak with his account manager. He set up the household expenses account, authorizing Dobby to make necessary purchases of cleaning supplies as needed. Once that was done, he sent the elf back to Grimmauld Place while he went over the state of his vaults. The Ministry, at the order of the Wizengamot, had granted him a total of 758,333 galleons as compensation for his unlawful imprisonment. Sirius actually got another surprise, learning that when his cousin Bellatrix Lestrange had been convicted as a Death Eater along with her husband and brother in law, he ended up being given one of the Lestrange vaults as per Ministry protocol. The Ministry had done an inventory and taken half the total cash value of the vaults’ contents and then divided the remainder between him and Narcissa Malfoy as everyone else who might have otherwise qualified for a share had also been convicted and had their assets seized. He paid a quick visit to his newly acquired vault, noting with some amusement that the Ministry had taken the majority of the actual coin but left all the furniture and household items and jewelry.
He also visited the Black family vaults and got a listing of all the Black properties he now owned, and made a sizable withdrawal.

Upon leaving the bank, he headed to Quality Quidditch Supplies and browsed through the selection of broomsticks. It took him about an hour to decide on a Cleansweep Six; while it wasn’t the fastest or newest broom on the market, it was a steady and reliable model which would make an excellent first broom for his godson. He could always get Harry a racing broom after the boy was at Hogwarts. He bought two, needing one for himself as well.

As he exited the store, Sirius became aware of several people pointing at him and whispering. More and more people started gathering and staring, making him very uncomfortable. He quickly apparated back to Malfoy Manor. To his pleasure, replies to both of his letters were waiting. Hagrid indeed still had his motorcycle and offered to meet him in Hogsmeade to return it to him at his earliest convenience. Remus expressed his pleasure that his old friend had been exonerated, his anger at Peter, and suggested a pub in Muggle London that he especially liked as their meeting place for Sunday, so they would hopefully avoid a mob of eavesdroppers.

After spending the much of the afternoon going through the listing of his properties, he attempted to floo to the ones he thought would offer the most space for his plans to teach Harry to fly. Only one still had a functional floo, but the house was in fair shape aside from the dirt of a decade, and best of all, did not contain any portraits of his mother. Satisfied, he flooed back to Malfoy Manor in time for dinner. That evening, he owled Stephen, suggesting that he bring Harry to 12 Grimmauld Place on Saturday, and let him know that they could floo to Black Oak Hall from there to go flying.

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On Saturday, Stephen pulled up on Privet Drive a little earlier than usual. Petunia was just walking out the door with Dudley in tow when he pulled up.

She told Dudley to go get in the car and wait for her, then waited for Stephen to approach. “I’m taking my son to visit his aunt,” she said. “The spare key is under the mat. Lock up behind you when you leave.”

“I will, and thank you,” he said.

“You’re… tolerable, for a freak,” Petunia said. “At least you come and go in a normal fashion, so the neighbours don’t talk. I’ve no idea what you’re teaching the boy nor do I wish to know, but it’s apparently done some good, as he’s not had an outburst of freakishness since you started coming around. So whatever it is, keep it up.” She turned and got into her car before he could respond.

Stephen stared after the Dursley car for a moment, watching Petunia drive up the road. He truly didn’t understand how Harry could be as caring a person as he was. His aunt might not abuse him, but she still made it obvious that the boy was about as welcome in her home as a badger loose in the house. He tapped on the door and let himself in. “Harry?” he called.

“Hi, Stephen!” Harry called back. Footsteps sounded upstairs and the boy came into sight a moment later. “You’re early. Is something wrong?”

“No at all,” Stephen smiled. “But go pack all your parents’ things up to take with us today. I’ve got a surprise for you after yoga class.”

Harry grinned. “I like your surprises,” he said. “I’ll be right back.” He dashed back upstairs to load everything into his backpack, returning a few minutes later. “What’s the surprise?”
Stephen laughed. “If I tell you, it won’t be a surprise,” he replied with perfect if annoying logic. “Ready for class?”

“Uh-huh! I don’t have a mat, but I’ve been practicing in my room a little bit every day,” Harry said.

“Very good,” Stephen approved as he locked the door and stowed the key back under the mat. They set off for the studio, where they spent a pleasant hour stretching and contorting themselves into the various poses of the exercise.

Back in the car afterwards, Harry asked again, “What’s the surprise, can you tell me now?”

Stephen laughed. “We’re on the way there, so I suppose so. Your godfather got his trial on Monday, and was set free. I’m taking you to meet him.”

“Really?” Harry’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Really,” Stephen confirmed. “I met him during the week, so I could tell him about you and arrange for this meeting. He’s very much looking forward to it.”

Harry clutched nervously at the straps of his backpack. “Do… do you think he’ll like me?” he whispered.

Stephen reached over to pat the boy’s shoulder reassuringly. “I know he will.” The rest of the trip into London was silent.

Harry gulped as they pulled up in front of a block of attached houses. He got out of the car and waited for Stephen to come around to the sidewalk. “Which one is it?” he asked nervously.

“Number 12,” Stephen said. He kept a reassuring hand on Harry’s shoulder as they walked up the steps and knocked.

Sirius jumped when he heard a knock on the door. “I’ll get it,” he told Dobby as the elf hurried past him towards the entry. The elf bowed and vanished back upstairs and Sirius opened the door. His breath caught in his throat as he gazed at his godson. “Hello, Harry,” he said softly. “Merlin, you look like James, only you have Lily’s eyes.” He blinked, realizing he was blocking the door, and stepped to the side. “Please, come in. Hello, Stephen,” he added belatedly.

“Hello,” Stephen said as they stepped into the house.

Harry let Stephen steer him inside, keeping his gaze on his godfather. Sirius looked as nervous as he felt, which oddly enough made him feel a little better. At least he wasn’t the only nervous one. “It’s… it’s good to meet you at last,” he said a little awkwardly. “I’m glad you finally got your trial and got released.”

Sirius dropped to one knee and reached out, pulling Harry into a gentle hug. “I’m so sorry, Harry,” he whispered in a choked voice. “I am so sorry I couldn’t be there for you the way I should have been…”

“It’s not your fault,” Harry said, clinging to Sirius tightly, responding to the overwhelming love he could feel in the man’s embrace. “You’re not the one who dumped me on their doorstep.”

Sirius choked up again at that. “I can’t believe… I ought to floo Dumbledore right now and…”

Harry shook his head. “No, don’t! Please don’t. With everything it looks like he’s done already… I just found you. I don’t want to lose you. If he contacts you, just… just tell him you trust him and…”
“And you don’t want to drag Harry away from the family he’s used to, to live with a stranger?” Stephen suggested quietly. “I’ve seen the Daily Prophet reports each year, and if I didn’t know better for myself, I’d have no reason not to believe them.” To Harry, he added, “Every year on your birthday, there’s an article about you in the Prophet, in which Dumbledore announces how well and happy you are.” Looking back at Sirius, he said, “I know you’d prefer to have Harry come live with you as soon as possible. But considering everything we’ve discovered already… well, with Vernon Dursley dead, it might actually be safer for Harry to stay with his aunt, at least until after he’s started Hogwarts. I see him weekly since Her Majesty appointed me his tutor, as she wants regular reports on his well-being, and I see no difficulty adding you to the mix as long as you don’t personally go to Privet Drive and risk triggering any alarms or wards that might tell the old man you’re there.”

Sirius thought about that for a moment. “I don’t like it,” he admits, “But it does make sense. Is that what you want, Harry?”

The boy nodded. “If it will keep Dumbledore from keeping you away from me somehow, yes. You’re the second person I’ve met that really cares about me and I like having people who care. Well, I guess the Queen and the Princess of Wales must care too, or they wouldn’t have sent Stephen in the first place, but they can’t have sent Stephen in the first place, but they can’t spend time with me like you can.”

Sirius smiled warmly. “Stephen told me how you got between the little prince and your cousin that time. Good for you for protecting someone smaller like that.”

Harry blushed and smiled, still unused to hearing himself praised. “Thanks,” he said.

“I’m going to pop out to the car for your backpack, Harry, and a couple other things we’ll need today,” Stephen said. “Are we heading out right away, Sirius, or will we stay here for a while?”

“I thought we’d head right out to Black Oak Hall,” Sirius replied. “I had my elves clean a couple of rooms so we’d have somewhere to sit comfortably, and unlike this place, it wasn’t in need of major renovation.”

“Where is Black Oak Hall?” Harry asked curiously as Stephen nodded and stepped back outside.

Sirius smiled. “It’s up in Yorkshire,” he said, “on the southern edge of the heather moors. It was originally built as a hunting lodge, which is why my parents hardly ever went there. They both preferred the city. But, I thought it would make a good secluded place for Stephen and I to take you flying.”

Harry’s eyes widened and a huge grin spread over his face. “Flying? Really?”

“Really,” Stephen confirmed, coming back inside with Harry’s backpack and his own broom. “Are we ready to go?”

Harry beamed. “I’m ready!” he said, taking his backpack from Stephen.

“So am I,” Sirius nodded. “The fireplaces are big enough for three, so we can all go together.” He led the way into the half-demolished sitting room, where a small fire burned in the huge hearth. “Have you flooed before, Harry?”

“No,” the boy shook his head.

Sirius nodded. “Okay, well, the way it works is, you toss a bit of this green stuff… Floo Powder…
into the fire, and when the fire turns green, you call out the name of your destination and step into it. Not the most comfortable way of travel, but on the other hand, you don’t have to have been to your destination before in order to get there, like you do with apparation. As long as you know the name of the place and speak it clearly, you’ll come out at the correct hearth. Since my hearths here and at the Hall are large, we can all three go at once. How about you get between us, Harry, and take Stephen’s hand and mine?”

Harry quickly shrugged his backpack on over his shoulders, reaching out to take the hands of the two men. “Ready,” he announced.

“As am I,” Stephen added from Harry’s other side, broom tucked under his free arm.

With his free hand, Sirius picked up a handful of the glittery green powder and tossed it into the fire. It flared green and he called out, “Black Oak Hall!” and pulled them into the flames.

Harry had an unpleasant sensation of spinning madly while getting the faintest glimpse of grates whipping past. While the green fire didn’t burn at all, he still had a rather nasty sooty taste in his mouth. And then they were stepping out of another fireplace, into a room full of old-looking leather chairs and sofas. A big deer head was mounted on the wall, and a glass case full of smaller hunting trophies stood off to one side. A light rain pattered down outside.

“Harry, Stephen, welcome to Black Oak Hall,” Sirius smiled.

Stephen looked around and chuckled. “It’s like something out of Jane Austen,” he said. “I half-expect Colonel Brandon to stroll in and offer a stirrup cup before we ride off to the fox hunt.”

Sirius gave a barking laugh at that, while Harry looked puzzled. “He’s a character from a book called Sense and Sensibility,” Stephen explained. “It was set back in the 1790s or maybe very early 1800s. I had to read it for a literature class this past spring.”

“Your mum liked that book,” Sirius added, “which is why I got the reference. Your dad decided to read it to try to impress her, and asked me to read it too… this was before they started dating… because he thought maybe if she heard us discussing it, she’d join in the conversation instead of ignoring him like usual.”

Harry grinned. This was the sort of thing he’d always wanted to hear about his parents… what they were like, how they got together and such, he thought. He shrugged off the backpack. “Since it’s raining, may I show you the things Aunt Petunia gave me that had been theirs?” he asked. “You might know more about them, although Stephen was able to give me some names from the pictures in the album.”

Sirius nodded. “Sure, let’s all sit down, then. It won’t hurt the brooms any to get wet in the rain, but for your first time up, it’s a lot better if it’s clear. And it is supposed to clear up a bit later on, at least according to the WWN… the Wizarding Wireless Network.”

Harry laughed as he took a seat on one of the couches and started pulling things from the backpack. “These and the photo album are what I’m most curious about,” he said as he unwrapped the little stone figures. “I figure you probably know more of the people in the album than Stephen would since he wasn’t in the same year as you. And we couldn’t figure out the figurines at all, except maybe my mother collected them.” He pulled everything out of the pack all the same, the rings and the two-photo frame and the wands, as well as the album and stone figures.

Stephen looked on with interested eyes as Sirius picked up the jet dog. “Your mum didn’t collect these things, actually. Just a few with special meaning. I’m sure you guessed the lily flower was for her, right? She’s the only one of us that didn’t have a secret identity back when.”
“Secret identity?” Harry repeated, his expression indicating he wasn’t sure whether Sirius might be pulling his leg or not.

“Some wizards can do what’s known as the animagus transformation,” Sirius explains. “They can take on the form of an animal, while keeping their mind intact. By law, anyone who learns to do it is supposed to register with the Ministry of Magic, but not everyone does. I didn’t register until just after my trial, and that only because it came out during the trial that I can do it. Your father could, too, and so could… Pettigrew. It’s how he was able to fake his death and escape.” His fingers tightened on the little stone dog for a moment. “The three of us, along with Remus Lupin, were the best of friends all through Hogwarts. Eventually, though, we noticed something odd about Remus… that he always went missing from the dorms right around the full moon. It didn’t take us too long to figure out he’s a werewolf. Dumbledore arranged to have him brought to a place where he could transform without endangering anyone each month, so that he could complete his schooling. The three of us decided to try to learn the animagus transformation, with the idea that we’d be able to keep Remus company in animal form. But since no one in the school was supposed to know he was a werewolf, we decided to keep it a secret. We’d learned how by fifth year. This one’s me… Padfoot the big black dog. The wolf is Remus, known as Moony. And James… your father was the stag, Prongs. There had been a fifth with the collection… Wormtail, the rat. But I was so angry when I realized what he’d done that when I went back to the house to collect whatever I could salvage, I smashed his figure. I wouldn’t touch the photos in the album because your parents are in them. But I had to do something to cast him out of the Marauders, if that makes any sense to you. That’s what the four of us had called ourselves, and of course, Lily was included once she and your dad got together. The five figures represented what we all thought was a friendship as solid as stone between us, and the thought of Wormtail’s betrayal…” He choked up at that point, unable to continue talking.

Harry, his own eyes teary, just hurled himself at his godfather and hugged him tightly. A fuzzy dreamlike memory drifted across his mind and he smiled. “I called you ‘Unca Paffoot’ when I was a baby, didn’t I?” he asked softly. “And there was also ‘Unca Mooey’ who came visiting with you sometimes.”

Sirius nodded. “You did… I can’t believe you remember. You were just learning to talk when your parents took you and went into hiding… the plan was that if You Know Who was still after your parents by mid-December, they were going to leave Britain for a while. And since too many visitors would make it too easy for any watchers to figure out the general area they were hiding in, I knew I might not be able to see you more than once before the holidays, so we had a party before they went into hiding and I gave you your Yuletide gift early… a toy broomstick. You went zooming all over the place on that little broom. It was charmed to go just high enough to keep your feet off the floor, of course, and had built-in cushioning charms in case you ran into anything. But you were a natural flyer.” He blinked a few times, smiling at the memory, and said, “I bet you still are.”

“Really?” Harry asked.

“Really,” Sirius grinned. “In fact, this is how sure I am.” He got up and opened a chest that was off to the side of the room, pulling out a broomstick with a bow tied around the handle. “Happy belated birthday, Harry.”

Harry took the broom with shaking hands and shining eyes. “Oh… wow… thank you so much, Uncle Padfoot!” he exclaimed.

Stephen, who’d remained silent throughout the earlier part of the conversation, got up for a closer look at Harry’s new broom. “A Cleansweep Six, very nice! That’s a good all-around broom, Harry.
There are one or two faster on the market, made especially for quidditch games and racing, but this is perfect to get started with.”

“And since the sun’s come out, shall we go out and give it a go?” Sirius suggested. “And when we come back, we can look through your album while we have a snack.”

Harry grinned. “Sure!”

The three trooped outside, carrying their brooms. Sirius placed his on the gravel drive and gestured for Harry to do the same. “First thing you want to do with a new broom, is get it to come to your hand. How quickly it does or doesn’t respond to your command indicates what sort of flyer you’ll likely be. If you’ve got a terrible head for heights, for example, it might take you a few tries. Same thing if you’re just scared in general. So, what you want to do is hold your wand hand out over the broom and tell it ‘up’ and it should jump into your hand.”

“Wand hand… oh, that’s my writing hand,” Harry realized. Holding his right hand over the broom, he looked at it with an eager smile and said, “Up!” The broom smacked solidly into his hand. “Now what?” he asked as both men called their brooms to hand as well.

“Now you mount up,” Sirius said, swinging his leg over the broom as if mounting a bicycle. Once Harry had done the same, he said, “And then kick off from the ground gently.” He demonstrated, coming to hover next to Harry at about the height of the boy’s head.

Harry nodded, made sure he had a firm grip on the handle of his broom, and kicked off from the ground. A huge grin split his face as he gently rose upwards. He leveled off at about the same height Sirius was at, circling his godfather and Stephen. “This is brilliant!” he enthused. “May I try going faster?”

Sirius considered, but nodded. “Okay, but not too high just yet. I think I was right that you’re a natural flyer, but I would hate myself forever if you got hurt falling off your broom when I only just gave it to you. Let’s see what you can do, keeping it at this level.”

“Okay!” Harry agreed cheerfully. A heartbeat later, he had the broom up to top speed, racing for the trees. Just as Stephen was sure the boy was going to crash into them, Harry banked into as tight a turn as he’d seen at many a quidditch match and came speeding back towards them. “I love flying!” he shouted as he braked to a halt and hovered beside them.

Sirius grinned back. “I can see that,” he laughed. “All right, take her up a ways if you want, but no higher than the trees. I haven’t had time to check over the estate borders yet, so I don’t know how close any neighbours might be and we can’t risk any Muggles seeing us flying.”

Harry immediately sent his broom into a climb, leveling off once more just below the treetops and racing back and forth a few times, getting used to the feel of the broom and reveling in the wind on his face. Sirius and Stephen flew up to join him, and the three spent the next hour or so flying all around the open area, with both men giving Harry tips and suggestions for improving his already excellent skills.

But both of them were out of shape, Stephen from his sedentary lifestyle with his desk job and school, and Sirius due to his long incarceration. Stephen was the first to call it quits, grinning up at Sirius and Harry. “I’m beat!” he called. “Time for a break! As it is, I’m probably going to need a cushion under my bum at all times tomorrow. It’s been ages since I’ve flown so much.”

Harry giggled and Sirius couldn’t resist teasing. “Sure, a kid like you? I’m the old man here, if anyone should be getting tired it’s me!” He actually was getting tired, but since Stephen admitted
fatigue first, Sirius just had to rub it in a little, and so stayed aloft on principle. But he flew very close to Harry and murmured, “I am starting to get tired, but I want to tease Stephen a bit more. Will you land and tell him you’re tired or sore or something, so that I can go down because I’ve been left alone up here?”

Harry giggled again, but nodded. “Sure, I can do that,” he replied. Circling his godfather once more, he sent his broom into a gentle spiral downwards, landing beside Stephen. “I see what you mean about getting a sore bum,” he laughed as he dismounted. “It’s like on my birthday when I rode a pony with Wills and little Harry.”

Sirius joined them a moment later, a teasing pout on his face. “Sure, leave me all alone up there,” he told them. Stephen blew a raspberry at Sirius, making Harry laugh again. And they both pretended not to notice that Sirius was also moving stiffly once he dismounted his broom.

They went back in and put their brooms in the rack Sirius pointed out to them, then returned to their seats where Harry’s things were still scattered on the coffee table. Before they picked up anything else, Sirius asked, “Do you both like pumpkin juice? I’m going to call one of my elves to bring us some sandwiches and something to drink… I’m sure we can all use it after all that exercise,” he smiled.

“I only had it twice before, when Stephen took me to lunch at the Leaky Cauldron. But it’s good,” Harry nodded.

“I agree,” Stephen said with a smile.

“Dobby!” Sirius called.

The elf popped in a moment later. “Yous called for Dobby, Master Sirees?” he said with a bow.

Harry stared as Sirius nodded. “We need an assortment of sandwiches and pumpkin juice for three,” he said. “And crisps, too.”

“Dobby will bees right back,” he said. “With good lunch for Master Sirees and his company.” He popped out again.

Harry grinned. “So that’s what real elves look like? That’s not even close to the pictures in the book of fairy tales Her Royal Highness gave me.”

Stephen chuckled. “I think I said almost the exact same thing the first time I saw one of the Hogwarts house elves.”

“Lily said something along the same lines,” Sirius said. “But she never did explain what Muggles think elves look like.”

“It depends on which Muggle stories you read,” Stephen said. “J.R.R. Tolkien pictured elves as looking much like humans, only more slender and fair, with pointed ears.” He drew his wand and conjured up an image of Galadriel from an illustrated copy of The Fellowship of the Ring.

Sirius gave a wolf whistle, causing Harry to giggle. “Wow… if that’s what the Muggleborn are expecting an elf to look like, no wonder they’re shocked when they finally see a house-elf.”

Stephen laughed and let the image fade. “On the other hand, children’s stories usually come closer to the house elf reality. But still make them much more human in appearance.” This time he created an image of the shoemaker elves from Harry’s book of Grimm’s Fairy Tales. “These versions of elves are often very helpful… for instance, in this particular story, the elves helped a
poor old man by assembling the shoes he cut out each night, and their work was so good that he made enough money to keep himself and his wife in comfort for the rest of their lives. But they chose the people they wanted to help, and left when the help was no longer needed.” He let the image dissipate.

Harry tilted his head. “Does that mean house elves aren’t free to help anyone? They’re like slaves?” he asked.

“Not exactly like slaves,” Sirius said. “But they’re not exactly free either. House elves have their own kind of magic, and they need to be bound to a wizard family or the magic will fade. There are a few house elves around that want freedom even though they know it means they won’t be able to do half the things they’re used to doing. But not many.”

Dobby popped back in again just then, accompanied by Tally. Between them, they carried a big jug of pumpkin juice, a huge platter of sandwiches, two large bags of crisps, and a basket containing plates and glasses and serviettes. “Does Master Sirees need anythings else?” he asked.

“Not right now, but before you go… Dobby and Tally, this is my godson, Harry Potter, and his tutor, Stephen Coyner. They will be frequent guests from now on, so I wanted you to know that you are to serve them as you would serve me whenever they are visiting,” Sirius told the elves.

Dobby and Tally bowed to Harry and Stephen. “It is being good to knows yours, Master Harry and Master Stephees,” Dobby said. “We will bees telling Konder and Lixy also. Both of yours be calling Dobby or Tally if yours needs anythings.”

“Thank you, Dobby and Tally,” Harry said politely. He decided he rather liked the funny little creatures.

Both elves’ eyes grew impossibly wide. “Oh!” Dobby gushed. “Master Harry is thankings Dobby!”

“And Tally too!” the tiny elf squeaked.

Sirius chuckled. “Go on back to Grimmauld Place for now, you two. We want to eat. But we’ll call if we need anything.” The two elves bowed once more and popped out. Sirius passed out plates and poured the pumpkin juice. “Take your pick of the sandwiches,” he told Harry and Stephen. “Looks like egg salad, ham and cheese, and chicken salad. Regular crisps or sour cream and onion flavoured, too.”

Harry took half a chicken salad and half an egg salad, along with the plain crisps. “Mm, do the elves make the food, too?” he asked. “It’s good.”

Sirius chuckled around his favorite ham and cheese. “Well, they do cook. Not that there’s much to cook for the sandwiches. I suppose they boiled the eggs and mixed up the egg salad, and made the chicken salad from the leftovers from yesterday’s chicken. When the house is closer to habitable, I’ll have you to a proper dinner and perhaps even an overnight if that can be arranged. Then you’ll see what the elves can do when it comes to real cooking.”

Stephen nodded. “I don’t see why we can’t come up with some means of doing an overnight once in a while. In Petunia Dursley’s own words, I’m ‘tolerable for a freak’ so it may be that I can convince her to let me take Harry overnight so that she can either take an excursion with her son or perhaps have her sister-in-law to stay over without him there to bother everyone.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “She still calls us freaks? Merlin.”

“It’s okay, Uncle Padfoot,” Harry said. “It’s just two years more until I start at Hogwarts and now
that I have you and Stephen looking out for me I’ll be fine.”

Stephen reddened a little and Sirius reached out to give Harry a light squeeze. “You bet you’ve got us looking out for you. Now then, I know I put the Potter signet ring in the box along with both of their wedding rings and the Potter heirloom engagement ring… did you have questions about any of those?”

Harry shook his head. “No, the wedding rings were easy enough to figure out, and Stephen recognized the engagement ring as being a hundred years old or more so we guessed it was a special family ring. Same thing with the signet ring. And Stephen taught me the repairing spell and the levitation spell, and we discovered that I work better with Mum’s wand than with Dad’s, although they both respond to me.”

Sirius smiled. “Excellent! Nothing like getting a head start on your education. Which is one reason I’m still bothered that Dumbledore left you with the Dursleys. There’s so much you should have learned already… but, at least you have Stephen and me to help now, right?”

“Right,” Harry and Stephen said in unison. They looked at each other and burst into laughter.

“So, that just leaves the album, right?” Sirius asked. “All right, let’s go through it. There’s me and your dad, first year. That’s Alice Clearwater with your mum… she married Frank Longbottom, this fellow who keeps trying to dodge behind Remus in the Gryffindor group photo, and they had a son who’s the same age as you, although I can’t remember his given name. But I’m sure you’ll meet him once you’re at Hogwarts…” They spent a couple hours going through the photo album before returning to Grimmauld Place.

Stephen could see that Harry and Sirius didn’t want to say goodbye quite so soon, so he suggested the three of them go to dinner in Muggle London and then walk around and window shop for a while, until it would be time to take Harry back to Surrey. Sirius happily agreed, so they piled into Stephen’s car and headed out for curry, then walked around for another hour before they had to drop Sirius off and head back. Harry and Sirius both consoled themselves with the thought that they’d be seeing each other again the following weekend.
And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

On Sunday, Sirius startled the Malfoy elves by not having a lie-in like his cousin and her family. He opted to have breakfast in his room while looking over the various bank statements he'd gotten on Friday in more depth. He decided to go to Gringotts before meeting Remus in London, as he thought he remembered seeing a pensieve in one of his vaults, and he wanted to be able to show Harry memories of his parents, instead of just telling him about them. And if he was wrong, he'd purchase a new one. He also decided to ask Remus if he'd supply some memories as well. As he'd been at the Manor for almost a week now, he no longer needed a guide between his room and the transport room, so he headed out.

He wasn't sure whether he'd seen that pensieve in the Black heirloom vault or in the one he'd acquired from the Lestranges. But, he had several hours before needing to meet Remus, so he spoke with one of the managers at Gringotts so that he would be brought to the Black vault and left with the means to summon a goblin with a cart to bring him either back up to the main floor or to the former Lestrange vault when necessary. That way he could take his time looking through the various artifacts stored in the vaults without taking up too much of anyone's time. The manager in question looked… well, Sirius supposed the expression was supposed to be pleased, although it still looked rather intimidating to him. But his tone of voice and demeanor both showed a definite hint of thawing when he agreed and supplied him with two pieces of enchanted parchment. Messages written on them would appear on the desk of the goblin in charge of dispatching the carts, and he'd send someone down when the message arrived.

Once down in the vault, Sirius took his time going through the stacks of items, smiling in satisfaction when he found the pensieve in question. It was a smallish one, but fine for his purposes. He made sure there was no memory residue clinging to it, and then grumbled when he realized he'd have to purchase one of the bank's bottomless satchels in order to bring the pensieve with him into Muggle London. But then he shrugged; those satchels were extremely useful, and the purchase price wasn't going to break his budget at all. Checking his watch, he decided to skip the other vault in favour of buying a satchel and making sure he was otherwise prepared to meet Remus. He jotted down the message that he was ready to depart, and exited the vault to wait on the platform. He didn't have more than five minutes to wait before a cart arrived and whisked him to the main floor, where he bought a satchel, exchanged twenty-five galleons for Muggle currency, and headed out of the bank. Another stop at the apothecary netted him a couple dozen vials suitable for storing memories for later pensieve viewing.

After a short pause in the loo at the Leaky Cauldron to transfigure his robes into what he thought would likely be reasonably appropriate Muggle attire based on how Stephen and Harry had been dressed yesterday, he stepped out onto Charing Cross Road and looked around. He smiled as he took in the bustle of the city, knowing that out here, there would be no stares, no whispers, and certainly no reporters. He checked the name and address of the pub Remus had suggested, but wasn’t sure where it was, so he hailed a cab, grateful both that Lily had shown him how, and that the technique hadn’t changed since then, as one pulled up to let him climb in.

“Where yer ‘eaded, guv’nor?” the cabbie asked.

“Harlow’s Pub on Huntley Street,” Sirius replied.
The cabbie nodded. “Right-o, then.” He pulled out into traffic. Sirius settled back, trying not to look too terribly much like a tourist as the cab wove in and out of the Sunday traffic, eventually pulling up by a small but nice-looking place. “All set, guv’nor. That’ll be seven quid fifty.”

Sirius fumbled through the Muggle money in his pocket, peeling off a ten pound note and hoping he was guessing correctly that the cabbie meant seven pounds fifty. “Keep the change,” he told the man.

“Thank yer, guv’nor,” the cabbie said with a grin.

Sirius smiled back and got out of the cab, taking a deep breath before entering the little pub. Most of the crowd within looked to be crammed in near the bar, where some Muggle contraption with a moving and talking picture on it showed a man gesturing at what looked to be some sort of sporting field, a wide expanse of green grass marked with white lines, and rectangular-framed nets at each end. The majority of the booths were empty, save for the farthest one on the end, where Remus sat reading, an untouched pint by his elbow. Sirius grinned to himself and hoped that the noise and scents of the pub would mask his approach as he headed for the table. “Hello, Moony,” he said as he slid into the seat across from his old friend.

Remus looked up with a smile that took years from his face. “Padfoot!” he exclaimed. “Merlin, but it’s good to see you.” He reached across to clap Sirius lightly on the shoulder. “Now start talking, old friend, I want to know absolutely everything. Your note was far too short.”

Sirius sighed. But then again, he’d known Remus would want to know. “What’s the moon phase?” he asked before saying anything else.

To Remus, the implication was clear. Whatever Sirius had to say was going to enrage him badly enough that if it was too close to the full moon, it could easily worsen his transformation. “Full moon was Tuesday last,” he said, correctly guessing that Sirius would have lost track during his imprisonment and likely hadn’t thought about it one way or the other until just now.

“Good,” Sirius said. “Although if that damned rat hasn’t been caught in the next three weeks…”

Remus grinned wolfishly. “The Marauders will run by moonlight once more,” he finished.

Sirius nodded. “Between us, I figure we can work out a rough location, then go in with our animal noses to pinpoint the bastard. Once we know where he is, slap a tracking spell on him and call in the aurors. As tempted as I am to handle it myself, I am not going to risk getting sent back to Azkaban.”

“Good point,” Remus conceded. “And once the traitorous little rat’s been taken care of, I’m sure Dumbledore will arrange for you to visit with Harry. Maybe even go to him now, if you haven’t written him already, and…”

“Not on your life!” Sirius interrupted. “Right now I don’t trust Dumbledore any farther than I could throw Hogwarts.”

Remus shook his head. “You want to repeat that? I mean, I know the Prophet said whoever discovered your lack of trial wanted to remain anonymous, but pretty much everyone assumes it was Dumbledore. You’re telling me it wasn’t?” The werewolf looked confused.

“Not only was it not Dumbledore who called my lack of trial to the attention of Madam Bones and Minister Fudge, I have reason to believe he knew I wasn’t guilty and deliberately looked the other way when I didn’t get a trial back then,” Sirius said flatly. “And believe me, it gets worse from
Remus picked up his pint and drank off half at one go. “All right, let’s hear it, then. Actually… wait a few.” He raised a hand to the server handling the few occupied booths. “Another pint for me, a pair for my friend, and two cheeseburgers with chips, please,” he told the young man. “That’ll keep us from pestering you too often while the game’s on.”

The server chuckled appreciatively and left to put the order in, returning moments later with a trio of dark ales. “Food ought to be up in about ten minutes,” he told them, setting the drinks down with a smile before turning to see if anyone else required anything just yet.

Once he was out of earshot, Remus said, “Might as well get our food and then put up a muffliato, that way we won’t be nearly as likely to be interrupted.”

“Good point,” Sirius acknowledged quietly. “The place really doesn’t seem much different from the Leaky Cauldron, but for the electick lights and that contraption over the bar with the moving and talking pictures.”

“Electric light,” Remus grinned, also keeping his voice down. “And the thing over the bar is called a television. There’s a football match scheduled to start in…” he checked his watch, “just about fifteen minutes. Muggles follow football like we do quidditch. And the television is similar to a wireless, but it shows pictures as well as transmitting sound. Whereas the only wizards who get to see any given quidditch game are those who have tickets to the stadium, the bigger football games are shown on the television so that anyone who cares to see the game but either couldn’t get tickets or live too far away to make it practical can still see the action on the field.”

Sirius chuckled. “Damn. Well, that’s just one more thing to prove my point, that Muggles and Muggleborns really aren’t so terrible or backwards. I might just have to drag His Lordship Lucius out here one of these days and rub his aristocratic nose in it.”

Remus raised a brow. “So you really are staying with the Malfoys?” he asked.

Sirius nodded. “Only until Grimmauld Place is habitable once more,” he said. “Mother shut half the place up and transferred all but one of her elves to Narcissa when she was expecting her son, not long after first Regulus and then Father died. And the one she kept went more than a little insane after she died. He stayed at the house, but only cleaned the stairs and upper hall where her portrait could see.”

Remus gave a snort of laughter at that. “Oh, Merlin! How are you managing with him?”

“He hated the very idea of serving me, probably because he’d listened to Mother’s portrait bad-mouthing me for all those years,” Sirius said. “But Cissa felt bad that the house had got so awful, so she did me a swap, four of her elves in trade for Kreacher, since he’d expressed a preference for working for her and anyway, she had gotten all those elves from Mother back when. So he’s now at Malfoy Manor and seems happy enough, and my new four are scouring and repairing to their hearts’ content.” He grins, “And I managed to get that damned portrait down, too… by taking the wall out from behind it.”

“Brilliant!” Remus laughed. “I wish I could have seen her face!”

“As loud as she was complaining, I’m surprised half of London didn’t hear her,” Sirius grinned just as the server returned with their food.

“Anything else for either of you?” the server asked as he set down the plates and made sure the
salt, the malt vinegar, and the American-style ketchup bottle were all on the table for them.

Sirius shook his head. “I think we’re good for now. We’ll give a wave if we need anything.”

“Enjoy your meals, then,” the young man said as a bell dinged somewhere behind the bar. He hurried off, to pop back into sight carrying a tray of loaded dishes to a table at the opposite end of the pub.

Remus slid his wand partway out of its arm holster and discreetly cast the muffliato spell to make sure they wouldn’t be overheard by anyone sitting nearby. “All right… back to business. What’s this about Dumbledore?”

Sirius munched a chip and took a pull from one of his pints before replying. “Right… well, for starters, he’s been Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot since before we graduated Hogwarts, right?”

“Yes,” Remus nodded.

“And what are the duties of the Chief Warlock?”

“Presiding over the Wizengamot, and working with the administration of the DMLE to schedule all criminal trials… oh!” Remus blinked, his eyes narrowing. “So he should have noticed years ago that you didn’t get a trial.”

“Not only that, I discovered that he knew that damned rat was the Secret-Keeper,” Sirius said grimly. “James and Lily said so in their will… and Dumbledore was the executor. Even if I’d had a trial before the will was read and executed, he should have called for a re-trial due to the new evidence. I’ve come to believe he doesn’t want me in contact with my godson.”

Remus gaped. He didn’t want to believe it. Dumbledore had done more for him than anyone else since he’d been bitten as a child, even to making arrangements for him to get his education despite his lycanthropy. And yet… why would Dumbledore allow an innocent man to remain in prison, if he had the evidence to free him at hand? “But… I don’t get it… why?” he finally managed to ask.

Sirius frowned. “I haven’t figured it all out yet. But I think he’s trying to control Harry for some reason or other. I know he’s stealing from Harry. He holds the keys to the Potter vaults. What’s more, he put Harry with Lily’s Muggle sister and her husband, breaking the terms of the will in doing so, I might add. And they were abusing him. There’s no proof, but there’s reason to believe Dumbledore knew about that, too, and made sure it would continue.”

Remus growled. “Those Muggles dared hurt Harry?” He tensed as if about to get up and find them without further ado.

“Keep your arse planted on that bench, Moony, so we can figure this shite out,” Sirius growled as well. “For once in my life, I’m trying not to be the idiotic Gryffindor rushing into things without a plan. That’s what landed me in Azkaban before. I stupidly didn’t tell anyone my suspicions about the rat, so no one else knew to look for him once they had me.”

Remus frowned and stabbed a chip with far more force than necessary. “Okay, so just how did you figure all this out anyway? Or did someone else do the figuring?”

“Someone else.” Sirius took a deep breath and tried to figure out where to start. “Right, um, you seem way more familiar with Muggles than I remembered, are you living or working in a Muggle area now?”

“Yes to both,” Remus said. Gryffindor or not, Sirius had never been skilled at getting straight to the
point, but when he went off on a tangent like this, it generally ended up making sense. “You know why I can’t ever keep a job on our side of things. Out here, I can hide my furry little problem by telling them I practice the Wiccan religion. It’s not a common one, of course, but surprisingly, it’s very similar to the old wizarding ways. On the one hand, the majority of Muggles think people who practice Wicca are a touch barmy, but they also have laws that require employers to make reasonable accommodations for various religious practices. For example, the Muslim religion’s practice includes about fifteen minutes of ritual prayer at certain times of day, so a Muslim worker is within his rights to request that his breaks be scheduled for any of those prayer times that happen during his work hours, and to be permitted a place other than a loo where he can do his praying undisturbed.” He grins a bit, “And since most Wiccans do their worship on the night of the full moon as well as the old holy days, by establishing myself as a Wiccan, I’m within my rights to request the day off following every full moon. It’s only been a problem once in the last two years. The bookstore I work at is open every day but for the Muggle Christmas and Easter, so I get two days off each week anyway, as does all the full-time staff. It’s just not always the same two days each week. The one time I did get called in, was because one of my co-workers was struck by a lorry whilst crossing the street to her bus stop and rushed off to hospital. I put a glamour up to hide the injuries from the night before and everyone did their best to take it easy on me as they all ‘knew’ I’d been up most of the night doing my religious rites.”

Sirius chuckled. “Nice dodge for you, that. So since you live in the Muggle world now, what if anything do you know about the royal family? Specifically about the Princess of Wales and her children?”

Remus thought. “Pretty woman, good with children, very popular. A lot younger than her husband, mother of two. I heard she’d been a nursery teacher before she married Prince Charles, but that was back during the war and you know what I was doing back then, so I wasn’t paying attention at the time. I think the older of the little princes is maybe two years younger than Harry.”

“Right again,” Sirius nodded. “She had been a nursery teacher. One of her old co-workers is now teaching in a primary school… the one Harry attends. Seems that back in May, Princess Diana and her sons were traveling through the area on their way to meet up with Prince Charles, and she decided to make an unscheduled stop to visit with her old friend for a bit. Anyway, the two little princes got away from the person minding them, and snuck out to the playground. Harry’s cousin decided he wanted the ball the princes were playing with, and shoved the older one down when he wouldn’t give it up. And tried to hit the younger as well, but that Harry got between them and took the blow instead.”

Remus smiled. “Good for Harry!”

Sirius smiled back. “I agree. And so did the Queen. She summoned the Dursleys to a private audience to thank Harry for trying to protect her grandsons, and to take his aunt and uncle to task about their son the bully. Not that they wanted to believe it, even coming from Her Majesty. Anyway, in between the incident and the audience, the Queen had some investigations done and determined that Harry was at best being neglected, and at worst, abused. But apparently she has at least one wizarding advisor, who told her that Harry has to remain with his aunt due to some sort of protections Dumbledore put in place, based on the blood relationship. So in order to make it clear that she would be taking a personal interest in Harry from now on, she made him a Royal Ward.” His smile grew into a satisfied smirk. “And that little announcement got dear Petunia’s husband so wrought up that he had a heart attack and died right there in the audience chamber.”

Remus cracked up laughing. “Dear Merlin, that’s priceless! Poetic justice at its finest!”

Sirius grinned. “I thought so too, when I heard it. Anyway, in order to make sure they didn’t just
start up the abuse again, Her Majesty sent out a notice to everyone at all connected with the
government, right down to the university students doing temporary apprenticeships, looking for
Hogwarts graduates. Merlin knows how many actually responded, but she selected a bloke called
Stephen Coyner to be a tutor for Harry. Gives him an excuse to see the boy weekly and report back
to her. He’s Muggleborn, was a first year when we were sevenths. Now, between her husband
being gone and knowing the Queen was hearing about Harry through Stephen, Petunia’s taken to
treating the lad better than before… I gather the husband was the primary abuser. She finally gave
him a box of James and Lily’s things that I salvaged from the cottage, which included their photo
album going back to our first year. Stephen was able to identify a few of us to Harry, who then
wondered why none of his parents’ friends had ever come to visit him. Like the rest of the
wizarding world, Stephen had believed I’d been found guilty at trial, and he decided it was better to
tell Harry the truth as he knew it, rather than lie and let him find out otherwise later. Apparently
Harry wanted to know why I did it… as Stephen put it to me, Harry felt that if You Know Who had
been threatening or torturing me, he could forgive me for the betrayal, but not if I’d done it just to
get in good with You Know Who.”

“That makes sense,” Remus nodded. “Most people would find it easier to forgive someone who
was being coerced in some way.”

“Yeah. So anyway, Stephen figured the best way to get the trial transcripts quietly would be
through Gringotts,” Sirius went on. “Mainly because he doesn’t want everyone and his brother
knowing he’s in touch with Harry, especially not Dumbledore.”

“Whyever not?” Remus asked.

Sirius frowned. “This gets ugly,” he warned. “He can’t prove it, but he suspects Dumbledore not
only knew Harry was getting abused, he made sure it would keep happening.”

“What?!?” Remus couldn’t believe his ears.

“Harry asked Stephen why no one ever checked up on him. And told him that on two separate
occasions when a schoolteacher reported signs of abuse, that teacher got sacked and Child Welfare
Services never investigated… and as it turns out, there are no records with Child Welfare that
anyone ever reported Harry as a possible abuse victim. The only way he figured that would happen
is if someone is obliviating a lot of people.”

“Dear Merlin…” Remus shook his head.

Sirius continued. “Stephen didn’t want to risk joining the ranks of the obliviated, so he went
through Gringotts to keep Dumbledore from knowing he’s acquainted with Harry. And since he’s
Harry’s tutor by appointment of Her Majesty, the goblins decided he counted as Harry’s
government-appointed magical guardian and gave him access to some of Harry’s account
information and allowed him to look at the Potters’ will. Turns out the will not only named the rat
as their Secret-Keeper, it specifically stated that under no circumstances was Harry to go to his
aunt… and Dumbledore was executor. That means he had evidence that I wasn’t guilty, and yet he
still didn’t make sure I had a trial with veritaserum used. He’s also the one who placed Harry with
Petunia permanently, against the terms of the will. And just to put the icing on the cake, he’s got
control of the Potter vaults at the moment and it appears the money that’s supposed to have been
going to Harry’s aunt for his support, has been going to a Dumbledore vault instead. Stephen thinks
it’s not just the money, though, he thinks Dumbledore wants to control Harry for some reason.
Swoop in and ‘rescue’ Harry from his horrible Muggle life and instantly become the boy’s most
trusted mentor. I don’t want to believe it, but it I can see it. I just wouldn’t have expected
Dumbledore to do it.”
Remus growled low in his throat. “You’re sure of this?”

“I believe Stephen,” Sirius said. “If he’s got an angle, I haven’t figured it out yet. He’s the one who set everything in motion to get me out, too, so I give him credit for bollocks on top of everything else… a Muggleborn approaching the Malfoys for a favor.”

Despite his growing anger, Remus couldn’t help but snicker at that. “I’m surprised they listened to him. So it was the Malfoys that got you a trial, then? Is that why you’re staying with them?”

“Yes to both questions. I have no idea how Stephen managed to talk them into helping, although I get the impression he approached Narcissa first. She probably figured that if I owed her big, I might make her son Draco my heir or something, I don’t know.” He paused, considering. “I suppose I should do something along those lines… Harry is my heir and will remain so, but I can certainly pick a property or two for Draco. He seems a nice enough boy so far. A bit of a spoiled prat at times… a lot like James was back when we were kids, come to think of it. His parents dote on him. Cissa didn’t say so, of course, but I got the impression that they lost at least one before having him, and possibly afterwards as well.”

“Pureblood inbreeding, or so Lily would have said,” Remus commented. “She and James, and Alice and Frank Longbottom were the only two couples of our year to have children so quickly. James and Frank were purebloods, but Lily was Muggleborn and if I recall correctly, Alice’s dad was a pureblood but her mum’s side was nearly all half-bloods and Muggleborns.”

“I said something to that effect to Lucius the other day, when he asked me why I didn’t just go along with my parents’ ideas,” Sirius nodded. “Lily was a brilliant girl and was Muggleborn, and while I might despise Snivellus, I have to be fair and admit he’s also intelligent and pretty damn powerful, the greasy git. And then I’m sure we all remember that great lump George Goyle, who finally graduated with us even though he started Hogwarts two years ahead of us. As I told Lucius, it’s kind of hard to believe in pureblood supremacy when faced with such a sterling example as that.”

Remus laughed heartily. “I believe it! What did he say?”

Sirius grinned. “That he still doesn’t like my politics, but I might have a point, and would I be so kind as to ask Stephen for more information about the reason Muggles outlawed marriage between first cousins? I’d brought that up, too, when explaining the inbreeding as Lily explained it to us. Narcissa did invite Stephen to dinner one night so he and I could talk, so Lucius didn’t get a chance to bring up the topic.”

“Merlin, a Muggleborn invited to dinner at Malfoy Manor? The world must be coming to an end.”

Sirius laughed. “I know! What’s more, they both seem to actually like Stephen. Not that they don’t still think they’re superior to him, mind, but there’s a subtle shift in the attitude. Now it’s more, ‘I’m a Malfoy, I am wealthy and with the best social standing, therefore I am better than you,’ as opposed to the ‘you are a Muggleborn and have no right to exist, therefore I am better than you because I am a pureblood’ attitude they used to give off. As I said, a subtle difference, but I can see it… and I get the feeling I’m thick as a brick compared to Stephen, so I bet he sees it too. Come Saturday, he’s going to bring me and Harry and Draco and Narcissa on a bit of a tour of Muggle London. Narcissa got it into her head that Draco should know how to find a Muggle policeman in case he ever became lost in a Muggle area, so that he could get help finding his way back to the Leaky Cauldron or Platform 9-3/4 at King’s Cross Station.”

Remus looked concerned. “Are you sure you want Harry exposed to the Malfoys?” he asked. “I mean, Lucius may have gotten off by claiming he was under imperius, but he was known to have
been on You Know Who’s side.”

“I’d be more worried, but for some things Narcissa told me,” Sirius said. “First off, my brother wasn’t killed in a terror raid like my mother believed. Narcissa said he’d come to her and a few others, telling them that You Know Who was growing mad and they needed to break away from them. He vanished not long after that. And perhaps a week or so after he disappeared, she said Lucius came back from a meeting during which he said You Know Who had thanked his followers for ‘ridding him of the black thorn in his side’. After that, she said, especially since she was newly expecting Draco, Lucius didn’t dare to present himself as anything but a loyal follower, for fear You Know Who would use her or Draco against him. And that while he admittedly had agreed with You Know Who’s ideals of pureblood supremacy, he quickly came to disagree with the methods employed and would have gotten out if he thought he could have without jeopardizing his family.”

“Huh. I guess it never occurred to me that any of You Know Who’s followers might not have been as loyal to him as everyone in the Order was to Dumbledore,” Remus said thoughtfully. “Merlin knows that when they arrested the Lestranges for what they did to the Longbottoms, Bellatrix was passionate that they’d been trying to fix things properly for their master’s return.”

“The Longbottoms? Frank and Alice? I knew that mad bitch Bella and her husband and his brother were in Azkaban… they had to move me to the isolation section to keep them and a couple others of their ilk from trying to kill me for what I supposedly did, since it led to You Know Who’s downfall,” Sirius frowned. “But I never did find out why they were there, I just figured they’d got convicted for general Death Eater activity.”

Remus winced. “Damn… I’m sorry, Pads. They tortured the Longbottoms… kept them under crucio for so long that both Frank and Alice are permanent residents at St. Mungo’s, since just after you were taken in. The dowager Lady Longbottom is raising their boy now.”

Sirius sighed. Still more friends he wouldn’t be able to reconnect with. “I’ll have to go pay my respects at some point in the next few weeks. I’ve got to get up to Hogsmeade, too, so I can get my old motorcycle back from Hagrid. And hopefully manage to avoid Dumbledore, although I doubt I’ll be so lucky. Well, if I do see him, I’ll ask if he’ll take me to see Harry and then reluctantly accept whatever dribble he gives me as an excuse as to why I shouldn’t. He won’t have to know I’ve already seen him.”

“You have? Why the hells didn’t you say so!” Remus demanded. “Tell me all about it!”

Sirius smiled. “Stephen brought him over to Grimmauld Place yesterday, and we flooed over to Black Oak Hall. It was a little awkward at first… I mean, how could it be otherwise? Harry looks so much like James, except for Lily’s eyes. I told him about the stone figurines and I gave him a broom and we went flying… he’s a natural, just like I knew he would be. And he remembered calling us ‘Unca Paffoot’ and ‘Unca Mooey’ when he was a baby, and then we went through the photo album and I named everyone for him, even Snivellus. Merlin help Harry when he starts Hogwarts, Stephen told me the greasy git is teaching there now.”

Remus frowned. “I never figured he’d end up teaching. He’s not got the patience nor a love for children. But… do me a favor, Pads, and stop calling him that name. I know you’ll not likely ever be friends with the man, but you don’t want to accidentally set Harry against him before the cub even starts Hogwarts, do you? Harry’s bound to pick up on the animosity between Snape and you and James sooner or later, and if he’s got to take five to seven years of lessons from the man, better he doesn’t learn to imitate that animosity before he even meets Snape.” He sighs. “Also, the man is a brilliant Potions Master. He’s one of only three in Europe who are capable of making the
Wolfsbane Potion. He makes mine, despite what happened back in our fifth year.”

Sirius winced. “Moony, I’m sorry,” he sighed. “I’ll behave, I promise.” After a pause, he suggested, “Maybe you can join us next weekend?”

“I have to work on Saturday,” Remus replied. “But if you’ll be anywhere in the area, maybe you all could stop in at the shop I work at? Waterstone’s, on Charing Cross Road near the Leaky Cauldron, surprisingly enough. That way I can at least meet Harry, and I won’t be barging in on your excursion with the Malfoys since they likely wouldn’t be comfortable with me there anyway.”

Sirius nodded. “All right, we can do that. After all, a good point of the whole trip is to demonstrate to Draco in particular that Muggles aren’t entirely backwards and barbaric; a bookstore will be a lovely point in favour of showing that they can be civilized.”

Remus laughed, and the conversation moved on to lighter subjects, the two old friends spending several hours catching up. He ended up accompanying Sirius back to Grimmauld Place for dinner, and to give a few vials of memories of James and Lily for Harry’s eventual viewing. When they parted company, it was with the promise of owling regularly and of getting together again during the week on Remus’ next day off.
Great Minds Think Alike

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

On Monday, Harry retreated to his room after breakfast. He’d done the grass and hedges yesterday, and while the flower beds could stand some weeding, the pouring rain that had started at some point during the night made that impractical. But his room was now a refuge, as after the bed-breaking incident, Aunt Petunia had given clear instructions to Dudley to keep out. His cousin had obeyed his mother thus far, at least aside from putting the snake Seren into his bed that one time, but it was clear he blamed Harry for his mother’s new firmness in keeping him from his favorite sport of Harry Hunting as long as the smaller boy remained in his room. Harry counted on his fingers; if he had it right, he’d be able to start martial arts lessons just about when school started, going by what Stephen’s friend Healer Abbott had said. He wished he knew more about martial arts; what if he didn’t like the one he picked? Then he smacked himself on the forehead. The library! He was pretty sure he could walk to the library from here, and surely there was information to be found at the library. Stephen had even mentioned it as a possibility. And while he was thinking about ferreting out information… Harry opened his trunk and looked over his set of papers declaring him a Royal Ward, with all the rights and privileges thereof. He nodded with satisfaction as he put the papers back into the ash compartment, deciding he’d also look up exactly what sort of rights and privileges a Royal Ward had.

Harry placed his spiral notebook and package of pens into a plastic grocery sack left from his last trip with Stephen to stock his cold compartment, tied the handles together loosely, and dropped the bundle into a second plastic sack to make sure it would stay dry on the walk over. Then he shoved his feet into his wellies… Dudley’s hand-me-downs, but since this pair actually fit him well, he had said as much to Stephen and so not gotten a new pair when they’d shopped. Taking the sack with his notebook, he slipped out into the hallway, listening for his cousin’s whereabouts before venturing towards the stairs.

He was in luck. “Mummy, I’m going to play with Piers at his house,” Dudley hollered. “I’ll probably stay for tea. Piers says they’re having chocolate cake with ice cream and strawberry trifle today.” His voice held a hint of accusation, that his own mother was failing to provide him with as much of his favorite junk food as she had done before his father’s passing.

Petunia came trotting out to the sitting room from the kitchen. “Are you sure you want to go out in this nasty weather, Diddyums?” she cooed at him. “Mummy wouldn’t want you to get sick, darling Duddykins.”

From his vantage point upstairs, Harry could just see his cousin’s face as he stood with one hand on the doorknob. Dudley frowned. He obviously wanted to go to the Polkiss house so he could stay for tea. Piers says they’re having chocolate cake with ice cream and strawberry trifle today.” His voice held a hint of accusation, that his own mother was failing to provide him with as much of his favorite junk food as she had done before his father’s passing.

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Petunia frowned. She had just finished the breakfast dishes since she wasn’t making the freak do the work anymore for fear of what Her Majesty would say if it was reported, and she’d really been looking forward to the chance to sit down and relax for a few minutes before doing the hoovering. But her precious baby boy had lost so much… and she always did relish a bit of dishing with

Harry waited a moment, pretending he hadn’t been waiting at the top of the stairs before coming down with his eyes downcast. “Yes, Aunt Petunia?” he said softly.

“Get in the car,” she told him. “Dudley and I are going out and I don’t know how long we’ll be, so I’ll drop you at Mrs. Figg’s.”

Did he dare? She had been so much nicer to him since Stephen started coming ‘round. “Would you… would you drop me at the library instead?” he asked diffidently. “If you haven’t come back before they close, I can walk to Mrs. Figg’s from there.”

Petunia frowned at him suspiciously while Dudley sneered. “Only a poncy little git of a nancy boy like you would want to go to the library over the hols.”

“Why the library?” his aunt asked.

“Stephen wants me to look up activities I might be able to do after school or on weekends,” Harry said truthfully. “Also, I saw a snake last week that I’ve never seen before, and I wanted to look it up.”

“Not in the garden, I hope?” Petunia asked, looking horrified. “What if it bit Dudley?”

“No, Aunt Petunia, it wasn’t in the garden,” Harry answered, although he didn’t volunteer as to exactly where he had seen it.

She pursed her lips. “All right, I’ll drop you at the library. It’s only three blocks from there to Mrs. Figg’s, so I expect you to go right there after it closes if we’ve not returned before then. She’ll give you tea; I’ll ring her up now and tell her to expect you.”

Harry bowed his head. “Thank you, Aunt Petunia,” he said softly.

She gave an annoyed-sounding huff as she headed into the kitchen to make the call to Mrs. Figg. Dudley took the opportunity to grab Harry by the arm and sock him behind the ear. Harry winced a little but didn’t react otherwise except to make sure Dudley didn't get hold of the sack with his notebook. Fortunately, his aunt returned from the kitchen before it occurred to Dudley that the sack might contain something important to his smaller cousin.

“Mrs. Figg says to come over as soon as you’re done with your assignments,” she told Harry as she picked up her handbag and the car keys. “We'll retrieve you there before bedtime.”

Dudley wrenched open the front door, yelling, “I get front seat!” as he took off for the garage.

Harry climbed into the back seat without complaint, even when Dudley slid his seat back as far as it would go, slamming it into his knees. At least he was not only going to be spending the day away from his aunt and cousin, he was even being given a ride to where he wished to go. He thanked his aunt once again when she pulled up in front of the library, then scrambled out of the car before she could accuse him of delaying her any more than absolutely necessary.

Once inside the little town library, he took a deep breath, inhaling the pleasant aroma of the fire crackling in the hearth on this rainy day, combined with the subtle scents of paper and ink. A little unsure where to start his search, he shyly approached the young librarian who'd brought him and Stephen to the conference room and gave them water when they'd been here before. “Excuse me, Miss?” he asked diffidently. “I need to look up some information, but I'm not quite sure how to go about it.”
The librarian smiled, wishing all the children who came in here were as polite as this young man. “Of course, what sort of information are you looking for?” she asked him.

Harry smiled shyly back. “Two different things,” he said. “I'm trying to find some martial arts classes that are hopefully close enough to my school that I can walk there for lessons after classes, and also if there are different kinds and what the differences are. Then also, I have a summer project and mine is on Royal Wards. I need to know what sort of rights and privileges came with such a title.”

She chuckled. “Well, that's certainly a diverse set of information you're looking for,” she said. “The encyclopaedia section would probably be the best starting point for what you're trying to find on Royal Wards, and then you can use the card catalogue to see if we have anything in greater detail. The encyclopaedia would probably also be the best place to look up the different martial arts that might be available to you, once you find out what your choices might be. Where do you go to school?”

Harry named his school, and she led him over to a shelf full of telephone directories. Pulling one off the shelf, she showed him how to use the business directory section to look up both the numbers and the addresses of all the martial arts studios listed. Two were close enough to both school and home to make lessons there practical, he discovered. One offered something called Tae Kwon Do, while the other taught Shotokan Karate. He copied down the addresses, telephone numbers, and business hours of both studios before following the librarian to the encyclopaedia shelves.

“As you can see, the books that make up a set of encyclopaedia are arranged in alphabetical order,” the young woman told him. “I don’t know much about martial arts myself, so I don’t know if you’ll need the S or the K volume to read up on Shotokan Karate. But you’ll certainly need the T volume for Tae Kwon Do, and either the R or the W for Royal Wards.” She smiled. “I should get back to the desk now, in case others need help also, but you come back and let me know if you need help with anything else.”

“Thank you, Miss,” Harry replied with his shy smile. “I will.” He started pulling volumes off the shelf and flipping through them to find the entries he needed. The articles on the two martial arts didn't give as much information as he’d hoped, as the styles seemed fairly similar in both technique and philosophy… which made sense as the Tae Kwon Do article pointed out that the style had evolved as a merging of an older Korean kick-based unarmed combat technique with various Karate styles learned at a time that Japan had been in control of the country. He decided he would walk over to the two studios during the week and see which one felt more comfortable to him. Next he looked up Royal Wards and the history behind them. The practice had become standardized during the early Tudor years, under Henry VII, who’d actually used the many wardships he held as a source of income, by taking a percentage of the annual profits from his wards’ estates in exchange for seeing to the administration of those estates. By Elizabethan times, there was an entire branch of the courts in charge of handling the wardships… either having the wards actually raised within the royal household or fostering them out with various noble families, as well as arranging marriages for them which would benefit the Crown. He giggled softly to himself at the thought of the Queen picking out a wife for him someday. He didn’t think that happened anymore, since both the Prince of Wales and Prince Andrew chose their own brides. Raised within the royal household, though, that part was interesting. While the royal family obviously didn’t live in the same sort of style as they would have in the middle ages or even as late as the Victorian era, so there just wouldn’t be anywhere for a bunch of random orphaned noble children to stay in the palaces anymore, if one of the rights and privileges of a Royal Ward was to be raised by the royals, did that mean he could possibly spend some more time with Wills and little
Harry? Perhaps on school holidays and such? He’d had loads of fun with them on his birthday, and
Wills had said he hoped they could play together again sometime… that he, Harry, was his first
friend who hadn’t made friends with him because he was a prince. That while some of the boys in
his class at school were nice enough, he’d overheard them lamenting the fact that his mum kept the
press away from the school so that they couldn’t be photographed with him and get their pictures
in the papers that way.

Harry jotted that down in his notebook to ask Stephen about… if that would actually be a privilege
he could claim. And the more he thought about it, the better an idea it seemed to be. Stephen had
indicated he was a Lord of some sort in the wizarding world, but he was being raised by an
ordinary upper-middle class Muggle family who until a month ago had treated him like a servant.
Maybe wizard Lords and Muggle Lords did things a little differently, but he certainly wasn’t going
to learn anything at all about being a Lord from Aunt Petunia. If he spent time with the royal
family, though, he might learn something from them. And even if he didn’t learn anything about
being a Lord, he did want to spend more time with the princes, because they were the first friends
he’d ever made thanks to Dudley’s habit of scaring off anyone who so much as smiled at him in
school.

He turned back to the encyclopaedia entry and grinned a bit. Her Majesty hadn’t been kidding
when she said the practice of Royal Wards had not been used in centuries. It seemed to have slowly
fallen out of favor during the rules of James I and Charles I, and never really came back into use
following the Commonwealth Era and the Restoration of Charles II. It did look likely that he’d
learn something about being a Lord, though. One of the points of a noble orphan being raised
within the royal household or another noble household was to teach that orphan governance of his
or her holdings. Hopefully wizarding nobility wasn’t too much different from Muggle nobility, and
whatever he could learn about being a Lord would carry over. His godfather could probably help
there, too. Since Uncle Padfoot and his dad had been friends for years, Sirius likely had at least
some idea of the sort of responsibilities his dad would have had.

Harry jotted down the names Henry VII and William Cecil, Lord Burghley and went back to the
desk to ask the librarian for help in finding books about them. He didn’t know if there would be
any more information about royal wards and how that worked in those books, but since they’d both
been mentioned specifically in the encyclopaedia article, he figured it was worth trying. The
librarian got him signed up for a library card of his own, then showed him the card catalogues and
how they were arranged… one set alphabetically by title, one alphabetically by author, and the last
one alphabetically by subject matter. She helped him find and check out a book about each of the
two men in question that wouldn’t be too difficult for someone of his age to read and understand,
and then he headed out to walk to Mrs. Figg’s house.

As he approached her door, two of her cats, Mr. Tibbles and Tufty, popped out from under the
neighbour’s car and joined him on her steps. He knocked, and then bent down to give them each a
quick scratch behind their ears, noting that Tufty sported a few patches of unusually short fur. She
must have been the cat which had been attacked by a dog that day back in June that he’d been taken
to Windsor Castle.

The elderly cat lady opened the door. “Hello, Harry,” she greeted him. “Did you get your
homework done?”

Harry shrugged a little as both cats shot past him into the house the moment the door opened wide
enough. “Sort of,” he replied. “I still have some reading to do, but I won’t have to answer any
questions about the reading until after school starts again. They’ll ask for a summary of what you
chose to read, but they don’t want you to write it before school starts, just so they can see you write
it and know you didn’t copy the summary from the back of the book.”
“Well, come in and have a seat. Just look at what that horrid dog did to poor Tufty,” she said, shoving an open photo album into his hands. The pictures showed Tufty with several shaved patches around sutured gashes. “She was so terribly embarrassed by the stitches. I probably wouldn’t have been able to take the pictures if she hadn’t been medicated at the time.” Mrs. Figg sounded quite indignant on behalf of her cat.

He supposed he couldn’t blame her. He rather liked her cats, at least when he wasn’t being forced to look at an endless pile of photos of them. Certainly they were much nicer than Ripper, the bulldog that Uncle Vernon’s sister Marge always brought with her whenever she came to visit. If Ripper didn’t like you, he’d bite. If Mrs. Figg’s cats didn’t like you, or didn’t feel sociable for whatever reason, they’d simply hiss and then run off to somewhere you couldn’t reach them. “I’m glad Tufty is all right now,” he said politely.

“Me too,” Mrs. Figg nodded. “How is everything at your house, Harry? Is your aunt holding up all right without your uncle?”

Harry blinked. Mrs. Figg had never tried to make conversation with him before. Usually all she did after greeting him was keep handing him photo albums full of cat pictures, and perhaps tell him it was time to eat if he happened to be there over mealtime. It made him uneasy. “Er… I guess she’s managing,” he said. “Although Dudley is always complaining now because she won’t buy more than three kinds of snacks for him when she does the marketing. She’s on a budget now, I heard her say.”

The old lady nodded. “I thought that might happen. A shame, really, young as your uncle was. Is that university student still coming around to practice his grief-counseling?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that wasn’t why Stephen was coming around, but he checked himself in time. That she was asking about Stephen made the uneasiness a lot worse. Maybe it was just a bored old lady being nosy… and he remembered when the old man down the street died last year, Aunt Petunia was one of the biggest gossips on Privet Drive when it came to digging up any bit of scandal in the man’s entire life. But what if it wasn’t just nosiness that made Mrs. Figg ask? It just seemed so odd for her to even talk to him, let alone ask questions. “Yes,” he nodded. “He’s supposed to come by for a whole year, actually.” He paused, and asked meekly, “May I do my reading now? It’s much quieter here than with Dudley blasting his video games on the telly.”

“Of course, of course,” Mrs. Figg said, patting him on the head. “You get right on with it. Tea will be ready in an hour or so.”

“Thank you,” he replied, pulling out the book about Henry VII and opening it up. He spent most of the next three hours reading, pausing only to gulp down a bowl of Scotch broth and a slice of bread along with some water at teatime. He noted with some amusement that Mrs. Figg apparently spent more of her money on fancy cat food than on food for herself. No wonder everyone in the neighbourhood thought she was a bit barmy. He was nearly finished with the book when Aunt Petunia pulled up out front and honked impatiently, so he shoved it into his sack with his notebook and the book on William Cecil and ran out to the car, calling, “Goodbye, Mrs. Figg, and thank you!”

The old lady waved from the door as he dashed up the walk and climbed into the back seat of the car. Albus would be pleased to know that Harry was doing just fine, she thought.

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In London, the Queen, the Prince Consort, their children and grandchildren were gathered
following a rare private family dinner. Sarah Ferguson, Prince Andrew’s wife, making an effort to
tell those closest to her before the tabloids did, had just announced to the family that she was
expecting their second child. She accepted their congratulations and hugs from Diana and the boys.
She couldn’t help laughing when little Prince Harry asked if the new baby was going to have stinky
nappies like baby Beatrice. Even the Queen cracked a smile at that, although she admonished the
boy that it wasn’t polite to talk about babies’ nappies at the dinner table.

“What is good to talk about?” the youngster asked.

Wills poked him. “We haven’t told Uncle Andrew and Aunt Sarah about Harry yet.”

“Oh yeah!” Little Harry brightened. “Mummy made it so we could have our friend Harry out to
Highgrove for his birthday and we rode our ponies and played with the new corgis and had a
birthday cake and everything!”

Diana chuckled. “It seems Harry hit all the highlights of the day,” she remarked. “The Harry
they’re talking about is that young man from Surrey who got between them and a bully back in
May. Since Mother Windsor made him a Royal Ward as her way of thanking him for that, I
decided it would be nice to give him a bit of a birthday celebration. He’s an orphan, and his aunt
doesn’t much like him. I understand there was some estrangement between her and her sister, the
boy’s late mother, and while she took him in out of familial obligation, she’s made it more than
clear he’s unwanted in her home.”

“The poor kid,” Sarah sympathized. “I can’t imagine having to grow up like that.”

“Nor I,” Diana said. “I’m hoping I can manage to do a bit more for him, in between my official
duties.”

“There may be a way,” the Queen said. “Charles, you come with me and Diana, as you’ll need to
know the details as well. Andrew, Sarah, if you would make sure the boys are taken up and
readied for bed before you head for your suite, I would appreciate it.”

“Of course, Mum,” Prince Andrew replied.

Diana gathered Wills and Harry into a big hug. “Go on, loves, and I’ll be up to read you a story
once Daddy and I are done talking with Grandmother.” The boys hugged back and ran over to their
aunt and uncle to walk with them up to the nurseries. Prince Philip, Prince Edward, and Princess
Anne headed off to their own apartments, while Charles and Di followed the Queen to her private
office.

Once inside with the door firmly closed, the Queen sat behind her desk and pulled out the file her
advisors had been able to gather with regards to Harry Potter. “Sit down, both of you. Charles, you
were out of the country when the incident took place, young Mr. Potter getting between your Harry
and his cousin, a much larger child who was about to hit him after he’d already struck Wills and
knocked him down. Nor were you there the day I gave the Dursleys their audience, to thank Mr.
Potter and to speak with them about their son’s bullying. What I hadn’t mentioned at the time is
that my agents reported the probability that the Dursleys were abusing Mr. Potter. Diana, I know
you wondered at the time why I went to the trouble of making the boy a Royal Ward, instead of
merely removing him from the abusers.”

Diana nodded. “I did, yes.” She gave a sideways smile. “And while I like to think of myself as a
charitable woman, I couldn’t help but be glad when that horrid man died of a heart attack brought
about by his own temper.”
The Queen allowed herself a small smile. “I found that rather satisfying myself,” she admitted. “Now then, what I am about to tell you is information that by long tradition has only been known to the reigning monarch and the Prime Minister. But in order to better help Mr. Potter, I believe you both need to know it.”

Diana sat forward, looking concerned as she always was when she learned of a child in difficulty. Charles was less obvious, but still very attentive to his mother’s words.

“There is a portion of Britain which is hidden to most people,” she said. “I haven’t seen it myself, only met a few representatives. But it does exist, and Mr. Potter is a part of it. I speak of the magical world.”

Diana looked astonished, while Charles looked sceptical. “Magic? Really, Mother?”

“Really,” the Queen said. She reached into her desk and pulled out a newspaper which she held out to them.

Charles took it and blinked. The paper was called the Daily Prophet, but what was most astonishing about it, was that the photo illustrating the main story was… moving. It showed a rotund man in a bowler hat gesturing behind a podium of some sort, apparently giving a speech. The caption under the picture stated that it was Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge, addressing the Wizengamot. He skimmed the article, which had something to do with putting new safeguards into place so that no alleged criminal could be imprisoned without a trial again, no matter the circumstances surrounding the arrest. “I can’t say I think much of these magical people, if they threw someone in prison without a trial,” he sniffed.

“They’d been in a war,” his mother told him. “I know you’ll remember, Charles, and you might also, Diana, starting back around 1979, there were all those odd building collapses?”

Charles nodded. “Yes, they were officially blamed on the IRA, weren’t they? Although now that you mention it, I did think it was strange that none of them were public buildings of the sort terrorists usually target to make their statements. They were all private homes and blocks of flats.”

“That’s because it was actually a sort of wizard terrorist that caused them,” the Queen said. “Bigotry exists everywhere, and this chap collected himself a sort of terrorist group made up of those wizards who believe they’re better than us because they can do magic and we can’t. But every so often, someone with the ability to do magic is born to average people, and these wizard bigots hate them even more than they hate us non-magical people. Those buildings that collapsed all had been homes to the families of average-born magical people.”

Diana tilted her head. “Those incidents stopped not long after our marriage,” she said. “I take it someone defeated this terrorist leader?”

“According to my wizard advisor, Harry Potter defeated him.”

“What?!? That was 1981! He was just a baby,” Diana protested. “How could Harry have defeated some terrorist?”

The Queen shrugged a little. “No one is certain. All that is known for sure is that the terrorist leader went after Harry’s family… his mother was born to average people, and his father worked as the wizard equivalent of a policeman, which made them both targets. Somehow, this terrorist found where they’d taken their baby and gone into hiding, and killed them through magical means. He tried to do the same to their son, but the spell rebounded and no one’s seen the terrorist since. They arrested many of his followers, but they don’t know if they got them all, and some of the ones they
did arrest, they weren’t able to prove any criminal activity and so had to release them again. And that’s why Mr. Potter has to stay with his aunt. According to my wizard advisor, the man leading the fight against the terrorists back then is the one who placed the boy there. This… resistance leader, if you will, is purportedly the most powerful wizard alive today. Because young Harry’s mother stood between her son and the terrorist, sacrificing her life in an effort to save his, she inadvertently established some sort of protection based on the blood relationship. So long as Mr. Potter considers his home to be with his mother’s blood relatives, those terrorists who either escaped altogether or got off on technicalities cannot find him.”

Diana nodded. “So that’s why you didn’t just take him away from the Dursleys. They were hurting him, but there are others out to kill him.”

“Exactly,” the Queen agreed. “By declaring him a Royal Ward, I served notice to his family that I was taking both a personal and official interest in the boy. Reports from the young man I engaged as his tutor indicate that the actual physical abuse has ended with the death of the uncle, although the cousin still favours him as a target for his bullying. However, I’ve asked my wizard advisor to give me as much information as he had on young Mr. Potter and also his parents. And it seems that on his side of the fence, the lad actually holds a title.”

Diana smiled at that, while Charles looked perplexed. “I’m sure that’s lovely for him, Mother, but what does all this have to do with us?” he asked.

His mother smiled. “One thing he’ll not learn at the Dursleys is how to conduct himself in public, with the press clamouring at his heels. And from what I hear, he’ll have that from the moment he starts at the school for young wizards, because of how that terrorist leader fell. Apparently the whole magic world sees him as something halfway between a rock star and the Second Coming of Christ.”

Diana was quick to see what her mother-in-law was getting at. “So you’d like him to spend time with us and the boys? School hols, perhaps, just tagging along with us as we go about whatever public duties we have, so he’ll learn to deal with obnoxious reporters and such?”

“Yes, if you’re willing,” the Queen said. “Especially as the burden will very much be on you, Diana, adding a third little boy to the group.”

“I’m more than willing,” Diana said decisively. “They’ll get some playtime together as well, too. Wills has already been asking when Harry can come out to Highgrove again.”

Her mother-in-law smiled. “I thought you might be. What about you, Charles?”

He shrugged. “If Di is willing, I see no reason not to be. As you said, the primary burden is on her, as the boys go with her when we have separate engagements. But surely someone will question why this unknown child is with us; what sort of statement do we give?”

“The truth,” said the Queen. “That your children met this boy and befriended him on a playground, where he then defended them from the local bully. At your boys’ request, you’re allowing him to spend time with them because you consider him to be a good example for them.” Her eyes twinkled, making her look far younger than her years for a moment. “And since his father was a hereditary knight, I thought perhaps I could quietly raise him in rank to baron. The general population won’t recognize any given knight by name, so that’s easy enough to blur over, don’t you think?”

Charles laughed. “Was his father really a knight?” he asked.
“I’ve no idea,” his mother admitted. “But from what I understand, he was an earl on the magical side of things. So really, young Mr. Potter is the earl now, but since the non-magical nobility will never have heard of James Potter, Earl of Herefordshire, Harry can’t use that title with us. On the other hand, enough people have been knighted for services to the Crown that no one will feel badly about not being able to recall Sir James Potter… and it will be much, much easier to sneak a new barony in if everyone thinks the lad already has a minor title.”

“Very sneaky, Mum,” Charles said with a grin. He got up and kissed his mother on the cheek. “If that’s all you need, I still need to go over the schedules for the launching of my organic food company and the distribution of the profits from it… assuming there are any… to the Prince’s Charities, and I need to have that done before I take that official trip to Hong Kong at the end of the week.”

“And I’d like to go find out the schedule of Harry’s school so I can start planning how best to add him into the group during his term breaks and such,” Diana nodded.

“Yes, yes, go along,” the Queen nodded. “You may go also, Diana, I know the boys are waiting for you.”

They both rose and said their good nights, then hurried off in different directions. The Queen sighed; while Diana was in many ways the perfect Princess of Wales, the longer their marriage went on, the more obvious it was that they had absolutely nothing in common save for their sons.
Sirius accompanied Lucius to the Ministry on Tuesday morning. He hadn’t particularly wanted to, but as the blond man pointed out, he had a lot of sympathy in his favour right now so it would be the best time to get to know a few people and make some useful contacts, especially since he was officially Lord Black now and would be expected to take his seat on the Wizengamot, at least for any lawmaking sessions requiring at least a two-thirds majority vote. Lucius also said it would be understood that he would be unwilling to sit in judgment on criminal trials, at least for a time. Due to his own recent incarceration for someone else’s deeds, he would be seen as being either too likely to be lenient on any alleged criminal, or if it was a suspected former Death Eater, he’d likely be too hard. So even though he was rather uncomfortable at going to the Ministry at all, the animagus put on his best robes and allowed his cousin by marriage to introduce him to any number of people whose names and faces were mostly a jumbled blur by the time he was finished.

A few did stand out, however, including Madam Bones of the DMLE. Partly because she offered him her personal apologies for not having paid enough attention eight years previously to have noticed he was sent to Azkaban without a trial, and partly because she asked his opinion on what sort of safeguards should be implemented to prevent such a thing from happening again, and even took notes of his answers. Minister Fudge also made an impression, although not for the reasons the politician likely hoped. Sirius managed to remain polite while Fudge effusively shook his hand and strongly hinted that he had been personally involved in getting him his trial. But since he already knew the whole story from Stephen, the animagus merely nodded and refrained from hexing the Minister into a squirrel. He also paused in his tour to wash his hands well immediately following his chat with the man.

Lucius smirked at him as he did so. “Feeling sullied, are we?” he asked, unable to resist needling his wife’s cousin a bit.

“You apparently aren’t,” Sirius replied, rolling his eyes. “But then again, he wasn’t trying to convince you that he was the one who came up with the brilliant scheme for getting me released.”

“True enough,” Lucius relented. “But he is useful for the moment, so I keep on his good side, at least for now. Fudge might not be especially effective, but he’s still preferable to one of Dumbledore’s sycophants.”

“Also true,” Sirius agreed.

Lucius hid his surprise, and wondered just what had changed the younger man’s mind about Dumbledore. He knew Sirius had been a member of the old man’s vigilante group back during the war, and had figured he would still be a supporter of the man. “Now I’m curious,” he said.

Sirius gave a short bark of laughter. “I don’t doubt. But it’s nothing I care to share at the moment. I expect you’ll hear about it in time, but now is not the time.”
The blond bowed his head in acknowledgement. He couldn’t blame Sirius for not fully trusting him yet, as they had been on opposite sides in the war, after all. Better to not push, and keep the tentative alliance slowly growing between them, than to allow his curiosity free rein and possibly sending Sirius fleeing back to Dumbledore’s side. “Very well. Is there anyone else you’d care to see here?” he asked instead.

“Not here at the Ministry, no,” Sirius said. “But I suppose I should issue some sort of statement to the press, shouldn’t I? It’s been a week now. I just have no real idea what to say.”

*Gryffindors!* Lucius thought to himself. *They never had any idea how to put ideas across in a way as to gain the most possible favor for themselves.* He shrugged a bit. “Tell them how glad you are that the truth is finally out. Perhaps thank Madam Bones and Minister Fudge for their willingness to take the time to correct such an old mistake. And if you’re asked what you intend doing in the future, just say that you’re still recovering from your incarceration and considering your options.”

“Oh,” Sirius nodded. “Right. I can do that. Off to the Prophet offices, then?”

“You go on,” Lucius said, checking his pocket watch. “I’m due in a meeting with Octavius Beltren, Edward Cavendish, and Walter Traverton in a quarter of an hour, to start hammering out a curriculum for the proposed wizarding culture class at Hogwarts. I’ll see you back at the Manor for dinner.”

Sirius nodded. “All right. Good luck with your meeting.” He squared his shoulders and headed for the public floo.

“One word of advice,” Lucius called before he could pick up the floo powder. “Ask to speak with either Matthew Twainbough or Eleanor Marchant at the Prophet. Avoid Rita Skeeter. The two I named can be trusted to report whatever you tell them without slanting it, while the Skeeter woman cannot.”

“Thanks,” Sirius smiled. “I’ll do that.” He tossed the floo powder in and stepped through as he called, “Main office of the Daily Prophet!”

When he stepped out at the Prophet’s office, the receptionist greeted him politely and led him to a small conference room. A moment later, a tall witch with salt-and-pepper hair stepped inside. “Lord Black? I’m Eleanor Marchant, good to meet you.”

Sirius stood. “A pleasure, Madam Marchant,” he said with a bow.

She smiled and sat down. “Please, call me Eleanor. Informality is much more comfortable, especially when I’m working on a story.”

He chuckled at that. “In that case, I’m Sirius. No pun intended… this time, anyway.”

She laughed. “I suppose that one’s been done to death by this time, yes. How are you adjusting to your newfound freedom?”

“Well, I’m certainly glad the truth came out at long last,” Sirius said quietly. “And I’m grateful to Madam Bones and Minister Fudge for their willingness to give me a proper trial after all this time.”

“I can imagine,” Eleanor nodded. “I understand you were just getting started with the Auror Corps when you were arrested; do you plan to go back to that?”

He shook his head. “Not at the moment, anyway. For now, I’m going to need more time to recover
fully from my incarceration before I could even consider taking on such an active profession again. I doubt I’d pass the physical exam just yet. So I’m considering my options and researching a couple of possible alternatives.” He gave her a charming smile. “I’d prefer not to say what those are just yet, you understand. It’s a personal superstition of mine… never tell anyone your ideas before you’re ready to put them into action, or they might beat you to the punch.”

She chuckled warmly. “Very well, I won’t ask, then. What about your godson, Harry Potter? Will you seek out custody of him now that you’re free?”

Sirius sighed at that. “I’d like to,” he admitted. “But I don’t know that it would be the best thing for him. I’m sure he’s grown up hearing the same stories as everyone else who was unaware of the truth all these years. I’m sure he’ll need time to adjust to the idea that I’m not the villain he’s likely been raised to think me. But I will say for the record that I do wish I’d been able to be there for him all these years, and that I hope he’ll consent to allow me into his life as his godfather and friend even if I’m not his guardian.”

“I hope so too,” Eleanor said sympathetically. She stood up again, offering him her hand. “And thank you, Sirius, for being willing to talk to me today.”

He also stood, shaking the offered hand warmly. “You’re welcome. You were recommended to me as being one of the most reliable reporters on staff here, and I have to say, you’ve lived up to what I’ve been told. You’re not only comfortable to speak with, you know when not to push, too. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said as she escorted him to the floo. She waited politely until he’d stepped through to head to the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade, and returned to her desk to the congratulations of her fellow reporters on getting the interview with Sirius Black.

In Hogsmeade, Sirius stepped from the public floo in the Three Broomsticks to be greeted by an enthusiastic shriek and a hug from Rosemerta. “Sirius Black! Oh, it’s good to see you!” she exclaimed.

Sirius laughed and hugged back. Like many Hogwarts alumni, he’d harbored a crush on the well-endowed landlady during his school days. “It’s good to see you as well, Rosemerta,” he said, planting a hearty buss on her cheek. “Stocking up on the butterbeer yet for the school year?”

“That I am,” she nodded. “And I’ve made a few additions to the menu as well. So many of the Muggleborns have asked for the Yankee imports of tacos and nachos in the last five years, that I took a trip across the pond to learn to make them. Care to try one or both?”

He checked his watch. It was getting on to lunchtime, and he was getting hungry. “Sounds wonderful, I’ll let you pick for me. And a gillywater with it, please. I’m going up to see Hagrid and get my motorbike back from him once I’m done, so much as I’d love a pint, I don’t need one before driving.”

She clucked at him as she bustled away to put in his food order and pour his drink. “I’ve said it for years, lad, you’re going to kill yourself on that thing.”

“It’s no worse than being on a broom, and a lot less far to fall, you know,” he told her with a winning smile as she brought his drink over. “And what will you be feeding me today?”

“Nachos,” she said. “It’s the bigger plate, so I figured you’d prefer it.”

“Thanks, luv,” he told her, taking a sip of his gillywater. “And are you sure I can’t persuade you to
come for a ride sometime?”

Rosemerta laughed. “Not hardly, you great prat,” she said affectionately. “I’m a respectable witch, I am, and not one to go gallivanting around the countryside on some ridiculously loud Muggle contraption. And that’s not even taking into account that I’m more than old enough to be your mum!”

Sirius heaved an exaggerated sigh, knowing they had an audience. “Ah, well, what can I say? You’ve broken my heart once again, luv. I suppose I shall just pine away quietly now.” He batted his lashes at her while the others in the pub laughed and applauded.

“Go on with you!” Rosemerta chuckled, although her cheeks were faintly tinted red as she hurried over to refill a few pint glasses at the bar. A few minutes later she brought over a steaming platter piled high with something that looked like crisps layered with spiced ground beef, melted cheese, a brown substance he couldn’t begin to identify, slices of small green things he also didn’t recognize, shredded lettuce and diced tomatoes, plus two bowls on the side, one filled with sour cream and the other with some sort of chunky tomato-based relish. “Here you go, lad. Just so you know, the little green things are holly… hally… hally-pain-yos. They’re a kind of hot pepper. If you like your curry, you’ll probably like them, but a few people have been surprised, so I like to let folks know the first time they try the nachos.”

“It looks and smells wonderful,” Sirius smiled, and dug right in. “Mmm…” he commented through his first bite. He swallowed and beamed. “No wonder so many of the kids were asking for this.” Rosemerta smiled at the compliment and went back to the bar as he set about demolishing his lunch. After paying up, he headed out to Hogwarts.

Once he got beyond the village proper, he paused in a wooded spot and shifted to his animagus form, knowing that as out of shape as he was, he’d make better time as a dog. Soon enough, he loped through the gates and headed up the drive towards the castle. A bizarre-looking woman with a multitude of gauzy and glittery shawls draped about her and with glasses that made her eyes appear twice their normal size emerged just as he was trotting past the main doors on his way around back to Hagrid’s hut.

She gasped, “The Grim! Oh, Circe!” and fled back inside.

Sirius gave a doggy grin and just kept going until he got to Hagrid’s pumpkin patch, where he shifted back smoothly to his human self. He was still snickering as he rapped on Hagrid’s door.

The half-giant opened the door, shoving his boarhound away as usual. “Back, Fang! What kin I do fer… Sirius Black! Ya didn’t tell me ya was comin’ today! It’s great ta see ya!” He patted the smaller man on the back.

Sirius hid a wince at Hagrid’s ‘gentle’ greeting. “I didn’t know I was going to be able to come today,” he explained. “But I finished up my morning’s errands sooner than I expected, and I knew you’d most likely be here getting the gardens ready for school to open, so I took the chance of coming up unannounced.”

“It ain’t a problem,” Hagrid reassured him. “I jus’ woulda made rock cakes or sumpin’ if I’d known ya were comin’, tha’s all.”

“I can’t really stay, though,” Sirius pointed out, hiding a shudder at the thought of Hagrid’s cooking. “Even with the… special features… on the bike, it’s still a long ways back to where I’m living right now.”
“Oh... I ‘adn’t thoughta that,” Hagrid admitted. “Still, ya coulda took some wit’ ya... eh, guess it don’t matter now. I shined up yer bike fer ya when I got yer letter, and stored it in the shed so it’d stay nice until ya came.” Nudging Fang back with his knee, Hagrid led Sirius over to one of the little outbuildings dotting the area around the vegetable gardens. He opened the door and stepped inside, wheeling the motorcycle out a moment later. “’Ere ya go!”

Sirius stepped up and ran his hand lovingly over the handlebars and fuel tank. He’d paid through the nose to get his hands on the first of the 1981 model year Harley Davidson FLHCs to be imported, and then spent a good chunk of his free time adding in a few wizarding features such as flight, disillusionment, and cushioning charms in case of accident. “Merlin, I’ve missed this,” he murmured. “Hagrid, I owe you, man, for taking such good care of it for me.”

The half-giant turned red. “Eh, twarn’t nothin’,” he mumbled. “I got ta ride it sometimes since I had it, after all.”

“I still owe you,” Sirius affirmed. “Let me buy you one of your own? That way you can enjoy riding even though I’m taking this one back.”

Hagrid wavered, obviously tempted. “Ya sure? Don’t they cost a lot?”

Sirius smiled. “They’re not cheap, but I’m the last of the Blacks. Got almost as much as the Malfoys. You’ve stored my bike for almost eight years, kept it running and looking good, you deserve something nice for that.”

“Well... arright, ya kin buy me a bike if ya want,” Hagrid capitulated. He really did want one of his own, especially since he was too big to fly on a broom. “But only ’cause I know ya can’t get me a dragon!” he laughed.

“You never change,” Sirius laughed as well. “You and your love for dragons.”

“They’re beautiful!” Hagrid said.

“Yeah, they are,” Sirius agreed. He did think dragons were beautiful... as long as they were at least a couple hundred yards away. “I better get going, though, so I’ll make it back for dinner. Write and let me know when you want to go looking for a bike for yourself, Hagrid, and we’ll make a day of it.”

“I will!” Hagrid called as he headed back to his hut. “See ya soon!”

Sirius mounted the bike and started it up, reveling in the powerful feeling of the big engine rumbling to life. Out of courtesy to those dwelling within the castle, he kept his speed down until he was outside the Hogwarts gates once more, then he opened up the throttle and took the machine to top speed before engaging the disillusionment and flight features so he could make it back to Wiltshire and Malfoy Manor in time for dinner. As the bike rose gently into the air, he breathed a silent sigh of relief that he’d gotten in and out of Hogwarts without having come face to face with Dumbledore.

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Meanwhile in Surrey, a young woman hurried into her flat, dropping her bag of groceries in an effort to grab the telephone before whoever was calling gave up. “Hello?” she said breathlessly.

“Please hold for the Princess of Wales,” a smooth voice said on the other end. There was a click, and then Diana’s voice came over the line, “Pammy? I’m so glad I was able to reach you. Have you got a little while to chat?”
Pamela St. Claire nodded automatically. It had been enough of a surprise when Di had stopped in at the school with her sons back last May, but she certainly hadn’t expected her former co-worker to keep up the contact. “I… yes, just let me put the milk away, I just came in from the market,” she babbled.

“Of course, don’t let your food spoil,” Di said with a smile. “I’ll hold on.”

Pamela set the phone down carefully and dashed back to her dropped bags, picking up the milk and a package of chicken and cramming them haphazardly into her refrigerator. Leaving the dry cereals and the canned goods where they’d fallen, she hurried back to grab the phone once more. “All right, I’m back. This is quite a surprise, as I’m sure you can tell.”

Di laughed. “I’m sure of that! I suppose I should have gone through ‘proper channels’ and written to your headmistress and all that rot, but I’m seeking some information and it seemed much easier as well as faster to go through someone I know, rather than go through the process of making a formal inquiry for something relatively small.”

“Information? Well, of course I’ll help any way I can, Your Highness, but what sort of information can I possibly offer you?” Pamela asked.

“I need to know your coming year’s term and holiday schedule, that’s all,” Diana replied. “You heard about what happened when I was there last May visiting your class, right?”

Pamela thought back “Oh, right! It was the talk of the staffroom that day, about the little Princes sneaking out to the playground and making friends with the Potter child, of all people.”

Diana blinked. “Did no one mention that the Potter lad stepped between my little Harry and a much larger bully who tried to hit him? Said bully had already hit Wills and knocked him over, and the Potter boy took the blow aimed at Harry.”

“Really, Di? Er… your Highness.” That shocked Pamela. “None of the children said anything about there being a fight, and neither did the schoolyard monitor. Although in fairness, she likely was too busy trying to get a glimpse of you to have been truly attentive that day. You’re sure this other child is an actual bully, and it wasn’t just a squabble of some sort?”

“Oh, we’re sure, Pammy,” Di said. “Does the name Dudley Dursley sound familiar at all?”

“Oh dear, really?” Pamela asked. “Several of us have suspected him of bullying, but we’ve never managed to catch him at it. What’s more, he’s the Potter boy’s cousin and they live in the same home. Mrs. Dursley has always given us to believe that the Potter boy is something of a troublemaker and a liar, actually. Certainly there have been some strange happenings around him. Would you believe he climbed onto the roof somehow, and then lied about how he got up there?”

Diana sighed. “It’s quite the other way ‘round, actually,” she told her former co-worker. “Her Majesty had some investigations done, and the fact is, the Dursleys may have taken in the Potter lad out of family obligation, but they never especially wanted him, and quite frankly, have encouraged their son’s bullying ways. That time the boy wound up on the roof, did you know it was because he was desperately trying to get away from the Dursley boy and some of his little followers who were chasing him. I don’t doubt he wasn’t able to recall climbing up there, because he was terrified… they were planning on beating him up for their own amusement.”

Pamela frowned. “I feel terrible now,” she admitted. “The Potter boy isn’t the best of students, and so it was easy to dismiss him as just another layabout troublemaker, you know? Especially when the Dursleys always made themselves out to be such concerned parents.”
“Concerned for their own son, maybe,” Diana snorted, not caring how undignified she sounded. “But not for their nephew. I’ve spoken to the Potter child, and he’s much brighter than you might think. But he got in trouble at home when he brought home better marks than his cousin, so he learned to skive off his lessons so as to spare himself punishment. Oh, and on top of that, his ‘loving’ relatives refused to get him the proper glasses, so I expect half the time he couldn’t properly read his assignments.”

Pamela winced. “I’m guessing your interest in the school term schedule has something to do with the Potter boy, then?” she asked.

Di nodded automatically. “Yes. Her Majesty called the Dursley family to a private audience to take them to task about their son’s actions towards Wills and Harry, and also to thank the Potter lad. She’s gone so far as to engage a sort of tutor for him, as she discovered the boy’s father was actually a hereditary knight… something else Mrs. Dursley refuses to acknowledge or believe, mind. Anyway, my lads want to spend more time with their new friend the Potter boy, and Her Majesty said it would be acceptable for me to include him when I take my sons on trips around the country and also have him out to Highgrove to play over term breaks and holidays. So I’m hoping your school’s schedule matches up with Wetherby School’s schedule.”

Pamela moved over to her desk, pausing to untangle the phone cord before it knocked over a stack of lesson plans. “I’ve got the schedule here somewhere… ah, here it is.” She gave the pertinent dates to Diana.

“Perfect, they do match,” Di sounded pleased. “Also, may I give you my private-access number, and ask you to call each week during school and let me know how the Potter boy is doing? I know he isn’t in your class this year, but I remember from our time at Young England just how quickly gossip gets ’round in the staffroom. I have an answerphone on my private line, so even if I’m away when you ring me up, you can leave a message. Will you do this for me?”

“Of course!” Pamela was quite happy to be asked. The favor was easy enough, and being able to brag that she knew Princess Di’s private number would give her a social boost even larger than the one she’d gotten when Di had stopped by the school to say hello last May. She quickly jotted down the number Diana gave her. “Is there anything in particular you’d want to know about the boy?”

Diana considered. “Just generalities,” she decided. “You know… does he look well, how is he doing in his studies, mainly that sort of thing. And of course, I’d appreciate a quiet word put about that the Dursley boy is the real troublemaker of that family, so that the rest of the teachers, particularly their teachers, know which one of the two they ought to be watching more closely.”

“Absolutely,” Pamela promised. “Expect my first call on 1 September, then, since that’s the first day of school. And each Friday thereafter.”

“Thanks ever so much, Pammy,” Di said, the smile on her face audible in her voice. “I’ve got to go now, but I’m so glad you’re able to help me out with this.”

“You’re welcome, D… ah, your Highness.”

“It’s still Di to you, at least over the phone,” the princess replied with a chuckle. “Believe me, it’s lovely to hear people who still remember that I have a name. Talk to you in a couple of weeks!” She hung up.

Pamela hung up on her end as well and went to collect the rest of her fallen groceries and put them away, smiling widely.
Elsewhere in Surrey, Harry was just washing up after weeding the front garden when the washroom door slammed open. Next thing he knew, his head cracked into the faucet hard enough to open a new cut right over his scar, courtesy of a blow from Dudley.

“Aww, the stupid freak slipped,” Dudley announced to the audience behind him… Piers Polkiss, of course, and Malcom and Gordon and Kevin. They all snickered appreciatively before thundering downstairs and into the sitting room.

Harry heard the telly come on, followed by the distinctive sound of Dudley’s latest video game starting up. He sighed and held a wad of loo roll to his bleeding forehead with one hand, while rummaging for the Elastoplast box with the other. He managed to stop the bleeding and get himself bandaged up, then he cleaned the sink and faucet where he’d bled so that Aunt Petunia wouldn’t scold.

He stopped in his room to grab his notebook and hurried out the door while Dudley and his gang were busy with the video game. Settling into an easy jog, he headed towards his school, and to the martial arts studios nearby. According to his notes, they would both be open at this time of day, and he wanted to see what they were like.

He found the tae kwon do studio first, and slipped inside. Several women who looked about the same age as Aunt Petunia were sitting in a sort of lounge area near the front with a railing separating it from the class space and a sort of reception desk near the gap in the railing. Most were reading, one was knitting, and a couple were watching the class in progress. He also noticed that only the women had shoes on; the students and the teachers out on the floor were all barefoot. He thought about that for a moment, but decided to leave his trainers on for the time being and simply took a seat to wait for the class to end.

He observed the class as he waited, and liked what he saw. The person who appeared to be in charge was a diminutive Asian man with a sprinkling of grey in his hair, who seemed very patient with the smallest of the students in the class. The two that Harry thought might be assistant teachers looked younger, one also looked Asian while the other looked British. They addressed the older man quite respectfully, and were quick to jump in and help the bigger students when needed, although they were more likely to demonstrate at slow speed what they wanted the student to do, rather than physically guide the child into the correct position and motion. When the class came to an end, the students stood and bowed to the trio of instructors, who bowed back. Only then did the children dash over to the waiting area and grab their shoes from under seats while chattering excitedly to their mothers.

Harry took a deep breath when the British-looking instructor moved out to the reception desk and checked what seemed to be a schedule pad. “Excuse me, sir?” he asked shyly.

The man looked up and gave him a friendly smile. “Hello, what can I do for you?” he asked.

“I… I’m considering taking a martial arts class this year,” Harry said softly. “But I don’t really know much about martial arts. I wondered if you could tell me a little more about tae kwon do and how everything works here, please?”

Eric Fossey looked the young boy over as he nodded. “I can do that,” he said. “Please remove your shoes and leave them under one of the seats in the waiting area, so I can give you a tour of the dojang… the school.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry nodded. He moved over to a vacant seat and removed his trainers, neatly placing
them under the chair. “May I bring my notebook and biro with me? Or should they stay here too?”

“Leave them for now,” the man said. “The tour won’t take too long, and I have some handouts that should have most of the answers you’re likely to want already printed up to give to potential students. I’m Mr. Fossey, by the way.” He watched as the boy tucked his notebook and biro safely under his trainers.

“I’m Harry Potter,” the boy replied as he approached the desk again.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Potter,” the teacher said, leading Harry beyond the railing. “And this is the head of the dojang, Master Soong, and senior instructor Mr. Kim.

The older man and the younger one bowed to Harry as they were introduced. A little uncertainly, he bowed back to each of them, earning an approving glance from the older man, Master Soong. “I will take the child from here,” the old man announced.

“I’m honored, sir,” Harry said shyly, a little disconcerted by all the attention. But since they were currently the only four people in the school, at least that he could see, there was no help for that.

“Why do you wish to study tae kwon do?” Master Soong asked. He reached out and rested a gentle finger against the Elastoplast on Harry’s forehead and the bruise beginning to form around it. “Because no martial arts can magically make you able to fight off a bully, you know. Someone larger and heavier than you will still be able to beat you up once they knock you down, despite what the cinema would have you think.”

Harry bit his lip. “Oh… well, that is why my tutor suggested it. But… well, I’m used to avoiding my cousin most of the time anyway. And if I’m not home as often, that will just give me less time around him for him to try to get me. Also, in my research into martial arts, most of them talked about a fillo… filla…”

“Philosophy?” Master Soong put in, one brow upraised as he studied the boy with new interest.

“Yes, philosophy, thank you,” Harry nodded. “A way of living in harmony and balance. I don’t exactly understand it in a way I can explain, but it made it sound a little like the yoga I do now.” He grinned, “Only fast where yoga is slow. But the encyclopaedia said tae kwon do teaches discipline, and that’s something everyone needs, right?”

“That is true, Mr. Potter. Everyone needs discipline.” He brought Harry around the training floor, showing him the punching bag and the board-breaking area as well as the main workout space. At the rear, there was a pair of small locker rooms with attached loos and showers. “Some of our older students have to go to their jobs from here,” he explained, “so we put in a space where they could clean up before they leave.”

“That makes sense,” Harry nodded.

Master Soong smiled. “Now, about tae kwon do itself…” Moving back to the waiting area, he spent perhaps half an hour giving Harry an overview of the practice and its philosophy, becoming more pleased as the boy listened attentively and showed it by asking intelligent questions and even taking notes. Usually from children as young as this, the questions were confined to ones such as ‘How soon before I can learn to do moves like in XYZ film?’ When the lecture was finished, he smiled and went over to the desk, pulling out a fairly thick folder with various informational papers within… schedules of classes, rules of the dojang, costs of classes, fees for tests, average amount of time between tests, even information about the dojang’s insurance policy.
Harry accepted the folder with a smile. “Thank you, Master Soong,” he said politely.

“I hope you do choose to return here, Mr. Potter,” the man said with a smile. “I believe you would be a valuable addition to the dojang, as well as a pleasure to teach.”

“Thank you again, Master Soong,” Harry said, blushing beet red. “If I choose to come here, I will do my best to learn well.” Unsure of what to do next, he bowed awkwardly and sat down to put his trainers back on before slipping out the door.

He made his way over to the shotokan karate school, but was less than impressed as he walked in the door. The single teacher here was barking orders at the class and obviously belittling one boy who was having trouble with a particular movement. The waiting area looked as though it hadn’t been cleaned in a while and smelled of old cigarettes. Three older boys argued over a Space Invaders game to one side, while a fourth was kicking at a vending machine and swearing because it took his money without giving him a drink. He didn’t bother to look for anyone to answer questions; it was readily apparent that this particular school was looking for money and didn’t actually care about the students.

He’d discuss it with Stephen and Sirius this weekend, but he was pretty sure he’d be signing up for tae kwon do classes in a couple of weeks.

Chapter End Notes

As tae kwon do is a Korean martial art, I’m using Korean terms in this story when possible, rather than the more well-known Japanese terms that people might have heard before. Hence dojang for the school, rather than dojo, and in the future, hyungs rather than katas for the forms.

Also, regarding my descriptions of the two martial arts schools, it is not my intention to portray tae kwon do as better than shotokan karate. What I personally know about either one could be contained on the head of a pin. In describing the "bad" school, I read an old article by a shotokan instructor which listed the signs of a good school and warning signs of a not so good school, worked up a rough contrast, then flipped a coin to see which would be the "good" place where Harry would decide to go, and which would be the "bad" place where he’d be uncomfortable. So if there are any practitioners of shotokan karate reading my story, I hope you’re not too terribly offended by my portrayal of a single school, and please realize I’m aware that they aren't all like that one.
London Excursion, Part One

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

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After exchanging owls during the week, discussing what they’d like to do on Saturday, Stephen met Sirius at the Leaky Cauldron on Friday night to finalize their plans over dinner. Over lamb stew and a few pints, they decided they’d start with showing off a bit of Muggle tradition and history with the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace, take a walk through Harrods figuring that it would appeal to Narcissa, and finish up with a trip on the Underground to Charing Cross Road, where they would stop in at Waterstone’s so Harry could meet Remus. They’d decide what else to do then depending on the time… either continue touring Muggle London if the boys and Narcissa so desired, or to head off in separate directions with Narcissa and Draco presumably returning home while the two of them spent more time with Harry.

On impulse, Stephen asked, “Want to head into Muggle London to a club?” as they finished their meal.

“Sure, sounds fun!” Sirius grinned. “I’ve still got some Muggle cash on me from when I talked to Remus last weekend.” He tossed down some galleons to cover their meal and tip. “Let’s go!”

Stephen laughed. “You’ll look a right berk hitting a London club in robes,” he reminded Sirius, drawing his wand. “For that matter, so will I, in my work suit.” He quickly transfigured their clothing into acid washed jeans and Doc Martens, with a black Led Zeppelin runes t-shirt for Sirius and a Pink Floyd Dark Side of the Moon t-shirt for himself. “There. We’ll not be the most fashionable blokes out tonight, but we’ll not look out of place, either.”

“Good thinking,” Sirius nodded.

Stephen took the lead as they headed out to Charing Cross Road and walked up a ways to a club called Spitfire. Sirius smiled as they headed inside; the song that was playing might not be familiar, but he hadn’t realized how much he’d missed rock music until now. They got drinks and started checking out the girls on the dance floor.

Before long, a cute brunette with pink streaks in her teased-out hair detoured over to the pair of them on her way to the bar for another round. “Oi… you blokes meetin’ up with anyone?” she asked. “Or would either of you be interested in a one-off?”

Sirius definitely perked up at that. “We’re not meeting anyone.”

The girl nodded. “Tina, me flatmate, I hauled her out tonight. It’s her first time back out after a right nasty breakup. Ain’t no way she’s ready to date again yet, but even she admits she misses the shagging.” She gestures to a blonde with purple streaks in her hair. “I’m usually good at readin’ blokes, and I get the sense neither of you are looking for anything permanent, but you’re not arses, either. Give it five minutes after I get back with our drinks, then come over and chat us up. No man left behind, either, I’ll take on whichever of you she don’t latch onto.” She grinned and sauntered casually over to the bar where she picked up another pair of pints and headed back to her friend.

Even before Tina shot over to the bar, Stephen grinned at Sirius. “Score!” he said

Sirius laughed. “At least nobody’s stuck playing gooseberry. And if they’re not the prettiest birds
in the place, they’re not beastly, either. And I’ll be blunt, after eight years? Either one is good with me. We’ll have to call it an early night, though, since we’re bringing Harry and Draco out tomorrow.”

Stephen laughed, and they headed over to the girls’ table where they introduced themselves and asked the girls to dance. Three or four songs later, blonde Tina was draped all over him, while Sirius and the brunette, whose name was Michelle, were already snogging on the dance floor. Tina laughed and poked her friend to get them to stop. “Let’s go back to the flat, before they throw you out of here, Michelle,” she teased.

Michelle gave her friend the two-fingered salute, but grinned all the same. The girls’ flat was only a couple blocks up the road, and Stephen and Sirius happily walked there with Tina and Michelle. But keeping in mind that they had places to be in the morning, they took their leave of the girls around midnight, apparating from the alley behind the block of flats; Sirius heading straight to Malfoy Manor, while Stephen went back to the car park near the Leaky Cauldron to drive back to his own place for the night.

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When Stephen picked up Harry in the morning for yoga class, the boy was smiling. “I’m going to take tae kwon do, I’m pretty sure,” he announced. “I went to the library this week and looked up a whole bunch of stuff and found the martial arts places I can walk to after school so that you don’t have to bring me there too and I visited them both and the karate place was nasty but I really, really liked the tae kwon do place and I think Master Soong liked me too so that’s where I want to go as long as it’s okay with you and Sirius,” he said.

Stephen laughed. “I’m surprised you had enough air in your lungs to get all that out at once! I see no reason you shouldn’t take tae kwon do if that’s your preference. And it’s good to see you’ve done your research.”

“I did some other research, too,” Harry said. “I looked up the rights and privileges of a Royal Ward, and since most of them were noble orphans, one of the things they’re supposed to be taught is how to govern their holdings. And you said I’m a wizard Lord, right? So even if it’s not quite the same as being a Muggle Lord, shouldn’t I be able to get lessons from the Queen or at least from a noble as to how to actually be a Lord?” He hesitated, then said more quietly, “And since most often Royal Wards grew up together with the children of the royal family, do you think that means I can ask if I can play with Wills and Harry again sometimes?”

Stephen considered that. “Well, not being a Lord myself, I have no idea what sort of lessons those would entail. But I’ll certainly bring it up to Her Majesty in my next report. I’ll ask about another chance for you to spend some time with the Princes as well. But you know I can’t promise anything.”

“Oh, I know that!” Harry nodded. “I just didn’t know if it would be wrong to ask or not.”

“Despite what your uncle might have taught you, Harry, it’s never wrong to ask for something you want. At worst, there might be a case of it being the wrong time to ask because of other things going on. But it’s never wrong to let it be known that you want something,” Stephen said firmly. “And speaking of wants, is there anything you’d especially like to see in London?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know… the Tower of London, maybe? Or… Dudley talked about going to the Toy Kingdom at Harrods one time. And the zoo, I never went to the zoo.”

Stephen nodded. “Well, the Tower we’ll leave for another day. It’s well worth the seeing, but it’s
better to get there early to avoid the worst of the crowds, and we’ve got a few other things planned
for today. One of them is Harrods, actually. Not only that, it won’t just be the two of us.”

Harry brightened. “Is Uncle Padfoot coming too?” he asked.

“Yes, Sirius is coming too. So is his cousin, Lady Malfoy, and her son Draco, who’s just a couple
months older than you are.” Stephen hesitated, but decided a warning would be in order. “Draco is
a bit spoiled, from what I can tell,” he said. “This is going to be his first trip to a Muggle area, and
if I’ve read his character correctly, he’s one who might put on a mask to keep anyone from
realizing he’s nervous or uncomfortable. I’m telling you this now, because he’s likely to seem
arrogant or cold, especially at first. Also, his father was a supporter of You Know Who, although
he seems to have changed his views somewhat, so it’s likely that Draco was raised to think he’s
better than everyone else, just because he’s a pureblood wizard. You’re not a Muggleborn, but
you’ve been raised Muggle, so that might lead him to saying something impolite, too. However,
you absolutely do not have to worry about him fighting you. Neither Sirius nor I would stand for
that.”

Harry nodded again. “So you’re saying he might be mean, but if he is, it might be just because he
thinks it makes him look weak to admit to being nervous?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Okay, then. As long as he won’t try to hit me, I don’t mind. And I’ll do my best to make friends
with him, too.”

Stephen reached over and ruffled Harry’s hair. “Good man, Harry.” They pulled in at the yoga
studio and went through class, then drove into London.

“Where are we going first?” Harry asked.

“We’re going to meet up at Sirius’ house… he said one of the elves would let us in if we got there
before he and the Malfoys do… and first on the to-see list is the Changing of the Guard at
Buckingham Palace.” Stephen grinned. “Lord Malfoy actually is the one who asked me to play
tour guide for his wife and son, having decided that Draco should learn to recognize a policeman in
case he ever gets lost in a Muggle area, so that he knows who is safe to approach for help. And
since I know how much purebloods value tradition, I thought I’d like to show them a bit of Muggle
tradition. Harrod’s is next on the list, as both Sirius and I thought it might appeal to Lady Malfoy.”
He chuckled. “Witch or Muggle, women nearly always like to shop. And last on the agenda is to
visit Waterstone’s on Charing Cross Road, because your parents’ friend Remus Lupin works there
and he’d like to meet you, too. What, if anything, we do after that, will depend how late it is and
what everyone wants to do at that point.”

“It sounds brill,” Harry smiled.

Inside 12 Grimmauld Place, Narcissa had to hide a smile at her cousin’s nervous pacing. “How
difficult can this be, Sirius?” she asked.

“Well… there’s going to be one more addition to the group,” he confessed. “My godson.”

“Harry Potter? Circe!”

Draco blinked and looked up. “Your godson is Harry Potter?” he asked.

“Yes, he is,” Sirius nodded. “I’m hoping you and he will become friends.” He squatted down next
to the blond boy. “A couple of things you need to know, however, Draco. One is, even though he’s
a wizard, he’s been raised by his Muggle aunt, so he’s nearly as ignorant of the wizarding world as you are of the Muggle world. That’s a big part of why I hope you become friends, because I think you can learn a lot from each other. But the other thing is, no one outside your parents and me and Mr. Coyner can know that you’ve met him, at least not until we say it’s okay to talk about it. There’s a lot at stake in this, quite possibly including Harry’s life and Mr. Coyner’s. I know I’m asking a lot of you, but I really need you to do this for me.”

Draco nodded, his eyes wide. “I can do it. Mother, is this something I should swear on my magic about?”

Narcissa thought about it for a moment. It might not be a bad idea, she mused. “Think very carefully about your phrasing, before you actually swear,” she cautioned.

Draco nodded again. “How about, I will not discuss the fact that I know Harry Potter with anyone until such time as Mr. Coyner or Cousin Sirius or my parents tell me I may?”

“Yes, that’s acceptable,” Narcissa said.

Holding his hands up as if the wand he didn’t yet own lay across his palms, Draco solemnly intoned, “I, Draco Lucius Malfoy, do swear upon my magic that I will not discuss the fact that I know Harry Potter with anyone until such time as Mr. Coyner or Cousin Sirius or my parents tell me I may.” A soft white light enveloped him briefly as the oath took hold.

Sirius smiled. “Harry and Stephen should be here any minute now… oh, I think that’s Stephen’s car pulling up.” He hurried to open the front door, waving happily.

Harry tumbled out and dashed up the steps to hug his godfather, while Stephen followed with a bit more dignity. “Good morning,” the young man said as he stepped inside and bowed to Narcissa. “Is everyone ready for an adventure?”

“Maybe,” Narcissa smiled. “Would you be so kind as to make sure Draco and I are dressed appropriately? Sirius admitted he wasn’t completely sure what’s correct for women and children nowadays, or how we needed to be dressed for what you have planned for us to do.” She was in a simple yet elegant sundress, while Draco wore jeans and a green t-shirt.

“Comfortable for walking is the most important,” Stephen said, transfiguring her high-heeled open-toed pumps to fashionable strappy sandals with cushioned soles. “I thought you might enjoy seeing a bit of Muggle tradition, the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace, a tradition which dates back to the Restoration of King Charles II in the 1660s. After that, I thought we’d explore Harrod’s, and then take the Underground to Charing Cross Road, where Sirius’ friend Remus Lupin works at Waterstone’s bookstore. Depending how long all of this takes, we may or may not choose to do other things as well. Harry has expressed interest in going to the zoo, for example.”

“What’s a zoo?” Draco asked.

“It’s a place where animals from all over the world are kept,” Harry spoke up enthusiastically. “My cousin’s been before, and he’s always talking about seeing camels and elephants and parrots and tigers.”

“How do Muggles get animals from all over, and keep them alive here?” Draco asked sceptically.

“They build special housing that’s made to be like where they live in the wild,” Harry explained. “Special temperature controls, and sometimes even water sprinklers to make it like it’s raining
inside. That’s what Dudley said, anyway.”

“Muggles can make it rain inside?” Draco said incredulously. “Mother, I definitely want to see that!”

Narcissa laughed. “Let’s get through what Mr. Coyner and Sirius have planned for us first, darling, and if we have time, we’ll talk about it. Or perhaps plan a trip to this zoo for some other day, when we’ve got more time.”

“Yes, Mother,” Draco sighed, not quite able to hide the pout on his face.

“Forgive me for rushing, everyone, but we do need to get going if we’re going to get near enough to Buckingham Palace to have a good view,” Stephen said. “I’ve added a bit of wizard space to my car, so we’ll all fit comfortably. Sirius, do you mind riding in the back with the boys?”

“No problem,” Sirius said as they all trooped out to the car and piled in. He sat in the middle so that Harry and Draco could have the windows.

Draco didn’t know whether to be amazed or scared as they pulled into traffic. Oh, he’d seen pictures of cars before, but the ones in the pictures he’d seen mostly looked fairly large, while Stephen’s was quite small. And he’d never imagined that Muggles would have so many of them! The books said cars were very, very expensive, something that rich people used, while poor people walked places. “There’s so many cars,” he murmured.

“Nearly everyone in the Muggle world drives nowadays, Draco,” Stephen told him. “Although within the city sometimes it’s more convenient to take public transportation… the bus, or the Underground… that’s a network of trains which run on electricity. That’s because parking is not always available within the city, at least not close enough to where you might want to go to be convenient. We’re going to take a bus from Buckingham Palace to Harrod’s, and then take the Underground from there to a spot close to where Remus works, so that you and your mother can get the full experience.”

“It can be a bit crowded,” Sirius put in. “But honestly, I think it’s something all wizards ought to experience for themselves. I took Muggle Studies when I was at Hogwarts, and I really think the class is a joke as it’s taught now, because most of the books and such are terribly out of date. I learned more in two weeks staying with Lily’s parents before she and James got married, than in five years of Muggle Studies.”

“Yes you serious?” Narcissa asked.

The animagus nodded with a grin. “I’m always Sirius, you know that.” He snickered as his cousin rolled her eyes and the two boys laughed. “All joking aside, I really do think the Muggle Studies classes need a lot of updating. I’d almost consider writing new textbooks myself, but I know I’m horrible at getting to a point without going round in circles and off on tangents.”

“What’s worse in my opinion is that since Muggleborns don’t ever take Muggle Studies… and why should they, after all? They never get considered for work in the Department of Muggle Liaisons in the Ministry, even though they would be much more qualified than the wizard-raised people who do work there,” Stephen put in as he pulled into a car park. “Anyway, here’s where we get out and it’s just a short stroll from here.” Once everyone piled out, he led them up the street towards the gates of Buckingham Palace. Plenty of tourists already had their places staked out and cameras set up, but they were able to get a good spot right near the front of the Victoria Memorial facing the palace and the balcony.
As the sound of drums from the regimental band heralded the beginning of the daily pageantry, Diana stepped out onto the balcony holding Wills by the hand. The two waved and smiled at the crowds of people, who cheered. Harry jumped up and down excitedly. “That’s the Princess of Wales!” he told Draco. “And Prince William! She invited me to Highgrove for my first ever birthday party, and Wills showed me how to ride a pony.”

“I have a pony,” Draco said. “Maybe you can come over and ride with me sometime?” Then something else Harry said caught his attention, even as he stared at the brightly-uniformed guardsmen marching in formation around the forecourt of the palace. “How come it was your first ever birthday party?”

Harry bit his lip. “Oh… well… Aunt Petunia never really wanted me because she hates magic and wizards, but I have to stay with her for now because of blood protections or something like that. And Uncle Vernon wanted me even less but when my parents died they had to take me in because Aunt Petunia was my mum’s only sister and no one else in her family or my dad’s was left who could take me. But Uncle Vernon was really really mean and he hit me sometimes and laughed when my cousin Dudley hit me and didn’t give me much to eat and made me stay in the cupboard under the stairs if I wasn’t doing chores. But then earlier this year the Princess of Wales came to my school to visit with someone there and the Princes came out to the schoolyard and Dudley hit Wills and knocked him down and went after little Harry too, so I got between them. Because Dudley is really big and heavy, and Wills is younger than me and little Harry isn’t even five yet and even though I didn’t know who they were, I didn’t want Dudley to hurt little Harry. I’m big enough to stand it, and he’s not.”

Draco was still rather confused, as it never occurred to him that anyone wouldn’t want a child. But he did realize this probably wasn’t the best time or place for asking more about Harry being unwanted by his aunt. “Why didn’t you tell someone that… Dudley… was hurting smaller children?” he asked instead.

“Dudley always blames me for things he does wrong,” Harry shrugged. “And his friends all do whatever he tells them. So if I told a teacher he hit me, he’d tell the teacher I hit him, and then all his friends would say that too. So it would be my word against four or five, and when that happens, they always believe the majority.” He wrinkled his nose. “And a lot of the kids at school are so scared of Dudley that they’d lie for him even if he isn’t friends with them, just because if they don’t, he’ll probably beat them up next.”

“That stinks,” Draco declared. “How come you’re in school already? I thought most kids got taught at home, either from their mothers or from tutors, until they go to Hogwarts.”

“Muggle kids go to school from when we’re about five,” Harry explained. “Sometimes even before that, some kids go to nursery school when they’re three and four. But nursery school isn’t really a school with lessons like reading and maths, it’s more a place where kids learn things like playing nicely and sharing. Plus it helps them get used to not being around their parents all the time, so that when they start primary school, they’re not so scared. Primary schools are mostly day schools that are close to where you live… you go in each morning and have lessons in reading and maths and history and science and things like that, and then you go home again each afternoon. And after school, a lot of kids have activities… sports like football, or music lessons, or whatever it is they like doing. I’m probably going to take tae kwon do lessons this year… that’s a kind of martial art and it also teaches discipline and balance and stuff. And then at age eleven, Muggle kids go to secondary school, and those are usually boarding schools.” He grins. “Dudley will be going to a place called Smeltings, where Uncle Vernon went as a boy. He always makes fun of me, because he thinks I’m going to be going to Stonewall High, the local council-run secondary school. He’ll be in for a surprise when I get to go to Hogwarts instead!”
Draco laughed appreciatively at that, and then turned his attention back to the Changing of the Guard. “What are they doing now?” he asked, seeing two groups meeting each other in the palace forecourt.

“The Old Guard is inspecting the New Guard, to make sure all is in order,” Stephen explained for everyone’s benefit. “Once the officers are satisfied, the Old Guard will hand over the keys to the castle to the New Guard, who will take up the sentry positions. Then the Old Guard will march back up the Mall to the barracks together with the regimental band.” He smiled. “They’ve been doing it like this since 1660, as I said. And so few countries have a working monarchy anymore, that it’s become quite a tourist attraction. Not many places in the Muggle world can say they’ve been doing something the same way for over three hundred years.”

Narcissa tilted her head. “You make it sound as though Muggles really do revere tradition,” she said. “But you admit that there isn’t much of it, either. I seem to be missing something.”

Stephen nodded. He paused to gather his thoughts, and incidentally, to let the regimental band and the Old Guard pass away from them so he wouldn’t have to shout his answer. “Muggles in general feel that while there is a time and a place for traditions, there needs to be flexibility to change to things that quite simply work better and more efficiently. Cars, for example. A broomstick can go to about sixty miles an hour, yes, but it holds one comfortably and two is a bit awkward. Three isn’t really possible save for the direst of emergencies and even then, it would be a nightmare to manage. When cars were first invented, they couldn’t go much faster than a horse-drawn carriage, plus they were noisy and smelled horrid. But over time, people learned to make better cars, bigger and faster and quieter. A little car like mine can hold four comfortably without the additional wizard space I added, and it can easily go a hundred miles an hour, probably tops out at a hundred and twenty or so. And while cars will never be cheap, they’re within the price range of nearly anyone nowadays. So even though horse-drawn carriages could be considered traditional in the Muggle world, they’re now only used for certain special occasions such as weddings, and people use cars for everyday travel. Tradition is revered, yes, but at the same time, so is progress.”

Narcissa nodded as Stephen guided the little group through Green Park to the bus stop they needed. “I think I see. It isn’t that tradition is disrespected, it’s that change is embraced.”

“That’s an excellent way of putting it,” Stephen agreed, as a double-decker bus pulled up. “Shall we ride upstairs or down?”

“Upstairs!” both boys and Sirius chorused.

Narcissa laughed. “All right, upstairs it is.”

Stephen smiled as they climbed up. “It’s just a couple of stops, so sit near the stairs if we can,” he cautioned. When they reached the proper stop, he herded them downstairs again and up the block to Harrod’s.

Draco was disappointed to leave the bus. “I wish we were going farther. It’s fun riding on the bus.”

Harry grinned. “Maybe you can come out with us again sometime and see more of London,” he suggested as they entered the famous department store.

“Merlin…” Narcissa breathed, looking around in awe. “I never would have believed it.”

Stephen and Sirius grinned at each other. “We picked this stop especially for you, cousin,” Sirius chuckled. “It seems a love of shopping is something that Muggle women and witches have in common.”
Draco’s mouth dropped open in amazement as his mother did something he’d never seen before: she dropped her Malfoy mask in public, laughing as she swatted Sirius on the upper arm. “You should have warned me, you buffoon!” she scolded. “I didn’t exchange nearly enough money to do this place justice!”

“We can always come back another time,” Sirius told her, still laughing. “I’ll even promise to carry your bags and not complain about how long you take trying everything on.”

“And I’ll hold you to that,” Narcissa told him, casting a longing glance in the direction of the couture dresses. “But I won’t even look today, or you’ll never get me out of here.”

Both men chuckled, and Stephen led the group through the store, giving Harry and Draco a chance to explore the Toy Kingdom. Draco was amazed at the sheer variety of toys, and at how many of them used something other than magic to move. No matter how simple Stephen attempted to make his explanations, Draco just didn’t see how inserting a couple of metal cylinders (or four, or six, or some other number) and flipping a switch could make a toy puppy waddle around and bark. He was even more convinced that Muggles used some sort of magic of their own on the toys when he saw a group of bigger boys playing with a set of something called radio-controlled cars, as the ones making the cars run were holding little boxes with knobs and switches and metal wands sprouting from them.

Fortunately for Narcissa’s peace of mind, as she wasn’t looking forward to trying to explain to her son how wizarding magic interfered with Muggle elektroniks, Harry soon had the other boy’s attention on toys that didn’t require those cylinders… bat-rees… to work. “Draco, check out the Legos!” he enthused, tugging the blond boy over to the display. “Look at all these things you can build with them!” Harry waved his hand at a Lego landscape which included a huge castle, and a knight on horseback fighting a dragon.

Draco’s eyes grew huge at the dragon. “Brilliant!” he breathed. “How do they do that?”

Harry pulled him over to a demo table with a couple of open Lego sets out on it. “The little bricks snap together like so,” he demonstrated. “As to how they do things like the dragon, I think they get artists to sketch it out first and then just keep trying until they get it right. I couldn’t build the dragon, not without a lot of practice, or some directions to follow. But I bet I could build a model of Stephen’s car.”

“Really?” Draco asked, experimentally snapping some Lego bricks together and taking them apart again.

“Really,” Harry nodded, working rapidly to snap pieces into place. It took a few minutes, but he was able to assemble a reasonable facsimile of Stephen’s Mini Mk IV. He rolled it across the table to Draco, who examined it with a grin.

“That’s brilliant,” the blond boy laughed. “Let’s build a bus!” Harry grinned and the two boys started grabbing all the red Legos and clear window bits they could find. Fifteen minutes later, a double-decker bus joined the Mini on the table.

The adults found seats where they could keep an eye on Harry and Draco. “They’re getting along well,” Sirius said happily.

“Yes,” Narcissa agreed. “And if it can be arranged, I wouldn’t object to Harry coming for a visit now and again. I understand it can’t happen too often, for fear of exposure. But I believe you were correct in saying he and Draco could learn from each other.”
Sirius smiled and looked at Stephen, who nodded. “I’m sure we can come up with some sort of arrangement to let Harry visit sometimes,” the younger man nodded. “And perhaps to let Draco come visit London again as well. Harry is particularly interested in history right now, especially anything to do with knights and castles, and he’s expressed an interest in touring the Tower of London. The Crown Jewels are kept there, along with a collection of armour going back to King Henry VIII’s personal jousting and battle gear. That might be an educational as well as an enjoyable trip for Draco to come along on… and a trip to the zoo, of course, if we don’t end up getting there today. Or even if we do,” he chuckled. “Kids do tend to be fascinated with the animals.”

Narcissa chuckled at that. “Indeed. What else is on the agenda for today?”

“A ride on the Underground and a visit to a bookstore at the other end,” Sirius said. “My old friend Remus works there, and he’ll be there today, and I know he’d love a chance to see Harry again after all these years. Lunch, either before or after that, depending on how hungry everyone is.” He grinned. “And on how brave and adventurous you’re feeling. Do you want to eat somewhere all high-class and proper? Or might you consider a venture to a Muggle fast-food place? Stephen tells me that many of the American McDonald’s shops have put small playground areas inside the stores for the kids. I’ll be the first to admit, the food is far from refined… chips and burgers and other hot sandwiches. But it’s not horrible, either.”

“They do have a sort of a chef salad,” Stephen put in, “and a chicken salad as well, if you’d prefer a salad to a burger.”

“Oh… today is for living dangerously,” Narcissa chuckled. “I’ll try this McDonald’s place. It’s not as though I need to keep up appearances whilst out and about in the Muggle world after all. Rita Skeeter isn’t going to pop out with that horrible photographer of hers in tow and take a picture of me eating a burger at McDonald’s, whereas she might well do so if I was to ever actually eat at, say, the Leaky Cauldron. And that sort of picture could easily hurt Lucius’ business dealings, as the Malfoys are expected to maintain a certain image.”

Stephen nodded and Sirius jumped to his feet. “I’ll round up the boys,” he announced. “I’m starved. Narcissa, do you mind if I get something for Draco? I’m going to get Harry a present, and don’t want to leave him out.”

She smiled. “Just as long as it’s nothing that needs those bat-rees, since we both know they won’t work at the Manor,” she told him.

The animagus bounced over to the boys. “Harry, Draco, you’ve each got five minutes to pick out one thing… anything you want, no worries as to the price, but it cannot use bat-rees. Then we’re going to go to McDonald’s for lunch.”

“Brilliant!” Harry beamed, abandoning the Legos table to head for the area where he’d seen some amazing-looking artist kits, with watercolours and pastels and coloured pencils and sketchpads and charcoal sticks and artists’ pencils. As much as he liked the Legos, Dudley liked them too, so he figured if he brought any of them home, they’d slowly vanish into Dudley’s already vast collection.

Draco headed for the shelves of Lego sets, where he frowned indecisively between a specialty set that had the pieces and instructions to build two dragons, and a huge generic set that had a little bit of everything.

Sirius, still grinning happily, ruffled the boy’s pale hair. “Ah, go ahead and grab both,” he told Draco. “Harry? Pick two things, not just one,” he called to his currently-hidden godson.
“Okay, Uncle Sirius,” Harry called back, emerging with a large and very high-quality art kit and moving over to the jigsaw puzzles. He picked up a set of two 500-piece puzzles packaged together with a felt mat in a tube that he could spread out to work the puzzles on, and roll it loosely with the puzzle still in progress if he needed to clear up and get it out of the way at any point. He smiled at the pictures on the puzzles; one was of a shimmering white unicorn against a background of fantastic flowers and trees and birds, while the other was of an iridescent black winged horse flying across a background of a sunrise over a seashore. Dudley hated puzzles, so hopefully he’d leave them alone.

Sirius brought the toys over to the till, and added five Rubik’s Cubes and five Slinkies to the pile as well. He paid up and lugged the bags over to the group. “Now can we eat?” he asked Stephen with a grin.

Stephen laughed. “And here I thought Harry and Draco would be the hungry ones. We’ve got to take the Underground to Charing Cross before we’ll find a McDonald’s, there isn’t one around here. But that’s okay, the station is just at the corner and it’s maybe a ten minute trip.” As they emerged into the street once more, he said to Draco, “If you look just ahead, see the fellow in black with the helmet-shaped hat? That’s a police constable. If you’re ever lost in Muggle London, look for someone dressed like that and ask for help. Just keep in mind they won’t know about the Leaky Cauldron specifically, but they will know King’s Cross Station, Charing Cross Road which is where the Leaky is located, or even Grimmauld Place where Sirius’ house is.”

“What if I’m not in London?” Draco asked.

Stephen thought for a moment. “Well, that’s a little more difficult, especially if you don’t actually know where you are. Which isn’t likely, but still, I suppose it could happen. If that’s the case, tell them you were traveling with friends and there was more than one car in order to hold everyone, and that apparently the driver of each car thought you were in another one and the group left without you. Then say you were on your way to London and your cousin lives there, at Grimmauld Place, but he hasn’t got a telephone. They’ll figure some way of getting you there.”

Draco nodded. “I can do that. It’s more likely I’d get lost in London than away from it anyway,” he admitted. “It’s the one place I can see myself ever going to that isn’t strictly a wizarding area, at least for the next couple of years.”

Stephen nodded again as the group descended the stairs into the Underground station. Narcissa looked up at the light fixtures in the ceiling. “I still can’t get over how bright it is down here, and inside the shops. The lighting is amazing,” she said quietly.

“The train we’ll be riding is powered the same way as the lights, through electricity,” Stephen told her.

“How do you know where to go? I mean, surely all the stations down here aren’t connected directly to each other, are they?” she asked.

Stephen shook his head. “No, they’re not. Usually two or three lines run through any given station in the heart of London, but they don’t all go to the same places at the ends of the line. For Charing Cross Road, we’re going to take the Blue Line from here. This map on the wall gives you some information as to where to go and when to get off again… it’s not an actual map so much as it is a listing of stations and the order in which the train will pass through them from here.” He escorted her to the map, which showed the Blue Piccadilly Line, and traced it from the ‘You Are Here’ indicator at the station they were in, up four stops to Charing Cross Road at Piccadilly Circus.

She nodded slowly. “It’s not nearly what I expected,” she admitted, “being out here, I mean. I
expected a lot more squalor and not nearly so much of… all this.” Narcissa waved her hand at the lights and the rails. “I think I’m seeing why Sirius said Muggle Studies is a joke of a class.”

He smiled. “Well, you’re seeing things at their best, too. The Underground can get a bit nasty later in the evenings, especially from an hour or so before pub closing time, to an hour or so after, what with drunks being sick or spilling their takeaway boxes.”

“What’s a takeaway box?”

“Oh… it’s boxed-up food. Pubs and some other restaurants box up meals so you can take them home and eat in comfort if you wish. Or if you eat there but decide there’s too much to eat in one go, they’ll box up the rest so you can take it home and heat it over again for a second meal at a later time,” Stephen explained. “As a bachelor and a university student, I eat a lot of takeaway, simply because it’s far easier to purchase a meal than to go through the bother of cooking for myself and then having to clean up afterwards, when I also have class assignments to work on.”


“No, I don’t,” Stephen agreed. A rumble of wheels on rails, accompanied by a squealing of brakes, heralded the approach of a train. “I believe this one is ours,” he said, bringing her back over to where Sirius and the boys were laughing together and watching the headlamps on the train getting closer. He had them step close to one of the doors as the train pulled to a halt, herding them aboard as soon as the last of the passengers getting off at this stop cleared the path. “We want to stay together just like we did on the bus,” he cautioned. “This will take a little longer than that did, but it’s still going to be a fairly short ride and I don’t want to lose anyone at the other end.”

“Okay,” Harry and Draco chorused. “How come this train goes without an engine?” Draco added.

“Did you get a look at the tracks?” Stephen asked.

Draco nodded. “Yes, they looked weird. Like there’s four rails instead of two. Three that are spaced out from each other, with one more crammed right up against another.” He held out his hand with his pinky finger pressed up against his ring finger, but holding his ring, middle, and index fingers slightly apart from each other. “Kind of like this.”

Stephen smiled, lightly touching Draco’s ring and index fingers. “These would be the running rails, what the train’s wheels roll on. And these two are called top-contact electrified rails, and they power the trains through electricity.” His smile widened into a grin. “And please don’t ask me to explain how, because I don’t remember all the science behind it, I only know that it works.”

Sirius laughed. “Well, we are going to a bookstore after lunch. Maybe if Draco or Harry is interested, there will be a book explaining it in simple terms.”

“Don’t Muggles know all about their world, though?” Draco asked, slightly confused.

Stephen shook his head. “That would be far, far too much for anyone, Draco. Some Muggles do learn all about electricity and how to build and maintain electrical systems like the one that powers the Underground, or the lights around the city or whatever. But others become doctors… those are Muggle Healers… or any number of other professions. You wouldn’t expect any one wizard to be an expert in everything from Charms to Defense to Offense to Transfiguration to Potions plus Astronomy, Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, Muggle Studies and Divination, would you?”

“Well, no, I guess not.”
“So it works the same with Muggles.” Stephen smiled. “Electricity isn’t something that especially interested me, so what little I did learn about it, didn’t stick in my conscious memory, because I was more interested in learning other things.” He grins again, glancing up at Narcissa and Sirius. “Kind of like how hardly anyone remembers much from History of Magic, since Professor Binns is so utterly boring to listen to.”

They both laughed, causing Harry and Draco to wrinkle their noses. “Aww, and I like history,” Harry grumbled. “I was looking forward to learning magical history, too.”

“I’ll see what history books might be in the Black library, Harry,” Sirius said. “And perhaps we can look up your properties through Gringotts and figure out which one the Potter library would be stored at. James let me and Remus use the history books he brought from his home collection to make sure we passed our History of Magic OWL with a good mark, despite the fact we mostly slept through Binns’ class.”

Everyone laughed at that, just as they pulled into Piccadilly Circus station. Stephen got the group safely out the doors of the train and headed up to the street level.
Harry was the first to spot the now-familiar McDonald’s sign up Charing Cross Road and gave a cheer. “Woohoo! Big Mac time!” He grabbed Draco’s hand and tugged his new friend along as he dashed up the street.

Draco blinked, unused to such treatment. Proper purebloods did not display such exuberance in public. But then he reconsidered, remembering his mother laughing and even swatting at Sirius, so he let Harry pull him along. “What’s a Big Mac?” he puffed out.

Harry slowed his headlong pace, realizing that he was going too fast for Draco. “It’s a really yummy McDonald’s sandwich,” he said, then he sang the famous jingle, “Two all-beef patties special sauce lettuce cheese onions pickles all on a sesame seed bun!”

“Okay…” Draco said, obviously still puzzled.

Harry smiled. “You’ll love it,” he reassured the other boy. “I did the first time I had McDonald’s food.” They waited outside the door of the fast-food restaurant for the adults to catch up.

Narcissa’s expression froze as they entered the garishly colorful place, as she obviously felt extremely uncomfortable in her new surroundings. But Sirius grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze. “No Malfoy mask,” he whispered. “This is a place where kids get to be kids, not little ladies and gentlemen. Just be Cissa.”

She took a deep breath and gave him a wobbly smile. “Right. Kids get to be kids, and I’m just Cissa,” she murmured as she peered at the menu boards. “The food certainly looks interesting.”

Draco was whispering to Harry. “What’s Coke and Sprite?”

“Fizzy drinks. Coke is… well… Coke-flavoured, I don’t know how to describe it. And Sprite is lemon-lime flavoured. There’s root beer and ginger ale too, but I haven’t tried those yet so I don’t know if they’re good or not,” the dark-haired boy replied.

Stephen spoke up. “Draco, how about you and your mother go pick us out a big table near the playplace. Harry, you go with them, and Sirius and I will get food for everyone. This place has one of the new self-serve drinks stations, so if you don’t like the flavour of your drink, you can pour it out and change it for something different.”

“Ohkay,” everyone agreed and the group split up. Narcissa let Harry take the lead in selecting a table big enough to hold the five of them comfortably, and which overlooked the huge and brightly coloured play area with its climbing tunnels and slides. Stephen and Sirius joined them a few minutes later carrying trays piled high with sandwich boxes and containers of chips as well as paper cups with drinks.

“I got a chef salad,” Stephen said, “but I got you a Quarter Pounder with Cheese, too,” he told Narcissa. “I thought you ought to at least try a burger since you’re here. Big Macs for the boys, as well as a Chicken McNuggets for them to share.”
Sirius was already digging in to his meal. “Oh, I’ve missed this,” he mumbled, which caused his
cousin to raise her brow at him. “What?” he said, a little defensively. “Meals at your place are
wonderful. But they’re so… formal. Even when it’s just family. It’s nice to be a little less than
perfectly refined sometimes.”

Draco and Harry laughed at that, and Draco’s eyes widened at the size of the Big Mac. “Oh…
wow…” he said as he lifted it carefully from the box. He surreptitiously watched Harry to see how
the other boy handled it, then followed suit, cradling the burger with both hands as he took a bite to
prevent the toppings from spilling out the back. “Mmm!” He took a sip of his Coke and giggled as
the fizz went up his nose. “It tickles!”

Stephen watched Narcissa for a moment. The aristocratic woman held her burger awkwardly,
obviously not used to eating anything larger than a tea sandwich without a fork and knife. She
cought him looking and smiled. “Do I look as silly as I feel?” she murmured.

“No at all,” he replied. “You do look a bit uncomfortable still, but believe me when I say I
understand that you feel more than a bit out of place here. You’re doing fine.”

She relaxed a little. “It’s just so… odd. Eating almost an entire meal with one’s fingers, letting the
children run and play between bites of their meals. I never would have imagined allowing Draco to
behave so, or subjecting myself to such things either. But here we are.” She smiled fondly as Harry
and Draco raced each other to the top of the climbing tunnels.

Stephen nodded. “I think this is less a Muggle thing as it is a… a class thing,” he said carefully.
“I’m not exactly a member of the elite in either wizarding or Muggle society. But as nearly as I can
tell through observation, the upper classes are the ones most likely to be strict about following
traditions and in encouraging their children to mind their behaviour at younger ages, while the
lower classes are far more likely to take the attitude of ‘let the children be children’ and don’t
bother with formal manners as such. Where I do see a Muggle vs. wizard difference is that even the
highest level of Muggle society attempts to give the children opportunities to… to drop the
formality and run around yelling if that’s their pleasure. Which is sort of the point of a place like
this. It’s for the children to do just that… run around, yell, and climb on things… all sorts of
behaviour that isn’t acceptable in other places. For most kids, they find it easier to mind their
behaviour even when they’re bored senseless, if they know they can come here after. Or if they
can go home and have a pillow fight with their siblings without their parents scolding, or
whatever.”

“A… pillow fight?”

He chuckled. “I have no idea how those came into being, but yes, a pillow fight. Traditionally,” he
laughed, “they happen at slumber parties, or in boarding school dormitories, especially the boys’
dorms. Any time there’s a group of children sleeping in the same place. And it’s exactly what it
sounds like: the kids hit each other with their pillows, or throw pillows at each other.”

“We had some wicked pillow fights in the Gryffindor dorms first and second years,” Sirius put in.
“Once we even had a girls vs. boys down in the common room.” He pouted a little. “The girls won,
too. Lily and Alice were better at strategy than we thought they’d be.”

Narcissa and Stephen laughed. “Serves you right,” she told her cousin. And to Stephen she said,
“And I think I see what you mean about the behaviour. I haven’t seen Draco so relaxed in ages,
especially not when meeting a new child. Maybe it’s just that he and Harry seem to have hit it off
well, but it could also be that we’ve essentially told him he doesn’t have to ‘act like a proper
Malfoy’ today since we’re out in Muggle London.” Changing the topic abruptly, she looked down
at a glob of ketchup dripping off her burger and asked, “Is there any way at all to eat these things
Stephen shook his head with a rueful smile as he passed her a stack of serviettes. “Not that anyone I know has figured out,” he said. “You’re actually doing as well or better than most people.”

Meanwhile, up in the climbing tunnels, Harry and Draco had taken possession of a pod shaped like a car, with Harry in the driver’s seat. Draco decided to ask about a couple of things that had been bothering him while they had a few moments without the adults listening in. “Harry?” he asked tentatively. “You said earlier your aunt doesn’t want you. How come she didn’t refuse to take you?”

Harry shrugged a little, having expected some questions of that nature at some point. “I don’t know. She won’t ever talk about magic except to call it freakishness. But I think she was forced to take me. Since the Queen herself appointed Stephen as my tutor, the goblins at Gringotts say he counts as a government-appointed magical guardian because she outranks the Minister of Magic and the Wiz… Wizengamot, even if they don’t like remembering that. Anyway, that meant they let him look at my account records and my parents’ will and stuff, and the will said I wasn’t ever under any circumstances to go to Aunt Petunia. There was a whole list of people they wanted to take me, if Uncle Sirius couldn’t do it for some reason.”

“Why would anyone want to force a Muggle to raise you, of all people?” Draco said, confused. “You’re famous, you know, in the wizarding world.”

“I know that now, thanks to Stephen,” Harry said. “We know it was Dumbledore who was the ex… ex… the person in charge of making sure the terms of the will got carried out. Stephen thinks he wants to control me… maybe for my money, or maybe for the power I’ll have when I grow up. By keeping me ignorant and in a house where nobody likes me, he’ll be able to come in and ‘rescue’ me when it’s time for me to go to Hogwarts, and presumably I’d be all grateful and think of him as someone I could trust without question.”

Draco nodded. “My father doesn’t trust Dumbledore much, but, well, my father was a supporter of You Know Who.” He looked a little embarrassed. “So some people don’t trust him much anymore. And since Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald years ago, most people act like he can do no wrong.”

Harry nodded in return. “Stephen thinks it’s better to keep it a secret that I’m in contact with wizards, so that Dumbledore will assume I’m the ignorant kid he expects me to be when I get to Hogwarts. And then, once I’m ‘officially’ back in the wizarding world, I can decide what’s best to do. Try to figure out what exactly Dumbledore wants of me, and then I can either keep playing stupid or stand up and tell him to kiss my arse.”

Draco giggled at Harry’s language. “You wouldn’t really say that, would you?”

“Why not?” Harry wanted to know. “Don’t wizards say things like that? Muggles use that phrase to tell people off all the time.”

“Proper pureblood wizards don’t talk that way, no,” Draco said. “But you wouldn’t know that, would you? No wonder Cousin Sirius said you and I could learn from each other.”

“I’d like to learn from you,” Harry said with a nod. “Stephen told me I’m a Lord in the wizarding world, and your father is a Lord, too, right? So you probably know a lot of things I should have been learning all along.”

“Mostly what I’ve learned so far is a lot of manners and such,” Draco said. “And that I’m not supposed to show what I’m thinking, especially in public, because I’m a Malfoy.” That last bit was
said with his ‘Malfoy Mask’ in place. “But some noble families don’t seem to mind showing what they’re thinking, so I don’t know if that’s a Lordly thing or a Malfoy thing.”

Harry grinned. “Have you ever asked?”

Draco looked astonished, then laughed. “It never occurred to me to ask,” he admitted. “Maybe I should. Are all Muggle families so… so rowdy… as the kids that are here?”

“Not really, no,” Harry shook his head. “McDonald’s is the sort of place where kids are allowed to be rowdy for a little while. Maybe Muggles that aren’t Lords don’t use a whole lot of fancy manners, but kids are mostly expected to behave decently.”

“I’m not used to kids being so noisy,” Draco said. “I like the food, and climbing up and going on the slides is fun, but it’s too loud. Want to see if everyone else is ready to go? The bookstore will be quieter, right?”

Harry nodded. “It should be, anyway. And maybe we can find a book about electricity there, if you want to know how it works.” He slid out of the seat he was in and started towards the big spiral slide as being the quickest way out of the play place.

Draco followed. “I would like that. Muggle lights are brilliant.”

Harry laughed at the unintentional pun. “You haven’t been out at night yet, either, when everything is all lit up.”

“Maybe we’ll have to convince Mother to let us stay out late, then,” the blond boy laughed in return as they waited their turns on the slide. On reaching the bottom, they headed back to their table. “We’re ready to go to the bookstore now, if you all are,” Draco told the adults.

Stephen, Sirius, and Narcissa all nodded. “Let’s just gather up and bin our rubbish,” Stephen said, “and then it’s a few blocks up the road from here.”

Out on the street, Draco bounced excitedly when he noticed a particular sign. “Look! There’s the Leaky Cauldron! So this is another place I could ask about if I ever get lost in London! What’s the name of this street again?”

“Charing Cross Road,” Stephen told the boy with a smile. “And absolutely. If you get lost, you can ask directions to Charing Cross Road and then find the Leaky Cauldron for yourself, so you can get to Diagon Alley.”

Waterstone’s proved to be two blocks up from the Leaky Cauldron and three blocks from McDonald’s. The little group entered, with Harry, Draco, and Narcissa peering around in amazement at the size of the place and the assortment of books available. Sirius peered around until he spotted Remus, who was up a ladder reaching some books down from a high shelf for an elderly customer. He gave a wave, but held back from dashing over until he was sure his old friend was done with his customer. Once he saw the elderly woman in question approaching the checkout stand, he grabbed Harry’s hand and hurried over to Remus. “Moony!” he called. “Look who’s here!”

Remus smiled warmly, his chocolate brown eyes lighting with pleasure. “Harry… oh, it’s good to see you grown up into such a fine young man,” he said, holding out his hand and arms as if unsure whether to hug the boy or merely shake hands with him.

Harry solved that one by wrapping the man up in a warm hug. “Hello, Uncle Moony,” he murmured. “I know you’re working and can’t really take time to visit, but I’m glad to get to meet
You, and I hope you’ll have a Saturday off soon so we can get to know each other better.”

Remus returned that hug, blinking away tears that threatened. “I hope so too, Harry.” He straightened up, since he was at work after all, and smiled. “Who else is this with you and Sirius today?”

“This is my tutor, Stephen Coyner,” Harry said with a pleased smile. “And my new friend Draco Malfoy, and his mother, Lady Narcissa Malfoy.”

The werewolf gave them all friendly smiles, shaking the hands offered by Stephen and Draco, and giving Narcissa a deep nod that gave the impression of bowing without actually bending at the waist. “I’m very pleased to meet you all,” he said.

Narcissa tensed slightly when Remus and Draco shook hands, but she managed to smile politely. “It’s good to meet you as well, Mr. Lupin.”

“Please, call me Remus,” the man said. “Are you enjoying your exploration of London so far?”

“I am!” Draco said with a grin. “And Harry said maybe you can help us find books that tell how the lights work.”

“I certainly can, right this way,” Remus replied, leading the group over to the children’s science books, where he found two that looked as though they would be appropriate. “How about you, Harry, is there anything you’re wanting to look up?”

“I like history, especially things about knights and kings and castles,” Harry said.

“All right, history is over this way,” Remus nodded, bringing Harry to the next set of shelves over, where he picked out two books, one about life in a medieval castle and one biography of Henry VIII. “How about some fiction for you boys?” He walked down the fiction section, pulling several books from the shelf: Hans Brinker, Tom Sawyer, Old Yeller, and after a moment of hesitation, The Secret Garden. “You two might enjoy these,” he suggested.

Harry took them all with a smile. “Thank you, Uncle Remus,” he said. He added to Draco, “We can each pick two and then trade when we’ve read them.”

“Okay,” Draco nodded with a smile of his own.

“Do you know the release date for the next Brother Cadfael book?” Stephen asked. “I heard it’s supposed to be out next month, but not when next month.”

“Let me check the list,” Remus said. He moved over to the checkout stand and pulled a ledger from behind the counter. “It’s going to be out on the 10th,” he told the younger man.

Stephen smiled. “Great, I can’t wait.” He moved into the general fiction section, smiling at the display for the latest Tom Clancy novel, Clear and Present Danger. “Brilliant, I hadn’t realized this was in stores yet.”

“Is that writer any good?” Sirius asked.

“Brilliant,” Stephen answered. “Start with Patriot Games, and then The Hunt for Red October.” He grabbed both books and passed them over to the animagus.

Narcissa couldn’t help but smile at their enthusiasm. “What do you suggest for women?” she asked.
Remus chuckled. “Well, I’m not exactly an expert, you understand, but the romance novels are quite popular, especially Bertrice Small and Nora Roberts.” He moved over to the romance section and plucked several books off the shelf: Nora Roberts’ Temptation and Local Hero, and Bertrice Small’s The Kadin and Love Wild and Fair.

She looked at the back covers, reading the blurbs, and blinked. “Oh my goodness!” She looked up with wide eyes. “This is… popular reading, you said?”

“Very popular,” Remus nodded.

“Oh… why not?” Narcissa decided. “Although I may have to hide them from Lucius.”

“Really?” Sirius said, looking interested.

“Er… no,” she said quickly. But she hurried over to the checkout stand before Sirius could grab one of the books and look through it for himself.

Stephen snickered as Remus and Sirius looked after her with puzzled expressions. “If those are anything like what my sister reads,” he muttered to them, “they can be pretty racy in spots.”

Both men laughed. “Ah, let’s just go pay and let Moony get back to work before his boss gets annoyed,” Sirius said. “I can tease Cissa later. Harry, Draco, time to pay up and decide on the rest of the day.” He steered the boys to the checkout, followed by Stephen. “Moony, we’ll talk later this week,” he smiled to his friend.

“Sounds like a plan, Pads,” Remus smiled back, giving the group a wave and heading towards the back of the store where another customer browsed, to see if that gentleman needed help finding anything.

After they all paid for their books, Sirius looked at his watch. “We didn’t take a third as long in Harrod’s as I expected, so it’s not quite 3:00. We do have time to head elsewhere if we want… what does everyone feel like doing?”

“The zoo?” Draco asked hopefully. Harry nodded his agreement, also looking hopeful.

Narcissa debated, but nodded. “I’m willing, as long as we do something about the bags. Can we duck out of sight somewhere and shrink them so they’re not so heavy and awkward?”

Stephen nodded. “We can, but let’s get to the zoo first. We’ve got just about enough time to make the bus we’ll need.” He herded them all out the door and up the street to the bus stop. Less than four minutes later, they boarded another double-decker bus and climbed upstairs for the ride.

After arriving at the zoo, they paid and headed in, finding a little alley between a balloon stall and a t-shirt shop first thing. Sirius and Stephen blocked Narcissa from view while she shrunk all their shopping bags, and then they pocketed the shrunken bags before heading deeper into the zoo. Harry and Draco happily accepted one of the free zoo maps at the gate, and pored over it together as they decided what they most wanted to see. Draco decided he most wanted to see the penguins, both because he’d never heard of a bird that could swim, and because Harry told him that penguins lived in very cold places so they had to have a special temperature controlled house. Harry wanted to go through the reptile house. Sirius voted for the big cats, Narcissa put in a word in favor of the rainforest birds, and Stephen announced that he wanted to ride an elephant. They worked out their best route to get to all five of their primary interests and set out.

They got to the big cats first, where Sirius gazed longingly at a white tiger lazing on a rock by a stream in one enclosure, while an orange tiger with two cubs scrambling behind her leapt
gracefully over a fallen tree. In the next pen over, a shaggy-maned lion snoozed in a shady spot.
They moved on to the elephants from there, and Stephen and Sirius rode one big Indian elephant
while Narcissa and the boys rode another. Stephen bought photos for all of them, which the three
purebloods found interesting because they didn’t move at all.

The penguin habitat came next. Draco was enthralled at seeing how Muggle engineering and
technology could create an icy landscape complete with a ‘seashore’ and a clear wall holding the
water back from the observation deck so that people could see the birds swimming about
underwater as well as waddling around on the ice above. It was only reluctantly that he moved on.
But the rainforest birds’ house impressed him as well, especially as they arrived in time for the
daily afternoon ‘thunderstorm’ complete with simulated lightning flashes and recorded
thunderclaps along with a sprinkler-system rainstorm pouring down in the trees while leaving the
central walkway dry. Several large blue and gold macaws screeched and flapped in the water,
adding to the cheerful cacophony while Narcissa laughed delightedly. Draco was full of questions
as to how it all worked, which Stephen was hard-pressed to answer.

They passed the monkey house on their way to the reptiles, deciding not to go inside. As it was a
warm day, most of the inhabitants were outside in their respective enclosures. Some were swinging
rambunctiously through their simulated jungles while others sat around eating fruit and
occasionally throwing things at each other and even the gawking visitors. Harry and Draco both
giggled at that. The reptile house was warmer inside than they’d expected, and relatively dimly lit,
with each tank having its own separate lights to give visitors a good view of the creatures within.
They saw tiny, brightly coloured geckos darting around in one tank. Some of them even ran straight
up the glass wall keeping them inside. In contrast, the komodo dragon was huge and merely lifted
its head to stare back at them when they approached. The chameleon tank’s sign indicated that
there were six of the creatures within, but Harry and Draco could only find five of them in the
habitat. The boys couldn’t decide if the sixth one was under something, or if its ability to change
colour to match its surroundings had simply camouflaged it that well. The next tank held a basilisk
lizard, a name which made the purebloods chuckle. It had a small television screen beside it, with a
button to press to learn more about the species. Harry pressed the button, starting a short video
showing basilisks in the wild, and how they would run upright on their hind legs to escape danger,
moving quickly enough that they could actually run on the surface of water. The narrator of the
video said that as a result, the other common name for the basilisk was the Jesus Lizard. Stephen
and Harry chuckled, while the other three looked confused.

“It’s a reference to the Muggle Christian religions,” Stephen explained. “The belief is that a man
named Jesus the Christ was actually the son of the Creator come to earth in human form. He
performed many miracles in his lifetime, healing the sick by touching them, for example, and one
of the miracles specifically mentioned in the Muggle Bible was of Jesus walking on water.”

Narcissa grinned a bit. “Maybe this Jesus was actually a wizard?”

“I’ve no idea,” Stephen shrugged. “I suppose anything is possible. All I can tell you is that
Christianity is the majority religion among Muggles here in England, and while most people are
tolerant, there are a few who will get very offended if they think someone is mocking their beliefs.
Not many, thankfully, but they do exist.”

They all nodded as they moved over towards the snakes. Harry’s face lit up at the sight of a huge
boa constrictor coiled up around a log in the biggest tank. “I wish I had a pet snake like that one,”
he said. “Then Dudley would stay out of my room for sure.”

Draco chuckled. “He’s scared of snakes?”
“Well, he’s scared of big ones. Grass snakes and smooth snakes like we have where we live don’t bother him, because they’re little. But Dudley’s, mm, not too interested in learning things, so he has it in his head that all big snakes are poisonous and might try to kill him,” Harry said.

They stopped at a tank holding a spectacled cobra, and at another holding a diamondback rattlesnake from the United States, as well as several others. At the end of the building, there was a room with an open tank containing several small and brightly-coloured and patterned corn snakes that people could handle if they wished. Harry gave Stephen and Sirius a pleading look.

“It’s perfectly safe,” the reptile keeper on duty assured them. “Corn snakes are some of the most popular of pet snakes, as they stay small, are quite docile, and have so many colour variations. Just close the door if you’re going to hold any of them, in case you drop them. We wouldn’t want them getting out into the main floor, where they might get stepped on.”

As the group filed into the room and shut the door, Narcissa shook her head. “Whoever would have thought Muggles would keep snakes as pets?” she muttered, staying back from the tank.

Draco, following Harry’s lead into the room, picked up a rather pretty creamy white snake with butter-yellow saddle markings on its back. ::Hello there::, he hissed to it, not noticing all four of his companions turning to stare at him. ::What’sss your name?::

::A human who ssspeaksss?: the snake reared back to flick its tongue in astonishment. ::The humanss who care for usss call me Ruby, but my name isss Sssilisssha::. Silisha gave a hissing laugh. ::I think you ssscared your companionss, little ssspeaker. I sssmell fear from them now::.

Harry blinked and looked up to see the others all staring at him, and blushed. “What?” he asked.

“You’re a Parselmouth,” Sirius blurted out. “But… but… how?”

“The last known Parselmouth was You Know Who,” Stephen explained. “Supposedly only those descended from Salazar Slytherin had that ability… the ability to speak the snake language.”

“Oh… is it a bad thing?” Harry asked, looking worried.

Narcissa pulled herself together and shook her head. “No, but some people might think so,” she said briskly. “Since the last known person to speak Parseltongue was You Know Who, plenty of people out there will be quick to assume that you’ll turn nasty also. It’s not something I’d advertise, if I were you.”

Harry nodded. “Okay, I’ll make sure no one else but you all knows about it.”

Sirius stepped forward and patted Harry reassuringly on the shoulder. “How long have you been able to talk to snakes, anyway?” he asked. He was still a bit shaken by the revelation, but after everything that had happened to him, he wasn’t going to assume the worst. Harry deserved better than to be reviled for an ability he happened to have.

Harry laughed. “I only just found out a couple weeks ago,” he told them. “Dudley and his friends caught a smooth snake from the garden or the park and put it into my bed, probably trying to scare me into yelling so I’d get in trouble for making noise. But I heard him grumbling about being stifled and so I was looking for someone, thinking one of Dudley’s friends was hiding to try to scare me or even hurt me, and I found him under the duvet. He was glad to get out from under it but was scared I’d hurt him. I told him I wouldn’t and found a safe place for him to stay for the
night and snuck him out of the house in the morning. He said other wizards have talked to snakes before, so I didn’t think it was such a rare thing.”

Stephen nodded. “Well, it’s possible it’s not as rare as people think,” he said thoughtfully. “It might just be that people who can do it, have hidden it so they wouldn’t be thought of as evil, since it has gotten a bad reputation.”

“I think it’s brilliant,” Draco said firmly. “I wish I could talk to them and understand what they say.”

“Maybe I can teach you?” Harry suggested.

Narcissa shook her head. “As far as I know, it’s an inborn talent, Harry. Either you can do it or you can’t.”

Harry got a stubborn look on his face. “But it’s a language. People learn other languages as they grow up, right? I learned some French words in school last year, even though I wasn’t born speaking French. Stephen says I’ll have to learn Latin for most spells, especially if I want to ever invent new spells. Maybe snake language… Parseltongue? Maybe it will be way harder to learn than French or Latin, but it’s still a language so I’m sure it could be learned.”

Narcissa and Sirius both looked astonished at the boy’s attitude, while Stephen smirked. “He does have a point,” the young man said mildly. “Japanese is also a very difficult language to learn for those who didn’t grow up speaking it, but some people manage to learn at least a little. Maybe he could manage to teach Draco a few words, even if he couldn’t tutor him into true fluency.”


Harry smiled at his friend and gave a soft hissing sort of sound. “That’s hello.”

Draco frowned and tried to imitate him. Harry corrected his pronunciation, and he tried again. This time the yellow and cream snake in his hands looked up and hissed something back at him. He looked at Harry questioningly.

“He said hello, and thank you for the courtesy of even trying to speak his language,” Harry translated.

Draco looked awed and pleased. “Did you see that, Mother? I talked to the snake and the snake talked back!”

“Yes, darling, I saw,” Narcissa answered. “You and Harry tell the snakes thank you for letting you hold them, and you’ll see them again sometime. I know you’d like to stay longer, but it’s nearly time for the zoo to close, so we need to leave.”

Draco sighed and looked at Harry, who obligingly hissed out, ::We need to leave now, to return to our own nessstss. But we thank you for letting usss handle you, and we hope to sssee you ssssome other time.:: He looked up at Draco and told the blond, “If you want to say goodbye for yourself, this is how,” and he proceeded to demonstrate a hiss that Draco could hear was different from the greeting sound.

It took a couple of tries, but after a few moments Draco managed to hiss out, ::Goodbye,:: to the snake in his hands. He smiled when the snake returned the farewell, setting it gently back into the tank with the rest. Harry did the same with the snake he held, and the group exited the snake petting room and the reptile house.
After leaving the zoo, they took one more bus ride to near Grimmauld Place, walking the short
distance from the bus stop to Sirius’ home. They settled down in the drawing room and Sirius
called for Dobby and Tally to bring them a meal. He also brought out and enlarged all their bags,
so they could divide up their purchases. He gave Harry the bag with the history books and Draco
the bag with the electricity books, then he pulled out a galleon. “Harry, heads or tails?” he asked.

“Heads,” Harry responded promptly.

Sirius flipped the coin and caught it neatly. “Tails. Draco, you reach in and pick one book without
looking,” he said, holding up the bag with the boys’ fiction books inside. “And then you pick one,
Harry, then Draco picks another, and you’ll get the last one, so that it’s random as to who gets
which books first.”

“Okay,” Draco smiled, as Harry nodded agreement.

The blond boy reached in and pulled out Old Yeller. Harry picked The Secret Garden next. Draco’s
second pick was Hans Brinker, and then Sirius handed Harry the remaining book, Tom Sawyer.
The animagus then gave each boy his bag from Harrod’s: Draco’s Lego sets, and Harry’s art kit
and jigsaw puzzle set. With a grin, Sirius pulled out one last bag. “Presents!” he announced
cheerfully as he reached in and handed each person there a Slinky and a Rubik’s Cube. Narcissa
got two of each. “The spares are for Lucius,” he told her.

Stephen grinned and Harry gave Sirius a hug. “Thank you!” he said with a big smile.

Draco hesitated, but also gave Sirius a shy hug. “Yes, thank you,” he echoed.

“I… thank you, but… what are they for?” Narcissa asked with a baffled expression. “What do they
do?”

Sirius plucked the Slinky box from Harry’s grasp. “If I may demonstrate?” he asked. At Harry’s
nod, he opened the box and broke into a silly little tune. “What walks down stairs, alone or in pairs,
and makes a slinkety sound? A spring, a spring, a marvelous thing! Everyone knows it’s Slinky!
It’s Slinky, it’s Slinky, for fun it’s a wonderful toy! It’s Slinky, it’s Slinky, it’s fun for a girl and a
boy! Fun for a girl and a boy!” As he sang the old jingle, he stacked several books into ‘steps’ and
placed the Slinky at the top. Grabbing the top end of the spring, he tugged it up and over and then
let go so the toy could ‘walk’ down the book-staircase.

Draco’s eyes grew huge. “That’s brilliant!” he enthused, opening his own Slinky and sending it
down the pile of books behind Harry’s.

Narcissa looked bemused. “I see,” she said.

“I’ve actually known some Muggleborns and half-bloods who’ve used these as a focus for
meditation,” Stephen put in. He picked up one of the toys and held it in both hands so that it
formed an arch between them, then moved one hand so that the spring moved its weight from hand
to hand without ever actually lifting up from either hand. The compression wave moved through
the coils with a soft and rhythmic ‘shhinnk, shhinnk’ sound. “A lot of people find the sound it
makes rather soothing and relaxing,” he said.

“It is rather soothing,” Narcissa nodded, sounding surprised. “What an odd toy. What is this other
thing?”

“The Rubik’s Cube,” Stephen grinned. “Probably one of the most frustrating puzzles ever invented
by a Muggle.” He opened the one Sirius gave him. “See how each face is a different colour? But
watch.” He gave it a few deft twists, scrambling the colours all around the cube. “The object is to get it back to where each face is just one colour again. Some people are brilliant at it, and others of us try and try and finally get so annoyed that we pry the thing apart and reassemble it back the way it should be.”

Narcissa and both boys laughed at that. Harry grinned. “And then you’ve got the people like my cousin Dudley, who just get so upset at it that they pry it apart and stomp on the pieces so they can’t put it back together again.”

Stephen snorted at that. “Why am I not surprised?” he said facetiously.

The elves popped in at that point, with individual dinners on tea tables, as the dining room was not yet fully functional. The meal itself was simple and hearty: roasted chicken with mashed potatoes and Brussels sprouts, with water, tea, or pumpkin juice to drink. Harry and Draco started getting noticeably droopy after the meal, so the adults declared an end to the day and started preparing to go their separate ways.

“I wish you lived in the wizarding world, so we could see each other all the time,” Draco told Harry. “I like you. You’re not like the other boys I know.”

“I like you, too,” Harry answered. “And I can’t wait until we have our next trip to London… or until I come visit you, whichever happens first.”

The two boys smiled at each other, then Harry, coached by Stephen’s whisper in his ear, bowed to Narcissa and kissed her hand before hugging Sirius. Draco shook hands with Stephen, then they all picked up their bags and headed out; the Malfoys and Sirius taking the floo to Malfoy Manor, while Stephen side-along apparated Harry back to where they’d left the car near Buckingham Palace earlier in the day for the drive back to Surrey.
Family Life and Lessons

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

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Lucius, alerted by a house-elf when the floo activated, hurried from his study towards the transport room to greet his returning family. Despite his best efforts, he'd been unable to restrain himself from a degree of concern that he'd allowed his wife and only child into Muggle London, with only the company of his wife’s Gryffindor cousin and a Muggleborn as protection. He smiled warmly as they emerged from the fireplace just as he entered the room. “How did everything go?” he asked.

Narcissa greeted her husband with a light kiss. “Quite well, actually, darling,” she replied. “Sirius’ godson also joined us, so Draco had a companion of his own age.”

“I like Harry a lot, Father,” Draco said. “Cousin Sirius says Harry and I can learn loads from each other, and we both want to learn. And I got Legos and some story books and some other books on how elki… elect-icity works, and Cousin Sirius gave us all a Slinky and a Rubik’s Cube and he got those for you too, and we went to a place called a zoo, and did you know there’s a bird called a penguin that lives where it’s really cold all the time and it can’t fly but it can swim about underwater? Muggles can build special houses to give them a proper hab… habi…”

“Habitat,” Sirius supplied with a grin.

Draco nodded and continued. “A proper habitat. There was a big clear wall holding the water in place so we could see the penguins swimming and catching fish to eat, and also keeping the cold air inside because they had some land in there too and it was all icy and snowy. And…”

Lucius was torn between disapproval and laughter at his son’s enthusiasm. “Draco, while I am interested in hearing about your day, shall we move into the sitting room or the library where we can get comfortable, rather than standing about next to the floo?”

The boy blushed faintly. “Sorry, Father,” he murmured, looking down.

Narcissa took her husband’s arm and smiled at her son. “It’s all right, Draco. I’m the one who told you to go ahead and express yourself today, so you’re not in any sort of disgrace for doing so now. But your father is correct that we should go get comfortable. I’m not used to doing the amount of walking around we did today and I’d like to sit down and rest my feet while we talk.” With a gentle tug, she propelled Lucius towards the sitting room, leaving Sirius and Draco to follow.

Once everyone was ensconced in comfortable chairs with cups of tea at hand, Lucius smiled. “Now, how about telling me about the day, in order that it happened?”

“We met up with Stephen and Harry at Grimmauld Place,” Sirius started. “Stephen drove us to Buckingham Palace, where we watched the ceremonial Changing of the Guard. According to Stephen, that is a tradition which dates back to 1660, and the Restoration of Charles II to the throne. He said that it’s quite a tourist attraction among Muggles, as very few nations have a working monarchy anymore, so there aren’t many traditions which have been carried out for over three hundred years as this one has.”

“He also explained that while Muggles do revere tradition, they also embrace change, and most often reserve the use of traditions for special occasions,” Narcissa added. “He used transportation
as an example. Horse-drawn carriages are considered traditional, but they are mostly used at
weddings and such nowadays, because cars are much faster and much more comfortable when it
comes to everyday travel.”

“Mm, well, I suppose that does make some sense, as they can’t apparate or floo,” Lucius nodded.
“Although I always understood that cars were something used only by the richest of Muggles, as
they are very expensive.”

Sirius shook his head. “They’re not cheap,” he said, “but nearly everyone can afford a car these
days. Some people prefer not to use them, though, especially within the city, as space for parking is
at a premium. Most cities have buses, and London also has the Underground. Both are forms of
public transportation… anyone may ride for a fee. We rode both today, to get the complete
experience. Once the Changing of the Guard ended, we took the bus to Harrod’s, the best
department store in the entire Muggle world.”

“And I have got to go back there, with a proper amount of Muggle money,” Narcissa said with a
chuckle. “Some of the evening gowns I saw there were quite the equal of anything I’ve seen
offered at Madam Malkin’s or Twilfit and Tatting. And surprisingly, didn’t look overly different
from witches’ dress robes, either. I opted not to do any serious shopping for clothing today,
otherwise we might still be there,” she joked.

Lucius allowed himself a small grin at that. “So, it seems that Muggle women have something in
common with witches after all… a love of spending money,” he teased in return. “What else did
this Harrod’s have?”

“A huge place called the Toy Kingdom,” Draco said, beaming. “And I really think Muggles have
something that works with magic. We saw some big boys playing with toy cars that moved around
by themselves! The boys were holding little boxes with knobs and a thin metal wand attached, and
they pointed the wands at the toy cars and twisted the knobs, and Harry said they were directing
the cars where to go! But even though Cousin Sirius bought presents there for me and Harry, he
said we couldn’t get anything that needed bat-rees, which are little metal cylinder things, because
magic makes the bat-rees stop working too quickly. But I don’t quite understand that, because
those magic cars need bat-rees.”

Sirius chuckled. “Those cars don’t use magic, Draco. They use a sort of tiny wireless for direction.
You know how on the wireless here, you can tune in to the WWN for news reports, or you can
tune in to a different channel for listening to classical music, and yet another channel to hear the
Weird Sisters?”

Draco nodded. “Yes.”

“Well, those boxes the boys were holding contain a very small wireless transmitter, and the metal
wand poking out of the box is properly called an antenna. It focuses the wireless output, which is
only one channel, and directs it to the car, which has a receiver inside it. And the transmitted signal
is what directs the car,” Sirius tried to explain.

The boy considered, but shook his head. “Maybe I need a book about that, too,” he finally said. “I
think I understand some of it, but not all of it.” He shrugged and smiled. “Anyway, Harry showed
me how Legos work, and they don’t need bat-rees but they’re really brilliant! I got two sets. One is
a general set that I can use to build all sorts of things, and the other comes with instructions to build
dragons!”

Lucius blinked. “Muggles know dragons exist? But how? The Ministry is supposed to obliterate
any Muggle who accidentally sees a dragon!”
Sirius chuckled. “Many Muggle stories involve dragons, actually. According to Lily, most Muggles believe dragons are nothing more than stories… along with unicorns, phoenixes, and various other magical creatures. I don’t know if it’s a case of a Muggleborn describing them to a non-magical sibling or parent hundreds or even thousands of years ago, or if perhaps some Muggles saw the various creatures equally as long ago and wrote down descriptions or drew pictures of what they saw or what. But the general belief is that such things are nothing more than the product of someone’s imagination, but they make for good stories that people enjoy.”

Draco pulled out his boxes of Legos, showing his father the set which could be made into dragons and showed him the picture on the front of the box, of the two rather stylized dragons made from the plastic building bricks. “Isn’t it clever?” he asked. “Maybe they’re not quite like real dragons, but I still think they’re brilliant.”

His father studied the picture carefully and nodded. “It is rather clever. I wouldn’t have expected Muggles to come up with anything of the sort,” he admitted. “What else did you see?”

“Before we left Harrod’s, I also bought Slinkies and Rubik’s Cubes for everyone, including you,” Sirius grinned. He handed one of each toy to Lucius. “The Rubik’s Cube is a puzzle… you give it a few twists to scatter the color squares around, then try to sort it back out again. I’m not very good at it, but it’s fun all the same.” He picked up Draco’s Rubik’s Cube, which the child had already been playing with, and demonstrated how the mechanism worked by sorting out the green face of the toy although he was unable to get anything besides the one face into any kind of order. “And the Slinky is just amusing. It makes a pleasant sound that some people use to help them relax when they’re stressed, and it can sort of walk down inclines and stairs.”

“It can do what?” Lucius quirked a brow.

Sirius transfigured a coffee table into a small set of stairs. Draco put his Slinky on the top of the flight and carefully lifted and dropped one end of the spring, grinning as the toy flipped end over end, descending the steps and eventually coming to a rest at the bottom.

Lucius chuckled, shaking his head as Sirius turned the steps back into the coffee table. “Well, that’s… different. But I rather like it,” he admitted. “What did you do after Harrod’s?”

Narcissa took up the tale. “We rode the Underground to Charing Cross Road… the lights are amazing! It was almost as bright down in the station as it was outdoors, and I’m pretty sure we were deeper than the dungeons at Hogwarts! The trains and the lights both run on electricity… Draco commented on the trains moving without an engine. But there is an arrangement of four rails, unlike for the Hogwarts Express… two rails for the train wheels to run on like normal, and two others that somehow power the train through electricity. We went back up to the street and stopped in a place called McDonald’s for lunch. It was… different, to say the least. I don’t know as I’d want to go back again, although the food actually wasn’t all that bad.”

“There was a place for kids to play inside the McDonald’s,” Draco said. “These huge climbing tunnels and little pods where you could sit and talk with a friend and big slides. Harry and I ate Big Macs and Chicken McNuggets and chips and we had Cokes to drink and then we went and played. That was fun, but it was kind of noisy, too, some of the kids there were yelling and being very rowdy.”

“Stephen explained it as a place intended for kids to have an opportunity to be rowdy,” Narcissa explained. “From what he said, while most Muggles don’t hold their children to quite the same standards of behaviour as we do with Draco, he believes that’s more of a class difference than a Muggle vs. wizarding difference… that the highest of the Muggle classes do hold their children to what we would call appropriate standards of behaviour. But that the Muggles believe their children
should be given opportunities to relax their behaviour from time to time, and that this McDonald’s is a place where they have that opportunity. Pretty much all of the food is meant to be eaten with the fingers, for example, and it is expected for the children to run around and play instead of remaining at the table until everyone is finished.”

“Interesting,” was Lucius’ only comment.

“We walked up the road to a bookstore after that,” Sirius put in. “My friend Remus Lupin works there, and I knew he’d want to meet Harry. So we chatted for a few minutes and we all bought some books, but of course we couldn’t stay talking too long since Remus was working. And as we had quite a bit of time left, we decided to go to the zoo for the remainder of the day.” He grinned. “As you already heard, your son was rather intrigued by the penguins and the Muggles’ ingenuity in creating a place they could live, in an area where they normally couldn’t live.”

“Another habitat was a tropical rainforest,” Narcissa smiled. “Complete with a thunderstorm. Special lights flashed like lightning, followed by recorded thunder… and no, I don’t recall how the Muggles record thunder,” she chuckled. “And a set of sprinkler pipes create the rain in the habitat while leaving the pathway dry. A flock of blue and gold macaws flew right down to a puddle near the edge of the pathway and started bathing in it, flapping and squawking in the funniest way. We had a look at the big cats at Sirius’ request, and Stephen treated us all to rides on the elephants and bought us photos. Muggle photos don’t move, I never knew that, did you?” She passed over the picture of Harry, Draco, and herself perched on the back of a big elephant.

Lucius shook his head. “I didn’t, no. Never gave it a thought one way or another, to be honest.” He studied the picture briefly, noting the bright smiles on both Draco’s face and the other boy’s. “But you certainly look like you were having fun.”

Draco grinned. “It was neat, being on the elephant like that. And then we saw some monkeys, too, and some of them were throwing things at each other and even at the people looking at them. And last of all, Harry wanted to see the reptiles.” He giggled. “Did you know that Muggles call a kind of lizard a basilisk? It can run on top of water once it gets going fast enough. But the most brilliant thing of all, Father…” He hesitated and looked between Sirius and his mother. “Er… it is all right to tell Father, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Sirius nodded. “Your father knows how to be discreet.”

“Harry can talk to snakes,” Draco breathed. “At the end of the Reptile House was an open tank with something called corn snakes in it… the person working there said Muggles often keep those as pets. And Harry and I both picked one up and he started hissing at the one he was holding. He even taught me how to say hello and goodbye to the one I was holding, and he told me the snake thanked me for being so courteous as to try talking in its language!”

Lucius was completely gobsmacked. Of all the unexpected twists of the day, the last thing he’d expected to hear was that Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, was a Parselmouth. “That’s… that’s… I don’t even know what to say,” he said, shaking his head. “Unbelievable.”

Sirius nodded. “I know. I still don’t know what to make of it.”

Draco smothered a yawn and Narcissa shook her head. “Go to bed, Draco darling. It’s been a long day, and the conversation seems to be taking a more adult turn now anyhow.” She smiled. “And no reading those new books until morning! I don’t want to see you with dark circles under your eyes at breakfast.”

The boy nodded and gave his mother a kiss. “Yes, Mother. Good night, everyone,” he said before
slipping away to his own room, leaving his bags behind.

“I think I’ll turn in as well,” Sirius said with a smile. “I’m sure you two would like to talk without me around anyway,” he teased, giving a wink before sauntering off towards his room.

Narcissa shook her head with a chuckle as her cousin left. “I’d almost forgotten what a prat he could be when we were children,” she said. “But at least he was never truly mean to family.”

“Only to Severus,” Lucius reminded her. “And tomorrow’s the day he usually comes by to spend time with Draco. Have either of you mentioned that relationship to your cousin yet?”

“No, it hadn’t occurred to me,” Narcissa shook her head. “Well, I’ll be sure to say something in the morning. Draco seems to be getting along well with Sirius, and very much likes young Harry Potter as well. I don’t want him to feel as though he needs to choose between his godfather and his newfound cousin and new friend. Speaking of whom, I did say we would be in touch with Stephen, in order to arrange for Harry to come and play with Draco sometimes. I imagine it will do the boy a world of good to see a proper magical household, given that he’s stuck with Muggles for the moment. The main difficulty is, we’d have to make sure no one drops in unexpectedly while he’s here, as no one can know we’ve met the boy.”

Lucius nodded. “Mm. Well, if we tell people we’re going away for a family weekend, hopefully no one will even try to contact us unless it’s an emergency. I’ll give it some thought as to how to arrange things, perhaps discuss it with Mr. Coyner. I want to speak with him again anyhow, as I’d like his opinion as a Muggleborn about the curriculum for the new class. And I did want to ask about that thing Sirius mentioned about Muggles not marrying cousins as well.”

“Owl him now, invite him to dinner tomorrow,” Narcissa suggested. “He’s likely not even home yet, as he has to drive Harry back to the Muggles’ house from London. He uses Muggle means of travel whenever he goes there, so that anyone possibly watching won’t think he’s a wizard. They’ve both made it very clear that they do not want Dumbledore learning that Harry is in contact with wizards.”

“All right,” Lucius nodded. “I’m sure Severus won’t mind an extra guest at the table tomorrow. It may even be beneficial, given that Sirius will be here as well.” He stood and moved off to the writing desk, quickly penning the invitation for Stephen to drop by any time after noon and stay for dinner. Summoning a house elf, he instructed the small creature to take it to the owlry and send it off immediately. The elf bowed and vanished again with a soft pop, and Lucius offered his arm to his wife. “Shall we call it a night as well?” he asked.

She smiled and took his arm. “A splendid idea,” she agreed. “It has been rather a long day, and a much more physically active one than I’m used to. Still, it was a good day overall, and I’m actually looking forward to another venture… once my feet recover from this one,” she laughed as they headed up to bed.

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Stephen spent the morning writing up his latest report for Her Majesty, making a point to include Harry’s questions about ‘getting lessons on how to be a Lord’ as he’d put it, and also about the possibility of him being able to play with the Princes again sometime. He added that Harry understood the latter might be impossible, but he was concerned about the former, as the boy had done some research on how Royal Wardships historically worked, and knew that living with the Dursleys was not preparing him in any way to administer an estate.

He also included his observations about Harry’s growing enthusiasm for learning in general, now
that he no longer feared retaliation for getting better marks than his cousin, and mentioned the boy’s real interest in history. Harry was eager for a chance to visit the Tower of London, he wrote, as he wished to see the armour as well as the Crown Jewels. The boy’s aunt continued to treat him civilly, if disdainfully; however, his cousin still bullied him at every opportunity. Stephen added that he was unsure if Harry’s aunt was ignoring her son’s behaviour, or if she was unable to control the boy now due to so many years of spoiling him.

Tucking the report into his briefcase to be delivered from his workplace in the morning, Stephen pulled on his best robes and apparated to the Leaky Cauldron, taking the floo from there to Malfoy Manor. To his surprise, another guest was in the transport room spelling himself clean of soot as Stephen emerged from the hearth. “Professor Snape,” Stephen said, recognizing the Potions Master.

Severus Snape looked up in surprise, not having expected anyone else to be visiting the Malfoys, and frowned slightly when he was unable to recognize the young man. “I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage,” he said smoothly, “as we’ve apparently met before, but I do not recall you.”

Stephen gave the dour man a nod. “Stephen Coyner… you started teaching at Hogwarts during my fifth year,” he said. “But you only had me for the one year, as I didn’t take NEWT-level Potions. I did write you for a bit of advice recently, however, and I thank you for your recommendations.”

“Surely Draco isn’t the boy you wrote about?” Severus asked with a raised brow. “While I realize he might well have asked you a potions question beyond your ability to answer, since you didn’t take NEWT classes, he’s my godson and already has the books I suggested to you.”

“No, it’s another lad entirely,” Stephen said. “Draco is your godson? I didn’t know that.” He smiled. “I might as well give you a bit of a warning, you’re likely to hear all sorts of things about Muggle London from him today. I escorted him and his mother, along with her cousin on a bit of an adventure yesterday.”

“Black is still staying here, then?” Severus sneered. “Damn. I knew from the Prophet he came to stay here for a bit following his trial, but I’d hoped he’d be gone by now.”

“His house in London needs quite a bit more work before it’s habitable,” Stephen said quietly.

Severus took the lead in heading through the manor and out to the back terrace. Lucius and Narcissa were sitting together with cups of tea, while a loud rumble sounded from the far part of the gardens. “What in Merlin’s name is that racket?” he asked his hosts as he took a seat.

Lucius gestured for Stephen to sit as well. “Sirius is taking Draco for a ride on that monstrosity of his,” he replied dryly. “After they rode the bus and the Underground yesterday, not to mention in Stephen’s car, Narcissa decided that the motorbike couldn’t hurt either, when the man offered.”

Stephen smothered a grin as Severus rolled his eyes. “Please tell me that my godson isn’t learning to be a Gryffindor hooligan from that… person.”

Narcissa shook her head. “I doubt that will happen. However, after some observations from yesterday, and a discussion with my husband this morning, we’ve decided to try an experiment in which we will be giving Draco certain opportunities to… to relax his standards of behaviour within boundaries. Not all the time by any means, and absolutely not when we’re out and about where any such laxness might reflect badly on us as his parents. We think he’s old enough to understand when to be Malfoy Heir, and when to merely be Draco.”

The Potions Master nodded. “A good lesson,” he acknowledged. “And one that could well aid him
in the future, especially if he needs to do business with Gryffindors or Hufflepuffs.” He fell silent as the rumble increased in volume to a roar.

Sirius, with a laughing Draco clinging to his waist, steered the big bike up the brick pathway towards the terrace. “So, was it as fun as I said?” he called back to the child over the noise of the engine.

“It’s brilliant!” Draco enthused. “When I’m big enough, I want to learn to drive one!”

Catching sight of additional people on the terrace, Sirius slowed the motorcycle to a halt and shut it off. “I’ll be happy to teach you, too,” he assured the boy. “But we’ve got more company. Time to park it for the day.” He held the bike steady for Draco to dismount, then dropped the kickstand and swung his own leg over the machine.

Draco hurriedly smoothed his hair down before darting up to the terrace with a smile. “Uncle Severus!” he called to his godfather. “It’s good to see you. And hello again, Stephen,” he greeted the younger man as well.

Sirius followed more slowly, reminding himself that Lily had seen something in his Slytherin year-mate that she considered worthy of her friendship, and that the man was now helping his own best friend. “Hello, Stephen,” he said with a smile. “Professor Snape.”

The Potions Master gave a cool nod. “Black,” he replied, a faint sneer evident in his tone. Turning his attention back to his godson, he gave the boy a smile. “It’s good to see you as well, Draco. I hear you went on an adventure yesterday. Will you tell me about it?”

While Draco, with Narcissa offering the occasional comment, launched into a tale of the previous day’s London trip edited only to omit any mention of Harry Potter, Lucius looked at Stephen and Sirius. “I’ve been wanting to speak with you both, get your opinions on what we’ve come up with so far for the wizarding culture class. Also, in a different but related conversation, Sirius told me that Muggles forbid marriage between first cousins in most places now, and said that the reasons they do so might well be relevant to the wizarding world as well. Can you explain why this is so?”

Stephen nodded. “I can give a basic explanation, anyway,” he said. “I’m not studying to be a Muggle doctor or a healer, but any university wants the students to have a well-rounded education, so I have learned the basic science. Have either of you heard the term genetics?”

Both wizards looked blank. “No, I haven’t,” Lucius said.

“Okay, well, simply put, genetics is the study of heredity… understanding how things like eye colour and physical build are passed from generation to generation,” Stephen said. “There’s an entire branch of Muggle science devoted to it these days. As I said, I know the basics of how it works.” Reaching into a pocket of his robes, he pulled out a small spiral notepad and a biro, and he sketched out several small grids that looked like naughts and crosses boards. “Taking it to the very simplest level, let’s use blue eyes and brown eyes as our example. Some of those traits, such as for brown eyes, are called dominant traits, while others are recessive, like the ones for blue eyes.”

Lucius peered with interest at the pen and the notepad. “Hmm. So does that mean that a blue-eyed person marrying and having children with a brown-eyed person will always have brown-eyed babies? Because the brown-eyed trait is dominant?”

“Not necessarily,” Stephen answered. “You see, each person gets half their genetic material… those things which control hair and eye colour, and size and general build and all that… from each parent. It’s a fifty-fifty split. So while a person will only have blue eyes if they get a gene for blue
eyes from both parents, someone with brown eyes might be carrying a gene for blue eyes, only they wouldn’t know it unless they had a blue-eyed child.” He started filling in some of the grids, using ‘Br’ for the brown eye colour gene and ‘b’ for the blue.

___|BrBr |BrBr _________ ___|Brb |Brb
bbb |Brb | Brb _________ Brb |BrBr|Brb
bb |Brb | Brb _________ Brb |Brb |bb

Lucius and Sirius both peered at the little grids. Sirius nodded. “So the first one shows a blue-eyed person and someone with two brown-eyed genes, yes? And all of their children would have brown eyes, but might be able to produce blue-eyed babies if their baby’s other parent either had blue eyes or also had a blue-eyed parent.”

“And the second shows the possible outcomes of the children of two brown-eyed people who each had a blue-eyed parent,” Lucius deduced. “They could have a blue-eyed child or a brown-eyed child, and even if the child shows brown eyes, that child might still carry the potential to pass along blue eyes.”

“Exactly,” Stephen nodded. “Mind, this is genetics at its most simplistic… there are more eye colours than just blue and brown, obviously, and so other factors that might make a difference. But for the most basic version, there you have it. Now, it happens that sometimes there’s a deformity of a particular gene. Most of the time, this isn’t a problem, as such deformities, being just that, will be recessive to a normal gene of the matching type from the other parent. But, if the other parent has a deformity of the same gene, that deformity can show up as a deformity or illness in the child. The Muggle disease of haemophilia, for example… it is a genetic disorder which keeps the blood from clotting properly, so that a bump like this,” he reached out and flicked his finger lightly against each man’s arm, “can cause a bruise the size of your hand, and an inch-long cut could potentially cause the child to pass out from blood loss before the bleeding could be stopped.”

Lucius looked horrified. “Dear Merlin,” he murmured, glancing at Draco, very obviously considering the implications of such a disease affecting his only child.

Stephen nodded again. “When Muggle doctors first started studying this, they took note of how such diseases seemed to run in some families. And they figured out that the reason for it was that those families tended to marry their first and second cousins in their efforts to keep the property in the family. Because they all had some genetic material in common from their grandparents or great-grandparents, it increased the chances of any two of them who married to both have the same genetic deformity which then manifested in their children.”

Sirius tilted his head. “So do you think this genetics affects wizards too?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” Stephen replied firmly. “Wizards are human too. In fact, I often wondered if magic might be genetic somehow. But Healers don’t seem to know anything about the Muggle sciences, and of course it’s not as though I can ask a Muggle doctor or geneticist to go ‘round taking samples from wizards and Muggles to try to find a gene for magic.”

“But if there is one, and something was wrong with it, wizards marrying their cousins too much might see things go wrong with their magic?” Sirius asked.

“It’s certainly possible,” Stephen said. “And physical problems as well. In isolated Muggle areas, where there is a very limited group of people to marry and procreate with each other, the birth rate tends to drop after a few generations, while the rate of stillbirths and miscarriages increases. This is because many times, a baby with too many genetic problems simply won’t survive to be brought to term.”
Lucius whitened at that. Narcissa had lost several babies both before and after having Draco. Nearly all the pureblood families of their social circle had only one child, the Greengrass family with two being a notable exception, and all of those families including the Greengrass family had lost at least three others along the way. “Is there… anything which can be done in such a situation?” he asked.

Stephen tilted his head, hearing a note of concern in the aristocrat’s voice. “There are Muggle doctors who specialize in high-risk pregnancies,” he said. “Although I have no personal experience with such things. But I do know they exist. Beyond that, I’m not sure what to tell you. I can look up some names if you would want to speak with someone of that sort, but I can’t give any personal recommendations.”

“I may ask for that later,” Lucius said. He got up rather abruptly and went into the manor. Stephen looked at Sirius in confusion.

“I suspect he’s either breaking something or having a drink,” the animagus said softly. “Neither of them have said anything openly, but I got the impression they’ve lost at least one child if not more. And while the Black family and the Malfoys have cast their marital nets more widely than two-thirds of the pureblood families in England, we both know that pretty much all of the oldest lines are related to some degree or other. I think it just hit him that marrying Muggleborns and half-bloods is what’s given families like the Weasleys their nearly legendary fecundity.”

Stephen nodded quietly. “I see,” he said. “I can understand how that would be disturbing.” He gave a sideways smile. “And I haven’t even brought up the possibility that Muggleborns might not actually be that, but be born to squib lines that had long since forgotten they once came from magical families. I mean, really… most squibs do end up moving to the Muggle world, from what I’ve heard, right? So once they’re three or four generations out, who’s to remember anything about the wizarding world anymore? And if magic really is a recessive gene or something, and the children of two squib lines marry and have children…”

“Then those children might turn out magical,” Sirius nodded as well. “That makes some sense, but I doubt most of the power-mongers would like hearing it. Still, it might be interesting to test.” He glanced over at Narcissa, Draco, and Snape, still chatting, but put up a muffliato all the same. “I plan on doing a blood adoption for Harry,” he murmured once the anti-eavesdropping spell was in place. “Once it’s done, the goblins will want to do a Heritage Trace on him to make sure it took, so that he can inherit the Black title as well as the properties from me. I’d like to see what comes up on Lily’s side.”

“I’d like to see that myself,” Stephen smirked. “When do you want to do it? This coming weekend?”

“Yes,” Sirius answered. “The sooner the better, just in case anything happens to me. Not that I’m playing stupid, mind, but better safe than sorry.”

Stephen nodded. “Understandable.”

Sirius cancelled the muffliato as Lucius returned, looking a little more composed than when he’d left. He brought a sheaf of parchments with him, with the notes and suggestions already made for the wizarding culture class. The three men chatted pleasantly, exchanging thoughts and ideas until Narcissa announced that it was time to come inside for dinner.

Severus Snape, already pleasantly surprised by the absence of any barbed remarks from Sirius Black, was surprised again when the animagus put out a hand to stop him just before they joined the others in the dining room. He tensed, but as the man’s hands were both visible and empty,
refrained from immediately drawing his wand. “What?” he spat.

Sirius drew a deep breath. “Look, I… I wanted to apologize for being such an ass to you for all those years. I’m not asking your forgiveness, because I know what I did… and that was just me, mind, James didn’t know about it until after you headed out… that was unforgivable. But I wanted you to know I am sorry I did it. And that since I’m renewing my ties with the Malfoys and I understand you’re Draco’s godfather, I’d like to get some kind of truce going. I don’t want the poor kid to feel that he’s being disloyal to you if he likes me or anything like that.”

Only years of masking his emotions prevented Severus’ jaw from dropping. The last thing he’d expected to hear out of the mutt’s mouth was an apology, and an unprompted and apparently sincere one at that. “Perhaps it is time to leave the past behind,” he said coolly. “I highly doubt we will become friends, but I will refrain from insulting you to my godson, or while under this roof.”

“Thank you,” Sirius said with a nod, allowing the Potions Master to precede him into the dining room.

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That same evening, in Kensington Palace, Princess Diana sat in her office looking over her schedule for the coming weeks. Good, she thought, I did make sure I’d have the week before school starts free to spend with the boys. We can go up to Balmoral and take Harry Potter with us for a couple of days. Wills and Harry will love that.

Looking further ahead, to the first term break of the school year, she saw a scheduled trip with the boys to Great Ormond Street Hospital. That would be a good opportunity to bring Harry along for his first exposure to publicity and the press. Hospital visits tended to be covered by the friendlier of the reporters, as no one wanted to annoy the relatives of any of the ill or injured being granted a visit. The press might not take seriously the thought that members of the Royal Family might like a bit of privacy now and again, but ordinary people in hospital were something else again.

She frowned as she turned the calendar forward to the Christmas hols. Charles still hadn’t let her know if he would be accompanying her and the boys to see The Nutcracker performed by the Royal Ballet. She had hoped to make a family outing of it, but since it was looking less likely he’d be there, she would go ahead and invite Harry to the show, and perhaps his tutor as well. They could most probably fit in a couple of days at Highgrove or Balmoral for the boys in between the end of school and Christmas week itself, as Her Majesty wanted the whole family together for the actual holiday. Diana didn’t have much hope that it would help close the growing breach between herself and Charles, but with any luck, they would at least manage to keep things friendly for the sake of the boys. They had it hard enough with the sheer amount of time that both she and Charles had to spend away from them due to their official duties, she would do her best to make sure their holiday wasn’t spoiled as well.
On Wednesday, Harry had just finished mowing the grass and raking up the cuttings when Aunt Petunia came outside. “Hurry and put the tools away,” she told him. “We need to go shopping for Dudley’s new school clothes, and I want to be home in plenty of time to cook supper.”

Harry really didn’t want to be dragged around Debenham’s or Marks and Spencer’s with his cousin. He knew from experience that Dudley would quickly become bored and either hit him or knock over displays and blame it on him. “I could stay here, Aunt Petunia, and have supper ready, or at least in progress, when you get back,” he said, hoping he could convince her to leave him at the house. “I promise I won’t touch the telly or anything else… I’ll stay in my room and read until it’s time to start cooking.”

Petunia debated, but grudgingly agreed. She had trained the boy to cook, after all, and he had stayed alone without being locked in the cupboard while she and Dudley were at church on Sundays since Vernon’s passing and hadn’t damaged anything or done anything freakish to the house in her absence. It would make things a little easier if she didn’t have to try to rush through the school shopping. “Very well, boy, you may stay here and cook supper. Have it ready for six o’clock. I’d planned on a pork roast with applesauce and roasted potatoes and carrots.”

“Would you like me to do an apple crumble for afters as well?” Harry asked.

“Yes, do. Dudders will like that, especially since I bought ice cream this week,” Petunia said. “Right, then, get those tools put away and get inside so we can leave.”

Harry did as he was told, inwardly cheering at the thought of missing the shopping trip. He hastily brushed off the grass clippings that clung to his trainers and made his way into the back door. He did have the misfortune to encounter Dudley before he got to his room, but his cousin satisfied himself with shoving him to the floor and kicking him in the ribs as Aunt Petunia was calling for him to hurry. He waited until Dudley was downstairs before picking himself up and probing his ribcage. Thankfully, his cousin was wearing trainers, so while Harry figured he’d have a new bruise, he didn’t seem to be seriously injured this time.

He set his watch alarm for four o’clock, so that he’d have plenty of time to prepare supper for six, and then stretched out on his bed with his book on wizarding etiquette and customs. A lot of the etiquette seemed the same as Muggle etiquette, but some seemed extremely old-fashioned. There was an entire chapter on the language of flowers, for example, and another on the proper code of dress for various social functions. Still, since he was a Lord, he’d probably have to know these things at some point. He’d bring this book along whenever Stephen came for him on Saturdays, he decided. That way, if he was going to see either Uncle Sirius or maybe Draco, he could ask them about the parts that confused him.

The alarm beeped at him, so he put the book back into his trunk and headed downstairs to start the supper preparations. With his long experience at cooking for his relatives, Harry set the pork roast into the roasting pan and poured a half a cup of apple cider over it before putting it into the oven. Next, he quartered a number of red-skinned potatoes and shook them in a bag with a little olive oil, garlic powder, savory, thyme, and parsley. They would go into the oven in a separate pan beside the roast in another half hour so that they would be lightly browned and crisp on the outside yet tender in the centre. The carrots would be easy enough to deal with, as Aunt Petunia preferred to purchase them frozen and steam them in the microwave. He poured the bag out into the small casserole dish she used to steam vegetables in the microwave and set the dish into the unit, although he didn’t yet start it since he wanted everything to be finished at about the same time. He
washed and put away the few utensils he’d used in his preparations, and was just taking out the plates to set the table when he heard the letter slot open and the soft swish of mail being inserted. This was followed with a solid thunk, and then another one before the flap of the letter slot clattered shut once more.

Harry set the plates down and went to collect the mail. Much to his astonishment, he discovered that the two small packages… obviously the source of the thunks he’d heard… and a letter were addressed to him! He made sure all the mail addressed to Aunt Petunia was facing the same direction and arranged by size with the largest envelope at the bottom of the stack before putting them in the basket on the hall table for her to collect when she arrived home. Then he picked up the two packages and his letter and dashed upstairs to put them in his trunk. As much as he wanted to rip them open immediately, he had to make sure the food was ready and waiting for his aunt and cousin if he hoped to be left home alone more often instead of sent to Mrs. Figg’s house or dragged along on errands.

Hurrying back downstairs, he slid the baking dish of potatoes into the oven and then started slicing apples for the apple crumble. He assembled them into another baking dish together with brown sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, and butter, topping it with a crumble mixture of flour, rolled oats, butter, and more brown sugar. That would go into the oven just as the roast and potatoes came out, to bake while they were eating and to be ready to serve as they were finishing the meal. He finished setting the table and started the microwave, and was just pulling the roast and potatoes out and sliding the apple crumble into the oven when he saw the car pulling up.

Dudley came waddling into the kitchen, sniffing the air hungrily. “Is it ready? I’m starved! Mummy wouldn’t stop for a snack, because she said you were cooking supper, so it better be ready, freak!” He plunked himself down in his chair and picked up his fork expectantly.

“I’m just slicing the roast now,” Harry said quietly. This was the one time he could count on not being hit by his fat cousin, because even Dudley had figured out that if he hit Harry while Harry was cooking or dishing up food, the food might be ruined and he would have to wait longer to eat. Harry brought the serving dishes over to the table and then hurried out to help Aunt Petunia with the shopping bags.

The woman looked at him in surprise. “Ah… thank you,” she said awkwardly as he calmly took half the bags from her and then opened the door to the house for her.

“You’re welcome,” Harry said. “Supper is on the table and the apple crumble is in the oven. Should I wait until you and Dudley are finished before I eat?”

Petunia looked at her nephew thoughtfully. “No. Leave the bags in the hall for now and you come eat as well. You cooked it, you might as well have it while it’s still hot.”

He smiled and set the bags down in a neat row. “Thank you.” He followed her into the kitchen and took his place at the far end of the table, somewhat apart from his aunt and cousin. Dudley had piled half the contents of each of the serving dishes onto his plate, and was busily shoveling the food into his mouth. Harry waited for Petunia to serve herself before reaching for any of the food for himself, pleased to see that despite Dudley’s greed, there was enough for two normal-sized portions left. He’d be able to wrap the leftovers for his aunt to have for lunch the following day, assuming his whale of a cousin didn’t eat it as a bedtime snack. He ate quickly and quietly while Aunt Petunia chattered about the wonderful time she and her darling Diddydums had had while shopping and how handsome her precious little boy looked in his new school clothes. Dudley merely grunted by way of answering his mother, being far too absorbed in eating to stop long enough between bites to actually speak.
Harry finished his meal and put his dishes in the sink. The oven timer pinged and he took the apple crumble out to cool while his cousin started eating even faster so as to get to the dessert more quickly. He wrapped the leftovers and put them into the refrigerator as his aunt finished her meal and got out the dessert dishes.

Dudley finished his enormous meal and let out a loud belch while shoving his plate towards his cousin. “I want dessert now, Mummy,” he demanded.

“Of course, Duddykins,” Petunia cooed, dishing up a large portion of the apple crumble and adding an equally generous portion of vanilla ice cream on top. “There you go, my darling, eat up!” She hesitated for a moment, then dished up a small portion of the crumble and the ice cream and set it at Harry’s place. “You may have some as well,” she said.

Harry blinked. “Thank you!” he said, sitting back down and savoring the unexpected treat.

“Why’d you give some to the freak?” Dudley whined. “Now there won’t be enough for me to have tomorrow!”

“Now, Dudley darling, Mummy only gave him a little bit,” Petunia cajoled. “He was nice enough to stay home and cook supper so you wouldn’t have to wait to eat after all that shopping, so Mummy wanted to reward him for helping.” She showed him the baking dish, which was still nearly two-thirds full. “See, Diddy, there’s plenty left for tomorrow.”

Dudley squinted his piggy little eyes at the dish and sulked. “I suppose. But I still don’t think freaks should get to have dessert. Daddy would never have let him have any.”

Petunia flinched. “I know, Dudders, but Daddy isn’t here anymore, and you know we’ve had to make some changes as a result. This is one of those changes, darling.”

“It’s still not fair!” Dudley crammed the last of his dessert into his mouth and shoved back, pushing the table at the same time so that it slammed into Harry. He stomped into the sitting room and turned the telly on full volume.

Harry carefully pushed the table back again so he could get out of his chair. Out of habit, he started to clear off the table.

“You should probably go on up to your room for the evening,” Aunt Petunia told him quietly. “I’ll clean up. And… thank you for offering to cook tonight.”

Harry smiled. He could almost like his aunt these days. “You’re welcome, Aunt Petunia,” he said just as quietly, not wanting to attract his cousin’s attention. “Good night.” He slipped up the stairs and took the opportunity to shower while Dudley was occupied with the telly. Only after he was clad in his pajamas did he close his bedroom door and open his trunk, pulling out the packages and the letter. He decided to open the packages first. The first was a book titled *Beginner’s Brewing*, and the second was called *A Starter’s Guide to Ingredient Interactions*. Both books were written by a Tansy Galingale. He noticed a note sticking out of Beginner’s Brewing, so he pulled it out to read.

**Dear Harry,**

**Remember a couple weeks back when we made the boil cure potion and you asked about why some potions need the porcupine quills added after you take the cauldron off the heat, while others ask for the porcupine quills to be added while it’s still on the heat, but I didn’t know the answer? I wrote to Professor Snape and asked if he could recommend any books good for novices with an interest in potions, and he suggested these. I found out by chance that he’s**
Draco Malfoy’s godfather, and that Draco has these books already, so I know they’re good ones.
See you Saturday!
Stephen

Cool! He thought. Now I can start studying potions so I won’t get on Professor Snape’s bad side right away, especially if he’s as harsh a teacher as Stephen says he can be. He paged through the books quickly, just to get an idea of what information could be found inside them. They both looked interesting and informative. He decided to wait for tomorrow to start studying them, however, as he’d done quite a bit of studying all day and wanted to work on one of his puzzles tonight. He put them into his trunk with his other wizarding books, and picked up the letter instead. Three separate pieces of stationery dropped out when he opened it. The first read:

Dear Harry,
My boys and I would be delighted if you would accompany us to Scotland next week. We plan to fly from Windsor Castle to Balmoral on Sunday afternoon, and to return early the following Saturday. I know your aunt likely won’t be willing to drive you to and from Windsor, but if Mr. Coyner is unable to drive you for some reason, I can arrange for a driver for you so that you can fly up with us. I’m hoping this will be an educational visit as well as a fun one for you, with the idea being that you can start learning how to live in the public eye by accompanying us to various places. I’m told that once you start at your parents’ old school, you’ll be very much in the public eye, and I know from experience, it can be quite unsettling when one isn’t used to it. Most of the week will simply be vacation, however, as I enjoy spending some time with my boys just before school starts for the year. Mr. Coyner has been given my private-access number, so when you see him on Saturday, ask if he’s able to bring you to and from Windsor and then ring me up so I’ll know whether to send a driver for you.
Regards,
Diana, Princess of Wales

Harry’s eyes widened. He’d figured he’d be lucky if he got to have another daylong visit with the young princes, and here he was being invited to stay for nearly a week! He looked at the other two notes and smiled. One simply read: HI HARRY in tipsy childish printing, with a big smiley face drawn below. He guessed that one was from little Prince Harry. The other was a little more polished:

Dear Harry,
Mummy says she’s going to ask you to come to Balmoral with us. I hope you can come. I had a lot of fun at Highgrove on your Birthday and so did Harry. We both want you to come stay with us. I hope to see you soon!
Your friend,
Wills

He beamed and put the notes into his trunk. He absolutely wanted to go to Scotland with the Princess of Wales and the young princes. Not only would they presumably get to ride and play with the dogs and whatever else they would be doing, but it would be an entire week away from Dudley! He looked into his wardrobe, trying to decide if he’d have enough of the proper kinds of clothing for the trip. He thought so, even allowing for the possibility that they’d be changing to school-type clothes for meals, but he’d have to pack nearly all of what he had. He’d check with Stephen on Saturday; presumably he’d have a better idea as to what to take or leave. He’d have to
buy a suitcase or duffel bag, too, as his trunk was not appropriate to take for a weeklong visit, but as he hadn’t spent any of his pocket money aside from buying the padlock for the trunk at his aunt’s request, he had over thirty pounds saved up, with another five to come on Saturday. Surely that would be enough to buy something appropriate. Oh, and he probably ought to buy a hostess gift for Princess Diana, too. The wizarding etiquette book talked about hostess gifts, and surely something like that would be polite to do in the Muggle world as well. A big box of chocolates, maybe? Harry recalled Uncle Vernon’s sister Marge bringing either a box of chocolates or a bottle of wine every time she came to stay… which thankfully wasn’t often. He’d ask Stephen about that, too, but he was proud of himself for thinking of it in the first place. He sat down at his desk and jotted a couple of notes to himself, so he wouldn’t forget everything he needed to bring up on Saturday, and then he settled in to spend an hour or so working on the unicorn puzzle.

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

That same evening, Sirius met Remus at the end of his shift at Waterstone’s and they headed off to a nearby pub for supper and a few pints. They exchanged pleasantries, ordered their food, and Sirius made Remus laugh with his account of the full day in London with the Malfoys and Harry, and of the look on Lucius’ face when given the Slinky and the Rubik’s Cube.

Once their meals arrived, though, the animagus got down to more serious topics. “I’ve got a proposition for you, Moony,” he told his old friend. “You’ve always had a way with words. Lucius is heading up a committee to put together a curriculum for a wizarding culture class, to be required of all Hogwarts students. I think you ought to write the textbook for the course. For that matter, I think you ought to write the textbooks for Muggle Studies as well. You know a hell of a lot more about the Muggle world than most purebloods ever will, and you’ve had a proper pureblood upbringing yourself, so you know all those things that the Muggleborns don’t.”

Remus looked thoughtful. “I’d love to help you out, Pads, but how can I? Between work and my furry little problem, I don’t have much more than an hour or so a day, and I do know how long it can take to get a book approved and published.”

“Oh, but this is where I come in,” Sirius said with a grin. “I’d like you to come stay with me at Grimmauld Place once it’s back in shape. My elves say not more than two weeks and it’ll be habitable again. And then you quit your job and write for your living.” Before Remus could protest, he held up a hand. “And this isn’t charity. I’ve looked into the publishing business, and authors get advances on their books all the time. I can guarantee the Wizarding Culture textbook will sell, so you’ll have a steady income once it goes to press. At that point, I’ll get a percentage of that income until the advance is paid off.”

The werewolf tilted his head. “Well, I admit, I wouldn’t mind quitting the Muggle job,” he admitted. “And unlike pretty much any other wizard out there, you aren’t going to sack me for being what I am. I just don’t like feeling like I’m being kept, you know?”

Sirius snickered. “Aww, you’d make an adorable boy toy for some rich little old lady,” he teased. But then he sobered again. “Honestly, though, you’d be doing me a favor if you came and shared the house with me. That place is too big for one bloke to live in alone, and anyway… I was kept alone for way too long. I want the sounds of someone else puttering around the place. I don’t want to wear out my welcome at the Malfoy’s, but at the same time, I truly can’t bear the idea of moving anywhere that I’ll be by myself.”

“I can imagine,” Remus nodded. “All right, I’ll do it, at least as far as the moving in with you part goes. But I’m going to keep the job until such time as I get an owl from Lucius Malfoy and his committee soliciting me to write their textbook, all right? Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate your
offer, but you’re not the bloke in charge of getting this new class set up either. I don’t want to take your money, only to find out that one of the others on the committee has a relative in mind to write the book. I’m willing to write it, don’t get me wrong there. I just don’t want to count on something that might not happen for any number of reasons.”

“Fair enough,” Sirius nodded in turn. “And if it makes you feel better, you can pay rent, too. I don’t know what you’re paying now, but how does half that sound?”

Remus chuckled. “Sounds like a wonderful break, but from you, I’ll accept it. And thank you for accepting that I want to pay something, so I can feel independent.”

Sirius reddened a little. “Well, I kind of know how you feel. Even though I have money enough, I worry about being a burden, staying with my cousin while the house gets fixed up, no matter how much she assures me that I’m not one.” He grins a bit. “You’d be proud of me, though. Turns out Snape is young Draco’s godfather. I found out when he came to spend the day last Sunday. But I not only didn’t call him anything rude, I apologized to him for everything I did back when. Told him I don’t expect forgiveness, but I wanted to call a truce because I like Draco and don’t want to put the kid in an awkward position.”

“I am proud of you, Padfoot,” Remus grinned. “What did he have to say to that?”

“Eh, he sneered a bit, but said maybe it was time to let go of the past, and that he would at least refrain from insulting me to Draco, or at any time while we were both under the Malfoys’ roof.”

“Good for both of you. I doubt you’ll ever manage to become friends, but it would be good if you don’t snipe at each other anymore,” Remus said.

“Yeah,” Sirius nodded. “I just have to keep reminding myself that Lily saw something admirable in him, and she wasn’t stupid, so I have to trust that it’s there even if I can’t see it. Anyway, to other matters. I’ve been nosing around, literally and figuratively, and I think I have a possible clue where the rat might be hiding.

“Oh really?” The werewolf’s eyes took on a predatory gleam.

“Really. Lucius brought me around the Ministry last week, and while I didn’t speak to him myself, I heard Arthur Weasley in a firecall with his wife when we stopped near the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office. In her rambling, I heard her mention that one of their children’s pet rat has started chewing up the newspapers before she could read them,” Sirius said. “It would be just like that little shit to hide as someone’s pet, don’t you think? I mean, why should he work for a living somewhere out of Britain, when he could have a life of ease right here? And if You Know Who ever does resurface, the little shit could go crawling back to his old master with information about everyone who stood against him before. I think we’ll need to check it out.”

Remus gave a faint growl. “I think you’re right. It would be just like him to hide in plain sight like that. And I bet anything he chewed the papers where they printed your description of his animagus form at your trial. With as many kids as the Weasleys have, ten to one the papers pile up for a while before anyone reads more than the headlines anyway, so he could have read the whole article and simply gnawed out his description so he wouldn’t lose his relatively cushy lifestyle.”

“It’s agreed. Two more weeks, and we head for Ottery St. Catchpole to see if we can smell him out,” Sirius stated. “And then... oh. Damn. I don’t know which of the kids claims the rat as his pet, but the next full moon is after the Hogwarts term starts. So the rat might well be off to school with the kid in question. Damn.”
“So, we have to try to get our hands on him before then,” Remus mused. “And we have to do it without giving him the hint that someone’s onto him. That’s the real problem. Still, I’m sure we can come up with something… maybe I can firecall Arthur myself tomorrow morning, after he’s at the Ministry, so there’s no chance of the rat overhearing the conversation. Maybe you can be there, too. Or something.” He frowned. “How do you get the rat within reach of the DMLE, without tipping him off, that’s the question.”

“And a damn good question at that,” Sirius grumbled. “Especially now that he’s aware the DMLE and the Aurors know about his animagus form.”

“Have Arthur invite a couple of Aurors to dinner, maybe? And cast an anti-apparition ward over his house, along with one to keep any animagi trapped inside?” Remus offered.

“Hell, I’d try anything at this point,” Sirius said. “I want to see that damned rat where he belongs.”

“You and me both.” Remus raised his pint glass. “To putting that bastard away.”

“Hear, hear,” Sirius replied, raising his own glass and clinking it against his friend’s. They both drank with matching determined expressions on their faces.
The Biggest Rat of All

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

The next morning, Sirius accompanied Lucius to the Ministry once more. Today, however, he separated from the blond almost as soon as they arrived, heading for the Misuse of Muggle Arifacts Office to wait for Arthur Weasley to show up.

Very little truly surprised the father of seven anymore, so he greeted his unexpected visitor with just a raised brow and a smile. “Congratulations on being exonerated, Sirius. What brings you out here today? Surely you aren’t here to report any cursed public toilets or illegal flying carpets.”

Sirius shook his head. “No, I’m not. But I do need to talk to you about a possible danger in your house.”

Now Arthur was shocked. “In my house, you say?”

“I was here the other day and happened to be in the area in time to overhear you in a firecall with Molly,” Sirius explained. “I heard her mention that the pet rat belonging to one of your boys had taken up chewing the newspapers before anyone got to read them. What does this rat look like?”

“Well, he’s grey,” Arthur said, looking somewhat confused. “He’s pretty old, I would think. Percy found him seven, seven and a half years ago. Why do you ask?”

Bingo! Sirius thought. “Is he missing a toe on one front foot?” he asked, wanting to be sure.

“Why, yes, he is,” Arthur replied. “How do you know that?”

“I think your son’s pet might actually be the animagus Peter Pettigrew,” Sirius stated flatly.

“What?” the older man gasped.

Sirius nodded grimly. “I’m guessing, mind. But the paper I bet he chewed up was the one with the full story of my trial, including my description of his animagus form. He was the Potters’ Secret Keeper, and when I found him and went to arrest him, he cut off his own finger and caused that explosion himself before transforming and escaping. I know him well enough to guess that he’d just as soon stay in Britain as someone’s pet as long as he was being treated well, in preference to going elsewhere and actually having to work for a living.”

Arthur sank back into his chair as he tried to make sense of all this. “But… why wouldn’t he have run, now that you’re out of prison?” he asked. “I don’t understand that part.”

“Well, he knows your family’s habits well enough that he feels secure still, I suppose, and of course he wouldn’t know that I’m aware that your son owns a pet rat,” Sirius shrugged. “If he knows you didn’t read the full article that mentioned his description, he’ll have chewed that part of the paper knowing you likely won’t try to get another over a few missing lines of one story, especially if it’s a week or more old. Plus, he knows you were with the Order during the war… if people are wrong and You Know Who does come back somehow, he’d be in an excellent position to return to his old master with information about your family, and presumably about Dumbledore as well, assuming your son takes him to Hogwarts each year. And if that never happens, he’s got a
“It could just be a coincidence,” Arthur suggested weakly, not really wanting to consider the possibility that it wasn’t.

Sirius shrugged again. “It’s possible that I’m wrong, yes,” he allowed. “But at the same time, it does seem a little odd that this pet rat you’ve had for over seven years only just started chewing the newspapers in the last week or so, don’t you think?”

“I suppose,” Arthur frowned. “But how do I deal with it? I mean, if you show up, the rat will simply hide or run away.”

“Bring home a new travel cage for the rat,” Sirius suggested. “Only when you buy it, have them put an unbreakable charm on the thing. That way, once he’s locked inside, he won’t be able to break out of it by changing into his human form, and you can bring him here in the morning and turn him over to Madam Bones.” Remembering who he was talking to, he amended, “In fact, I’ll go buy the cage right now. If I’m wrong, there’ll be no harm done. And if I am right, I’ll buy your kid a new pet to replace the one he’ll be losing, with your permission of course.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” Arthur protested.

“It’s only fair, though,” Sirius said. “Losing a pet stinks. Being forced to give one up is worse.”

“Well, in that case, if it turns out that Scabbers really is Pettigrew, I’ll accept your offer,” the older man nodded.

Sirius smiled. “Right then, I’m off to Diagon Alley to get that travel cage. I’ll be back with it by noon, and then you can decide how to present the cage and get your son to put the rat into it. I really appreciate the help with this, Arthur.” He shook hands with the balding redhead and headed out.

Figuring the quicker this issue got resolved, the better, Arthur checked with his boss, and then firecalled home to let Molly know he was going to be home for lunch. When Sirius returned just before noon with the cage as promised, he took it from the younger man and headed for the floo, telling him, “I’ll be back after lunch with Scabbers.”

“See you in an hour or so, then,” Sirius replied as they made their way out of Arthur’s office. He strolled off to the Ministry lunchroom while the redhead turned towards the public floo.

“Molly, I’m home,” he called as he emerged in the Burrow.

“And just why are you home, Arthur?” his wife wanted to know. “Not that I object to your presence, of course, but this is a little unusual for a weekday noon.”

Arthur held up the little travel cage with a smile. “I’ve got a gift for Percy, although I need to borrow his pet for the afternoon in order to get it. I’ve been asked to test a new travel cage for small animals, in exchange for getting to keep the cage.”

“Oh, Percy will love that!” Molly gushed. “His one complaint about Scabbers concerns the, er, ‘gifts’ left behind when he carries Scabbers about in his pocket for long periods of time like on the Hogwarts Express.” She moved to the stairs and called, “Boys! Ginny! Lunchtime! Wash up and come down now!”

She went back to the kitchen and started directing various serving dishes to float over to the table as five of her seven children came thundering and shoving down the stairs. Fred and George were
laughing uproariously while Ron glowered at them from under green and silver striped hair, while Charlie carried a giggling Ginny on his back. Percy trailed behind his siblings, walking sedately, his hair neatly combed and his clothing immaculate, with a book tucked under one arm.

“…not a slimy snake, change it back!” Ron demanded hotly of the twins, who continued to laugh.

Fred snickered, “Oh, but the colors are…”

“So very pretty on you, ickle Ronniekins!” George finished.

Molly shook her head. “Fix your brother’s hair,” she told them. “Why must you always do things like that?”

“We wanted to get Percy…”

“Or Charlie. But Ron went into the loo first. The colors will fade…”

“In about an hour. He’ll just have to wait.”

Ron growled. “I’m going to be so glad when you two leave for Hogwarts and I don’t have to put up with you until the winter hols.”

Percy wrinkled his nose. “I do hope, Fred and George, that you won’t completely embarrass the family with your shenanigans once you’re at school,” he said pompously.

“They’ll do fine,” Charlie said as he deposited Ginny into a chair. He sat down as well and started serving himself. “Speaking of, when are we going for our supplies?”

“Saturday,” Molly answered. “Bill said he wants to come along as well, and he has Saturday off work.” She looked sternly at the twins. “And I expect you two to behave yourselves while we shop.”

“Yes, Mum,” the twins chorused, and then they just looked at each other with matching identical evil grins as they started eating.

Percy rolled his eyes. “Do I need to go along, Mother? I ran into Mr. Lovegood in the village yesterday, and he said he could use a bit of assistance editing some articles that have come in for the Quibbler this month. He’s offered to pay me a whole galleon if I go and help on Saturday.”

Ron and Charlie snorted at that, and he gave a shrug. “The Quibbler might be sensationalistic journalism at its finest, but it’s still pay for honest labour. It’s hardly Mr. Lovegood’s fault that his contributors don’t always bother with spell-checking quills.”

Molly considered. “I suppose that’s all right, then, as long as you leave your list of books that you’ll need this year. I’ve already altered some of Bill’s old school robes for you for the year. If you need more quills or anything of that nature, just add it to your list and we’ll be sure to pick it up for you, Percy dear.”

“Thank you, Mother,” the young man answered.

“I wish I could go to Hogwarts too,” Ginny sighed wistfully.

“We’ll write you all about it, Gin, won’t we, Gred?”

“Absolutely, Forge. We can’t let our little sister pine away with no one but Ron for company, after all.”
“Oi! What do you mean by that?” Ron demanded, looking angry again.

“You know, Ron,” Arthur spoke up mildly, “if you didn’t get upset at their teasing so easily, they’d stop teasing you so much. Now everyone settle down and eat. Percy, I need to speak with you after the meal.”

“Is something wrong, Father?” Percy asked. “Is that why you’re here for lunch today?”

Arthur shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong, no, but I’ve been offered a chance to help out with someone’s project and I need your assistance, that’s all.”

Percy looked gratified by that. “I’m honoured, Father,” he beamed, causing all four of his brothers to snort.

Before the twins could start up again, Molly asked, “Arthur, Bill also said he hoped to have some interesting news for us by Saturday; have you any idea what that might be?”

“Well, he did get that curse-breaker apprenticeship at Gringotts once he was out of school earlier this summer,” Arthur speculated. “Perhaps his news has something to do with that? I’d rather wait and let him tell us, Molly, rather than speculate and build up something in mind that has nothing to do with reality.”

“True enough, Mum,” Charlie put in. “Maybe it’s the job. Maybe it’s a girl. Maybe it’s that he discovered some long-lost relation who’s left us a fortune. We’ll find out when he tells us.”

Molly shook her head with a chuckle. “All right, I’ll hush up now. Fred and George, it’s your turn to clear the table. The rest of you, back to whatever you were doing.”

Arthur gave his middle son a smile. “Percy, I need you to go get Scabbers and bring him to me, please.”

Percy looked startled by the unexpected request. “Scabbers? What… of course, Father.” He went up to his room, returning a few minutes later with his pet, which was nibbling a bit of apple.

“Pop him right in here,” Arthur said, holding up the neat little travel cage.

Percy did so and latched the door carefully. “May I ask what this is about?”

“It’s a new travel cage being tested,” Arthur said. “I carry Scabbers about all afternoon, through floos and apparition and such, and then report on how well he handled the travel and how easy the cage was to carry with me, and you get to keep the cage in exchange. I know you’ve wanted a proper travel cage even though you haven’t complained that we haven’t been able to afford one for you, so when this chance presented itself, son, I volunteered so I could get the cage for you.”

“Thank you, Father!” Percy said, looking stunned.

“I know it’s not easy on you, son, being a quiet type in this madhouse,” Arthur said. “But I want you to know, your mother and I love you and we’re proud of you, even if we’re sometimes so busy dealing with your brothers’ antics to remember to tell you so.” Not being the sort to be ashamed to show his feelings for his children, he wrapped an arm over Percy’s shoulders, giving him a quick hug. “Would you care to come around with me for the afternoon, or are you still working on your summer homework?”

“I’d like to come along, if I may, please. I’ve only got a foot left on my Charms essay and then I’ll be completely finished.”
“All right, let your mother know where you’ll be and we’ll get going.”

Percy popped into the kitchen to deliver the message and returned, eager for the chance to escape his brothers for a while. He rejoined his father and followed the man through the floo to the Ministry, where he looked around with a smile. “I do hope I can get on here when I finish at Hogwarts,” he said.


Percy hesitated. “Not quite,” he said carefully, not wanting to offend his admittedly un-ambitious father. “I… respect that you like being where you are, because of your interest in anything Muggle. But I would like to actually be Minister of Magic someday.”

Arthur nodded, glancing down at the caged rat in his hand and noting with some concern that Scabbers had curled up in a ball in one corner of the cage, and seemed to be trembling slightly. “An admirable goal,” he said to his son. “I need to go check in with my department first thing, in case any emergencies came up while I was at lunch. If there isn’t anything I have to deal with immediately, I’ll give you the full tour of the Ministry and see if anyone in departments that will give you a better chance at making it to the top might be available to chat with you for a bit.”

“All right,” Percy nodded.

Sirius was waiting just outside the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office when they approached. “Hello again, Arthur,” he nodded pleasantly. “And… Percy, right?”

“Yes, Sirius, this is my third son, Percy. And his rat, Scabbers,” Arthur introduced.

The rat in the little travel cage froze, his eyes wide in terror, and then hurled himself at the door of the cage, trying to pop the latch. “What in Merlin’s name…?” Percy stared at his pet, and then looked up at his father in confusion.

Arthur sighed and handed the cage to Sirius. “I’d say that pretty well confirms your theory. Go on to the DMLE with him while I explain the situation to Percy. We’ll catch up with you down there.” He steered his son into his office without waiting for a reply.

Sirius headed straight down to the DMLE and requested to speak with Madam Bones. The rat in the cage continued to throw himself at the door of the cage, which refused to budge thanks to the charms Sirius had put on it. He was escorted into her office and set the cage on her desk. “I do believe I’ve located a certain rat,” he announced.

Madam Bones blinked and looked carefully at the caged rat, noting the missing toe. “Well… I certainly hope I won’t need to chastise you for your methods,” she said. “Exactly how did you get him?”

“I discovered by chance that one of Arthur Weasley’s children had a pet rat,” Sirius said, “And that the rat was missing a toe. Arthur and Molly hadn’t read the entire Prophet article about my trial, as that pet had taken to chewing on the papers, so they never saw the description I’d given. Anyway, when I learned all this, I bought the travel cage and asked Arthur to come up with some excuse to get the rat into it and bring him here to the Ministry. If it’s okay, I’d appreciate if you’d wait until he and Percy get here before interrogating him. I think it’s only fair that the young man sees for himself that his pet really is Pettigrew.” The rat gave a loud, terrified squeak at that and slammed himself into the cage door once more.

“I see no problem with that,” the DMLE head nodded. She looked at the frantic rat attempting to
batter the cage apart with his body, drew her wand, and stunned him. “And no point letting him injure himself before we can question him, either,” she said, tucking her wand away once more.

Sirius nodded just as Arthur and Percy appeared in the doorway. The youngster looked unhappy, but resolute. “Father explained that you have reason to believe Scabbers is actually an unregistered animagus, and a wanted criminal,” he said. “It… I hope it won’t reflect badly on me, that I didn’t see the description of him from the Prophet and call him to anyone’s attention myself?”

Madam Bones shook her head. “Of course not, Percy. Why would you suspect your pet of being anything other than what he appeared to be, after all?” Percy looked relieved at that, and she opened the cage and lifted the stunned rat out carefully. “Would you all care to be present for the interrogation? You’re welcome to be an observer… you’ll be able to see and hear everything, but he won’t be able to see or hear you.”

Both men and Percy all nodded. “Yes, please.”

She summoned a pair of aurors and handed the rat to one of them, grabbed a vial of veritaserum and its antidote from her potions cupboard, and led the way to an interrogation chamber. She gestured for her guests to take seats on a comfortably padded bench near the door, and then touched a plate on the wall, activating a ward that shimmered into faint view before them. “From the other side, this ward acts as a mirror,” she told them. “Once I pass through it, I will activate another ward to keep you all on this side. While I might sympathize with any desire you might have for vengeance, Lord Black, the DMLE is going to handle this case strictly by the book.”

Sirius gave a mirthless bark of laughter. “I understand, Madam Bones. I’ll behave.”

She gave him a smile and moved further into the chamber, activating the ward in question. The auror holding Scabbers placed him in the interrogation chair and spoke the incantation to force an animagus back to his human form. Scabbers rippled and grew, turning into a pudgy, pale man with mousey brown hair and a distinctive overbite. The second auror performed a second spell, binding the man’s animagus ability even before fitting him with magic-suppressing shackles. The first one then cast enervate on him to wake him up, and Madam Bones administered the veritaserum before he had a chance to protest.

As soon as the man’s eyes glazed over, Madam Bones got straight to the point. “What is your name?” she asked him.

He made a feeble attempt at fighting the potion before admitting, “Peter Pettigrew.”

“Were you the Secret-Keeper for James and Lily Potter?” she asked next.

“Yes,” he said.

She thought for a moment, and asked, “When did you give your allegiance to You Know Who?”

Peter struggled to remain silent, breaking out in a sweat before saying, “When I graduated Hogwarts.”

“Why?”

“The… the Dark Lord was winning,” Peter cringed. “I didn’t want to become a target, and I knew I would if I didn’t join him, because of James and Sirius. They were going to end up dead and I wanted to live.”

Behind the wards, Sirius snarled. “I should have killed that little shit when I had the chance,” he
muttered.

“Easy, Sirius,” Arthur cautioned the younger man.

“Sorry,” Sirius mumbled.

Madam Bones continued her questioning. “Why did you betray the Potters’ location to your master?”

“He… he had been told of a prophecy, about a child to be born at the end of July who would have the power to defeat him. I don’t know exactly what the prophecy said,” Peter explained, “but he said it was either the Longbottom boy or the Potters’ son. So he was going to eliminate them both, just in case. Because I was able to give him the Potters’ location, he took me into his confidence and told me how he planned to achieve immortality. He’ll be back, you know.”

“And just how do you know this?” Madam Bones asked. “How did your master plan to achieve immortality?”

“He made horcruxes,” the animagus replied. “More than one at that, although he didn’t tell me how many or what they are.”

Amelia Bones turned white at that, as did the senior of the two aurors in the interrogation chamber. Behind the wards, Arthur Weasley gasped, while Sirius and Percy looked at him in confusion and consternation. Arthur explained to the pair, “It’s some of the darkest magic known to wizardkind. It involves splitting your very soul, to put a piece of it into an inanimate object… and as I understand it, part of making one involves murdering someone. Not killing, mind, since accidents can kill, but purposefully taking another’s life.”

Percy looked like he wanted to be sick. “Merlin. And You Know Who made more than one of these things?” He shuddered.

The senior auror with Madam Bones asked, “Did he tell you what any of them are?”

Pettigrew looked fearful, desperately trying to remain silent, but eventually whispered, “His old journal, but I don’t know where it is. He said it was his first one, made when he was still a student at Hogwarts.”

“Dear Circe,” Madam Bones murmured. “He was a murderer that long ago.” She looked at the aurors, saying, “This information is absolutely not to be discussed. We don’t know if all of his followers were caught, and I see no point in alerting them as to what we’ll be trying to find, lest they find it first and bring him back.” She administered the antidote to the veritaserum and told the aurors, “Wait here with him while I make sure there is an anti-animagus ward on the high-security cell. I’ll alert you when you can bring him to it.” With that, she stepped through the wards and out of the interrogation chamber, gesturing for the trio watching the proceedings to follow.

Arthur, still looking shaken, spoke for all of them. “Don’t worry, we won’t say anything either. I’ll swear on my magic, if you’d like, as will Percy. I know you wouldn’t have asked us to observe if you’d had any idea that he’d reveal something so sensitive.”

“I’ll do the same,” Sirius said.

“I appreciate it,” she nodded. “It isn’t that I distrust either of you, but under the circumstances, it’s better to be safe. Word your oath that you won’t discuss the horcruxes created by You Know Who with anyone until and unless their existence becomes public knowledge.”
All three nodded and held their wands across their open hands, swearing the requested oath. Afterwards, Sirius gave her a tired smile. “Thank you for believing me when I brought Pettigrew in,” he said.

“Thank you for figuring out his hiding place,” she replied, and gave Percy a smile, telling him, “And thank you for being willing to believe that your pet wasn’t just your pet.”

“Speaking of that, Percy,” Sirius said, brightening a bit, “I owe you a replacement pet. With your father’s permission, I’d like to take you to Diagon Alley and let you choose one.”

The boy still looked shaken by the revelations of the day, but brightened as well. “Really? May I go, Father?”

Arthur nodded. “Of course, son. Enjoy yourself. Sirius will bring you back here when you’re done, but there’s no need to hurry.”

“Thank you, Father,” Percy said. He looked up at Sirius, his expression tentatively hopeful. “Er… what sort of budget are you wanting to keep, sir?”

Sirius grinned. “Thanks to your cooperation, kiddo, the person most responsible for my false imprisonment is now in custody. No limits, unless it’s something your folks would not want in the house.”

Percy’s eyes grew wide. “You mean… I could have my very own owl?”

“You sure can,” Sirius smiled. “Let’s go.” He gave the boy a friendly pat on the shoulder and steered him towards the floos. Later that afternoon, when he returned Percy and his new tawny owl to Arthur Weasley’s office at the Ministry, Sirius thought to himself that he’d have to introduce the boy to Stephen Coyner at some point. Percy and Stephen had very similar ambitions and would likely get along well. Not to mention, with some pull from either Arthur or Lucius, Stephen might well end up with a place in the Ministry instead of the Muggle government after all.
Heredity and Mystery

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

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On Friday, Harry offered to help out by doing the laundry for his aunt. When asked why, he admitted he’d been invited to Scotland for the coming week, and so he wanted to make sure all of his clothes were clean for the trip. Petunia pressed her lips together in a displeased frown, but nodded. “Am I expected to bring you anywhere?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No, Aunt Petunia. I’m to ask Stephen to bring me to our departure point tomorrow, and if he can’t, a driver will be sent for me.”

She nodded again, looking slightly happier. “Good. It’s not so much that I object to you going, but the last thing my Duddikins needs right now is to see you getting anything he thinks is a special privilege. Marge said something about taking the two of us to the seashore this week but she didn’t want you along, so I was going to decline because I can’t afford to pay Mrs. Figg to keep you for a week. This is good timing. Dudley will get his holiday, and Marge won’t have to see you.” She started sorting through the laundry, dividing it into whites, darks, and colors. “If you’ll do all the wash today, then, I can do the hoovering, mop the floors, and clean the bathrooms and kitchen. You’ll need a suitcase, I expect. I’ll let you have the one we bought Dudders last year, and give him the one that was his father’s.”

Harry brightened. “Really? Thank you, Aunt Petunia!” He picked up the pile of dark clothes, knowing from experience they would take the longest to dry and so wanting to get them done first thing, and loaded them into the laundry basket. He paused, though, and asked, “Aunt Petunia? Is a box of chocolates a good hostess gift? I want to make sure I do the right thing when I go.”


“I remembered Aunt Marge bringing chocolates or wine whenever she visited,” Harry explained, purposefully not mentioning the wizarding etiquette book in his trunk. He didn’t want to upset her by saying the words wizard or magic, knowing how she felt about such things. “And I want to make a good impression.” He hefted the basket and headed downstairs to put the laundry into the washer.

She gazed after the boy as he trudged down the steps, wondering why he seemed so much more normal lately. Then she shrugged and picked up the telephone to ring Marge and accept her offer of a week at the seaside for herself and Dudley.

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Petunia was at the door when Stephen arrived on Saturday morning. Not bothering to give him an actual greeting, she bluntly asked, “Can the boy spend tonight with you, and you take him to his destination tomorrow?”

Taken a little aback by her abruptness, Stephen nonetheless nodded. “Of course, if it will make your life easier. My flat isn’t much, but Harry’s small enough that my couch won’t be terribly uncomfortable for him. And I’ll bring him back about the usual hour next Saturday evening, if
that’s all right?”

“Yes,” Petunia nodded. She called upstairs, “Boy! Bring your suitcase down with you. Your tutor is here,” before she vanished into the depths of the house.

Harry appeared at the top of the staircase, dressed in his yoga pants and carefully holding a large suitcase in front of him so that it didn’t bump on the steps or hit the wall as he made his way carefully down. “Hi, Stephen!” he beamed. “How’s your week been?”

“Busy enough,” Stephen smiled as he climbed up to meet Harry and take the suitcase from him. “I take it your aunt approves of your coming holiday?”

“Uh-huh,” the child nodded vigourously. “Especially since Aunt Marge invited her and Dudley to the seaside, but they weren’t going to go because she couldn’t afford to pay old Mrs. Figg to keep me for the week. Now they can go on their holiday too.”

“That’s good,” Stephen nodded. “Are you sure you have everything you’ll need?”

Harry nodded. “Just about. I want to get a big box of chocolates for a hostess gift. I suppose I could have gone yesterday, but I was afraid Dudley would see it and eat them,” he explained as he climbed into Stephen’s car. “But I packed all my nice clothes and my good shoes and I remembered my toothbrush and all that.”

Stephen hefted the suitcase into the back seat and slid behind the wheel. “Very good. We can stop off for the chocolates later today, then. For now, off to yoga, then we’re meeting Sirius at Gringotts.”

“Brilliant!” Harry bounced in his seat. “How come? Will we also see Draco today?”

Stephen laughed. “Sirius wants to do a ritual called a blood adoption with you, so that you can inherit the title of Lord Black as well as his money someday,” he explained. “I don’t know if he knows he can’t have kids or if there’s some reason maybe he doesn’t want any or maybe it’s just that he doesn’t expect he’ll ever marry. But anyway, what the blood adoption will do, is magically make it like you’re his son as well as James Potter’s son, which will mean you can inherit the title even though it’s dependent on bloodlines. As for seeing Draco, I have no idea if Sirius has any sort of plans aside from taking care of the ritual. But we can ask.”

They pulled into the car park at the yoga studio and headed in for their class. Even with the nutritional potions from Healer Abbott as well as several weeks of proper eating, it was evident that Harry had inherited his mother’s slim build rather than his father’s stockier one. They started their warm-ups and stretches, during which Harry impressed Stephen by already being able to bend over and touch the floor while keeping his knees straight. Stephen himself could just barely brush his ankles with his fingertips yet. After class, they swung by the tae kwon do school and got Harry signed up for twice a week novice classes which would begin 10 September, then they drove to Stephen’s flat to clean up. Harry daubed concealer over his scar while Stephen cast the now-familiar glamour to change his hair and eye colour, then Stephen side-along apparated him to Diagon Alley.

Sirius, knowing that Harry would be under a glamour, waved from the steps of Gringotts when he spotted Stephen apparating in with a brown-haired boy in tow. He headed into the bank with Stephen and Harry right behind him, and let one of the tellers know they were there for their appointment with his account manager in one of the bank’s warded meeting rooms. Once they were left in the meeting room to wait for the goblin in question, Stephen removed the glamour from Harry, who promptly jumped up to give Sirius a hug. “It’s great to see you again, Uncle
Sirius!” the boy chirped happily. “Guess what? I’ve been invited to Balmoral with the Princess of Wales and Prince Harry and Prince Wills! She wrote to me herself and so did the little princes and I never got to go anywhere on holiday before so I’m really looking forward to this. I just hope I don’t do anything wrong and make anyone mad at me.”

“That’s great!” Sirius exclaimed in return. “And you’ll do fine. I’m sure everyone understands you might not know all the… the little details, but as long as you’re polite and mind your manners, I’m sure they’ll all be happy to help you learn those details,” he reassured his godson.

“Just showing you’re willing to make an effort goes a long way, too,” Stephen pointed out. “Her Royal Highness was very pleased on your birthday, when you waited to be invited before taking any sandwiches in between your pony ride and going to play in the stream with the puppies. What do you think Dudley would have done in the same situation?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “He’d have grabbed the whole plate and started stuffing his face. And probably would have shoved Wills and Harry out of the way if he thought they were going to get to the food first.”

Sirius smiled. “So, you know perfectly well that following this Dudley’s example is wrong. Maybe you needn’t have waited to be invited if the princes were helping themselves to the food, but if you’re not sure what to do, better to err on the side of politeness. Or quietly let someone know that you’re not sure, and ask nicely if they’d guide you so that you don’t accidentally give offense.”

Harry nodded with a smile. “I can do that.” He turned as the door opened to admit a pair of goblins.

“I am Kraygon, senior account manager for Lord Black,” the seemingly older of the two announced. “This is my assistant, Greshko.” The younger of the pair bowed silently. “How may we of Gringotts assist you, Lord Black?”

“I need to update the will I have on file with Gringotts,” Sirius said. “But before that, I wish to perform a blood adoption of my godson Harry Potter. As it is likely I will never have children of my own, I want him to eventually assume my title as well as my property. However, the adoption must remain unknown to anyone outside of this room for at least two years, as I wish to keep Dumbledore from learning that I’ve already met Harry.”

Kraygon nodded. Lord Black had owled his request when making the appointment, but proper protocol had to be followed even though he already knew what would be required. “Indeed. When I prepared the summary of your accounts upon your release, Lord Black, I discovered a notation that the man requested access to your vaults ‘to manage them for your heir’ even though you had never actually been convicted and therefore control had not passed to your heir. Given the recent discovery of his… handling… of both the previous Lord Potter’s will as well as young Lord Potter’s accounts, I would assume Dumbledore was aware that you had named young Lord Potter as your heir?”

Sirius nodded. “Yes. At Harry’s own request, I’m leaving custody matters as they stand for the moment, so that we have time to discover exactly what Dumbledore is gaining from his actions towards me and my godson. But by having the adoption already on file with Gringotts and witnessed by Mr. Coyner, when the time comes that I put in for custody, it will be one more point in my favour with the Ministry and Wizengamot, especially if we can prove something against Dumbledore by then.”

“Greshko, fetch the potions, the Heredity Parchment, and the Star Iron dagger from Lord Black’s vault,” Kraygon told his assistant. The younger goblin nodded and slipped silently out of the room.
Harry looked curiously at the goblin elder. “Excuse me, Mr. Kraygon? What is a Star Iron dagger?”

Kraygon blinked, unused to being called Mister, even by so young a wizard. Then he remembered that young Lord Potter was living with muggles. “It is a ritual tool, in this case, a dagger, made of metal fallen from the heavens as opposed to mined from the earth. Such metal is considered a gift of the gods, and is always crafted by goblin and wizard alike into ritual tools as opposed to common tools or weapons. In this case, a blood adoption ritual requires that you and your godfather exchange a small amount of blood. By drawing that blood with a Star Iron dagger, you bring the blessing of the gods onto your ritual.”

“Star Iron ritual tools of any sort are extremely rare,” Sirius added. “I know the Potter family has a Star Iron chalice, since it was used when I became your godfather, Harry, as well as at your parents’ bonding. I believe that about a dozen or so of the oldest family lines have Star Iron chalices, daggers, or other ritual tools tucked into their vaults.”

Stephen grinned a bit. “I’m glad you asked that, Harry, because I didn’t know about Star Iron either,” he told the boy.

Harry giggled at that, but then grew sober and looked back at Sirius and Kraygon. “Since I live in the muggle world, I don’t know anything about any sort of rituals. What do I have to do so I don’t mess this one up?”

“When I ask if you are willing to become the son of my blood, you’ll need to answer, ‘I am so willing’ and then at the end, you and Stephen will both echo ‘So mote it be’ to seal the ritual,” Sirius answered. “Other than that, don’t be too squeamish about drinking the potion, even though it will have a bit of my blood mixed in. I’ll be drinking the one laced with your blood. That’s how the exchange is made.” He smiled. “If you were of age, or if your guardian was someone other than Petunia Dursley, we would be able to use your Star Iron chalice as well, and drink our potions from it.”

“Perhaps you still can,” Stephen said. He turned to Kraygon. “According to Garnok, senior account manager for young Lord Potter, Gringotts acknowledges me as a government-appointed guardian of Lord Potter by order of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. As such, if it is within my jurisdiction as defined by the goblins of Gringotts, I would request that the Potter Star Iron chalice be brought and used in this ritual.”

“Very clever,” Kraygon smiled toothily. “Allow me to pass the message to Greshko before he returns to this level.” He stepped over to one of the little wall-mounted boxes which seemed to exist in every public room of the bank… private offices had them mounted on the occupant’s desk… and spoke in rapid Gobbledygook while touching one of the buttons on it. There was a delay of a minute or two before they heard a reply, but Kraygon nodded and said something else before turning back to them. “He’ll be just a few more minutes, as he now needs to go to the main Potter vault as well as the Black vault.”

Harry beamed. “Thank you, Mr. Kraygon!”

The goblin inclined his head in as kindly a manner as Sirius had ever seen from one of his race. “You are welcome, Lord Potter.”

When Greshko returned with everything required for both the ritual and for Gringotts to confirm Harry’s heritage once the ritual was complete, Harry and Stephen looked in awe at the chalice and dagger. The blade was covered in a random pattern of bright silvery and darker grey crisscrossing ‘ribbons’, with a handle of narwhal ivory and a gold crosspiece and end cap. The bowl of the
chalice had a similar pattern, and was set on a gold stem and base studded with black pearls.

Harry tilted his head and reached out to brush a reverent finger over the base of the cup. “The combined powers of sky, earth, and sea,” he murmured. “Star Iron, gold from the earth, and pearls from the sea. Are all Sky Iron ritual tools made so?”

Both goblins bestowed approving looks on the child at his question. “Yes,” Greshko spoke for the first time. “They were. The Black dagger’s handle is made of ivory from the sea creature that humans call a narwhal. You are correct, though, that the makers of such tools chose their materials with balance in mind.”

“Ready, Harry?” Sirius asked.

“Yes, I’m ready,” the boy smiled.

The two goblins moved back and gestured at the door with a few muttered words in Gobbledygook, bringing up the protective wards on the room. Sirius poured one potion into the chalice and handed it to Stephen to hold. Taking up the dagger, Sirius faced his godson. “I, Sirius Orion Black, seek to strengthen the bond of spirit with the bond of blood, by taking my godson Harold James Potter as the son of my blood, to be recognized as mine by all of Magic. Harold James Potter, are you willing to become the son of my blood?”

Harry nodded solemnly. “I am so willing,” he replied firmly.

Sirius opened a small cut on the palm of his left hand with the Star Iron dagger, letting seven large drops fall into the potion in the chalice held by Stephen. “Then take my blood into yourself, as a child draws his blood from that of his parent.”

Harry took the chalice and gulped down the potion within. There was only a couple of mouthfuls within it, and while the taste wasn’t exactly pleasant, neither was it as bad as he already knew potions could be. He handed the chalice back to Stephen, and Sirius immediately poured the second potion into it.

“And now I take your blood into myself, in token that you will forever be a part of me,” Sirius said. He nicked Harry’s left palm with the dagger and repeated the process of letting seven drops of blood fall into the potion before drinking. He handed the chalice back to Stephen and took Harry’s left hand with his own, so that their blood mingled together on them. “Godfather and godson now father and son, by Magic’s will. So mote it be!”

“So mote it be,” Harry and Stephen echoed. A blue-white glow flared briefly around Harry and Sirius. As it faded, Harry noticed that his hand no longer stung. When Sirius let go, he saw the cut had healed without even a mark.

Greshko quietly collected the chalice and dagger, quietly casting a cleaning spell on each of them before Kraygon un-warded the door so he could return the precious items to their respective vaults. The elder goblin then turned to Harry with a touch of humor in his eyes. “Lord Potter, while I do not wish you to think that we of Gringotts are related in any way to vampires, I must beg your indulgence and ask you to give a little more of your blood before we are through here today. In order for Gringotts to be able to certify the legality of your adoption, we need to check it via Heredity Parchment. If you place three drops of blood on the top of the parchment, it will display the names of all family lines to which you are heir via birth or adoption, and also create a family tree linking you to each of those lines.”

Harry grinned a bit, while the two men blinked at hearing a goblin making a joke of any sort.
“Sure,” he said. “Have you got a pin or something? I don’t have anything I can use.” Kraygon produced a letter-opener which appeared to be made of a shark’s tooth, which Harry used to stab the tip of his left middle finger. He then squeezed three drops of blood carefully onto the Heredity Parchment.

Kraygon nodded. “This will likely take a little while before the family tree is finished. Lord Black, shall we start on the modifications to your will while we wait?”

Sirius nodded. “Please. Mostly it’s a matter of having more specific bequests, since as Lord Black, I have a lot more property now than I did when I originally made Harry my heir. He still gets everything not specifically named, including my title. But for those specific bequests… I want to give Remus Lupin the island-estate of Fara in the Orkneys along with 100,000 galleons. To Draco Lucius Malfoy, Chateau Noir outside of Cherbourg, France; and also the Chez Noir on the Rue de Rivoli in Paris, along with 100,000 galleons. And to Nymphadora Tonks and Stephen Coyner, 100,000 galleons each. Everything else goes to Harry.” Kraygon wrote all of this down and signed the will as a legal witness.

Stephen blinked, hearing his name, and blushed. But before he could either protest or say thanks, Harry gasped. “No way!”

Both men and the goblin turned to see the boy staring at the Heredity Parchment. Three jaws dropped simultaneously at the sight of six family names listed across the top, and at what three of the names were. Kraygon’s eyes bulged out of his head. “On the honor of my clan, I did not expect this!” he exclaimed. “I admit, I thought I recalled that Harold Potter had married a woman who was the last of her line, so I was expecting a third name besides Black and Potter. I’d also heard rumors that the Potter family was of the line of Godric Gryffindor although I didn’t know for certain. But this… this is just incredible!” He hastily scanned down the parchment and his jaw dropped again. “I… it seems that Lord Potter’s mother was not truly muggleborn, but came from several generations of squibs. Squibs tracing their ancestry to both Salazar Slytherin and Rowena Ravenclaw.”

Stephen’s face held a mix of shock and satisfaction. “I suspected she might be of a squib line,” he said. “In fact, I’ve wondered for a while now if the majority of the muggleborns might actually be from squib lines. If possible, I’d like to be tested by Heredity Parchment as well, please, Kraygon. Even if I’m not actually heir to any old family lines, I’m curious to know if I’m related to any, however distantly.”

“Oh… yes, of course, Mr. Coyner,” Kraygon nodded, his eyes still focused on Harry’s parchment. He walked over to the box on the wall and spoke in Gobbledygook, receiving a reply almost immediately. A moment later, a young goblin knocked on the door and handed the senior account manager another Heredity Parchment.

Stephen accepted the parchment and pulled out a small pocketknife, poking his own finger and depositing the appropriate amount of blood before turning back to Harry and Sirius. “What does this mean for Harry?” he finally asked.

“I’ll have to speak with account manager Garnok,” Kraygon said. “He may already be aware of the Marlowe vaults from young Lord Potter’s grandmother. As to the three Founder’s Vaults, I suspect Lord Gringott will want to confirm these results for himself, before releasing control from the bank to Lord Potter’s guardians.”

Harry looked up from the parchment at that. “If it can be done, sir, I don’t want the bank to release control of those vaults yet. Not while Dumbledore still has access to my accounts. In fact, I’d prefer if he doesn’t know I’m the heir to all of this.”
Stephen and Sirius both nodded their agreement. “He’s right, it's better that Dumbledore doesn’t know,” Sirius said.

“Especially given that we already know he’s acted against Harry’s best interest in the past,” Stephen added.

“Very well,” Kraygon nodded. “I’ll pass that along to both Garnok and Lord Gringott. Mr. Coyner, may I ask what results you’ve obtained?”

Stephen looked at his Heredity Parchment. “Hmm… seems I’m heir to the Brevin family, whoever they are or were… and apparently a distant cousin to the Abbott family, the Weasley family, and,” he started laughing, “the Malfoy family.”

Sirius stared for a moment before he also joined in the laughter. “Oh Merlin! I have to be there when Lucius finds out! The Malfoys are one of those families who generally disowned any squibs produced, to pretend they never happened. Maybe you two ought to come back to the Manor with me for lunch? I’m sure Draco would love to see Harry again anyway.”

Stephen nodded. “Well, the only plan Harry and I have for the rest of the day is to stop off for a large box of chocolates that he wants to buy as a hostess gift for Princess Di since he’s going on holiday with her and the princes starting tomorrow. What do you think, Harry, would you care to visit Malfoy Manor and see Draco for a while?”

“Sure!” Harry said with a smile. Then he looked back at his Heredity Parchment. “May we take copies of these with us, Mr. Kraygon?” he asked.

“Hmm? Yes, of course,” the goblin replied absently, duplicating both parchments before moving to the box on the wall once more. He held a brief conversation in Gobbledygook and then looked at Stephen. “The Brevin family seemed to have died off during the war with Grindelwald,” he told the young man. “But apparently there was a squib daughter who moved to the muggle world in the previous generation… I believe that would have been the late 1920s or perhaps the early 1930s.”

“And she was my great-grandmother,” Stephen nodded, tracing his family tree back. “Grace Brevin, who married my great-grandfather Herbert Coyner. So her wizarding siblings either didn’t have children, or those children died during the war with Grindelwald and only the squib line through Grace survived… to eventually marry another squib line and produce a magical child… me.”

“Yes, well. The Brevin line wasn’t one of any particular import, but neither were they impoverished,” Kraygon informed Stephen. “I can take you to the main vault now if you wish, or if you prefer, we can prepare an account statement and audit to be delivered at a later time.”

Stephen considered. As a university student, he sometimes found himself running short of cash at inopportune moments. But he didn’t want Harry bored by spending much more time at the bank, either. “Sirius? Would you mind taking Harry to the Manor while I see about the Brevin vault and make an appointment for a full accounting later this week? I’ll follow along once I’m done here.” He didn’t really think the older man would object to spending more time with his godson. “Just redo the concealer and the glamours before you leave.”

“Sure thing,” Sirius grinned. “I flooed in from Wiltshire, so it’ll be a quick enough trip. What’s this concealer thing?”

“Muggle makeup,” Harry chuckled. “Which is really a girl thing, but Stephen thought it would be better to use a muggle way of hiding my scar in public, in addition to using a glamour to give me
brown hair and eyes. That way even if someone accidentally hits me with a spell that would drop the glamour, the scar still won’t give away my identity.”

“Very smart thinking,” Sirius nodded as Stephen handed the boy the bottle of concealer and followed Kraygon out of the room. He pulled out his wand and cast the gla...
fell silent as they emerged on the terrace.

Narcissa was seated at the table with a glass of lemonade, watching Harry and Draco with their heads together over one of Draco’s books on electricity. “Sirius, Stephen, hello,” she called. “Stephen, it’s good to see you and Harry again. Will you be joining us for lunch?”

Stephen bowed and kissed Narcissa’s hand, eliciting a smile. “How could I possibly refuse?” he replied as he and Sirius joined her at the table.

Lucius emerged from the house and strolled over to the group, bending to kiss his wife’s cheek before giving the two men a nod. “Sirius, Stephen. This is a pleasant surprise.” His eyes widened slightly at the sight of the dark-haired boy with his son. “Is that…?”


The two boys clambered to their feet and Draco tucked his book under his arm before leading Harry over. “Father, may I present my friend Harry Potter,” he said formally, knowing that Lucius would expect the proprieties to be observed. “Harry, my father, Lord Lucius Malfoy.”

Harry gave an unpracticed bow, feeling a little awkward but realizing that formality was called for. “It’s an honour to meet you, Lord Malfoy,” he said shyly.

The blond aristocrat gave an approving nod. The Potter boy seemed small for his age… shorter than Draco, even, and Draco had always been a delicate child… and he seemed unusually wary as well. But even without the benefit of a proper traditional upbringing, he seemed quick to observe and respond appropriately to new situations. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance as well, Lord Potter,” he replied with a half-bow and a smile. “Draco has spoken quite highly of you all week.”

Harry looked both astonished and pleased at hearing that. “I… I’m glad,” he said. “I never had a friend my own age before. I like having a friend.”

Lucius masked his puzzlement at the boy’s words, simply nodding. “Yes, well, it’s a rare person who doesn’t like having friends.”

“If possible, Father, Harry would like to learn more about being a Lord in the wizarding world,” Draco said. “I expect he needs to know the same sort of things you’ve been teaching me, right? Do you think you could help teach him, since he has to live with his muggle aunt right now and doesn’t have another way to learn?”

“I’m sure we can come to some sort of arrangement,” Lucius smiled. “If for no other reason that perhaps you’ll be more attentive in your lessons if you have some competition.” Draco flushed at the mild rebuke and Lucius chuckled. “You boys go on back to what you were doing for now. I expect lunch will be in about an hour.” Draco tugged Harry off to the far end of the terrace once more and Lucius looked at the other three. “What in Merlin’s name did that child mean by that remark about friends?” he asked.

Stephen sighed. “Harry’s late uncle hated him and passed that attitude on to his own son. Dudley is a bully, plain and simple, and he’s intimidated the other children in their neighbourhood and their school badly enough that none of them will even speak with Harry for fear of what his cousin will do to them. I know that Dudley attacks Harry when given the opportunity, too. Harry’s aunt does seem to have been trying to keep the two apart since her husband’s death, but I’m under the impression that she really doesn’t have much control over her son right now. On the bright side, due to Her Majesty’s influence, Harry now has opportunities that his late uncle denied him before, he has me looking after him, and now he also has Sirius and your family as his friends as well.
Believe me when I say he’d prefer not to dwell on the past, but instead wishes to learn all he can about the wizarding world and his place in it.”

Sirius and Narcissa nodded, as did Lucius, although the blond man looked less than happy about the situation. Sirius attempted to placate his cousin by marriage. “Vernon Dursley might have been the worst sort of muggle bigot,” he said. “But don’t make the mistake of thinking all muggles are like him. They’re not, any more than all wizards are like You Know Who… their beliefs might have been at opposite ends of the earth, but their personalities seem to have had more in common than most people’s!”

As Sirius had hoped, that got a chuckle from Lucius. “Yes, well, we won’t go into that just now. Did you get your business accomplished today?”

The animagus nodded. “Yes, I performed the blood adoption ritual to make Harry fully my heir… after the conversation we had last Sunday and considering the… the vast majority of my relatives, I don’t want any children of my own, for safety’s sake. And I updated my will, since I did inherit the title against all expectations and therefore have a lot more property to think about. I’ve chosen to leave the properties in France to Draco, as I know the Malfoy family has several French ties. I thought that would be the most appropriate.”

Narcissa smiled. While it might have been nice if Draco would have inherited a second title, she’d known from the moment Sirius was released from Azkaban that it likely wouldn’t happen. And two properties in France were nothing to scoff at, especially not the Parisian townhouse, which she had visited with her parents just before her wedding to Lucius. “I’m sure he’ll be quite appreciative,” she murmured. “Did anything else of interest happen?”

“Yes, actually, yes,” Sirius grinned. “Lucius, you recall the talk we had of genetics last weekend. Well, Stephen and I decided to put something to the test based on that. He’d voiced the possibility that magic itself is genetic, and that perhaps muggleborns aren’t actually manifesting magic at random, but in fact are descended from squibs who chose to move to the muggle world.”

Lucius and Narcissa both stared in shock. “Surely you jest,” Lucius began.

“Not at all,” Sirius shook his head. “Since the goblins were going to run a Heritage Trace on Harry in order to confirm the adoption, we had them bring a second Heredity Parchment for Stephen. The results were… quite interesting.”

At Sirius’ gesture, Stephen pulled out the copy of the Heredity Parchment and handed it to Lucius. “It turns out that I’m heir to the Brevin family through my great-grandmother,” he said. “But even more interesting are the other wizarding lines to which I’m distantly related.”

“Huh. The Brevin family… mostly solicitors and merchants,” the blond said. “Fairly well off, I should think, even if they weren’t of the nobility. I remember my grandfather making reference to a Darius Brevin once, saying he was the best young solicitor he’d known and it was a shame his line died out.” Lucius then looked down at the family tree and snorted. “The Weasleys, how unsurprising, given their propensity for breeding like nifflers. The Abbotts, a solid family even if they are all Hufflepuffs, and… Malfoy?!!?” He dropped the parchment and stared at the two younger men.

Narcissa picked it up and ran a delicate finger down the family tree. “Your great-great-grandfather’s sister, apparently, the one your father said was disowned for running away with a muggle. Perhaps that’s why she ran away? I suppose I can understand not wanting to be constantly surrounded by something one can never have, after all.” She shrugged and smiled, and to her husband’s consternation, leaned over to give Stephen a light kiss on the cheek. “Welcome to the
family, Cousin Stephen,” she said.

“Thank you,” he answered with a smile. Tilting his head slightly, he peered at Lucius. “Are you all right?”

“I think I need a drink,” the older man answered, looking dazed.

Sirius gave a bark of laughter and called for Tally, sending the little elf for a bottle of firewhiskey and some glasses. When she returned, he poured a generous amount and handed it to Lucius. “There you go,” he said. “Drink up.”

Lucius downed the alcohol in one go and held out the glass for a refill. After downing that one as well, he drew in a deep breath. “I assume Harry’s Heredity Parchment showed his mother as being related to a wizarding family as well?” he asked.

“To more than one,” Sirius nodded soberly. “Although we feel it would be better not to reveal who until such time as Dumbledore no longer has quite so much interest in the boy. Not because we don’t trust you, mind, but because we don’t trust him. As it is, we’ve already taken a huge risk in even introducing Harry to you and your family, but he needs exactly what he can get from you… acceptance of him as he is, and a sense of what a proper, loving family is like.”

“Yes, I understand,” Lucius nodded. “Believe me, I don’t trust Dumbledore any more than you do. He seems to oppose anything I propose just because I proposed it, rather than based on the merits or lack thereof. When I introduced the idea of a wizarding culture class, for example, he tried to object on the basis that it would be forcing muggleborns to follow traditions other than their own. This, despite the fact that he himself introduced celebrations for Halloween and Christmas into Hogwarts, neither of which are traditional wizarding festivals even if the dates coincide with Samhain and Yule.”

“This knowledge might be a way to help integrate the incoming muggleborn, you know,” Stephen said thoughtfully. “Oh, not immediately, I understand that. But if each child was tested as they entered the wizarding world, they could perhaps be introduced to one or more members of whichever wizarding family or families they’re related to, as mentors of sorts. Rather like Jason Abbott acted as a mentor to me and to Jacob Harris who was a year ahead of me, back in Hogwarts. I know that even if he didn’t necessarily tell us everything about the wizarding world, he did help keep both of us from making berks of ourselves a time or two. He also helped us learn to write properly with quills, so we didn’t destroy too many homework assignments, for example.”

That caught Lucius’ attention. “Now that you mention it, that wasn’t a quill you used to illustrate your genetics lesson last week, was it? I was too interested in the lesson to pay attention to what you were writing with.”

Stephen grinned. “No, it was a ballpoint pen, more commonly known as a biro.” He pulled one out of his pocket, along with his little notepad, and handed them over to Lucius. “They’re a lot more convenient than lugging about bottles of ink, nor do they require periodic trimming.”

Lucius examined the pen curiously, uncapping it and peering intently at the tip before making a few marks on the notepad. “Fascinating. So Jason Abbott acted as a mentor towards you and another muggleborn? It’s Tom Abbott who runs the Leaky Cauldron, I believe, so I expect the Abbott family in general sees more muggleborns than most of us do outside of the halls of Hogwarts.”

“I believe Jason said that Tom Abbott is his grandfather,” Stephen nodded. “Jason is a healer at St. Mungo’s like his father Tom Junior, and if I remember correctly, it’s Jason’s uncle Warren and
aunt Maddy who help old Tom at the Leaky. His cousin Hannah will be starting at Hogwarts with Harry and Draco.”

A house elf popped in just then and announced that lunch was ready, and did Master and Mistress wish to eat on the terrace or in the dining room? Narcissa opted to enjoy the weather since it was holding and instructed the elf to serve them on the terrace, then called for the boys to join them at the table for the meal.

After lunch, Sirius brought out his broom for Harry to use, so that he and Draco could go flying together. The two boys spent a couple of hours in the air, racing each other and performing moves that occasionally had the adults threatening to ground them for the rest of the day. Given Harry’s level of skill on a broom, the Malfoys were amazed to learn that he’d only flown once before.

When they decided to land, Draco escorted Harry off to his room to show his friend what wizarding toys were like. Harry adored the animated toy dragons that dominated the room, and became determined to learn chess when he saw the wizarding chess set. Draco asked what sort of things Harry did when he wasn’t studying, so Harry told him about yoga and demonstrated a couple of the easiest poses and movements. He also talked about the tae kwon do class that he’d be starting in a couple of weeks. For quieter activities, he mentioned that he liked drawing and building model aeroplanes and working puzzles. Draco made him promise to bring a puzzle they could work together sometime, and then taught him to play exploding snap. Draco spoke of holidays in France and Italy. Harry confessed that his muggle family never took him with them on their holidays, instead leaving him with the batty old cat lady of the neighbourhood. He added with some excitement that he’d be leaving for his first holiday ever in the morning, going to Scotland with the Princess of Wales and the two young princes. Draco, recalling the Changing of the Guard and Buckingham Palace, was impressed as well as pleased for him. He pulled out a camera, which Harry noted didn’t look any different from good-quality muggle cameras, and insisted on teaching Harry how to use it, so he could take pictures of his first ever holiday.

While the boys talked and played, the adults returned to their conversation as well, debating how to best spread the idea that muggleborns were more accurately squib-born halfbloods and purebloods. Stephen suggested contacting known muggleborns and requesting they do Heritage Traces, in order to make sure that he and Harry weren’t just isolated cases, and so that they would have many Heredity Parchments available to show as proof to doubters. That suggestion pleased Narcissa, as it gave her a good opening to make an attempt at reconciliation with her estranged sister Andromeda, disowned by their father for marrying a muggleborn. Sirius, who had maintained contact with his cousin Andromeda until his imprisonment, agreed to make the first approach to both request that her husband Ted do a Heritage Trace and to extend the olive branch on Narcissa’s behalf.

Eventually, Stephen checked his watch and announced that he and Harry had to leave, as they still had an errand or two before their day would be over. Sirius sent Tally to alert the boys, who joined them a few minutes later. Harry clutched Draco’s camera carefully in his hand. Looking towards Narcissa and Lucius, he hesitantly asked, “Is it all right if Draco lets me borrow this? He wants to see pictures from the holiday I’m going on starting tomorrow, and I don’t have a camera of my own.”

“Of course, Harry,” Narcissa smiled. “I know you’ll be careful of it. Did Draco give you enough film?”

“Oh… I forgot about that,” Draco admitted, flushing uncomfortably. He summoned an elf, who popped out and returned a moment later with four new rolls of film. “Do you think this will be enough?”
Harry, who figured he’d have maybe one additional roll of film beyond the partial roll still in the camera, nodded. “Oh, yes, thank you!”

Lucius shook hands with him and wished him a good holiday before shaking hands with Stephen as well. Draco shook hands with Stephen while Narcissa surprised Harry by giving him a hug and a light kiss on the cheek. “Have fun on your holiday, Harry,” she murmured.

He shyly hugged her back. “I will, and thank you,” he said.

Draco grinned. “I can’t wait to hear all about your holiday, and see the pictures. Don’t forget to bring a puzzle the next time you get to come over!”

“I won’t,” Harry promised with a grin of his own. “Finish reading Old Yeller and Hans Brinker, so we can swap books next time I get to come over. I already finished Tom Sawyer and The Secret Garden.”

Draco laughed and promised, then moved back to let Sirius sweep Harry up in a hug. “Take care of yourself, pup, and I’ll find out what Stephen’s plans for you for next weekend are, so I can meet up with you then,” the animagus told his godson. “I love you, pup.”

Harry hugged back hard. “I will, Uncle Sirius,” he murmured. “Love you too.” Stepping over to Stephen, he wrapped an arm around the man’s waist and waved as they apparated away.

Back at Stephen’s flat, he carefully packed the camera into his suitcase while Stephen rang up a nearby Chinese food takeaway restaurant and placed an order. They headed out and bought the nicest box of chocolates they could find as Harry’s hostess gift for Princess Di before picking up their food. After they ate, Stephen got Harry settled with a pillow and blanket on the couch before putting Star Wars into his VCR. When the movie was over, Harry commented, “Luke is sort of like me, isn’t he? Only his uncle wanted him around.”

“Maybe a little,” Stephen allowed. “Certainly Luke had powers that his uncle didn’t understand, and therefore feared. Should I have picked a different movie?”

“No,” Harry said. “I always wanted to see Star Wars. I guess I’ve just been thinking about family because of the Heredity Parchment. I noticed something weird on mine. Aunt Petunia isn’t on it, even though plenty of other ancestors’ brothers and sisters are.”

Stephen blinked, and pulled out the copy of Harry’s parchment. Sure enough, Lily Evans was listed as the only child of Robert Evans and Daisy Thompson Evans. He shook his head. “That does seem to present a bit of a mystery,” he allowed. “However, you’re on holiday starting tomorrow, so I think you should just not worry about it for now. Time enough to investigate when you’re back, don’t you think?”

“Okay,” Harry nodded obediently. He snuggled down under the blanket Stephen provided. “But I do want to find out why that happened. G’night, Stephen.”

“Good night, Harry,” the young man said. He stood and turned off the lamp, but paused to turn on the light in the loo and pull the door most of the way closed, just in case his young guest awoke during the night and needed to find his way there. His last thoughts as he settled into bed concerned this new mystery. If Harry was truly not related by blood to Petunia Evans Dursley, what did that mean with regards to the protections supposedly on his home there?
By Friday, Harry wasn’t sure he’d stopped smiling all week. Stephen had woken him early on Sunday so they could stop at a launderette and wash his previous day’s clothes and pack them for his holiday as well. From there, they drove to Windsor Castle, where a governess from the Princes’ household met them. A stern-faced man in a dark suit accompanied her and took charge of Harry’s suitcase while the governess had him say goodbye to Stephen. After that, she escorted him to a relatively small sitting room, where Princess Di was reading a story to Wills and Harry. The three boys were given a light snack of fruit and yogurt since lunch would be later than usual, and after they all paid a visit to the loo at Di’s suggestion, more men in dark suits escorted the group outside to a waiting helicopter. From there, they flew to Heathrow Airport, where they boarded the Royals’ private plane to fly to Aberdeen. During the flight, Wills let him know that there would likely be reporters with cameras when they landed. Harry was grateful for the warning as he tried to emulate the Princes’ nonchalance as they walked from the plane past the paparazzi to the waiting limo for the drive to Balmoral.

The estate itself was incredible. On the drive, Diana, with comments from Wills and little Harry, told him all about Balmoral and its history. She also explained that she and Prince Charles and the boys stayed at Craigowen Lodge whenever they visited, rather than the castle itself. The Lodge was a seven-bedroom stone house about a mile from the castle, which gave them plenty of distance to have their privacy, while being close enough to drop in for family dinners if the Queen was in residence at the same time they were.

Servants took care of everyone’s luggage while they ate lunch. Afterwards, Diana suggested they all change into more casual clothes so they could go for a ride. Wills and little Harry escorted Harry to the room he’d been given for his stay, which was between theirs, and he put on his most comfortable jeans. They spent a couple of hours on horseback, exploring the estate, before Di called a halt, reminding her sons that their guest wasn’t used to riding and they didn’t want him to be too sore to walk later. She settled in with a book while the boys played tag and hide’n’seek on the grounds of the Lodge. With permission, Harry took several pictures of the Lodge and grounds, and the governess took several of him with the Princes as well as a couple of him presenting his hostess gift to Princess Diana and a few group shots of all of them. Dinner was a casual affair, during which Wills told Harry and little Harry all about the Wetherby School which he attended, and which little Harry would be starting this term. Harry told the boys about his school, and his intention to get better marks this term now that his uncle wasn’t there to punish him for making better marks than his cousin.

The next several days were just as enjoyable. Harry and the Princes rode and played with the dogs, explored the stables and kennels, and took picnics into the woods. Escorted by gamekeepers and ghillies, they learned to fish for salmon and trout in the Dee. Harry also accompanied Wills to his first lessons in gun safety and hunting. Under careful supervision, the two boys also shot at clay pigeons with air rifles. Diana admitted she didn’t especially care for hunting, but knew that her boys would be expected to at least know the basics in the future, so she didn’t forbid it. However, she did say that little Harry was, at not quite five, still too young to participate. To make up for his disappointment in not getting to go with his big brother and their friend, she offered to go fishing with her younger son that day despite her general distaste for such vigourous outdoor activities.
Little Harry returned from that excursion giggling madly, as Di had slipped as she tried to net the salmon she’d hooked, and landed on her backside up to her neck in the river while the fish escaped. Appreciating the humour in the situation, she joked that it was a good thing Harry hadn’t been there with his borrowed camera that day, or he’d have gotten a photo even more embarrassing than the infamous one taken of her with the sun shining through her skirt to silhouette her legs back when Prince Charles was first courting her.

As Harry and the Princes piled into the gamekeeper’s Land Rover for the ride back to the Lodge from their final fishing excursion, Wills expressed similar thoughts to Harry’s own. “It’s too bad the hols are nearly over, isn’t it? I wish you could stay with us all the time.”

“Me too,” little Harry added.

Harry blushed. “Thank you,” he murmured. “I wish I could stay, too. But at least we had this hol, right? And your mother said something about making sure we’d get to see each other over term breaks, too.”

“Good,” Wills smiled. “I know she didn’t make you go to bed at the same time as me and Harry. Did she say anything about when or what we’d be doing?”

“Not yet,” Harry shook his head. “She might not know yet herself, after all. I don’t know how far ahead she knows her schedule.”

“Sometimes far,” little Harry put in. “Mummy always has a special dinner with us on our birthdays.”

Harry chuckled. “Birthdays are different,” he said. “Your birthday is always the same date every year. Term breaks and school holidays are not.”

Wills laughed and little Harry pouted. “I didn’t know!” he protested.

“It’s okay,” Harry smiled. “Those are things you learn as you go to school. Wills knows more than you do because he’s older, and I know more than Wills because I’m older than he is. And your mum knows more than any of us because she’s a grownup.”

The Land Rover stopped in front of the Lodge at that point, and the trio of boys tumbled out and headed into their respective rooms to clean up for lunch. Half an hour later, the threesome emerged again, freshly washed, and headed down the hall towards the dining room. As they drew near, Harry slowed his steps instinctively when he heard Princess Di’s voice. While it wasn’t overly loud, he recognized the anger in her tone due to his years of experience with the Dursleys. A male voice he didn’t recognize, but which also sounded clipped with anger to his ears, responded. Wills and Harry brightened and dashed ahead, calling, “Daddy!”

Harry entered the dining room in time to see little Harry launch himself at Prince Charles, who caught him up in a hug and then freed one arm to pull Wills into the embrace as well. Princess Di’s expression combined a look of motherly indulgence with a hint of annoyance, but as that annoyance didn’t appear to be directed towards him or the boys, he hesitantly stepped into the room and bowed to the Prince of Wales.

Charles set his sons down and gave the third little boy in the room a pleasant smile, although it seemed as if his mind was elsewhere. “So, you’re the famous Harry Potter that my boys speak of so often. It’s good to meet you at last.”

“It’s a pleasure meeting you, too, Your Royal Highness,” Harry said softly. “Wills and Harry have
told a lot about you, too.”

“Good, good. I trust you’ve been enjoying yourselves this week,” Charles said. “Shall we sit and eat? I had to meet with the board of the Prince’s Trust charity before I could come up, and it’s been far too long since breakfast.”

Wills and little Harry immediately tugged their father towards the table and sat to either side of him, while Harry and Di followed behind. The Princess was much quieter than usual, while the two young Princes kept up a steady chatter, telling Prince Charles all about their holiday, and the fun they’d been having with their friend Harry. The dark-haired boy was also quieter than usual, his ingrained wariness of any unfamiliar adult once again manifesting as a slight shyness, although he did respond to direct questions and added a few quiet remarks to the brothers’ running commentary.

When the meal was finished, Charles looked apologetically at Harry. “I hope you don’t mind if I spend a bit of time with my boys this afternoon,” he said. “You understand that with my official duties, I don’t get to see them nearly as often as I’d wish.”

“Of course I don’t mind, Your Highness,” Harry said. “I can see they’ve missed you.”

Diana’s eyes snapped a bit and her colour was high, but she kept her voice even as she said, “It’s no problem at all, Charles. I wanted to speak with Harry before we returned to London anyway, so I’m sure he and I will find something to do while you’re out with the boys.” Her expression warmed as she glanced at the bespectacled child beside her. “I wanted to speak to him about excursions during term breaks and holidays, so we’ll do so this afternoon instead of in the morning when we’re rushing about getting ready to leave.”

“Right, then,” Charles nodded, looking slightly awkward. “Harry, Wills, how about you get your boots on and we’ll go for a ride? And then we’ll see you two back by dinner the latest.” He made a rather hasty exit of his own, followed by his sons.

Diana’s eyes flashed for a moment, but then she sighed. “Harry, I’m sorry you had to see that. I don’t know how much attention you pay to the papers, but there is a grain of truth to reports that Charles and I aren’t getting along quite as well as we ought at times. He’d originally told me he’d not be able to make it up here at all this week, but now he’s turned up unexpectedly and wants the boys to stay until Sunday instead of going home tomorrow as had been planned. But since you’re expected to return home tomorrow, and I have some meetings planned for Sunday, would you be terribly upset if it was just the two of us flying back tomorrow?”

Harry wasn’t quite sure he understood everything Princess Diana was telling him, but he wasn’t going to upset his hostess by pouting because Wills and little Harry were getting to stay an extra day without him. “Of course not, Your Highness,” he told her. “I understand that the plans were made already, and it would mess things up if I don’t get back when I’m expected.”

Di smiled warmly. “Thank you for being so understanding, Harry. I just wish your aunt would see the treasure she has in you.”

He blushed. “I… you’re welcome.”

She chuckled. “Her Majesty let me in on the secret about your parents,” she said. “I trust your tutor has told you by now?” She stood and took his hand, leading him to her private sitting room where they wouldn’t be overheard.

“About… about where they went to school and stuff?” Harry asked, trying to make sure she was
asking what he thought she might be.

“Yes,” Diana nodded. “That they were magic.” From his expression, she guessed that he had been told, but told it was something to be kept secret. “The Crown knows about the wizarding world, and when I said I hoped to be able to have you to spend more time with my boys, the Queen told me a few things.” She motioned him to a seat, dropping onto the couch in her sitting room.

“Among other things, she told me that hold the title of earl in the wizarding world, as well as being rather well-known due to the events of the night your parents died.”

Harry nodded. “Stephen said something about that. Since I don’t know anything about being an earl, and I looked up what sort of rights and privileges a Royal Ward has, I asked him to ask if that was something I could get help with.” He wrinkles his nose. “It sounds silly, put like that. But the books I found that talked about how Royal Wards were raised back when it was common said that most times they were raised in the palace nurseries, or maybe fostered with other high-ranking nobles so they could learn to manage their holdings. That’s not something Aunt Petunia can teach me.”

Di smiled. “Very clever of you, to do that research,” she said. “That’s not quite something we can teach you, as I understand those things are done somewhat differently in the wizarding world. But what I can help teach you is how to handle yourself in public, and especially with the press.” She looked at him seriously. “They used to call me ‘Shy Di’ back when Charles and I first got together, mostly because I had no real idea how to deal with the press, so I simply tried to avoid it, and said as little as possible. Her Majesty tells me you’re going to be as much in the public eye in the wizarding world as I am in the normal world. I’ll be honest, it’s not the most comfortable place to be, and I’m sorry that you’ll have to deal with it at such a young age. That’s why I want to help you learn something called poise. Basically, it means being able to keep looking and acting calm, even when you really want to scream and throw things.”

Harry wrinkled his nose at that information. “Ugh, that doesn’t sound at all nice.”

“It can be rather unpleasant at times,” Di admitted. “But as I’ve discovered, it’s much better to learn to handle yourself in public, than to try to avoid the press and have them swarm you anyway. What I thought to do is to have you come along with Wills and me when we do things such as visiting hospital patients. I thought hospital visits would be the best place to bring you along, at least at first, as the press tends to be slightly more respectful there… not so much of me, but on account of the patients themselves. Wills and I are scheduled to visit the Children’s Wing and the AIDS patients at Great Ormond Street Hospital over term break, and we’d be most pleased if you’d join us for that.”

Harry smiled. “I’d be happy to go with you,” he said. This was the sort of thing he’d been hoping for ever since researching Royal Wards, the opportunity to learn things that Aunt Petunia couldn’t or wouldn’t teach him. “Did you have anything else planned yet, or is it too soon for you to know your whole schedule?”

Di smiled back warmly. “Well, I’d like to invite you, the young man who is your tutor, and perhaps a third person if there’s someone else you’d care to bring, to come with me and Wills to a performance of the Nutcracker at the Royal Opera House when it gets more towards Christmas. The Royal Box holds eight, and one of my ladies-in-waiting will also be coming along, and that will leave the last two seats vacant in case Charles decides to come along after all. If he doesn’t, Andrew and Sarah might, or I’ll just invite two more of my ladies so as not to waste the space. Charles adores opera, but he isn’t that keen on ballet,” she elucidated. “But I’m mad for ballet. I trained for it as a girl, but I got too tall. Ballerinas are best off when they’re short as well as slim, so there’s less of them for their partners to have to lift… well, you’ll see during the show.”
Harry chuckled. “It sounds like fun. May I invite my godfather? Stephen helped… uh, do you know anything about the war in the wizarding world?”

“I know there was one,” Di said, recalling what the Queen had told her and Charles. “Something about a bigoted terrorist sort, who wanted to kill off the wizards who were born to regular people?”

“Yes,” Harry nodded. “He’s who killed my parents. They’d gone into hiding, you see, and the person who held the secret to their shelter gave it to him. But what I found out thanks to Stephen, is that the person with the secret wasn’t the person everyone thought it was. My parents had done a switch, asking my godfather to hold the secret but actually giving it to another of their friends instead. But it backfired for two reasons… one, because the person betrayed them, and two, because in the confusion after the bad guy disappeared, people remembered that my godfather had been asked to hold the secret and they threw him in jail without a trial.”

Diana frowned, vaguely recalling something about that in the newspaper the Queen had shown to her and Charles. “I think I saw something about that.”

“Sirius should have had custody of me after my parents died, but because he got sent to jail, I got sent to the Dursleys instead,” Harry said. “When Stephen took me to the wizarding bank to ask some questions about my parents’ estate, that’s when we got to see a copy of their will, which specified that they’d given the secret to someone else and not to Sirius. Stephen talked to some other people with influence, and managed to get Sirius his trial a few weeks ago, so he’s free now.” He tilted his head, thinking for a moment, and then decided to confide the rest. “Stephen and Sirius and I also think that someone else is doing something to try to control me somehow. Like, my parents’ will said that I wasn’t ever to go to Aunt Petunia no matter what. And we can’t help but wonder if someone purposefully forgot to give Sirius a trial back then so that he couldn’t interfere with sending me to Aunt Petunia. So since Uncle Vernon is dead now and Aunt Petunia is being a lot nicer to me, the three of us decided we’d be better off if Sirius doesn’t try to get custody of me just yet. Not until we can find out exactly what’s been going on.”

“I see,” Diana nodded slowly. “I don’t entirely approve, but I do see your point. If someone has been working behind the scenes to control you, it’s better if that someone thinks you’re still in his control. And I understand that there isn’t much contact between the normal world and the wizarding world, so it’s easier for you to spend time with your godfather in the normal world, isn’t it? By all means, invite him.” She made a mental note to question Harry’s tutor with regards to the situation, but grinned and added, “Just don’t be too terribly surprised if he declines. Plenty of men dislike the ballet.”

Harry grinned back. “He’ll come, because I’ll be there,” he assured her. “Although I don’t have any clue if he likes ballet or not.”

“What does he like?” Di asked curiously.

“Pranks,” Harry replied promptly. “And music, he talked a lot about Led Zeppelin and Alice Cooper.”

She laughed. “And here I thought there might be different music in the wizarding world.”

“There is. But I only heard of one band so far, called the Weird Sisters. Sirius told me he started listening to Muggle music… normal music… because his mum hated it.”

Di laughed harder. “Oh, a rebel! And does he also ride a motorcycle?”

Harry giggled. “Actually, yes!”
“I believe I’m looking forward to meeting your godfather, Harry,” she smiled. “He sounds like quite a character.”

“Sirius is really nice, and he cares for me a lot,” he said softly. “I know that when things change and he can get custody of me, I’ll finally have a real family of my own.”

Diana gently pulled the boy into a hug. “I believe you already do have a family in him, Harry,” she said softly. “Just because you don’t live together right this moment, doesn’t mean he’s not your family.” Not wanting to give him time to become too sad, she grinned and suggested, “Now, how about I give you a different sort of lesson that you’ll need as you get older?”

Harry tilted his head curiously. “What sort of lesson?”

“Dancing,” Di smiled. “I can’t imagine that the wizarding nobility doesn’t have balls and such, so sooner or later, you’ll need to be able to dance with girls. The better you are at it, the better the impression you’ll make on people… but don’t let that thought scare you into thinking you need to be brilliant at it, because you don’t. As long as you can lead properly, without treading on your partner’s toes, you’ll do just fine.”


“Give me a moment to find some appropriate music,” she answered, getting up and moving to a shelf holding a ‘boom box’ type stereo cassette player and piles of cassette tapes. She pawed through the tapes until she found one with a handwritten label of ‘slow dance mix’ and popped it into the boom box. Hitting the play button, she tugged Harry to his feet. “Put your right hand on my waist, and hold your left hand out, palm up,” she instructed, as the classic opening riff of Aerosmith’s Dream On filled the room.

Harry complied, a little awkwardly, trying not to laugh. At a little over 4’ tall, he was still somewhat smaller than average for his age. The Princess of Wales was, at 5’10”, quite tall for a woman, and his nose was just about in her bosom. “What next?” he asked.

Diana grinned, draping her left hand on his shoulder and placing her right hand in his outstretched left hand. “Now move in time to the beat of the music, just steering me around in a bit of a circle to start,” she told him. “And don’t look at your feet, or you’re more likely to trip yourself up.”

He moved, a little hesitantly at first, but relaxed when she smoothly followed his lead and kept her feet out from under his. “Like this?”

“Very good,” she praised his efforts. “You might not think so now, but eventually you’re likely to do all sorts of silly things to impress the girls. But to let you in on a secret, being willing to dance and being halfway good at it nearly always impresses them.”

“Why?” Harry wanted to know.

“Why would you want to impress girls, or why are girls impressed with a boy who dances?” Di asked.

“Both,” Harry said simply, as the music changed from Dream On to Poison’s Every Rose Has Its Thorn.

She grinned. “Well, sooner or later, most boys start thinking about girls as people they might want to marry someday, and of course, you would want the girl you decide you like to like you back,” she explained. “And since most girls enjoy dancing, and plenty of boys dislike dancing, girls nearly always like a boy who is willing to dance, and they’ll like him better if he doesn’t trip them or
mash their toes.”

He thought about that for a moment as he steered her around the room, and wrinkled his nose. “Maybe that will make more sense when I’m older. But I’ll take your word for it all the same.” After a moment, he asked, “Are there different kinds of dances?”

“There are, yes,” Diana replied. “Most people nowadays collectively group them as slow dancing… which is what we’re doing a simple version of… and fast dancing. Why do you ask?”

He laughed. “Well, if I’m going to use dancing to impress people someday, I should learn all kinds, right?”

She laughed as well. “Fair enough. The simplest version of fast dancing just involves getting out there and moving to the beat of the music. Shall I put some fast songs on?”

“Sure,” Harry said. “Are there places to learn the harder versions of dancing?”

“There are, yes,” Di said. “If you’d like, I can help you look into what might be available near you in Little Whinging, and if there isn’t anything close enough to be convenient, I can see about getting you to one that is farther away.” As the song ended, she dropped Harry’s hand and took a step back, giving him a small curtsey. “Thank you kindly for the dance, good sir,” she said with a chuckle.

Harry took his cue and bowed. “A pleasure, Your Highness,” he replied with a laugh of his own.

She stepped over to the boom box and ejected the cassette that they’d been dancing to, returning it to its case and a spot on the shelf. Looking through the other cassettes, she smiled and dropped in one with the handwritten label ‘dance favourites’. She hit play and the relentlessly cheerful opening of Adam Ant’s Goody Two Shoes blared out. “For this, you just bop around and have fun,” she said, suiting her actions to her words. She swayed from side to side, shaking her hips and prancing to the beat.

He watched for a moment before joining in. He felt a bit silly at first, but he had to admit, it was rather fun to just cut loose and move like that. What’s more, his experience at observing adults allowed him to see that Princess Di was very much enjoying herself. And Diana was having a lot of fun. It had been ages since she’d been able to go dancing, given Charles’ distaste for popular music and the club scene. After she and Harry bounced through Cyndi Lauper’s Girls Just Wanna Have Fun, she showed him some of the choreographed steps from the music videos to Michael Jackson’s Beat It and You Can’t Touch This by MC Hammer, followed by her longtime favourite song Hungry Like the Wolf by Duran Duran. After that, she showed him some of the easiest steps of swing dancing to the Stray Cats’ Rock This Town and Elton John’s Crocodile Rock. Eventually they both collapsed onto the couch, out of breath and laughing. “That was so much fun!” Harry exclaimed.

Diana beamed. “Good, I’m glad you had fun. Perhaps next time you spend time with us, I’ll find a couple of girls about the size of you and Wills so you both can practice with someone who isn’t a relative giant. Princess Anne’s daughter Zara, perhaps, she’s between you and Wills in age, and I’m sure she’s got a friend she might invite. I don’t know if she’s all that keen about dancing, but she knows she’ll need to at least be passable at it the same as you and my boys, so I expect she’d be willing to give it a whirl now and again.” She moved over to the small bar and took a bottle of water from the mini refrigerator for herself, and offered Harry a coke.

He accepted with a smile of thanks and took a drink. Talking of extended family members reminded him of the mystery with regards to his heritage trace. “May I ask an odd question? It’s
nothing personal, or to do with you or the Princes,” he hastened to add.

She sipped her water and nodded. “All right, go ahead.”

“Is it possible for someone to be adopted and not know they’re adopted?”

Diana blinked, as that question had certainly come out of left field. “It is possible,” she said carefully. “Although I don’t imagine it happens often anymore. But forty or fifty years ago, being an adopted child was rather stigmatized, due to the assumption that most children in orphanages were there because either they’d been born to an unwed mother, or they suffered some deformity or defect and had been abandoned for being imperfect. So adoptive parents often let their children believe they were born to them, to keep them from fretting that something was wrong with them. Why do you ask?”

Harry went with a partial-truth answer. “Someone I know was making a family tree, and didn’t find the birth records of a close family member at the hospital where they expected to find them. It’s not that important, but I’d been thinking about it earlier today, plus I’d asked Stephen last weekend but he didn’t know. So I figured I’d ask someone else.”

“Keep asking around until you get a definite answer, eh?” Diana chuckled. “Good lad. That sort of inquisitiveness will serve you well in school.”

“I hope so. Stephen explained that I shouldn’t skive off my work just because I might do better than Dudley… and anyway, it was always Uncle Vernon who punished me for getting better marks,” Harry said. “Dudley will probably still try to get me in trouble when I do, but as long as I can keep him from ripping up my homework, I know I can do well this term.” He grinned. “Besides, Aunt Petunia doesn’t let Dudley bother me when I’m in my room now, and since I don’t have to do the housekeeping anymore, I spend a lot of time in my room. I’ve discovered that learning can be fun!”

Di smiled. “Have you now? What sort of things have you been learning this summer?”

Since he didn’t have to keep his wizarding studies secret, Harry spent the next couple of hours telling her all about the books he’d gotten on wizarding history, wizarding etiquette, as well as the two Stephen had sent him about potions. He also talked about going to the library to do his research into Royal Wards and the history about them, his lessons in budgeting and related maths with Stephen. He also mentioned the book on meditation techniques and how the exercises in that book helped him keep from losing his temper and accidentally doing something with his magic when Dudley tried to get him into trouble. He also told her about his yoga class and his upcoming tae kwon do class. Diana was a good listener, asking questions and generally being very interested in everything he had to say.

When they joined Charles, Wills, and little Harry for dinner, the two young princes took over the bulk of the conversation, telling their mother and Harry how their father not only took them riding, he let them mount one of his polo ponies and… under strict supervision of course, and without other riders on the field… allowed them to practice shots at the goal with a polo stick. Wills had done this a few times previously, but it was the first time little Harry had been permitted this treat. After the meal, Charles politely offered to pose for a few photos with Harry and his sons. Harry noticed, though, that during the entire meal and afterwards, the Prince of Wales never said a word directly to his wife. It made him slightly uncomfortable; while Charles seemed kind enough if a bit on the formal side, he’d become quite fond of Diana over the holiday and had started to consider her a friend. Witnessing the marital discord between them made him feel as though he was intruding on their privacy.
Charles excused himself to go over some papers and proposals, and Diana gathered the boys to read to them from a book of Andersen’s fairy tales. As she kissed her sons good night, she told them that since their father had requested it, they would be staying an extra day along with their governess and returning to London on Sunday, but that as she had some appointments, she would be flying back to London with Harry after breakfast as originally planned. Wills and little Harry were excited enough at the thought of a day with their father that they forgot to be disappointed that their friend couldn’t also stay the extra day. After they got settled in their rooms for the night, Harry retired to his room as well, to pack for his return home.
In the morning, a servant came to collect Harry’s suitcase before breakfast. He made sure Draco’s camera was packed safely along with a few souvenirs of his holiday including a book Diana gave him on the history of Balmoral before the servant brought his suitcase as well as Diana’s luggage out to a waiting Land Rover. Wills and little Harry did most of the talking at breakfast, chattering excitedly about everything they hoped to be able to do with their father over the day. When the meal ended, Prince Charles shook Harry’s hand in farewell and said he hoped to be able to spend more time with him as well as his sons the next time he came to visit. Harry smiled and thanked him politely in return, grateful that the Prince of Wales didn’t object to his friendship with the young Princes. Di hugged and kissed her sons in farewell, finally shooing them off to get ready for their day with the universal mothers’ instruction to behave themselves and that she’d see them the following day.

She stood as they dashed off, and Charles stood as well. “Have a good flight, then,” he said, hastily following his sons.

Diana sighed, but summoned up a small smile for Harry. “Do you need the loo before we leave?” she asked, her motherly instincts still running at full strength.

Harry grinned back. “It might not be a bad idea,” he agreed.

After taking care of business, he met her back in the sitting room of the Lodge and they headed out to the waiting car for the ride to Aberdeen. The flight back to London was uneventful, if a little bumpier than the flight up due to some strong winds. As the plane taxied towards the terminal building, Harry noticed a person with a large, professional-looking camcorder beside a well-dressed woman carrying a microphone standing with a group of photographers with regular cameras near the area where they would be exiting the plane. He pointed them out to Diana, who wrinkled her nose. “Oh dear… someone must have noticed you in the photos from Aberdeen and now they want to know who you are. I guess you’re getting your actual press introduction a little sooner than we anticipated.” She attempted to neaten his hair, but laughed when it refused to stay flat, and ruffled it so that the tousling looked more intentional than messy. “You’re welcome to just not answer questions, if you prefer, but I would suggest giving answers that let them know you’re not ignoring them, but you value your privacy.”

Harry thought about that for a moment as the plane drew to a halt. “So I might tell them my name is Harry if they ask, but then if I’m asked further, tell them that I don’t want to give my surname so that the neighbours don’t treat my family any differently because I happened to make friends with Prince William and Prince Harry?”

“Exactly,” Diana approved. “Chances are, the news reporter will speak mostly with me, but it’s good to be ready for any questions that might be directed to you all the same.” The security guard and the flight attendant opened the door of the cabin and secured the steps, so she stood. “Ready?”

“Not really, but I have to be,” Harry said, taking a deep breath and standing. He followed the Princess of Wales out of the aeroplane, trying to look more calm than terrified. He wasn’t able to put on a smile, but he did manage not to flinch when he heard the clicking of the cameras.
“Your Royal Highness,” came the expected call from the woman with the microphone. “We expected to see the young Princes arriving with you today; is anything wrong?”

Diana, recognizing the field reporter employed by the airport, and knowing she wasn’t too terribly pushy, shook her head with a smile. “Oh, no, Laura, not at all. Charles managed to rearrange his schedule to join us for the last of our holiday, and while I have a charity board meeting this afternoon, I saw no reason the boys shouldn’t enjoy the unexpected extra time with their father. They’ll be back with him sometime tomorrow, in time for school to start on Monday.”

“I’m sure they’re enjoying the extension of their holiday,” the reporter agreed with a smile of her own. “I see you’re not traveling alone, however. Who is this young man with you?”

“He’s a friend of my sons,” Diana replied. “I know you’re all aware by now that I’m attempting to give them as normal a childhood as possible given their station in life. That includes having playdates, and inviting friends to accompany them on holiday, even if doing so is a bit more involved than is usual. As the original plan called for our return at this time, we felt it was better not to disrupt his family’s plans by changing his return time at the last minute.”

The reporter nodded. “Understandable.” She squatted down closer to the child’s level and asked, “What’s your name, lad?”

“I’m also Harry,” he replied a little shyly, but he managed a nervous smile.

“And how did you come to meet the young Princes?” the reporter asked.

Harry took a deep breath as Di gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder. “They came visiting at my school with Her Royal Highness,” he said softly. “And they got separated from their governess somehow and came out to the schoolyard when my form was out for recess. They invited me to play ball with them, and I hadn’t recognized them because I’m not allowed to watch telly too often, so I thought they were new to the neighbourhood and their mum was signing them up for school and they wanted to get to know some people. A bully came over and tried to take the ball away from us and he knocked down Wills but I stopped him from doing the same to Harry, and then the bell rang just as their governess came out looking for them so we said goodbye and I honestly hadn’t thought I’d see them again once I realized who they were.”

“Wills said to me that it was nice to have made a friend who didn’t know who he was,” Diana put in. “Apparently he overheard some of his own schoolmates discussing their chances of being photographed with him if they befriended him. So even though Harry and my sons are at different schools, I decided to do what I could to let them pursue the friendship. Not just because of the bully incident, but because Harry made two younger and unfamiliar boys feel welcomed, rather than shutting them out due to their ages.”

The reporter stood with a smile. “I see. Well, Harry, it’s been nice meeting you. I hope you had a lovely holiday.”

“I did, thank you,” Harry replied politely.

Diana gently steered him forward then, and the two of them moved into the terminal building and away from the cameras. Once they were out of sight, she gave him a hug and a smile. “You handled yourself brilliantly, Harry. I’ll grant that Laura is one of the nicer ones out there, but even so, you did very well with your first exposure to the press.”

He smiled. “I was scared,” he admitted, “but I didn’t want to do something embarrassing, so I remembered what you said about showing poise and I tried to do it.”
“And you succeeded,” she assured him. One of the security men walked over to them, so she dropped to one knee and turned Harry to face her. “Unfortunately, we’ve come to a parting of ways for the moment. Officer Kirke will bring you through to the main area of the terminal and make sure you meet safely with your tutor. And I’ll be in touch with you in regards to term break and Christmas hols, all right?” She gave him a hug and kiss on the cheek as she would to her own boys. “I’m very glad you came with us, Harry, and I look forward to seeing you again.”

Harry hugged back tightly. “Thank you for having me,” he said. “I look forward to seeing you again, too.” When they parted, Diana went off further down the wing of the terminal building towards an area marked ‘Helipad Access’ with several of the security men in dark suits escorting her.

Officer Kirke gave Harry a nod. He didn’t smile exactly, but when he spoke it was in a kindly tone. “The luggage handlers are unloading right now. Once they separate your bag from Her Royal Highness’ things, one of them will bring it here and then we’ll go meet your tutor in the main area. General safety regulations forbid anyone who isn’t actually flying in or out from being in the wings that have direct access to the aeroplanes.” He did grin a bit then, although it was a very faint one, and added, “Pity the press gets ‘round that by being actually employed by the airport.” Harry chuckled at that. A moment later, one of the workers unloading the luggage from the plane detached himself from the group and hurried over with Harry’s suitcase. Officer Kirke took it with a nod and steered Harry in the opposite direction from the one in which Diana had gone.

They emerged into the main area of the terminal building, where Harry spotted two familiar figures waiting. “Stephen! Uncle Sirius!” he called, waving and smiling.

“Harry!” the two men called back, moving to meet the boy and his escort.

Officer Kirke pulled out a small photo of Stephen and checked it, giving a nod. “Young Harry’s bag, Mr. Coyner,” he said politely, as Sirius wrapped Harry in a big hug. “I trust this other gentleman is the boy’s godfather?”

“Yes, he is,” Stephen confirmed as he took the bag. Sirius stood up, his arm still draped over Harry’s shoulder.

The security officer nodded and looked at Sirius. “Jasper Kirke of SO14 of the Metropolitan Police Service,” he introduced himself briefly. “If I may, sir, I need your full name as well as your permission to take a photograph. That way, if Mr. Coyner is unable to meet Harry following any of his future excursions with Her Royal Highness and the young Princes, you will be recognised by anyone on the detail as someone authorised to take care of him.”

“Oh, of course. I’m Sirius Orion Black,” he said with a nod. He held still while Officer Kirke pulled out a small instant camera and snapped a couple of pictures.

“Thank you, Mr. Black,” the officer said. “As Harry is now in safe hands, I need to get back to my regular duty assignment. Goodbye.” He turned and vanished into the crowd.

Sirius grabbed Harry’s suitcase and the three of them headed out to the car park and piled into Stephen’s car. Harry chattered excitedly all the while, telling the men every detail about his holiday as they drove towards Grimmauld Place, and made sure to mention that they were both invited to a performance of The Nutcracker ballet at some point in December although he didn’t know the exact date just yet. Sirius immediately said he’d be there, no matter when it would be, and Stephen agreed to attend as well. Both men cracked up laughing when Harry described his ‘dance lesson’ with Princess Di, and Sirius commented that she sounded like a very fun person and that he looked forward to getting a chance to meet her come December.
When they arrived at Grimmauld Place, Harry noticed that it looked much nicer than it had on his first visit there. Sirius nodded, looking pleased. “The house elves have been doing a wonderful job with the repairs and cleaning, and I’ll be moving in this week. Remus is going to come live here as well… he’s my oldest friend, and he’s hoping to write the textbooks for the proposed Wizarding Culture course at Hogwarts, but in order to have enough time to write, he’d have to cut back on his hours at the bookstore, and he can’t afford to do that. He can pay me enough room and board to feel independent, while being able to do what he’d prefer to do without being forced into poverty.” He smiled, and added, “And I have a surprise for you, too, Harry.”


“Come upstairs and see,” Sirius told him with a grin.

The surprise proved to be a bedroom, decorated with a theme of medieval knights, and with a selection of wizarding toys similar to many of Draco’s displayed on shelves around the room. “Oh… wow…” Harry breathed. “This is brilliant!”

“And it’s yours, Harry,” Sirius said softly. “I know it can’t be full time for a couple of years yet, but any time we can manage for you to stay overnight, you’ll stay here. And once it’s safe for me to get custody of you, this room will be waiting for you to move into it. No matter what, Harry, you will always have a home with me.”

Harry just threw himself at his godfather, hugging him tightly. “Thank you,” he finally managed to whisper.

They collected themselves after a few moments and headed back downstairs to rejoin Stephen, and Dobby and Tally brought them a hearty lunch. While they ate, they talked about plans for teaching Harry all the things he should have grown up knowing, while not overwhelming him given that he still had to attend his Muggle primary school. At Stephen’s suggestion, Sirius supplied him with a set of quills and inks, plus parchment, so that he could start learning to write neatly with them. Sirius also suggested they pay a visit to Gringott’s, as he thought the goblins might release the Potter Family History to Stephen, given the younger man’s position in Harry’s life. That way, Harry could learn about his family through reading the journals and other writings of his ancestors. At the same time, he would get a fair idea of the happenings in the wizarding world, at least as they had affected his ancestors, since the founding of Hogwarts or possibly before.

Stephen agreed, so they went to Gringott’s after lunch, where they were able to acquire the first five volumes of the Potter Family History. The goblins would have given them the entire collection, but when Harry learned that it contained over thirty volumes, he decided it would be better to take just a few at a time and exchange them for the next few as he finished reading them. From there, they headed into Muggle London to buy the uniforms Harry would need for his Tae Kwon Do classes. Harry also used some of his accumulated pocket money to buy his own yoga mat, to make it easier to practice in his room during the week. He and Stephen had to explain yoga to Sirius, who decided it sounded interesting and decided he wanted to sign up for their class. So from there, they piled back into Stephen’s car and drove to Little Whinging. Sirius signed up for yoga, and then Harry offered to show Sirius his school and the dojang where he’d be learning Tae Kwon Do and various other places. Stephen frowned, but decided it would be all right as long as Sirius disguised himself with a glamour first… just in case. Sirius agreed, and gave himself dirty blond hair and brown eyes before they set out walking through the village.

Along with his school and the dojang, Harry pointed out the library and the park. They decided to go into the small amusement arcade when Harry said he’d never been inside, and spent a couple of hours trying out various games. Sirius was familiar with pinball and even recognized Space
Invaders from visits to the Muggle world prior to his incarceration, Pac-Man and Donkey Kong hadn’t yet made it to England at that time, and he was fascinated with them both. Stephen turned out to be an expert at Arkanoid, while Harry adored the newest game in the arcade, Tetris. The three of them also enjoyed a few multiplayer rounds on Gauntlet II.

Given the dim lighting of the arcade, though, Harry didn’t notice the identities of the other kids entering and exiting the place, until he moved over to the pinball machine called High Speed, and was slowly surrounded by Dudley, Piers Polkiss, and the rest of Dudley’s gang.

“Well, if it isn’t the freak, Potter,” Piers sneered, before two of the others grabbed him.

Dudley laughed. “Stupid of the freak to show up where normal people do,” he commented, before punching his cousin in the stomach. He followed that with another blow to Harry’s face. His friends let go at the same moment, so that the force of Dudley’s punch caused Harry to fall backwards and hit his head on the pinball machine. All of the boys started laughing.

Stephen had to grab Sirius to keep him from hexing the boys. Fortunately, this particular arcade had staff on watch for trouble, and those staff members were already hurrying over to the disturbance. One helped Harry to his feet, while two others started herding the gang to the door. “That’s it! We’ve seen you little berk in here harassing smaller kids before, but we couldn’t prove anything. This time we can. You’re out, and you’ll stay out, too. Don’t come back, or we’ll just throw you out on your arses again!”

“That’s not fair!” Dudley whined. “That freak bothered me first! My mum will hear about this! Why aren’t you doing anything to that stupid little freak?”

The arcade staffer laughed. “Go on and tell yer mum on me! What’s she gonna do? Especially when she sees the security tape of you lot surrounding that littler kid and punching him for the laughs… you should be counting yerself lucky we ain’t calling the coppers on you. Now bugger off!”

Dudley stomped off fuming, followed by the rest of his gang. He still couldn’t believe the arcade worker hadn’t believed him, and that the freak had gotten him kicked out of the arcade.

Inside, Harry just sighed and allowed the other staffer to fuss over him, along with Stephen and Sirius. On the one hand, it was rather pleasant to have people looking out for him and making sure he wasn’t badly hurt. On the other, he knew perfectly well that Dudley was going to be looking for revenge because he’d been thrown out of the arcade.

Once Sirius was satisfied that Harry was all right, the three of them left the arcade in search of dinner, deciding on pizza, which was something Harry had yet to try. His mood lightened with the treat, plus Sirius’ tales of how his mum had started out disliking his dad from the moment they’d met on the Hogwarts Express, when James had swaggered into the compartment Lily had been sharing with Alice Clearwater and two other girls and attempted to impress them with his casting ability. Unfortunately, the train had given a lurch at the wrong moment, causing him to wave his wand wildly and resulting in Alice’s defense textbook permanently turning into a blank diary. While James had, of course, offered to replace the book for her, he rather smugly told her that he’d actually done her a favor, since all girls needed a diary. Lily had not only demanded he leave her compartment, she’d chased him out and thrown the diary at his head. Harry and Stephen both laughed at that. “Tell me more about them?” Harry requested.

So they spent another hour or so, with Sirius regaling them with story after story about his parents… the years that Lily thought James was an arrogant little showoff and a bully, but then after fifth year, James started to mature and Lily slowly came to appreciate him for the man he
became, instead of disliking him for the boy he had been. “They were so very happy the day they got married,” Sirius said. “There were only two times I saw them happier… when they found out you were on the way, and when you were born.” He paused, then suggested, “There’s no time left today, I know we have to get you back to your aunt’s house soon, but maybe next weekend I can show you some of my memories of them.”

Stephen interjected quietly, “A Pensieve is a wizarding device that allows people to place memories inside and then show those memories to others, sort of like a home video.”

“That would be brilliant,” Harry smiled. “Oh, that reminds me of cameras… I’ve got all that film I used in Draco’s camera on my holiday. How do I get that developed?”

“Give me the film before we part company,” Sirius said. “Lucius Malfoy’s mother loved photography, so his father built a darkroom into the Manor for her. The developing process isn’t all that difficult, and I know how to do it, so I can develop them for you.”

Harry beamed. “Brilliant! I didn’t know you liked photography.”

Sirius laughed. “I don’t like it especially. I only learned how to develop the pictures because I had managed to hide a camera in the girl’s showers back in fifth year, and didn’t want to give myself away by sending the film off to be developed!”

Harry and Stephen both stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing.
Harry gave the film to Sirius as soon as they headed out to the car, so that he wouldn’t forget as he was being dropped off. Before they dropped Harry off, they stopped by Tesco to restock Harry’s food stash, since he’d been gone for a week and Stephen knew there was a good chance that whatever bread and sandwich meat might have been left from their last shopping trip would more than likely have gone off by now. Harry bought a package of lunch sacks and a box of sandwich bags as well, planning to make his own lunches to take with him to school. Once they arrived back at Privet Drive, Stephen walked Harry inside and carried his suitcase up to his room as a precaution against Dudley and his friends, while Sirius stayed in the car so that none of the neighbours would wonder who he was, and would just assume he was a friend of Stephen’s. The two men drove off again, hoping the young boy would be all right.

Harry himself wasn’t especially worried, at least not for the moment. He knew that as long as he either stayed in his room or within Aunt Petunia’s sight, Dudley wouldn’t do anything worse to him than call him names or deliver a covert pinch or kick. It would be on Monday, either before or after school that Dudley and his gang would retaliate for being thrown out of the arcade. But he had a plan in mind that would hopefully work to keep himself safe. And while he didn’t know it yet, thanks to Her Royal Highness, he now had an ally of sorts at his school, and things there were about to change for the better.

While Harry, Sirius, and Stephen had been at the arcade, the teachers at Harry’s school were having their annual start-of-year meeting. Pamela St. Claire decided to speak up when the headmistress asked if anyone had any concerns to bring up before the term started. “I do,” she said. “The Potter boy, and the Dursley boy. The Princess of Wales has taken a personal interest in Harry Potter, since it seems that he protected her younger son from a bully… Dudley Dursley… when they were here visiting last spring.”

The headmistress’ eyebrows shot up practically to her hairline. “And just how did you come by this information?” she asked.

“Her Royal Highness rang me up to ask about our schedule, and told me so then,” Pamela answered. “She also asked me to keep an eye on the Potter boy, and to call her weekly to let her know how he’s doing, as he is apparently his cousin’s favourite target for bullying. But likely not his only target,” she added.

“Once or twice I’d see one of the younger children staring at the Dursley boy during lunch,” one of the other teachers said slowly. “And the younger child would have no food in front of him or her. But they claimed to have forgotten their lunch. Do you suppose they were too frightened of the Dursley boy to accuse him of the theft? I mean, the Potter boy is so much smaller than his cousin… do you suppose his cousin stole and ate his lunches, all those times he claimed to have forgotten it?”

“It’s possible,” Pamela said. “Especially if he thought we wouldn’t believe him. It does seem as though his aunt and uncle have always taken their son’s word over their nephew’s, no matter what the circumstances. Her Highness also said to me that while there’s no proof of the matter, she believes the Potter boy was punished if he brought home better marks than his cousin, and so
would skive off his work to make sure his marks weren’t as good.”

The headmistress frowned at that. “It is true that his test scores were generally better than his schoolwork would suggest.” She stood and moved to a filing cabinet, extracting Harry Potter’s records and looking through them. “Well… I’m surprised no one caught this, but then again, it was his first year… his marks took a significant drop after first term.” She opened a different drawer and pulled out Dudley Dursley’s records. “And, starting second term, leveled off just below the Dursley boy’s marks.” She looked further into both files and shook her head. “It also seems that nearly every time the Potter boy was involved in an altercation, so was the Dursley boy. Mrs. Dursley was contacted a time or two, but told us that her nephew was a liar and troublemaker, and refused to believe that her son was ever to blame for any of the incidents.”

“Is there any chance we might separate them this term, and see if that makes any sort of difference with either of them?” Pamela asked. “Since each teacher chooses which reading assignments they give from the master booklist, if they’re in different classrooms, it will be obvious if one copies the other’s homework. Also, if the Potter boy really has been purposefully keeping his marks lower than his cousin’s, it will be harder for him to do so when they’re not doing the same assignments.”

“That’s a good point,” the headmistress acknowledged. “All right, the Dursley boy stays in Ms. Tyler’s class, and I’ll move the Potter boy to Ms. Beckett’s class.” Ms. Beckett looked slightly dubious, but nodded her assent. “All right, then, if there’s no other business, I suggest we all go home and enjoy the evening and tomorrow, and I’ll see you all on Monday.”

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

In keeping with his plans for evading Dudley, Harry made sure to wake up early on Monday morning. He made a sandwich to take to school with him, loading it and an apple and a packet of cheese and crackers into a lunch sack. Packing his old backpack with his lunch, his spiral notebook, his biros, and his copy of *Tom Sawyer*, he headed downstairs. His aunt was already in the kitchen frying eggs and sausages. She looked up when he stepped in and started to pull a box of cold cereal… the one Dudley had begged her to buy for him, and that he then tasted and declared awful… from the pantry. “It’s the first day of school, boy,” she told him stiffly. “You might as well have a hot breakfast since I’m cooking anyway.” Without another word, she slid two eggs and two sausages onto a plate, along with two pieces of slightly burned toast.

“Thank you,” he replied, eating quickly, as he could hear his cousin thudding around upstairs, presumably getting ready for the day. By the time Dudley came down, whining that he’d had to get up so early, Harry had finished his breakfast and put his plate in the dishwasher. He picked up his backpack and slipped out the door while Dudley was complaining that his eggs were overcooked and his toast was cold. He got to school well ahead of pretty much all the other students, but he’d brought *Tom Sawyer* along for just that reason. He sat down against the wall of the building, as close to the doors as he could get without risking being hit when they opened, pulled out his book, and settled in to read until the bell.

He didn’t have to wait quite that long, though. About five minutes before the bell, the school’s PA system crackled to life. “Would Rachel Allen, Harry Potter, Surya Sharma, and Mark Ramsey please report to the office,” one of the administrative assistants said.

Harry got to his feet and opened the door, pausing and holding it open when he spotted three other students making their way towards him. The four filed down the hallway to the office, where the administrative assistant gave them an absent smile. “Right, you lot,” she said. “We’ve had to make some adjustments to your placements to accommodate new students to the school and keep the class sizes comparable. Miss Allen, you’ll be in Mr. Chaney’s class this year, room 207. Mr. Potter
and Miss Sharma, you’re going to Ms. Beckett’s class, room 310. And Mr. Ramsey, you’ll be in
Ms. St. Claire’s class, room 317. As you’re all being moved to classes which are slightly more
advanced than your classes from last year, you’ll get two one-hour sessions each week with Mr.
Khatri the resource teacher, at least until we’re satisfied your marks aren’t suffering from the
move.” She looked at the clock and turned back to them. “Bell’s about to ring, so go on up to your
classrooms now. No point heading for the doors just to turn ’round and come back in.”

An elated Harry followed the other three out of the office. *I’m not in the same class as Dudley this
year*, he thought. *Even if the other kids still won’t talk to me, I don’t have to worry about what he’s
doing to get me in trouble during class. I’ll be able to pay full attention to the teacher for a change.*
He was smiling as he entered room 310 behind Surya Sharma.

His new teacher, Ms. Beckett, smiled back. “I only assign seats if I have to split up people who
either make trouble or won’t stop talking in class,” she said. “So you two get first choice.”

“Thank you, Ms. Beckett,” they said. Harry decided to pick a spot right up front, while Surya chose
a seat about halfway back and off to the side beside a window. The bell rang a moment later, and
the sound of nearly three hundred children swarming the hallways in search of their new
classrooms filled the air.

Most of the day was spent in a series of getting-acquainted exercises and several quizzes which Ms.
Beckett assured the students were only for review purposes. She merely wanted to see how much
they all had remembered from last year, and how much time she would need to spend in revising
previous material before moving into the new coursework. Harry spend recess reading *Tom Sawyer*
while staying as close to the playground monitor as possible, hoping that if Dudley and his gang
attempted to make trouble, the monitor would see that he really had been minding his own business
until they approached him. The tactic seemed to work, so he did the same in the lunchroom,
picking a seat at the very end of his classroom’s table where he was in the direct view of the
lunchroom monitors. It helped that there were three classrooms for each form, and that the table
assigned to Mr. Baker’s class was between Ms. Beckett’s and Ms. Tyler’s class tables. Dudley
would have to get up and walk over to Harry if he wanted to start trouble, and so would be much
more easily noticed than if they were seated at the same table. For the first time since he’d started
school, Harry was able to eat his entire lunch. He also discovered that it was much easier to
concentrate in his afternoon lessons when he wasn’t either hungry or hurting or both.

Unfortunately, the school day did have to come to an end. Harry managed to keep himself hidden
in the crowd of kids headed towards the neighbourhood which included Privet Drive, Wisteria
Walk, Magnolia Crescent, and Sunflower Street until as far as Magnolia Crescent. But at that point,


Dudley’s fist connected solidly with the side of his head, sending his glasses flying. “They really
wouldn’t let us back in at the arcade, and it’s all your fault, you stupid freak,” he snarled, aiming a
second punch at Harry’s jaw before backing off just enough to let the other boys get their own
blows in. Harry did his best to stay limp, long experience having taught him that the beatings did
less damage when he didn’t tense up against them, but also that the boys would tire of their sport
more quickly if he didn’t make any noise or fight back.

A man’s voice called angrily, “What do you little hooligans think you’re doing?” The boy holding
Harry dropped him and all five of the gang scattered.
Harry stayed down for a moment, getting his breath back and squinting around trying to spot his glasses. A glint caught his eye and he reached out, breathing a sigh of relief when the lenses proved intact. One of the side arms was broken off, but at least he’d be able to see his way back to the house, and thanks to Stephen’s suggestion, he had spare pairs safely stowed in his trunk. He balanced the one-armed glasses carefully on his face and then blinked as a girl’s voice asked, “Are you okay, Harry?” He looked up to see Surya Sharma clutching the hand of a young man with a distinct resemblance to her, both of them peering at him with concerned expressions.

“I… think I’m all right,” he said. “Nothing feels broken, anyway.”

“Get up carefully all the same,” the young man said. “What got you on those hooligans’ collective bad side? They’re always picking on my sister because she’s Indian, but they haven’t done worse than pull hair and call her names, probably because they know they would never be believed if they got caught fighting her and tried to claim she’d started it.”

Harry nodded as he carefully clambered to his feet. “Which is what they do whenever they’re caught pounding me,” he admitted. “As to why, it’s because I exist. Unfortunately, the leader of that gang is my cousin, and I’ve been in my aunt’s custody since my parents died when I was a baby.” He looked at Surya and asked, “Were you as glad to get switched to Ms. Beckett’s class as I was?”

She giggled. “Yes! I should apologize… for never talking to you last year, I mean. But I was too scared to, with Pig-boy and that lot in class, you know? Especially since I knew his father had tried to keep us from moving in here.” She wrinkled her nose, “Pig-boy made a point of saying that he agreed with his dad that us ‘filthy Pakis’ shouldn’t be allowed in nice neighbourhoods.”

“I understand, and I don’t blame you at all,” Harry assured her. “Honestly, most of the kids at school are scared of that lot.” He offered his hand, saying, “So even though we know each other’s names, I’m Harry Potter, and it’s good to meet you, Surya.”

She shook his hand solemnly, save for the grin on her face and the hint of a giggle in her voice as she replied, “The pleasure is all mine, Harry, and I’d like you to meet my oldest brother Anand.”

The young man also shook Harry’s hand. “If it won’t get you in trouble, you’re welcome to come to our house and get cleaned up. I might be able to fix your glasses, too, depending on how they broke. Our dad wears glasses as well, and he’s got a little repair kit for them.”

“Do come,” Surya added. “Mum’s making jalebi as a treat, since it’s the first day of school.”

Harry had no idea what jalebi might be, but decided it would be rude to refuse, especially since Surya’s offer was the first time any of his schoolmates had made a friendly overture since his very first week of school. “Thank you for asking me,” he said with a smile.

Surya chattered brightly as they walked the half-block to her house, telling him about her family, of which she was the youngest by a large margin as well as being the only girl. “Anand is twenty-four,” she told him, “and he’s just started working as a pre-registration house officer*… he graduated from St. George’s Hospital Medical School back in June. Mum’s torn between pride that he’s a doctor, and annoyance because of the crazy hours he has to keep this first year. Twelve hours a day, three days on and three days off, so that every week he’s working different days. Deepak is twenty-two and Kumar is twenty, and they’re working with our dad at the family’s restaurant in Greater Whinging. Mum volunteers at the library in the mornings, but she’s always home before I’ll get home from school.”

“Uncle Vernon died at the beginning of summer,” Harry told her. “He… never liked my parents,
and so he never liked me, either. I think that’s why Dudley is always after me… certainly Uncle Vernon never once punished him for hitting me, and I think he might even have encouraged it although I can’t prove it. Aunt Petunia’s been trying to keep Dudley away from me since Uncle Vernon died, although she can only do so much. They spoiled him for years. Even now, she still makes excuses for him whenever he does anything wrong, but at least she doesn’t automatically blame me like Uncle Vernon always did.”

Anand shook his head as they entered the house. “Pig-boy is going to wind up either in hospital or in jail one of these days, and I bet it comes as a complete surprise to your aunt when it happens,” he said.

The three of them went into the kitchen and Surya smiled at the sari-clad woman who was scooping things that looked like a cross between pretzels and very skinny doughnuts out of a frying pan and dropping them into a shallow bowl of some sort of sweet-smelling syrup. “Hello, Mum,” she said. “This is Harry, one of my classmates. Pig-boy and his lot ganged up on him just up the street, so Anand scared them off and we invited him back here to clean up and have some jalebi.”

Mrs. Sharma turned and hugged her daughter. “Someday, Pig-boy get what is coming to him. Harry, welcome.” She took a closer look and blinked. “Wait… you are boy with Princess Diana on telly news last night!”

Harry blushed. “Yes, ma’am, I guess I was.”

Now Surya blinked. “Does you being on the news have anything to do with last spring? I’d heard a rumour that when Princess Diana came to our school, Pig-boy went after Prince William and Prince Harry on the playground, and that another kid managed to get between him and Prince Harry. Is that why you were with the Princess?”

“It is, but you have to understand, I didn’t recognize Prince William or Prince Harry,” Harry explained. “I hardly ever get to watch telly, and you know photos in the papers are never very good. They’d gotten away from their governess and went out while we were at recess. I just saw these two kids who were obviously too young for our form, and figured they must be getting ready to move in around here and had gone exploring while their mum was getting them registered. Dudley knocked Wills down before I could react, but I did get between him and little Harry. Her Royal Highness said she was pleased at what I did, not just defending Harry, but making her sons feel welcome even though they were younger. And since she wants them to have as normal a childhood as possible, that includes getting to invite friends on holiday, so I got to go up to Balmoral with them. Only Prince Charles joined us at the last moment even though he’d thought he couldn’t, so Wills and Harry stayed an extra day to spend time with him, while Princess Diana returned back with me when we’d originally planned to come back, so that Aunt Petunia’s arrangements for me wouldn’t be disrupted.”

Anand poked around in the kitchen junk drawer until he located his father’s eyeglass repair kit, then quietly relieved Harry of his broken glasses as Mrs. Sharma set a plate of the jalebi between the two children. Harry discovered that the jalebi were a bit chewy, and sweet, with an unfamiliar flavouring that Surya identified as rosewater in the sugar syrup. She asked him about his holiday at Balmoral, and talked about spending a fortnight visiting some of her mother’s relatives in and around Delhi, in India. About ten minutes into their conversation, Anand handed him his mended glasses… they were still slightly bent and didn’t sit evenly on his face, but they did stay put without him needing to hold them on, so he thanked the young man for the repairs.

Harry ended up chatting with Surya for almost an hour, and when he did say that he needed to get going, Mrs. Sharma told him he was welcome to stop in any time. He arrived back at Number Four
Privet Drive without any further incident, and with the pleasurable feeling of having made a new friend.

*Pre-registration house officer is a slightly older British term for a recent medical school graduate, what is called an intern in many other countries.
And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

By the time term break drew near, Harry had settled in to a satisfying routine. Now that he was able to focus on his studies, instead of on evading his cousin, he’d quickly moved to the top of his class. He also had the pleasure of overhearing a conversation between several teachers, during which Ms. Tyler confessed to being at her wits’ end with Dudley Dursley. His cousin had, on the first week of school, copied the answers from Harry’s maths homework without actually noticing that the figures weren’t the same as on his own homework. When she’d called the boy’s mother, she’d been told that there must be some sort of mistake, that perhaps Dudley was still suffering from the sudden loss of his father and that surely the teacher could overlook a couple of poorly done assignments under the circumstances. Ms. Tyler was sure that Dudley was still copying other students’ homework assignments, as several of the better students in her class were acting more and more stressed as the term went on, but she had yet to either catch him in the act or hear any direct accusations against him.

In his own class, Harry made two more friends besides Surya, the four of them forming a little circle of misfits finding common ground in being the odd one out. Surya was Indian, a minority race in a predominately white neighbourhood. Lucy had leukemia; chemotherapy over the summer had put her into remission, but she wore a headscarf and had a permanently surprised look on her face because it also caused all her hair to fall out, including her eyebrows and eyelashes. Paul was horribly shy and stuttered, as well as suffering from asthma. Paul's mother didn't mind if he brought guests home, but his family lived in a small flat and had a new baby, which made it rather cramped and noisy there, and Harry didn’t dare bring anyone to his aunt’s house because of Dudley. On Tuesdays and Thursdays Harry had his tae kwon do classes after school, and sometimes he'd go to the dojang on Wednesdays and Fridays as well, depending on how much homework he had. Master Soong allowed his students to come and practice hyungs* outside of their class times as long as they were quiet and respectful of any classes in session while they were there. Sometimes he or Mr. Kim or Mr. Fossey would come over and give pointers if they weren’t needed at any given moment with a particular class. His first test was scheduled for the Tuesday following term break, so Harry was grateful for the opportunity to practice… as well as for a good reason to avoid spending more time near his cousin than absolutely necessary.

The four took to studying together after school each Monday, sometimes at the Little Whinging library, and sometimes at either Surya’s or Lucy’s home. Paul’s mother didn’t mind if he brought guests home, but his family lived in a small flat and had a new baby, which made it rather cramped and noisy there, and Harry didn’t dare bring anyone to his aunt’s house because of Dudley. On Tuesdays and Thursdays Harry had his tae kwon do classes after school, and sometimes he’d go to the dojang on Wednesdays and Fridays as well, depending on how much homework he had. Master Soong allowed his students to come and practice hyungs* outside of their class times as long as they were quiet and respectful of any classes in session while they were there. Sometimes he or Mr. Kim or Mr. Fossey would come over and give pointers if they weren’t needed at any given moment with a particular class. His first test was scheduled for the Tuesday following term break, so Harry was grateful for the opportunity to practice… as well as for a good reason to avoid spending more time near his cousin than absolutely necessary.

His Saturdays were spent with Stephen and Sirius; every other weekend the Malfoys would join
them at Grimmauld Place in London, where Lucius would teach him and Draco about estate management, finance, and politics, while Narcissa coached them in etiquette and social graces. Harry, perhaps due to Stephen’s early lessons on budgeting the stipend he received as a Royal Ward, was the quicker of the two boys to pick up on the basics of estate management and finance, while the self-assured Draco shone in politics and etiquette. But they both made enough progress to satisfy their elders, and they always had at least a couple of hours to play together when the lessons were done. On the in-between weekends, Stephen and Sirius taught Harry various household charms and some simple potions. Remus occasionally joined them, although as he still worked at Waterstone’s, he wasn’t always able to do so. Sirius told Harry story after story about his parents, which the boy loved hearing. Tales of the pranks pulled by the Marauders mostly made him laugh, with one glaring exception.

“And so we snuck up on the little greaseball and hit him with a levicorpus, it was great! Yoinked him up by the ankle and since he was in robes they flipped down over his belt so everyone around could see his tatty old greyled-out pants,” Sirius laughed. “Your mum stopped to yell at James for picking on ol’ Snivellus again, not that I get what she ever saw in the bloke, but the git turned on her, saying he didn’t need a mudblood sticking up for him. That’s when she finally stopped hanging around with the greasy git, she finally believed what everyone was saying about him looking to join up with You Know Who. I mean, she was practically the only person… and certainly the only girl… who ever talked to Snivellus, and yet he’d turn ‘round and call her that? So Lily stomped off again all mad, and James decided to get him back for what he called her and vanished his pants altogether and all of us conjured snowballs and threw them at his willy since he was flapping in the breeze…” He stopped when he finally realized that Harry wasn’t laughing this time. “What’s wrong, pup?”

“That was mean!” Harry burst out. “You and Dad… you… you bullied that other kid!” He sounded appalled.

Sirius blinked, not expecting that reaction. “We weren’t bullies, Harry, it was only Snape, and he was so into the Dark Arts, he deserved it…”

Harry cut him off angrily. “Yes, and I’m ‘just a freak,’ so I deserve it when Dudley beats on me. That’s what Uncle Vernon always said, and as like as not he’d add a few blows of his own to make sure I never forgot it! No one ‘deserves’ someone else picking on him all the time, no one! Do you even know why he was into the Dark Arts? Maybe he was trying to prove that he really did belong in Slytherin or something. You told me yourself that your family was into the Dark Arts, too, even though you personally weren’t. But you had my father as your friend and my grandparents took you in when you ran away from home. Maybe he didn’t have anywhere to run to, so he learned Dark Arts to please his family since he had to live with them. But it doesn’t matter, because it’s still wrong that you bullied him!” He ran upstairs to the room Sirius had put together for him and slammed the door hard enough that one of the house-elves popped in to make sure that nothing had been broken.

Stephen looked at Sirius and shook his head. “I did warn you that Harry had been bullied, and so hates bullies,” he said softly. “I know you don’t quite see it that way, since Professor Snape was able to defend himself well enough if it was one on one against any of your lot. But you did gang up on him rather often.”

Sirius looked stricken. “Merlin, I never thought of it like that. But looking back, we probably did pick on Snape as often as we did the rest of the school put together. Harry’s really going to hate me, isn’t he? Especially if he ever finds out the truly awful thing I did to Snape… I could have gotten him killed if it wasn’t for James.”
“Maybe you ought to tell him about it, though,” Stephen suggested. “I heard you apologising to Professor Snape at the Malfoys’ place that time. So you can tell Harry honestly that you’ve come to see how wrong you were and that you’ve at least attempted to make amends. And better if he hears it from you, than from someone who wants to make him think that you’re not nearly as nice a bloke as you present yourself to be.”

“Like Dumbledore,” Sirius nodded with a sour expression. “Or anyone who treats him like he’s infallible. Which is about three quarters of the wizarding world.”

“Exactly,” Stephen agreed. “I’ll grant you’ve got the advantage that he doesn’t know you and Harry are seeing each other regularly, but you can bet that he’ll be just waiting to step in as Harry’s rescuer, mentor, and trusted confidante as soon as the boy turns eleven.”

Sirius nodded and got to his feet. “Right. Which means I’d best make my confession to Harry now and stop telling about the times the Marauders ganged up on Snape in hopes that he’ll forgive me for being such a prat when I was a kid.”

“He’ll forgive you,” Stephen said with a smile. “Harry is a very forgiving young man. It helps that you can tell him honestly that you’ve told Professor Snape you’re sorry, and that you do see now that you were bullying him back then.”

“Wish me luck,” Sirius said as he headed up the stairs. On reaching Harry’s door, he tapped lightly. “Pup? May I come in?”

“I guess,” Harry replied.

Sirius stepped into the room to see Harry on the bed, hugging his legs to his chest and resting his chin on his knees. He dropped to a cross-legged position on the floor so he wouldn’t be looming over his godson. “You’re right and I’m wrong,” he said quietly. “I guess back then I didn’t think of it as bullying, partly because we didn’t go round picking on all the younger or weaker kids, and partly because one on one, Sni… Snape was a match for any of us. But you’re absolutely right, the Marauders ganging up on him like that was bullying, plain and simple. Does it help at all to know that I saw Snape at the Malfoys’ a few weeks back and told him I was sorry for everything I did to him back in school? He’s Draco’s godfather, if you didn’t know, and I didn’t want Draco to feel as though he might have to choose between us.”

Harry nodded slowly. “It does help,” he said softly. “Did Professor Snape forgive you?”

“Not exactly,” Sirius admitted. “But he did say he wouldn’t insult me to Draco, or to try to force him into choosing between us. Anyway, I didn’t expect forgiveness, and I’m okay with that as long as he doesn’t take out his animosity towards me on either you or Draco. See, I did worse than just bully him back in school once, and if it hadn’t been for your father, Snape could have been killed. So I don’t blame him for hating me now.”

“What did you do?” Harry asked.

Sirius sighed. “You remember I told you that we learned to become animagi in order to accompany Moony in his transformations each full moon. Well, when Dumbledore first allowed Remus into Hogwarts, he’d set up a secure place for his transformations to take place. It was a little hut outside of Hogsmeade village, and it was connected to the castle grounds by way of a secret tunnel. Remus would go there before sunset each full moon and return in the morning. The tunnel entrance was hidden, of course, but also guarded by a Whomping Willow to keep anyone from getting close to the entrance by accident. The only way to get by the tree was to touch a specific knot on the base, otherwise that thing would knock the stuffing out of you. Well, at some point during fifth year,
Snape noticed Madam Pomfrey, the school nurse, escorting Remus to the Whomping Willow. He’s not one to leave a mystery alone, so I knew he’d be going spare trying to figure out what was going on… and I told him how to get by the tree and into the tunnel, without telling him what he’d find at the other end. James stopped Snape before he actually got into the hut with Remus, but if he hadn’t, Remus could have bitten him and turned him into a werewolf as well… or even killed him.” Sirius frowned, his eyes distant. “That’s the one time I ever saw Moony upset enough to tell me off. I’d really only wanted to scare the pants off Snape, you know? Teach him a lesson about being so nosy and all that rot, but I didn’t think about how Moony would feel if he had attacked anyone.” He dropped his head with another sigh. “For that matter, I didn’t think about how I would feel if Snape had been really hurt or worse. Pretty badly, in all honesty. I just didn’t think, you know? Except maybe about how funny it would be to see him running away screaming like a little girl.”

That got a reluctant chuckle out of Harry. “I guess I can understand that part a little. You all were really mean to him, but thinking about the stories you’ve told, you never actually injured him, did you? You didn’t beat him up or anything like that. You mostly just made him look foolish.”

“That’s right,” Sirius nodded. “Oh, we’d do trip jinxes and stinging hexes and stuff like that. I think Snape might have got a nosebleed once, from hitting a wall face-first after we got him with a trip jinx. But generally it was all about catching him unawares and changing the colour of his hair to Gryffindor red and gold or creating the illusion that he’d wet himself or making him jump and yelp from a stinging hex… that’s sort of the wizarding equivalent to a muggle joy-buzzer, at least that’s what your mum said when she learned how to do it. Anyway, yes, mostly what we did was meant to make our target look foolish. It’s just that we did pick him as our target more often than not.”

Harry sighed. “I still don’t like it,” he said softly. “But I know people can change. If they didn’t, Aunt Petunia would still be not feeding me anything but scraps. So I can understand that you’re not the same person you were back when you were in school.”

Sirius smiled. “I’m glad you understand, pup,” he said softly. “Azkaban gave me plenty of time to think, and I hope I spent that time halfway productively. I used to be as prejudiced in my own way as You Know Who was in his. Only my prejudice was that anyone who used the Dark Arts at all was automatically evil. It kind of shocked me when I found out that several healing spells are considered Dark Arts.” He chuckled, “Granted, half the students at Hogwarts think Madam Pomfrey is evil anyway, but that’s got nothing to do with Dark Arts and everything to do with nasty-tasting potions and her tendency to keep students in the infirmary overnight whether or not they need it!”

Harry laughed.
Hospital Visit

As Stephen’s university schedule was different from that of Harry’s school, Petunia Dursley agreed to bring her nephew to the train station in Little Whinging and see him onto the train into London for his planned excursion to Great Ormond Street Hospital with the Princess of Wales and Prince William on the Friday morning of term break. The boy had brought her a lovely teacup and saucer set from his holiday at Balmoral, as well as a signed copy of The Old Man of Lochnagar, Prince Charles’ children’s book for Dudley, and he hadn’t had an outbreak of his freakishness since Vernon’s passing besides, so she felt he deserved at least that much of a reward for his good behaviour. She didn’t need to accompany him into London, as the letters from Princess Di stated that he’d be met off the train at Victoria Station, which meant she could drop him at the Little Whinging station and then take Dudley to the local Harvest Fair. Meanwhile Harry would stay the night in London and Stephen would pick him up there the following day for their usual Saturday session and return him to Privet Drive then.

Petunia couldn’t help but contrast her nephew’s behaviour during the drive to the train with Dudley’s. Harry climbed into the back seat of the car without a word and immediately fastened his safety belt. Dudley dashed for the front seat but refused to wear his safety belt, instead getting up on his knees and turning around to poke at his cousin. Growing bored when the smaller boy refused to make a fuss, Dudley then rolled his window all the way down and started fiddling with the wireless, changing from channel to channel with the volume up full before complaining that he couldn’t find anything worth listening to and repeatedly kicking the dashboard. Vernon had always excused such behaviour, saying that Dudley was just a rambunctious little boy and he’d outgrow it eventually, but she was starting to wonder if she might somehow encourage Dudders to sit quietly in the car. Petunia hadn’t driven very often before Vernon died, and she was still less than comfortable behind the wheel. Diddyums might be a perfect angel in most ways, but he is rather a distraction when I am driving, she thought, unlike my nephew. It galled her to admit that there was anything about the boy that she preferred over her son, but she was honest enough to acknowledge it.

“Thank you for the ride, Aunt Petunia,” Harry said politely as they pulled up at the train station and he climbed out of the car. He had his ticket in his pocket already plus a change of clothes and a dozen cards he’d made at Princess Di’s suggestion in his backpack, so he just needed to go through to the platform to wait for the train.

“You’re welcome,” she replied. “You’ll be back at the usual time tomorrow?”

“I expect so,” the boy answered.

“Unless you catch AIDS from one of the poofs in hospital and die!” Dudley hollered from the passenger seat. “And I hope you do!”

Petunia was shocked by her son’s vicious tone. “Why, Dudley darling, what a horrible thing to wish on anyone,” she chided gently.

Dudley’s jaw dropped and he stared stupidly at his mother for a long moment before his expression turned sulky. “He’s just a useless freak and a waste of space, like Daddy always said,” he pouted. “So what difference does it make? Don’t you love me anymore, Mummy? How come you’re defending him?”

“Oh, Duddikins, of course I love you!” Petunia exclaimed. “I just want to make sure everyone else sees what a fine young man you are… and you know some people don’t like hearing people say
they wish someone else would die, no matter who it is.”

Harry shook his head in amazement as the car pulled away with Dudley still sulking beside Aunt Petunia. He never thought he’d see the day that she would ever chastise his cousin, much less that such an event would occur over something Dudley said to him. He’d have to be on the lookout come Tuesday when school resumed, as his cousin would surely blame him for Aunt Petunia’s scolding. Since his first tae kwon do test was scheduled that day, he didn’t want to have to take it while hurt, or worse yet, be too hurt to be able to take it. As he boarded the train to London, he thought perhaps he’d ring up Lucy on Sunday or Monday. Her mum often drove her home after school, especially now that the weather was turning cooler, because the leukemia left her more vulnerable to illness. Perhaps her mum would be willing to drop him at the dojang since it would only be a couple of streets out of the way to her house.

Arriving in London, Harry expected to see Officer Kirke or another of the black-suited security men waiting for him. To his surprise and pleasure, he saw Sirius on the platform instead. “Uncle Sirius!” he shouted as he jumped down the steps. “I didn’t expect to see you!”

Sirius caught Harry up in a hug. “Stephen set it up with Her Royal Highness and the security people,” he told his godson with a big smile. “Since the original plan was for him to accompany you on this jaunt, until everyone realised he had classes he couldn’t miss today, he suggested I go along instead. And we decided to keep my going a secret to surprise you with.”

“Brilliant!” Harry enthused. “I get to see you today as well as tomorrow.”

“And you’ll be staying the night at Grimmauld Place, not the palace,” Sirius told him. “Moony will want to hear all about the trip today. I’ve got the bike with me here; I’m to bring you to the palace and we’ll all go in the official cars from there to Great Ormond Street Hospital.” He guided Harry towards the car park and his bike. “I have to admit, I’m interested to see how muggle healers work. Is it true that they actually sew people up like mending a robe if they get a big cut?”

Harry grinned. “Yes, sometimes. Since there isn’t anything magical they can do to keep a bad cut from re-opening, they put in stitches to keep the edges together and that lets it heal over time.”

Sirius wrinkled his nose. “That sounds bizarre. Doesn’t it hurt?”

Harry shrugged. “I’ve never needed stitches, so I don’t know,” he said. “I heard they give a shot of something to make it numb before they put the stitches in, though, so all the patient feels when they’re done is the needle with the medicine… the potion, I guess you’d call it.”

“I still think it sounds bizarre,” Sirius said, fitting a helmet on Harry’s head and loading the boy’s backpack into the cargo box on his bike. “But I suppose I’ll see for myself soon.”

They rode off into the London traffic, arriving at one of the smaller and less public entrances to Buckingham Palace, where Officer Kirke met them. He had Sirius turn the motorcycle over to another security officer as soon as Harry retrieved his cards, and then led them through to what appeared to be a comfortable sitting room. “Have a seat; Her Royal Highness and Prince William will join you momentarily,” the officer told them before vanishing through another door.

They waited perhaps five minutes before that door flew open again and Prince William dashed in, followed at a more sedate pace by his mother. “Harry!” the young prince cried joyfully. “It’s so good to see you!”

Harry and Sirius both jumped to their feet and bowed. “It’s good to see you, too, Your Highnesses,” Harry said with a smile. “May I present my godfather, Lord Sirius Black? Uncle Sirius, this is
Diana, Princess of Wales and Prince William.”

Diana grinned and applauded lightly. “Very nicely done, Harry,” she praised. “I see you’ve been studying. Lord Black, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Harry spoke of you often when we were on holiday.”

Wills gave a sunny smile and added, “It’s nice to meet you, sir.”

Sirius returned both smiles. “It’s wonderful meeting both of you as well. I’ve heard all about you both ever since I was able to start seeing Harry regularly. And please, call me Sirius… whenever someone says Lord Black, I want to look over my shoulder to find my father.”

Diana laughed. ‘Oh, I can understand that feeling! Very well, Sirius, although I’d prefer it if Wills calls you Mr. Black, rather than by your first name, as you’re an adult but neither a relative nor a servant.”

Sirius nodded agreeably. “Sure, I’m fine with that, Your Highness.”

She smiled. “All right, then, if we’re all ready, we should be off. Have either of you visited a hospital before?”

“Once, on a school excursion,” Harry said. “But we didn’t get close to any patients. They showed us some of the treatment rooms, but not while anyone was being treated.”

“I’ve never been,” Sirius said.

Diana nodded. “We’ll be visiting the Children’s Oncology Centre and the AIDS ward today. I’ll warn you now, some of them are going to look positively horrid due to their illnesses and the treatments. You don’t have to get close if you’re uncomfortable, but you mustn’t show any discomfort in your expression. Especially on the AIDS ward… you’d think that by now, the general population would have it through their heads that it can’t be transmitted by casual contact, yet to this day I’ve seen hospital staff who ought to know better refuse to so much as shake hands with an AIDS patient unless they’re wearing surgical gloves. The first time I visited the ward, I hugged the young man I was speaking with, and he cried. He said it was the first affectionate gesture he’d gotten from anyone since he’d been diagnosed.”

“That’s awful,” Sirius declared. “I’ll follow your lead, Your Highness, as best I can.” He grinned a bit, “Although I’ll restrict myself to pats on the shoulder and the like, if that’s acceptable. Hugging a good friend is one thing, but I’m not entirely comfortable hugging a stranger.”

Di chuckled as she led the way out to the waiting car. “I can understand that, Sirius, and that’s fine. I just don’t want to make them feel worse than they already do, by bringing someone along who’ll do one of these numbers.” She proceeded to screw up her face in revulsion and hunch in on herself as if trying to avoid touching something both nasty-smelling and slimy.

Sirius laughed. “I can certainly manage not to do that,” he said.

Harry looked up from whispering with Wills. “Oncology… that’s cancer treatment, right?”

“Yes, it is, Harry,” Di answered. “I’m surprised you know that.”

“My friend Lucy from school, she has cancer. Leukemia, only it’s in remission, she said. But a lot of the kids won’t play with her because she looks funny… very skinny and pale, and she hasn’t got any hair. Well, it’s starting to grow back now, but she didn’t have any at all at the start of term. She said that the chemotherapy made all her hair fall out, even her eyelashes,” Harry explained. “Her
family moved to Surrey from Yorkshire, to be closer to her oncologist.”

“Cancer treatment makes people lose their hair?” Sirius blurted, looking shocked.

“Sometimes, yes,” Diana said. “The drugs that kill off the cancer cells unfortunately also damage healthy ones. I’ve no idea why hair cells are so vulnerable, but they are. Harry, I’m glad your friend is in remission, and even happier to know that you’re friends with her despite the fact that she looks funny right now.”

Harry reddened. “I’d be as bad as Dudley if I wouldn’t be friends with someone just because they look funny. A few of the kids used to tell me I looked funny, when I had the old taped-up glasses and Dudley’s old clothes to wear.”

“Dudley’s the one who looks funny,” Wills said with a mischievous giggle. “He’s so fat; he looks like a dressed-up pig with a wig on its head.”

Harry and Sirius both snickered at that, and Diana couldn’t help but grin, even as she shook her head. “Wills, you know better than to say things like that out loud. You’d get some leeway because you’re so young, but you remember what nasty things were in the papers when Aunt Sarah was overheard saying something less than polite about Lady Swynford’s hat and dress at Ascot.”

The young prince wrinkled his nose. “Oh… I forgot. That was when you told me that even though lying is wrong, sometimes it’s better to tell a little lie to be polite than to tell the truth when it’s rude. Right, Mummy?”

“Exactly,” Di nodded. “Can you think of an example?”

Wills thought, but shook his head. Sirius grinned. “I can,” he said. “Never, ever tell a woman that what she’s wearing makes her bum look big, even if it does… and especially not if she asks. That’s not only rude, it’s likely to get you in trouble with the lady in question.”

“Why would she ask, if she didn’t want you to tell the truth?” Wills asked, looking puzzled.

“Sometimes ladies worry that they’re not pretty enough or something. But they feel awkward about coming right out and asking if you think they’re pretty, so they ask if they look bad instead, hoping you’ll say no,” Sirius explained. “So always tell ladies how pretty they look.”

Diana chuckled as both boys nodded. “For a bachelor, you seem to have quite a good grasp on being in a relationship,” she commented.

Sirius shrugged and gave her a self-deprecating grin. “Eh, I paid attention when Lily was getting James trained up right,” he said. “Back then, I’d still figured on getting married at some point, so I thought I might as well learn from his mistakes and save myself some trouble in the future.”

Di tilted her head. “Do you no longer think you’ll marry?” she asked.

“Well, I’m not against the idea,” he said. “But Stephen was explaining a bit about genetics to me and my cousin and her husband a few weeks back, and to be honest, what he had to say made me rather nervous about producing children given my family history. So if I was to ever marry, it would have to be someone who wouldn’t mind not having children. I suppose it could happen, but I’m simply not going to worry about it one way or another at this time.”

“A sensible attitude,” she agreed as the car pulled up in front of Great Ormond Street Hospital.

Princess Diana exited the car first, followed by Prince William. Harry went next and Sirius brought
up the rear. A white-coated doctor met the group at the door and escorted them into the building. Sirius had to smother a grin while the boys exchanged eye rolls at the man’s fawning manner as he spoke to Diana. “I thought perhaps you’d like to read a story or two to the children in the Oncology Centre, Your Highness,” he said. “I know that would make the children most happy. And then afterwards, I understand you visit the AIDS ward… are you sure you wish to risk your son there? Oh, I know the chances are slim, but it is still possible, after all.”

Diana took a deep breath. “Yes, Doctor, I have every intention of bringing Prince William into the AIDS ward with me. I’m well aware that many of the patients there have been rejected by their families, and they can use some cheering up. My son and his friend have both made cards that they wish to give out, to brighten the days of people who don’t get to see their own nieces and nephews anymore.”

A look of disapproval crossed the doctor’s face for a brief moment before he smoothed his expression out once more. “As you wish, Your Highness,” he said. “Come right this way, then.” He led them down the corridor and into a separate wing of the hospital. Harry noticed a few nurses and orderlies peeking out of rooms as the group walked by, and caught a few excited whispers as they passed, the whisperers seeming thrilled at getting a personal glimpse of the Princess of Wales and Prince William.

At the far end of the wing, the corridor opened into a large dayroom. About twenty children ranging in age from perhaps four up to twelve were gathered there, chattering happily amongst themselves. A hospital volunteer keeping watch over them clapped her hands sharply when the group entered, and the children quieted down, then chorused, “Good afternoon, Your Highness!”

“Good afternoon, everyone,” Diana smiled. She went around and gave each of them a gentle hug, careful of their IV needles and other medical paraphernalia attached to them. “How are all of you feeling today?”

Answers ranged from, “Not bad,” to, “A little tired and achy,” to one rather cheeky, “Glad you decided to come here today, Your Highness, because I talked ‘em into putting off my new round of chemotherapy until tomorrow so I wouldn’t be sick all over you.” Diana, Wills, and Harry all giggled at that reply.

Sirius managed to smile slightly when the other three laughed, but he was too shocked at the appearance of the young patients to be truly able to participate in the banter. Oh, sure, he’d guessed that they would be rather sickly-looking, and Harry had mentioned the hair loss his friend had suffered, so the number of bald heads didn’t surprise him. But he hadn’t expected that some of the children would be sporting bruises all over their arms and legs, or that some of them would be wearing some sort of mask over their noses and mouths. And he certainly hadn’t expected that all of them would have little metal spikes attached to tubes stuck into their arms, with the tubes attached at the other end to pouches of liquid hanging from poles on wheels, which the children had to pull along with them whenever they moved about.

“Everyone, I know you know who I am, and most of you probably also have seen Prince William,” Diana said, indicating her son. “And this is his friend Harry, and Harry’s godfather Mr. Black.”

“Hello, Harry and Mr. Black,” the children greeted them.

“Hello, everyone,” Harry and Sirius answered.

“Story first, or questions and answers first?” Diana asked them. “And if it’s story, which one?”

The smallest child, a boy of about four, pulled a book out from behind him in his chair. “This one,
please, Your Highness?” he requested shyly, holding out The Little Engine That Could.

Diana smiled. “Of course, darling. Would you like to sit on my lap whilst I read it?”

“May I?” he said with a smile. She responded by lifting him up and settling him comfortably with her while Sirius, Harry, and Wills also found seats.

Sirius looked down, surprised by a tugging on his sleeve. “May I sit on your lap, Mr. Black?” a little girl of perhaps six whispered. “You look a lot like my Daddy but he had to go away and I miss him.”

“Oh, sweetie…” Sirius scooped her up, a little awkwardly as he tried not to disturb the metal thing in her arm. “Why did your Daddy have to go away?”

“He joined the RAF after I got sick, ‘cause it paid better than his old job did, so Mummy could quit her job to stay home and take care of me better. But he got ‘signed to the base in the Falklands last month, ‘cause he’s a brilliant aeroplane mechanic,” she said.

Sirius hugged her gently. “I bet he’s the best aeroplane mechanic in the whole RAF,” he said softly. He really wasn’t certain what the RAF might be, but at least he had some idea of what aeroplanes were. “But I know he wishes he could be here with you and your Mummy.”

She curled up against his chest with a little smile, as Harry and Wills found seats with the rest of the children and Princess Di opened the book to start reading. After the story, Di opened the floor to questions, which mostly were about her day to day life. A couple of the youngsters wanted to know how Wills and Harry had met, and when Harry mentioned his school, one girl brightened a bit and asked him to give her greetings to Lucy. The two had met during chemotherapy rounds over the summer, she explained, and Lucy had mentioned that she would be starting classes there in the fall as long as her health permitted it. He promised that he would.

The oldest of the boys asked Sirius what he did for work. The animagus, not expecting the question, blinked. “Oh… I’m working with a friend to write new textbooks for a course about different cultures,” he said. It was stretching the truth a bit, but Lucius had owled just that morning to say that his committee was willing to accept Remus as the author of the textbook for their Wizarding Culture course. He was going to give Moony the news that evening.

The boy wrinkled his nose. “That sounds dead boring,” he said.

Diana jumped in to defend Sirius with a grin. “The writing of a textbook might not be exciting,” she said, “but learning about other cultures is quite useful. What if you were to travel around the world when you grow up, perhaps on business? Would you want to insult your hosts by accident?”

“Well, no,” the lad said. “But I know manners pretty well, I think. Mum taught me to chew with my mouth closed and not to belch at the table or anything like that.”

“Ah, but if you were in China, you’d want to belch at the table,” Di informed him, to giggles all around. “In Chinese culture, it’s considered a compliment to the chef, and a sign that you’ve eaten well and enjoyed your meal. I actually had to learn to belch at will before my first visit there, so that no one would be offended that I didn’t enjoy my meal.” More giggles greeted that statement. “And did you know that in Saudi Arabia it’s very rude to eat with your left hand, or even to use your left hand to pass food along to someone else at the meal?”

“Even if you’re left-handed? How come?”

Di grinned. “Because going way back in history, when most Arabs were still desert nomads living
in tents, they couldn’t wash their hands every time they had to heed the call of nature… and they didn’t have loo rolls either. So to keep from making themselves ill, they reserved the right hand for food and the left for, ah, personal hygiene purposes.”

“You mean they used to wipe their bums with their hands?” The boy asking sounded torn between laughter and disgust. Most of the other children were giggling and making faces as well.

“We used to be as bad here in England,” Sirius put in. “Worse in some ways. Back in medieval times, when the king held a feast, no one was allowed to leave the room until he officially ended it, including to heed nature’s call. So they’d simply adjust their clothes a bit and, well, be pouring the drink in one end while pouring out what they’d already drunk at the other, right there under the table.” Everyone burst into laughter at that, even Diana and the hospital volunteer.

“And they used to empty the night jars out the window into the streets back then, too,” Harry added. “The book I was reading about medieval times said that London was especially bad… that people wouldn’t walk close to the buildings for fear of getting doused by someone dumping a jar from an upstairs window.”

Diana tried to get the conversation back on track. “So you see, the ancient Arabs at least made an attempt to keep things as clean as possible, given their lifestyle and circumstances. They may not need to do it that way anymore, but the tradition persists.”

“Do we have traditions for things that don’t need to be done that way anymore?” one girl asked.

“Yes,” Di nodded. “It’s traditional for a gentleman to offer his left arm to a lady when he’s escorting her somewhere, because in the past, that left his right hand free to wield his sword in her defense.” She glanced at the clock, and then around the room, taking a quick head count. “And I think that will the addition of Wills and Harry, we have enough gentlemen to escort all the young ladies present back to their rooms, as our time with you is up and you all need to have lunch shortly. Everyone line up by size, now.”

The girls all giggled as they lined up, while about half the boys just rolled their eyes. Harry and Wills inserted themselves into the boys’ line. They all watched as Sirius offered his arm to Princess Diana and she took it with a smile. The boys all followed suit, offering their arms to the girls opposite them and they all strolled down the hallway with only the hospital robes and IV poles spoiling the illusion of a deportment lesson. Diana gave each child a hug as they got to their rooms, and the little girl who’d sat with Sirius during storytime insisted on hugging him as well and showing him a picture of her father, who did somewhat resemble the animagus but for having brown eyes and an olive complexion.

Once all the children were settled, the fawning doctor reappeared to escort them to the AIDS ward. This time he positioned himself at the door of the ward, radiating his disapproval when Diana, followed by Wills, Harry, and Sirius, greeted each patient with a hug. Sirius, as promised, contented himself with smiles and handshakes, while Wills and Harry took turns in giving out the cards they’d made. As there were only about ten patients on the ward today, the little group spent several minutes chatting with each one.

Since he hadn’t given out all his cards, Harry paused at the nurses’ desk as they were leaving and set the rest of them down. “When new patients come in, Sister, will you give these out to them?” he asked the nurse on duty. “I’d made a bunch since we didn’t know how many we’d need today.”

The doctor made a huffing noise, but Diana smiled and nudged Wills, who added his leftover cards to the pile. “Mine too, please, Sister,” he said.
The nurse smiled at the boys. “Of course, and thank you both. That’s very thoughtful of you.”

Harry smiled back. “Thank you, Sister.”

Once they were all back out in the official limousine, Sirius sagged a bit and ran his hand over his face. “That was…” He shivered. “Those metal spike things they all had in their arms. What were they? And why didn’t you warn me that they’d be there?”

Diana frowned. “Oh goodness… I’m sorry, Sirius, I should have thought of that. They’re just so… familiar… that I suppose I don’t really notice them anymore. I forgot that you grew up in a family that used holistic remedies and so you wouldn’t have seen an IV before,” she said with a glance at Wills.

Sirius nodded, understanding that whatever exactly ‘holistic remedies’ might be, the term would mean enough to the little prince so that he wouldn’t ask awkward questions. “So what does an IV do?” he asked.

“It delivers fluid and medication directly into the bloodstream,” she explained. “That’s why the needles in the arms. Chemotherapy is notorious for causing nausea and vomiting, so an IV is always started beforehand, so that the patient won’t become dehydrated even if nothing including water will stay down.”

“Oh, well that makes sense. I just didn’t realise… and it looked so awful…” Sirius shivered again. “That poor little girl, missing her dad on top of being in hospital. And yet most of the children seemed so… so cheerful… despite being ill.”

Di smiled. “Today’s group was fairly cheerful,” she said. “Great Ormond Street Hospital has some of the best oncologists in Britain on staff, and according to the briefing I got, every one of those children is expected to be in remission within two months.” Her smile widened into a grin. “As for your little friend, I’m going to make some inquiries. Her father may be a brilliant aeroplane mechanic, but I suspect he’s as unhappy being overseas while his little girl is ill, as she is with having him gone. Surely there’s an RAF base within reach of London that could use him in exchange for one of the mechanics currently stationed there.”

“That’s awfully kind of you,” Sirius said with a smile of his own as they pulled into the palace drive.

She blushed slightly, giving a bit of a shrug. “Well, a good attitude makes for better healing, so why not do what I can to help raise her spirits?” She led the group to the apartment shared by Wills and little Harry, who was there playing Candyland with the governess on duty.

“Harry!” the younger boy squealed when his brother and his friend entered. He jumped up to hug the green-eyed boy. “Are you having fun in school this year? I think mine is brilliant! Are you staying for tea?”

“Hello, Harry, yes, school is going well this year. And I don’t know if I’m staying for tea or not,” Harry replied, hugging the smaller child back.

“He is, if his godfather says it’s all right,” Diana smiled.

Sirius smiled as well. “I have no objections,” he said. “I’m sure the three of you boys have lots to talk about.”

Diana rang for tea before directing Sirius to the far end of the room, where they could keep an eye on the boys while being far enough away to grant them the illusion of privacy as well as hear each
other despite the chatter from the three of them. Sirius took the opportunity to ask for more details about muggle medicine, while Di responded with questions about the wizarding world. Eventually their conversation turned to music, something they shared a love for. Sirius promised to come up with a way to introduce her to the music of the Weird Sisters and other wizarding bands, while Diana promised him tapes of some of her favourite bands that had become popular during his time in Azkaban. She also gave him the bad news that Freddie Mercury of Queen appeared to be seriously ill, although he had not as yet made any sort of official statement with regards to his health, so she didn’t know what he might be suffering from. “As a public figure myself, I do my best to respect the privacy of others, you know?” she said. “I’ve seen him at a few functions over the last year, and he very much looks as though something is amiss. But aside from a general ‘how are you?’ sort of query if I am speaking with him, I feel that his health is his business until such time as he chooses to make it public. Even if the rumors are true and he has AIDS or cancer or something equally life-threatening, as far as I’m concerned, he has the right to handle it as he wishes.”

Sirius nodded. “Understandable. I just hope whatever might be wrong is something he’ll be able to get through all right. The world of music will be a much poorer place if he’s no longer in it.”

Di nodded her agreement, but before she could say anything else, a lady-in-waiting entered. “Your Highness, I’m sorry to interrupt, but you do have to get ready for your benefit dinner for Centrepoint.”

The princess glanced at the clock and sighed. “So I do. Well, it’s getting near time for the boys to get washed up for dinner as well, and I don’t even know how long it will take you to get Harry back to your place for the evening, Sirius. It’s been a pleasure getting acquainted, though, and I do hope you’ll be accompanying your godson to the ballet with us come December.”

Sirius stood with a smile, and bowed gracefully. “I have every intention of it, Your Highness, and it’s been lovely chatting with you as well.” He grinned. “And thank you for not taking the mickey over my ignorance earlier today.”

Diana laughed at that, and gave Harry a hug when he came over to make his farewells. “I’m looking forward to seeing you again come December, Harry,” she told him. “Also, I’ve spoken with Princess Anne, and she’s agreeable to having Zara and one of her friends come for a dance lesson along with you and Wills. We’re still working on the details, but we’re hoping to have you to Highgrove for a few days over the Christmas hols.”

Harry smiled. “I’m looking forward to it as well, Your Highness,” he said eagerly. “Even to the dance lesson. I had fun, when you were teaching me up at Balmoral.” He took Sirius’ hand as the lady-in-waiting cleared her throat impatiently.

“Frances will see you out,” Di said, holding out her hand to Sirius. “Your motorbike will be waiting for you.”

Sirius bowed over her hand, kissing it lightly instead of shaking it as she’d expected, and she flushed just faintly. “Once again, Your Highness, thank you for including me in your day with my godson. Until December, then.” He backed up a few steps before turning to follow the lady-in-waiting with Harry, through the palace and out to where the security officer stood waiting with his bike. He got Harry’s helmet strapped on, mounted up, and held the machine steady while the officer helped Harry mount behind him. With the characteristic rumble, he pulled the big Harley out into the road, heading for Grimmauld Place.
Remus was already there when Harry and Sirius arrived at 12 Grimmauld Place. When he heard the bike approaching, he called for the house-elves to get supper on the table. Harry was laughing as the two came inside.

“But why were they all looking at us like that?” Sirius asked, a confused expression on his face. “I mean, my bike doesn’t look any different from any other muggle motorcycle.”

“But most muggles wouldn’t ride one at this time of year,” Harry explained through his chuckles. “They can’t cast warming charms, after all, and moving as fast as a motorcycle does makes the air feel even colder than it is already. So they thought you were barmy for riding at all, and worse for subjecting me to the ride as well.”

Sirius nodded, his expression clearing. “Oh, now I understand! Maybe I should buy a car, then? Especially since I might need to bring you to muggle places again this winter. Hi, Moony,” he smiled at his old friend as they entered the dining room.

“Hi, Uncle Moony,” Harry said, giving the werewolf a hug before sitting in what had become his usual spot at the table.

Remus smiled warmly as he returned Harry’s hug. “Hello, pup,” he said. “Did you and Pads have fun today?”

Harry shrugged a little. “Mostly, although I think seeing everyone in hospital bothered Uncle Sirius more than he expected. But after, I had fun talking and playing with Wills and little Harry, and Uncle Sirius seemed to get along well with Princess Diana.”

Sirius shivered a bit. “It was those spike things in their arms that bothered me,” he said. “IVs, wasn’t it? Her Highness said those IV things put medicines… that’s what muggles call potions, right?... directly into the bloodstream, so that when the illness makes them sick, they won’t just sick up their medicines. And that if they’re even sicking up plain water, the IVs will also keep them from getting dehydrated. But it just looked so horrible, especially on the littlest children.”

Remus wrinkled his nose. “That does sound horrible.”

“Her Highness is really nice, though,” Sirius said, brightening a bit once more. “One little girl wanted to sit on my lap during storytime, because she said I looked a bit like her father, who is overseas with his job. She showed me his picture, and the man does look a little like me. Anyway, Princess Diana said after we left that she’d make some inquiries and see if she couldn’t get that little girl’s father transferred back to England. And we talked for a while after, while Harry was playing with her boys at the palace. She’s going to get me some tapes of various muggle bands she likes, and I’m going to figure out a way to make a tape of the Weird Sisters for her. I’m hoping Arthur Weasley might be able to help with that, since he loves all things muggle so much, maybe he’s come up with a way to keep magic from making bat-rees go bad so quickly. I’ve seen the newest muggle tape machines, and they’ve got a wireless built right in. So if I get one and enchant it to pick up the WWN as well as muggle channels, I should be able to make tapes of wizarding music… as long as the bat-rees don’t go bad in the middle of recording.”

Remus and Harry chuckled. “Your mother would be appalled,” Remus said. “But I suppose that’s as good a reason as any to get one.”
“Once you have it, can either of you teach me how wizards dance?” Harry asked. “Lady Malfoy said that once we got done with learning formal table settings and occasions, we’d be moving on to balls. Her Highness taught me a little bit about dancing when we were on holiday, and she’s going to give me and Wills another lesson over the Christmas hols, but I’ve noticed that wizards do a lot of things that muggles would consider old-fashioned, so I wouldn’t be surprised if the dances are different, at least for formal things like balls.”

“Huh… maybe that’s something else you should include in your book, Moony,” Sirius grinned. “Speaking of which, Lucius owled before I left this morning, his committee wants you to write the textbook for the wizarding culture course. Harry, what sort of things would muggles consider old-fashioned?”

“Sending messages with flowers, that’s the really big one,” Harry answered promptly. “The etiquette book Stephen and I got in Diagon Alley had a whole chapter about that, and the meanings of flowers. But when I looked up a muggle etiquette book in the library, the only thing it said about flowers was that it was appropriate for a gentleman to get a corsage for the lady he’s escorting to a formal dance, and he should be sure to get something that will look nice with the color dress she’s wearing. And if he knows her favourite flower, it’s a nice touch to include it in the corsage.”

“Learn something new every day,” Remus chuckled. “I didn’t realise muggles don’t know the language of flowers myself. Of course, it’s not as though I’ve had anyone I’ve cared to send flowers to either. And given my furry little problem, that’s probably just as well.”

“The right woman won’t care, Moony,” Sirius said. “Sod the laws anyway. I’ll be taking my seat on the Wizengamot after the New Year, and I’m going to see if I can’t get some of the restrictions eased. There’d be fewer problems overall, I would think, if more of you could get decent-paying jobs and so better afford the wolfsbane and a secure place to transform.” He tilted his head and asked, “And how did you manage the second part, all these years? I know you’ve been using the back garden here, since it’s got the anti-muggle charms on it along with the rest of the house. But wolfsbane or not, you can hardly have transformed in your old flat.”

Remus grinned. “I apparated up to the Shrieking Shack, of course, and home again in the morning. I figured it wouldn’t hurt anything to add to the tales of the haunting there.”

Sirius laughed, and explained to Harry, “The Shrieking Shack is the name of the hut that Remus used for his transformations back in our Hogwarts days. Before the wolfsbane potion was invented, the transformations were quite painful, and so the place got the name as well as the reputation of being the most haunted place in Britain, all due to his howls and cries back then. Last I knew, no one would even consider going there at night, for fear of the horrible spirit haunting the place.”

Harry grinned as well. “That’s actually pretty clever. Do you think someday I’ll learn to be an animagus so I can transform with you too?”

“I don’t see why not,” Remus said. “Mind, it’s not the easiest thing to do, and you need to be better than average at transfiguration. But I’ve always thought that more people would be able to do it, if it wasn’t made out to be such an extraordinary feat.”

“What lessons were we going to do tomorrow, anyway?” Harry asked.

“That depends,” Sirius said. “I owl-ordered a beginners’ indoor herbology starter kit that’s supposed to be here no later than tomorrow morning, but as I’ve heard Remus say about the muggle post, the more you want something in particular to arrive, the more likely it is to arrive late.”
Harry nodded. “I heard Uncle Vernon say more than once that bills always arrived on time, and everything else came at least three days late. A least a week late, if it contained money.”

Sirius chuckled. “Well anyway, if the kit comes in, we’ll do an introduction to herbology and potions. If it doesn’t, we’ll do potions and whatever other subject you feel like, how’s that sound?”

“All right,” Harry agreed with a smile.

The conversation turned to more tales of Harry’s parents as the house elves cleared the meal and brought out a large Banoffee pie for afters. Remus offered to teach Harry to play chess and Sirius coached his godson from the sidelines. Moony’s chessmen didn’t like that, and kept giving Sirius the two-fingered salute whenever his suggestions worked out, which kept Harry in a near-perpetual state of giggles until bedtime.

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One of the Malfoy’s elegant eagle owls arrived with a letter just as Stephen did the next morning. Harry gave the huge bird a piece of his bacon while Sirius scanned the letter and started laughing. “Lucius wants us to come for lunch, even though this isn’t the week we usually give the boys lessons together,” he said. “They had the Tonks family over for dinner yesterday, and apparently Ted finally went through with the Heritage Trace. He’s not heir to anyone, but he’s related to the Clearwaters, the Rosiers, the Prewetts, and the Fudges. Lucius admits that three of three muggleborns turning out to be from squib lines is more than just a coincidence, and wants to talk to both you and I, Stephen, about how to adjust people’s thinking and better welcome the ‘recovered bloodlines’ as he puts it, into the wizarding world. Remus, he wants you to come as well, as he’d like your opinions about the Wizarding Culture course and the textbook that you’ll be writing. Harry, Draco wants you to bring your broom since the weather is supposed to be clear in Wiltshire this afternoon.”

Harry gave an exuberant whoop and dashed upstairs to retrieve his broom, causing all three men to chuckle. “When do we leave?” the boy asked as he charged back into the dining room clutching his Cleansweep.

“At least two more hours,” Sirius told him. “You know as well as I do that the Malfoys have lunch around one most weekends, and it’s not quite ten now.” He summoned quill and parchment and penned a quick acceptance, attaching it to the patient owl’s leg before sending the bird on its way. “We’ve got time enough for a potions lesson before we go.”

Harry sighed, but brightened again. “Which potion are we doing today?” he asked eagerly.

“We’re up to the basic bruise ointment,” Stephen answered. “But we won’t have time to do that one today if we’re going to the Malfoys. It has to simmer for six hours, being stirred every half hour.” He held up the old potions textbook they were using for Harry’s lessons to show the instructions to the others.

“How about rainbow ink?” Remus suggested. “It’s not in the Hogwarts curriculum, of course, but I have the instructions for it in my prank journal, and it only takes about an hour.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Sirius nodded. He looked at his godson with a grin. “And I really want to know where you get this love of potions from. James hated potions class with a passion. Only reason he continued taking it NEWT-level was because he needed a NEWT in it to qualify for auror training.”

“Lily loved potions, though,” Remus reminded his friend as he stood up to go fetch his journal.
“Harry might look almost totally like his father, but he seems to have gotten more of Lily’s personality.”

Sirius nodded. “I just hope Sni… Snape doesn’t kill his interest due to his conflict with James,” he muttered. “Well, let’s head off to the lab, shall we?”

Harry grabbed one last piece of bacon before heading towards the basement stairs. Stephen had explained early on that potions labs in older houses were usually in the basement, as stone walls were far more resistant to damage from exploding or melting cauldrons than wood or plaster, should anything go wrong during the brewing process, and 12 Grimmauld Place was no exception. He thought about what Sirius said, and asked, “Uncle Sirius? Is there any way of changing what I look like? Permanently, I mean. It’s not that I dislike how I look or anything, but, well… even you sort of expect me to act just like my father sometimes, because of how much I look like him. I want people to see me, not a… a small version of James Potter.”

Sirius halted for a moment in shock. “I… yes, there are some things that can be done,” he said dazedly. “I don’t know if they’re safe on someone your age, though. Kind of like it’s not safe to do a magical eye correction before your magical maturity at age sixteen. Sometimes magical maturity, especially in someone powerful, can cause physical changes. Most often when it happens, it’s something like a growth spurt… the child going through it grows a couple of inches, literally overnight, something like that. But sometimes it will heal scars and such, and since the eye correction does something to change the shape of parts of your eyes, it can reverse that too. For whatever reason, the correction process tends not to work as well if it’s done a second time, so most healers just don’t bother mentioning it until after you’re sixteen. It’s why I hadn’t suggested you get it done yet.”

“I didn’t know you could correct vision with magic,” Harry said.

“Me either,” Stephen put in. “But we can look into the possibilities, Harry, all right?”

“Okay,” Harry agreed.

He washed his hands and set up his cauldron for the lesson. Remus came down to the lab with his journal and the brewing instructions, and took charge of the lesson since Stephen had no idea how to make rainbow ink.

Sirius pulled the younger man off to one side and put up a muffliato spell. “I didn’t realise how much being accepted as himself truly means to him,” he said. “And it’s true also that Snape is likely to look at him and see a miniature version of James. The man tolerated sitting at the table with me that one time, but that was for the sake of his own godson Draco. Lucius admits that Snape’s not good with kids in general, and that he dislikes teaching, but that he remains at Hogwarts because he owes Dumbledore in some way. I don’t know for sure, but I can’t help but wonder if maybe he’d been interested in Lily as more than a friend himself, at least up until that incident where we took it a little too far and he used the word mudblood when she tried to intervene. So he’ll not only be seeing a small James, he’ll be seeing his own lost opportunity to have had Lily for himself and been the father of her child, if I’m right.” He paused, and asked sheepishly, “Do I really treat Harry as if I thought he was James sometimes?”

Stephen frowned thoughtfully. “Well, you do tend to look puzzled and disappointed when he isn’t extremely enthusiastic about setting up pranks,” he said. “And it’s not that he hasn’t had fun with some of them, but he does prefer quieter pursuits. I think it’s because he’s had no friends at all until just a couple months ago, you know? So he enjoys reading and drawing, or practising his yoga or tae kwon do over playing football or something. Also, don’t forget he’s been abused. From what I’ve been able to gather, abused children tend to very much dislike being the centre of attention,
because if they’re being overlooked, they’re not being beaten.”

“And I have rather been expecting Harry to be a boisterous prankster who lives to be the life of the party, as it were,” Sirius admitted, looking chagrined. “As if I don’t know enough myself about being different from expectations, what with being the only Black ever sorted into Gryffindor. I should know better. Do me a favour and throw something at my head next time you notice me doing that again, will you?”

Stephen laughed. “I can do that,” he said with a nod. “What are your thoughts as to Harry’s request, though? It’s not anything I even knew could be done.”

“Well, there’s a second level of the blood adoption, that will give him some of the Black family features mixed with his own,” Sirius said. “I’m not sure that a small version of me would go over any better with Snape than Harry’s current looks are likely to do. But it’s not likely to do anything so extreme, and might change him up just enough to keep everyone from seeing ‘James, only with Lily’s eyes’ like he looks like now. I’ve just never heard of that level being done on anyone over a year old and don’t know if that makes a difference. Aside from that, I know it’s possible to do partial transfigurations and make them permanent; healers have done that to adjust the size of a woman’s... assets. Make ’em smaller if they’re causing her back pain, or bigger if she thinks she looks like a boy. But like the magical vision correction, those won’t be done on anyone younger than sixteen.” He chuckles, “And I doubt my godson wants that particular enhancement anyway.”

“I’m sure of it,” Stephen laughed. “Well, we’ll just have to look into that second level blood adoption thing, then.”

Sirius ended the muffliato and the two moved over to watch Harry’s progress as he sliced, diced, and chopped the various ingredients and added them to the cauldron at the appropriate moments. The animagus was surprised at Harry’s skill at preparation, now that he was trying to pay attention to what the boy was doing, rather than assuming that his godson was merely enduring the lesson and eagerly awaiting the chance to do anything else. “You’re better than most third-year students at prepping,” he said, sounding mildly impressed. “Most kids your age and even a little older don’t have such precise knife control.”

“I learned to cook before I started primary school,” Harry said quietly. “I liked cooking best of all my chores, even though it was hard to reach the cooker and the counters, because Dudley figured out pretty fast that he wouldn’t get fed as quickly if he hit me while I was cooking, because I might drop the food and have to start over. He might be dumb about most things, but even he knows better than to get in the cook’s way when he wants food, which is almost all the time. Anyway, potions kind of reminds me of cooking, because it’s like following a recipe, only with ingredients other than meat and veg and spices.”

“That makes perfect sense to me,” Remus nodded, as he and Sirius both hid their reactions to learning just how young Harry had been when he made to cook for his relatives. He peered into the cauldron with a smile as Harry added the last ingredient, a half-teaspoon of minced orris root. He gave seven clockwise stirs and the liquid within turned from a milky cream to a shimmering opalescent white. “And that looks perfect, take it off the heat now and let it cool; we’ll test it when we get back from the Malfoys later today.”

Harry carefully lifted the cauldron off the heat and set it to one side before picking up his mother’s wand to put out the flames. Sirius watched him and shook his head. “You know, I can’t believe I didn’t pay attention to that before. Looks or no looks, you’re obviously more like your mum than your dad or it would be his wand you’re using now instead of hers.”

His godson smiled. “They did both react, but yes, this one much more strongly than my dad’s,” he
replied as he washed his hands. “Is it time to go yet?”

“We’re a little early yet, but I don’t suppose they’ll mind,” answered the animagus. “Let’s go!” They all trooped upstairs and Harry grabbed his broom before they stepped through the floo two at a time.

A house elf greeted them in the transport room and informed them that the family was in the library, so Sirius led the way in. When he saw who was there, Draco brightened and murmured to his mother, “Am I the future Lord Malfoy right now or just Draco?”


He jumped up with a grin and raced over to greet Harry and check out the other boy’s broom, while the men greeted Narcissa and Sirius introduced Remus to Lucius as the two had not met before. They headed in to lunch, and the conversation turned almost immediately to the textbook for the wizarding culture course. Lucius was astonished to learn that muggles considered sending messages with flowers a quaint historical custom. “How in the blazes is a man supposed to tell his betrothed if he likes her or would prefer to leave her to her own devices so long as she causes no scandal? For that matter, how in Merlin’s name do they remain discreet in their assignations if they can’t signal to one another across a room with their flowers?”

Stephen shook his head. “Well, first of all, in current British culture, a married couple is supposed to stay faithful to one another. Normally this isn’t an issue, as most people choose their own mates; arranged marriages are exceedingly rare, and the few that still take place tend to crumble fairly quickly. It’s become common knowledge, for example, that Prince Charles wed Lady Diana Spencer because she was considered a good candidate to be a future queen, but in fact, he would have preferred to marry someone else that he’d courted some years earlier, but who was considered unsuitable. However, it’s patently obvious that His Highness goes out of his way to spend as little time as possible in his wife’s company.”

Harry, listening to the adults speaking, nodded. “They were really awkward to each other when Prince Charles showed up at Balmoral,” he said. “And Her Highness admitted to me that they’re not getting along well. Aunt Petunia likes reading the gossip newspapers, and I saw there’s speculation that they’ll divorce.”

“Is that even allowed?” Narcissa questioned.

Stephen nodded. “It is now, yes,” he said. “Since just after Grindelwald’s time, what muggles know as the Second World War, divorce has become more and more socially acceptable. You see, even back then, very few muggles had arranged marriages, and with the war on, people tended to rush into things for fear of one or both of them dying in combat or a bombing or something. From the stories I’ve heard, some couples back then ran off to Gretna Green less than a month after they’d met, so as to be married before the young man was shipped off to the front. And then it might well have been years before they saw each other again. Plenty of couples discovered once they’d been reunited that they had nothing in common and no real wish to even try to make a go of things together, and so divorce slowly but surely became a viable option. Nowadays it’s considered fairly commonplace, at least amongst the general population. If the Prince of Wales gets a divorce, however, that will be somewhat of a shock to many.” He chuckled and added, “And the truth is, Princess Diana is loads more popular with people than her husband is. It’s already suspected that he and his former paramour are seeing each other again despite both being married to others, so if they do divorce, the perception will be that the blame is solely on him, whether or not that’s actually true.”

Narcissa nodded. “I see. Divorce only just became legal in the wizarding world since the time of
Grindelwald, and there’s still a huge social stigma attached to a divorced person. Since about half of wizarding marriages are still arranged ones, the socially acceptable method of dealing with simple incompatibility is to produce an heir quickly and then appear together in public when necessary while ignoring your spouse’s little diversions while making sure your own little diversions remain discreet and easily ignored. There are only two reasons for divorce that would still allow a modicum of social acceptance— if the divorced person was a victim of spousal abuse, or if their former spouse sired or bore a child with someone other than them.”

Stephen smiled. “Well, that seems perfectly reasonable to me. Those were two of the earliest acceptable reasons for divorce, at least among the general population of muggles, too. The ruling classes had a bit more leeway, especially if a wife proved barren. She’d most often trot off to a religious house to live out her life in some comfort while he could then wed a younger and presumably fecund woman in order to produce an heir or two.”

Narcissa closed her eyes briefly, a hint of pain creasing her aristocratic features for a fleeting moment. Lucius reached out and took his wife’s hand before addressing Stephen. “We want to speak with one of those muggle healers that specialises in difficult childbearing,” he said quietly. “I think I need not point out that money is no object. All we want is another child. Will you help us with this?”

“Of course,” Stephen replied promptly. “First thing Monday, I’ll make some inquiries as to which doctors and facilities have the best records.” He considered what might be needed, and told them, “They will need records of your entire reproductive history for certain, and possibly all of your adult medical records. Can your healer translate magical diagnostics into the muggle sort for the muggle doctors to look over?”

Narcissa and Lucius looked at each other blankly for a moment. “I have no idea,” Lucius replied. “It’s not anything that’s come up before, you understand.”

“If the answer is no, with your permission, I’ll ask Healer Abbott to suggest someone who can, if he’s unable to do it himself,” Stephen said. “As painful as it might be for you to discuss the matter, the doctor will need to know everything. Very often, couples with problems having children show certain patterns of those problems, which as often as not gives some clues as to the solution.”

Sirius spoke up. “Also, you both need to know that muggle healing can be both incredibly advanced and completely barbaric at the same time. I went with Harry on a visit to a hospital in London yesterday, accompanying the Princess of Wales and young Prince William. On the one hand, muggles have developed potions that can fight and in some cases even cure cancer. On the other hand, they get those potions into the ones who need them, by means of a metal spike stuck in the arm, and some of the side effects of the cancer-fighting potions include hair loss.”

Stephen noticed Draco’s eyes had gone very big. “Harry, Draco, why don’t you go out flying now? I’m sure you have loads to talk about, and would rather not have to listen to us right now.”

Lucius nodded his permission and Draco stood up immediately. “Come on, Harry,” he said, tugging at his dark-haired friend. Harry stood and allowed the blond boy to lead him out of the dining room.

“I wasn’t sure how comfortable you would be going any further with this discussion in Draco’s presence,” Stephen said. “Sirius raised a good point. Muggle diagnostics and procedures are necessarily more invasive than the wizarding equivalent. While it will be done in a clinical manner, there will be some physical touching of, uh, intimate places.” He reddened, but went on anyway. “Obviously I’m not a woman so I don’t know exactly what’s involved and can’t tell you exactly what to expect. But I do know that there will be hands as well as medical equipment in private
places. If you want to go through with this, you will have to accept that.”

Narcissa looked a bit pale, but nodded. “I appreciate the warning. I can’t say I’m entirely comfortable with it, but… if the end result is that Lucius and I have another child, I can tolerate the discomfort.” She stood abruptly and brushed off her robe. “And now if you gentlemen will excuse me, I think I’ll go give the boys an audience for their aerial antics.” She hurried out of the room.

Lucius sighed. “That was awkward, but thank you for being brutally honest, Stephen. Better we have even a vague idea of what to expect, than to be frightened out of our wits while the healer is doing whatever it is that needs doing.” He smirked, “Or worse yet, me cursing the poor fellow for thinking he was attempting to assault my wife.” He stood as well. “Shall we adjourn to the library and get back to the subject of the wizarding culture textbook and course?”
Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy!

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

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The following weekend, Stephen frowned at the black eye Harry sported when he picked the boy up to go to Grimmauld Place. “What happened?” he asked. “Your cousin again?”

Harry shrugged. “Yes, he was mad because Aunt Petunia sort of scolded him over something he said to me when she dropped me at the station last week. So of course, that made it all my fault.” He grinned, though. “Anyway, I did manage to avoid him until after my tae kwon do test, which I passed. Master Soong says if I keep working hard, I’ll be able to take the next test right after New Year.”

Stephen smiled at his enthusiasm. “Well, that’s good, at least. But you say your aunt scolded your cousin? What did he say?”

“Oh, something about hoping I’d catch AIDS from one of the patients in hospital and die,” Harry said. “Aunt Petunia looked shocked and told him that he shouldn’t say such things out loud.” He laughed. “I don’t know if anyone else would even have considered that a real scolding, but Dudley looked as stunned as if he’d been told there was no ice cream left in the world, and then started whining because she was ‘defending the freak’ and probably didn’t love him anymore. They drove off at that point, so I don’t know what happened after that.”

Stephen laughed as well, making a mental note to put that into his next report to Her Majesty. “Well, it’s nice to know that your aunt is at least starting to see that her son isn’t the perfect angel she’s always made him out to be. But I’m sorry that your cousin blames you for her actions.”

Harry shrugged again. “Everything was my fault according to Uncle Vernon,” he said. “No matter what. I got punished if he got a flat tyre coming back from his work, because it was ‘obviously’ my freakishness that made the tyre go flat. So it’s no surprise that Dudley blames me for things like getting tossed out of the arcade back before school started, or for Aunt Petunia telling him not to say he wishes I’d die.”

“I see,” Stephen said thoughtfully. Apparently Petunia Dursley was developing a bit of conscience, now that her late husband was no longer influencing her thinking. “Well, it’s nice to know that your aunt is at least starting to see that her son isn’t the perfect angel she’s always made him out to be. But I’m sorry that your cousin blames you for her actions.”

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“I see,” Stephen said thoughtfully. Apparently Petunia Dursley was developing a bit of conscience, now that her late husband was no longer influencing her thinking. “Well, I suppose it could be worse. She’s still keeping him out of your room and the like?”

“Oh, yes,” Harry nodded. “And I get as much food as I want for breakfast and dinner now, too. Sure, I get the Tesco-brand cornflakes while Dudley gets the Honey Monster Sugar Puffs, but I can live with that. I still make my own lunches out of my cold compartment foods, though. Mostly because Dudley never wants anything but jam sandwiches for his lunch and since you explained about healthy eating being extra important for me because of how they used to not feed me enough, I want lunches that are more than just sugar on bread.” He grinned, “Not that I’ve anything against sweets, mind. I’ve bought myself a Toffee Crisp or Curly Wurly out of my pocket money after tae kwon do class sometimes. But for lunch, I want gammon and cheese or tuna or something on my sandwich, so I won’t be hyper for an hour and then fall asleep in afternoon lessons.”

Stephen laughed at that. “Good point, and good thinking. Are you keeping up that accounts book I
gave you? Not that I’m concerned with what you choose to spend your pocket money on, mind, but it is good practice for when you’re older and start handling your stipend on your own.”

Harry nodded. “I am! And I don’t mind that you see what I spend money on, because I know you won’t laugh at me, no matter what it is.” He was quiet for a moment, and then asked, “Stephen? I know there’s magic to make someone forget things. Is there some kind of magic that can… can persuade someone to give you information they aren’t supposed to? Not force them to do it, but make them think that you’re asking for a proper reason?”

Stephen was quiet for a moment. “I believe there is,” he replied, “although I don’t personally know how to do it. Why do you want to know?”

“Because I still want to know why Aunt Petunia isn’t on my Heritage Parchment,” Harry said. “I had a chance to get to the library a couple weeks back to learn how to go about looking up birth records and such, and I asked Aunt Petunia where she and my mum had been born, saying it was for school exercise. She said they were born in Cokeworth, so I wrote away to the General Register Office and they wrote back that Aunt Petunia’s records are sealed and she’s the only one who can ask for them. So I went back to the library this week, and found out that pretty much only happens when there’s a private adoption involved. But Aunt Petunia doesn’t seem to know she might be adopted.”

“Well, Harry, remember I told you that some people wouldn’t tell their adopted children that they were adopted, because there was a bit of a stigma to it,” Stephen said, his mind racing. “Petunia’s a muggle, he thought, and if she isn’t aware she’s adopted, she’d have no reason not to believe Dumbledore about blood wards protecting her family as long as Harry lived with them. Maybe the goblins can check the wards without triggering anything? He focused his attention on the boy once more. “But if we can prove that she’s not blood related to you, that’s one more point in favor of getting you away from there and living with your godfather once we’ve figured out why Dumbledore put you with her in the first place.”

Harry nodded. “That’s why I asked about magic to make people think it’s okay to tell you things even if you’re not supposed to be able to get that information. I thought maybe you or someone could make an inquiry at Cokeworth Hospital… tell them you found out your dying mother had a baby girl that she gave up for adoption and she wants to contact her daughter before she passes on. Or something like that.”

Stephen blinked. “Where in Circe’s name did you get an idea like that?” he asked, shaking his head.

“It’s right out of one of Aunt Petunia’s telly programmes,” Harry laughed. “Those shows are full of things like that in between the weddings and divorces. Sometimes they’re even mixed up together. One of them I remember from last year when I was still doing all the chores, the handsome young man was all set to marry some sweet young thing when they learned she was his half-sister.”

Stephen laughed as well. “I will never for the life of me understand what women find so fascinating with telly programmes like that,” he said. “But, that’s actually not too bad of an idea. You do know Petunia’s birth date, right? There can’t have been all that many baby girls born in Cokeworth on the one day, after all. We just need to find someone that knows a spell to be more persuasive… or just find someone persuasive enough on their own willing to go make the inquiry for you. We can bring it up with Sirius after lessons, if you’d like,” he added as they pulled up in front of 12 Grimmauld Place.

“Brilliant!” Harry exclaimed as he let himself out of the car and shot up the steps. “Hi, Uncle Sirius!” he greeted the animagus who’d opened the door.
“Hello, pup,” Sirius said with a smile, hugging the child. “The Malfoys are here already, and Draco wants you to pick whether to do estate management or etiquette first today.”

“That depends what we’re covering in etiquette,” Harry laughed, heading inside to find his friend. “Hi, Draco! What are today’s lessons supposed to be?” he asked as he stepped into the library.

Lucius and Narcissa emerged from the dining room as Harry vanished and Stephen stepped inside. “Were you able to get the information about those specialist healers?” Lucius asked with a faint trace of anxiety in his tone. “I… we… well, it’s become urgent we see one as soon as possible.”

Stephen smiled and took out a packet of information, which he handed over to the couple. “You’ll need a referral, but Rosie Hospital is considered one of the best for obstetrics as well as neonatal intensive care, should it be necessary… that’s specialised care for babies born too early, or severely underweight or with other medical problems. I also took the liberty of speaking with Healer Abbott. I didn’t give names, but simply said I knew of a wizarding couple with a history of difficulties in childbearing who wished to look into muggle alternatives, and was there a way to go about arranging it for someone who’d never been to a muggle doctor before? As it happens, due to the need to send any medical reports about muggleborn Hogwarts students to their muggle doctors, there’s an office within St. Mungo’s that handles such things. Healer Abbott told me you could go through them, both to get your medical records put into a form the muggle doctor will understand, and also to get your referral to the obstetrics clinic at Rosie Hospital.”

Narcissa gave a soft sigh of relief. “Oh, thank Merlin!” she murmured, one hand moving to her stomach.

Lucius slid a gentle arm around her shoulders. “Cissa… being able to see this doctor… let’s not get our hopes too high just yet. Yes, it’s a much better chance than the usual healer, but there’s still no guarantee, especially if the problem is with the… the jenna-ticks?” He glanced at Stephen, unsure if he had the correct word.

“Genetics,” Stephen said quietly. “Oh, one other thing to consider… the doctor is likely going to ask why you haven’t seen a specialist before now. I suggest you say something to the effect of your religion not precisely being against modern medical procedures, but that it sees them as being something of a court of last resort, so it wasn’t until you truly believed that you wouldn’t be able to carry again without intervention that you felt comfortable seeking the help. The religion statement will then, in the doctor’s mind, explain any number of things including your ignorance of the medical procedures and the hospital itself.”

Sirius nodded his agreement. “That does make sense. Remus told me that muggles have laws forbidding anyone from interfering in someone else’s religious beliefs. At most, the doctors might suggest you rethink waiting to seek medical help in the future, but they won’t refuse to help out of disapproval either.” He smiled a bit, and said, “And now for the silly question, how do you plan to get to Rosie Hospital once you’ve got your referral from St. Mungo’s?”

“How does one travel anywhere?” Lucius said. “We’d floo over of course, or apparate… oh. Right. Muggle hospital. Umm…”

The animagus chuckled. “Perhaps it’s time for you to buy a car and learn to drive?” he suggested. “I need to buy a car as well, I discovered. Yes, I do have the motorcycle and don’t plan to give it up, but I noticed any number of disgusted looks directed at me when I had Harry on behind me last weekend. He explained that most muggles thought I was mistreating him by making him ride on the bike in the cold and wind, because of course they haven’t got heating charms to keep them warm. So, since I’ll need to drive him about from time to time, including in winter, I’m going to get a car. I was thinking I’d ask Stephen to take me to a car dealer once the boys were in their lessons,
but perhaps we can wait until after you’ve done your part of the teaching, Lucius, and you can come along as well.”

“Why don’t we just skip the lessons this week?” Narcissa suggested. “I’ll floo over to St. Mungo’s to get that referral thing, along with getting our medical records put into muggle form, while you gentlemen take the boys and go look at cars. Perhaps you can give Lucius a lesson in driving a car, too, Stephen? He’ll have to pass some sort of exam in order to drive legally, isn’t that what you told me, Sirius?”

“Yes, but it’s fairly easy,” Sirius said. “A couple dozen questions about the various rules of driving, and then a short road test with an examiner riding along. There are booklets available to study from for the written portion of the exam.” He grinned at the blond man. “What sort of car do you want?”

Lucius drew himself up haughtily, although the glint of mischief in his eye indicated he was teasing as he answered, “Something befitting my status, of course. Malfoys only ever get the best, even when we’re condescending to embrace muggle transportation.”

Draco and Harry reappeared in the hall, wondering what was taking the adults so long, and heard Lucius’ remark. Draco blinked. “Muggle transportation, Father?”

Stephen grinned. “Your father and Sirius both want to buy cars, so we’re going to skip lessons today and go looking at some. We were just thinking about what sort of car would suit each of them.”

“A Rolls-Royce for Lord Malfoy,” Harry said shyly. “They’re very luxurious cars, and considered a status symbol by most everyone. The Queen’s official car is a Rolls-Royce.”

“I want something fun to drive,” Sirius put in. “Fast and maneuverable.”

“You want a Porsche,” Stephen told him with a smile. “Like every other single man in Britain. The difference being, you can actually afford one. They’re not so costly as a Rolls-Royce, but they’re not half so inexpensive as my Mini, either.” He thought for a moment, and looked at the two men. “Speaking of cost, I’m guessing you both plan to purchase your cars outright? If that’s the case, we’ll need to pop over to Gringotts and get some muggle money. You’ll need that if you find a car you like today, so that they’ll hold it for you while you go get a bank draft for the full amount. If you weren’t aware, Gringotts has a quiet arrangement with Lloyds Bank. If a wizard needs a muggle bank draft for whatever reason, even though the money comes out of his Gringotts vault, the draft itself appears to be from Lloyds so that whoever it’s being paid to won’t question it.”

“Excellent,” Lucius nodded. “How much do you suggest we bring?”

“A thousand pounds each should cover it easily,” Stephen said. “It’s only a fraction of what either car will cost, but it’s more than enough that they’ll hold the exact car you want for a day or so, to give you time to get the bank draft.”

Narcissa chuckled. “Boys and their toys,” she said. “You lot are no different now than back in school whenever a new broom came on the market.” She kissed Draco and hugged Harry. “You two be good and keep an eye on those three,” she told them, “and I’ll see you back here when you’re done with your adventures. For now, I’m going to get moving on my own errands.” Stepping to the hearth, she tossed a pinch of floo powder into the fire and called out, “St. Mungo’s,” as she stepped into the green flame.

Draco looked at his father in concern. “Why is Mother going to hospital?” he asked.
Lucius frowned. He and Narcissa normally wouldn’t make any mention of a coming baby until she was much farther along with a better chance of carrying to term. But he didn’t want to lie to his only child, either. “Draco, I know you’re aware that your mother and I have been unable to have another child. Stephen has not only told us of muggle healers who specialise in helping people who are having problems either getting with child or carrying to term, he’s kindly suggested a specific group of such healers and the hospital they practice from to us. Your mother is off to get her medical history copied into a form appropriate for a muggle hospital to see.” He gave his son a smile. “I know you’ve always wanted a brother or sister. With a bit of luck, perhaps you’ll have one by this time next year.”

Draco blinked and Harry smiled. “Oh, brilliant! Draco, you’ll be the best big brother ever!”

The blond boy smiled back at his friend. “Do you really think so?”

“I know so,” Harry nodded.

“Now that’s settled, shall we head to Gringotts?” Stephen suggested.

“Actually, while we’re there, I want to see if it’s possible to do enact the second stage blood adoption with Harry,” Sirius said. “Just because I’ve never seen it done except on infants doesn’t mean it’s impossible… and he’s expressed an interest in looking a little less like James as even I keep expecting him to act like James did. I can only imagine how many others will expect the same, especially given Dumbledore’s annual news article outlining his privileged life.” The animagus sounded sour about that.

“You want to try to stave off any problems with Severus, don’t you?” Lucius asked perceptively.

Sirius nodded. “Yes, I do. Especially as Harry enjoys potions so far. I’d hate for that to be taken away from him once he’s at Hogwarts, by a man who still bears a grudge against his father.”

Lucius nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, Severus does have, shall we say, a bit of trouble leaving the past where it belongs. And frankly, he’s ill-suited to teaching, but he hasn’t got a choice. He avoided Azkaban due to Dumbledore claiming he was a spy in the Dark Lord’s camp, reporting back to the Order of the Phoenix. Not only did that leave Severus vulnerable to retaliation from those faithful who evaded capture back then, apparently Dumbledore made it rather clear that he could and would reverse his stance if Severus didn’t accept the protection of the castle and the post of potions professor along with it. Forced him into signing a twenty-year contract and refuses to let him out of it for anything short of complete physical incapacitation. So I can see where you’d want to be cautious. A man with a job he loathes and far too many bitter memories isn’t likely to react kindly when faced with…”

“With a boy who’s the image of some of the worst of those bitter memories,” Sirius nodded. “Yes, I did manage to call a truce of sorts when I was staying with you, but I not only apologised to Severus, I made a point of telling him I didn’t want Draco upset by any difficulties between us. I suspect he only accepted my apology for Draco’s sake, and the only concession I got in return was his promise that he’d not say anything against me to Draco, nor would he insult me as long as I was under your roof.” He saw Draco start to open his mouth, and added, “I’ll explain later, or Harry can while we’re looking at cars. I told him the whole story several weeks ago. But for now, we need to get moving before we lose the entire day.”

That got everyone moving to the jar of floo powder, and Harry belatedly remembered to daub on a bit of the concealer he kept with him on weekends. “Don’t forget my glamour,” he reminded his godfather and tutor.
“Whoops,” Stephen said, swiftly changing the color of Harry’s eyes and hair before they all flooed through to Diagon Alley. “Sorry about that.”

The little group made their way to Gringotts. Lucius and Sirius took out enough cash to convert to the muggle money as Stephen said they should do. Sirius had a brief consultation with his account manager and returned looking thoughtful. “Well, the second stage blood adoption won’t be a problem of itself,” he said. “But as the goblins pointed out, there will be quite a few questions if Harry’s looks changed too much while he’s in a muggle school.”

“Do it once the summer holidays start,” Stephen suggested. “That way his teachers and such will just attribute any changes to a growth spurt or something like it... my cousin was rather plump until she was about ten; while she didn’t grow especially tall that year, she did get quite slender and that changed the shape of her face from very round to more of a triangle. And since he’ll be away from the school for a couple of months, even if the change is fairly dramatic, it won’t be questioned like it would be if he looked different on Monday than he had on Friday.”

Harry smiled. “That makes a lot of sense,” he agreed. “Although I don’t think the changes would be too drastic. Uncle Sirius and I already have the same colour hair. It would be a lot harder to get away with it if he was adopting Draco,” he added with a laugh.

Draco looked appalled at the thought. “I’m a Malfoy! Malfoys all have blond hair!”

Lucius snickered. “Yes, we do. Which is part of the reason my father selected Narcissa as my bride. Cygnus and Druella would have preferred to match Bellatrix with me as she is the oldest of the Black girls. My father said in the negotiations that he preferred Narcissa for me as she is younger than I am and Bellatrix is older. But he also said privately to me that he wanted his grandson to have the same hair as he did, and so would not consider a dark-haired bride for me.”

Everyone laughed at that, and laughed harder when Harry asked, “Do you know which of my ancestors cursed the Potter men with this horrible birds’ nest hair, then?”

“It might have been James, I don’t recall that your grandfather’s hair was nearly so messy,” Sirius said once he caught his breath again. “Then again, he wore his hair on the long side, which might have been to give it enough weight to lie flat and to be able to tie it back.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “Figures. School rules say boys’ hair must be short enough to not reach their shirt collars, so I can’t start that solution until the summer before Hogwarts.”

“But you can use a hair growth potion then,” Draco pointed out. “So you don’t have to wait for it to grow out on its own.”

“All well and good, but this isn’t getting the car shopping done,” Stephen pointed out, starting to herd the boys back to the Diagon Alley public floos. “Shall we?”

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By the following weekend, Sirius was the proud owner of the newest Porsche 911 in a colour called Baltic Blue. He’d originally wanted a bright red one, but Stephen pointed out that since the red was meant to draw attention, he’d be far likelier to be noticed and stopped by a policeman for going even a slight bit over the speed limit or forgetting to signal a turn. He thought about that for a while and decided that the blue might be better. Lucius had chosen a new Rolls Royce Silver Spirit in black for its understated elegance. He spent the week practising with Stephen whenever the latter had no classes, and on Friday passed his driver exam. On Saturday, while Sirius and Remus took Harry and Draco to the cinema, he, Narcissa, and (at their request) Stephen, settled into the
As the big car purred along the road, Narcissa clutched nervously at the folder containing her medical records. Stephen leaned forward from the back seat to pat her shoulder gently. “I know it’s easier said than done,” he murmured, “but try your best to stay relaxed. Stress isn’t going to help matters any, you know.”

“I know,” she answered ruefully. “It’s just… you seem so sure that muggle medicine can help, but at the same time, I’ve had so many disappointments already, I’m afraid to hope.” She paused, and asked in a small voice, “Will you tell me what sort of things muggle medicine can do? Not just having to do with pregnancy, with anything you’ve heard about.”

“Of course,” he answered, gladly distracting the worried woman so her husband could concentrate on driving. “Muggles don’t have blood replenishing potions, but they do transfer actual blood… people go to special collection centres and allow the people there to draw off a pint of blood. It gets sorted by type and stored, and then when someone of the same blood type is injured and needs blood, they’ll take a pint out of storage and feed it into the injured person.”

“You mean when they’re injured badly, muggles drink blood like vampires?” Narcissa asked, sounding torn between fascination and disgust.

“No, nothing like that,” Stephen reassured her. “Remember Sirius mentioning what he called spikes in the arms of the ill children he visited with Harry? Its proper name is an intravenous line, or IV, and it’s actually a hollow needle that gets inserted into a blood vessel so that liquids, medications, and if necessary, more blood can be delivered straight into the bloodstream of an injured or ill person.”

Narcissa laughed a little. “That sounds almost as bad,” she said. “I realise you have no personal experience, but what can muggles do for pregnancy problems?”

Stephen thought for a moment. “Well, in 1978, a young lady named Louise Brown was born right here in England. Her birth is significant, because she was the very first child born who wasn’t conceived in, ah, in the usual manner. She was created by a process known as in-vitro fertilisation, or as the common parlance has it, she’s the world’s first test-tube baby. Here’s where my knowledge is a bit sketchy, but as I understand it, some couples have problems getting pregnant because either the woman has some sort of internal blockage preventing her eggs from reaching her womb properly, or else the man’s seed isn’t fully viable for some reason. So doctors have managed to surgically harvest eggs from a woman, which they can then combine with a man’s seed in a laboratory, and once they’ve confirmed that fertilisation has occurred, they use something like a modified IV needle to insert the fertilised egg directly into the woman’s womb.

Narcissa’s eyes were wide with shock, but she giggled. “Oh… oh my! I can think of a few couples that would prefer creating an heir that way to the traditional one, just because they’re that poorly suited for each other.”

Stephen laughed, and even Lucius’ lips twitched. “Perhaps we’ll have to tell them about it,” the aristocratic blond murmured as he turned into the hospital’s car park.

Once inside, Narcissa grew nervous again while Stephen helped her and Lucius fill out the necessary paperwork. When her name was called, she tugged Stephen forward as well as Lucius. “May our cousin come in with us?” she asked the nurse politely. “I… my husband and I grew up with people who don’t believe in mu- modern medicine. But Stephen’s family does, and he’s been explaining quite a bit of what we need to know already, because he knows how we grew up even though he didn’t grow up the same way.”
The nurse looked a little surprised at the request, but as long as it was what the patient wanted, she didn’t see any problem with allowing it. “He may, as long as you understand that you will be in a state of undress. Most women prefer not having a mob in the exam rooms with them.”

Narcissa nodded. “I understand. I just… Stephen is good at making sense of things that Lucius and I are unfamiliar with, so I’d like him there in case we don’t understand what the doctor tells us.”

The nurse smiled. “All right, then, come on back.” She led the three to an exam room, giving Narcissa a hospital gown and a sheet. “Just take off everything and slip the gown on,” she said. “It ties in the back. Hop up on the examining table and you can drape the sheet over your legs for now.” She exited the room, closing the door behind herself.

Stephen politely moved into a corner and faced the wall to give Narcissa as much privacy as possible while she changed. “This certainly isn’t a gown as I know it,” she murmured ruefully as she struggled into the flimsy garment. “Stephen, is there a point to asking me to wear this thing? And you can turn around again.”

He turned to see Narcissa seated on the table with the sheet over her legs and Lucius standing beside her with one hand resting on her shoulder. “Well, the doctor has to examine you physically,” Stephen said. “Hospital gowns are made so that the doctor can get at any part of your body as necessary while keeping the rest of you somewhat covered.”

There was a light tap at the door of the exam room and then it opened to reveal the nurse who’d escorted them to the exam room and an older woman in a white lab coat with a stethoscope draped around her neck. “This is Dr. Gardner,” the nurse introduced. “Dr. Abbott who referred you to us mentioned that you’ve never had an actual obstetrician before, Mrs. Malfoy; that you always had homeopathic healers and midwife services prior to this, and so we felt that you’d be most comfortable with a woman doctor, at least for your first visit. We eventually have you see all of our obstetricians within the practise at least once, though, because babies do tend to come when they feel like it, and not necessarily when the doctor you’re most familiar with is on duty.”

“It’s good to meet you,” Dr. Gardner said, looking from Narcissa to Lucius, and then giving Stephen a puzzled glance. “I assume this other gentleman is here by invitation?”

Lucius nodded. “Yes, Stephen is a distant cousin, one whose family always embraced modern medical practises. My wife and I asked him to come along in case we needed something explained in terms we would understand, since we don’t have the same sort of background as most of your patients.”

Dr. Gardner nodded. “Well, that’s perfectly understandable. All right, then, I’d like to go over your history first thing, and then we’ll get to the physical portion of the examination, shall we? I see your first pregnancy was in 1976, yes? And resulted in a stillbirth at twenty-seven weeks.”

Narcissa nodded. “Yes… the midwife thought the early labour was due to stress. Lucius’ mother was killed in a riding accident just beforehand, and neither he nor his father were taking her loss particularly well. I was trying to be strong for them and not burden them with my own grief… well. I didn’t see any reason to disbelieve the midwife, given the circumstances. She gave me something to take for six months or so, to prevent me from becoming pregnant again too quickly so my body could heal. But even when I stopped taking it, it took another three years to become pregnant once more.”

“You did give live birth that time, yes?” the doctor asked. “5 June 1980, according to the records.” She frowned. “Early, though, thirty-two weeks.”
“Yes, our son was born at the beginning of June, although he wasn’t due until late July or early August,” Lucius contributed. “The midwife wasn’t at all sure he’d make it, but thankfully, he did.”

“We started trying again when he was a year old,” Narcissa continued. “We’d always hoped to have at least two if not three children. I became pregnant again in early 1983, and lost it at twenty-five weeks. Then again in 1986, and lost it at twenty-three weeks even though the midwife had me on bed rest in an effort to prevent it. I believe I’m about eight weeks along with this one,” she said, resting her hand lightly over her stomach.

Dr. Gardner nodded thoughtfully. “Well, just based on your history, and I’ll have to confirm it with the physical exam, I’d venture to guess that you’ve got an incompetent cervix, Mrs. Malfoy, based on the timing of your miscarriages. What happens, is that for some reason, the cervix in some women is weaker than it should be, and as the pregnancy progresses, the weight of the growing uterus and baby puts pressure on the cervix. With most women, that doesn’t matter, but if the cervix is weak, it may open prematurely, causing the loss of the pregnancy in the second or third trimester. Fortunately, there is a simple surgical procedure that prevents this, called a cerclage. Basically, it sews the cervix closed, and then it’s removed again when the pregnancy is close enough to term for the baby to do well.”

Narcissa grabbed for her husband’s hand. “There… there really is something to be done then? I won’t lose this one too?” she asked tremulously.

“If that’s the only difficulty, then I’d have to say there’s a more than fair chance you’ll be meeting your new little one in about thirty weeks,” Dr. Gardner said with a slight smile. “But we’ll want to make certain of a few other issues as well before I’ll give any better assurances. It does concern me a little that you averaged more than two years of trying before becoming pregnant each time, for one thing, and also you’re old enough that there is an increased chance of certain genetic problems. Mind, the chance is still only about one in four hundred, but the chance is there, so in about seven more weeks I’d like to do an amniocentesis to check.”

Both Malfoys looked at Stephen, who shrugged a little. “I know that amniocentesis involves using a really big needle to draw out some of the waters from around the baby, but that’s as much as I know,” he said. “I don’t believe I know anyone who’s had it done.”

Dr. Gardner nodded. “Essentially correct,” she said. “We use a machine called an ultrasound device to find a pocket of the fluid that isn’t right up against the baby, and use that image as a guide before we stick that needle in. And we do give something to numb the area so you don’t feel the needle. Once some fluid is drawn, it takes about an hour to run the tests, but then you’ll know if there are any major genetic problems… and if you want to know, we can also tell if you’re having a boy or a girl.”

Lucius twined his fingers with Narcissa’s. “And if there are genetic problems?” he asked.

“Then you have a hard choice to make,” the doctor admitted. “The tests show if the problems exist, but not how badly they’ll affect the child. Some people choose to keep the baby and deal with any issues as they arise. Others opt to end the pregnancy. NHS might cover the medical requirements for a special needs child, but not every family has the resources to handle other issues that may arise in the future. For that matter, depending on the nature of the problems in question, it’s possible that the child wouldn’t survive for long even if it comes to term. Under those circumstances, some people believe it’s easier all around to terminate the pregnancy before the foetus is able to feel pain… easier from a purely physical standpoint on the mother’s body, and kinder not to force a short and painful existence on the child. And mind, this all is worst-case scenario. The odds are very much in your favour that everything is just fine with this pregnancy.”
Narcissa nodded, looking pale. “All right, so what now?”

Dr. Gardner smiled. “Now we’re going to do the physical exam.” She reached under the end of the table and unfolded the stirrups for the patient’s feet. “I need you to scoot down so that your bottom is just on the end of the table here, lie back, and put your feet into the stirrups to support them while I check your cervix and everything else.”

Stephen moved back to his corner while Narcissa arranged herself to the doctor’s satisfaction. Lucius remained by her side, holding her hand and observing quietly as Dr. Gardner tugged on a pair of exam gloves and proceeded to poke and prod at his wife. He was grateful that the woman made a point of explaining what she was looking for each time she touched Narcissa. For her part, Narcissa just tried not to tense up too much when she was touched. The whole experience was nerve-wracking for her, between worrying about the child she now carried, and being unused to anyone but Lucius touching her so intimately. “There isn’t anything… more wrong… is there?” she asked softly when the doctor withdrew her hands and pulled the sheet back over her legs.

“Not at all,” Dr. Gardner shook her head with a smile. “Yes, I did find evidence that you’ve got a weak cervix, but in a few weeks, we’ll put in a cerclage and take that worry off your shoulders.” She stripped off the exam gloves and tossed them into the trash can. “And to reassure you further, would you care to hear the heartbeat and see an image of the foetus today?”

“You can do that?” Narcissa looked incredulous.

“We certainly can,” the doctor chuckled as the nurse slipped out of the room. She removed a strange-looking device from a drawer. It consisted of a box with switches and a keypad on it, and a stick with a belled end connected to it by what looked like a tightly coiled piece of… something neither Malfoy could put a name to. “This is a Sonicaid,” she said. “It allows us to hear the electronically-enhanced and amplified sound of the baby’s heartbeat.” She tapped at the keypad for a moment before placing the belled end of the stick low on Narcissa’s abdomen. She moved it around a bit and smiled as a very rapid rhythmic sound filled the room.

Lucius looked awed. “That’s… that’s really the baby’s heart?” he whispered, his own ‘Malfoy mask’ cracking in public for the first time since he was a child himself. “It’s so fast.”

Dr. Gardner smiled, peering at the box part of the device. “It’s right where it should be at this gestational age,” she said. “This is just about as fast as a foetal heartbeat ever gets… it starts out slower and speeds up over time to this point or a little faster, and in another week or so it will decrease again and over about three more weeks it will settle to an average of 140 beats per minute.” There was a light tap on the door, and the nurse came in pulling a cart with another, much larger device on it. She connected a few cords to sockets in the wall, and a screen on the device lit up. “All right,” the doctor said, “now you’ll get to see it as well. Not that it will look like much at this point,” she added with a chuckle as she turned off the Sonicaid and set it on the counter.

The nurse moved over to the exam table and fiddled with the end, pulling out an extension so that Narcissa could lie flat, and folding the stirrups back underneath. She rearranged the sheet and gown to expose the blonde woman’s abdomen, and gave her an apologetic smile before flipping off the room lights. “The gel will feel a bit cold, I’m afraid,” she said, taking a tube of the stuff and squirting it onto Narcissa. “I’ll try not to push too hard, but at this gestational point, I may have to in order to get a decent image.” She picked up something that looked similar to the belled stick of the Sonicaid device, only bigger and with a more rounded end, and ran the round end over the gel.

Grainy black and white images promptly appeared on the screen, shifting with the movements of the stick in the nurse’s hand. “Oh, perfect,” the doctor said, as a fuzzy shape that looked like a cross between a lima bean and a prawn moved into the center of the screen. “That, Mr. and Mrs.
Malfoy, is your baby.” Dr. Gardner ran her hands over the device, doing something to it that caused a little arrow to move around over the image, pointing at various parts. “This is the head,” she informed them, making the arrow trace over the rounder end. “Here’s the bottom, and the beginnings of the legs,” she traced the other end. “And see this flutter right here in the middle? That’s the heart beating.”

Narcissa stared at the screen in awe. No, it didn’t look particularly like a baby to her eyes, but she did trust what this muggle doctor was telling them. “That’s… amazing,” she murmured.

Dr. Gardner tapped something else and the device whirred and spat out several slips of paper with the image from the screen on them. “You can take these with you to show off to your friends if you’d like. I can mark one of them to show the head and heart, so you can give them the guided tour I gave you. Anyway, everything looks perfect so far.” The nurse took the stick away from Narcissa’s belly and turned the room lights back on. “We just need to draw a bit of blood from you both to make sure neither of you are carrying any illnesses that might affect the pregnancy, and Mr. Malfoy, I’d like a sperm sample from you as well, so I can check count and mobility given that your history as a couple indicates some difficulty in conceiving.” She gave them a nod and exited the room.

Lucius blinked and sputtered as the nurse handed him a paper cup, then took his free hand and stuck a needle with a thin flexible tube attached into the back of it. She filled two small vials with his blood, capped them, and removed and discarded the needle and stuck an elastoplast to his hand. She labeled the vials quickly, and repeated the blood-drawing process on Narcissa. While she was occupied with his wife, he looked at Stephen. “A… sperm sample?” he whispered.

Stephen managed through sheer force of will not to laugh. “Exactly what she said. You, ah, wank, and catch it in the cup, and she’ll run tests on it. Certain childhood illnesses and some injuries can have adverse effects on a man’s seed, make it more difficult for him to impregnate a woman even though he isn’t actually unable to do so,” he whispered back. “Remember on the way here, when I spoke of that in-vitro fertilisation? The problems she’s looking for are some of the reasons the technique was developed. Just ask where the privacy room is, so you can provide the sample. They don’t expect you to do so here and now.”

“Thank Merlin,” Lucius muttered sourly. Aloud, he asked, “Excuse me, but, where do I go to, er, provide the sample?”

“Oh, there’s a room just down the end of the hall,” the nurse said. “The door locks, and there are men’s magazines in there. When you’re done, just set the cup inside the little metal hatch in the wall for the laboratory staff to collect.” She labeled the vials of Narcissa’s blood and told her, “And you can get dressed now, and come back out to the waiting area. Your husband can meet you and your cousin there when he’s done. Oh, and here’s a towel to get the gel off your stomach so it won’t make your clothes all sticky. Just leave it on the table.” She bustled out of the room with the blood samples.

“I guess I’ll head right for the waiting room, then,” Stephen said, slipping out after her.

Lucius sighed and headed out to the privacy room, while Narcissa cleaned up and dressed. When she got to the waiting room, the receptionist gave her a smile. “The doctor would like you seen again in four weeks,” she said. “Of course, if you have any problems such as bleeding or severe cramping, call or come in straightaway.”

“I will,” Narcissa nodded, accepting the card with her next appointment time and date written on it. She sat down with Stephen to wait for her husband. When Lucius emerged from the back, they all headed out to the car. Once there, with no chance of muggles overhearing the odd questions, she
looked back at Stephen. “Can you explain this whole weak cervix thing a little better?” she asked.

“We think so, give me a moment.” Stephen thought how to phrase it, brightening as an idea hit. He pulled his wand and transfigured his handkerchief into a slick satin drawstring pouch with smooth silk strings. He dropped a knut into the bag and drew the strings, then turned it upside down and held it by the bottom. “All right, picture your womb as this bag, and your cervix is the drawstring end of it. Early on in the pregnancy, everything is fine. But as the baby gets bigger…” He opened the bag and pulled the knut out, replacing it with Lucius’ heavy gold pocket watch. “The weight of the growing baby forces the cervix open the way the weight of the watch forces the drawstring open.” He flipped the bag upside down once more, and after a moment the mouth of the bag loosened under the weight of the watch, dropping it into his hand. “I don’t know the exact procedure, but as I understand it, putting in a cerclage keeps the cervix closed, like knotting the drawstring after closing it instead of just pulling it tight and leaving it untied.” He repositioned the watch into the bag, this time knotting the string before turning it upside down. Even when he shook the bag hard, the knot held and the watch stayed safely in the bag.

Narcissa brightened. “Oh, that does make sense!” she exclaimed. “I can’t quite picture how they’ll do this cerclage thing, but the doctor made it sound fairly simple. Why did she put those gloves on before doing the examination?”

Stephen spent the rest of the drive back to Grimmauld place explaining that since some muggle diseases could be transferred via bodily fluids, they’d invented those thin gloves so that a doctor could touch a patient without needing to worry that the bodily fluids of an ill person might come into contact with a small cut on their own hands and thereby give them the same disease. He also said that both the gloves and the blood-drawing needles were disposable so that there would be no chance of any contamination between patients, and then hastened to explain that in this case, ‘contamination’ didn’t necessarily refer to germs or dirt, but any bodily fluids at all, because if something like a blood test was being done, accidentally mixing two different people’s blood would result in an invalid test.

At Grimmauld Place, the boys, Sirius, and Remus were already back from seeing Batman on its final week at the cinema. Harry and Draco were animatedly re-enacting their favourite scenes from the film, to applause from the men. But they all looked over when Stephen and the Malfoys entered. “How did it go?” Sirius asked.

“Dr. Gardner thinks everything should go well this time,” Narcissa said. “I’m almost scared to hope, but she said that there is something to be done to prevent the problems I’ve had in the past. And look!” She passed out the copies of the ultrasound.

Draco took a picture and looked at it, confused. “What is this, Mother?” he asked as Harry also peered at the fuzzy image.

“That, Draco, is called an ultrasound picture,” Stephen said.

“But what is it?” the boy persisted.

Narcissa looked up at her husband, who wrapped an arm around her shoulders with a smile. “That is a picture of your baby brother or sister,” she said.
Decisions, Decisions

And now for the disclaimer… I’m not JK Rowling and I do not own the character. I just like to play with them for my own entertainment and I promise to put them back neatly when I’m done.

While the evening meal at 12 Grimmauld Place was a festive one as the friends and family gathered there celebrated the Malfoys’ renewed hope for a second child, the mood in the Kensington Palace apartments of the Prince and Princess of Wales was ugly.

“Isn’t it bad enough that I’ve spent the last two years outright lying to the boys when they’ve wanted to know where you are, Charles?” Diana hissed, her eyes furious. “You know, you’ve known for years what the paparazzi can be like! How could you be so careless? Wills got kept in at school yesterday for attacking another little boy who taunted him over that picture of you and Camilla!”

“He needs to learn better,” Charles said dryly. “It’s part and parcel of being in our position.” He steadfastly refused to acknowledge what Di said about his own carelessness in getting photographed with his lover in as intimate of an embrace as could be managed with all their clothes on.

Diana’s eyes narrowed. “I’m hardly condoning his actions, but he is only seven, after all. He’s done fairly well handling himself when the other boys merely teased him about you hardly ever being around even when you’re not abroad on diplomatic visits. I can’t exactly blame him for losing his temper over that photo, though, not when I have to admit to smashing a few teacups this morning myself when faced with it. I’m bloody well aware you’ve been cheating on me for some time, but I was willing to remain silent as long as you were conducting yourself discreetly. Not anymore, though, so you had best speak with your mother and advisors as to how best to handle things.

Now Charles looked vaguely alarmed. “Diana… surely you don’t mean…”

“Oh, I mean it. I want a divorce. I married you believing you loved me, and if you weren’t as demonstrative as I might have liked, I chalked it up to your upbringing. And then I figured out that you’d never loved me, not like I loved you, but I still thought we were friends at least,” Diana said bitterly. “It seems I was wrong about that, too. A friend would have taken more care not to be so… so blatant.”

Charles ran a hand over his face. He really wasn’t sure how to deal with his young wife when she got on an emotional tear like this, as his own family was rather known for their stoicism in the face of any sort of adversity. “Right then,” he said awkwardly. “What exactly do you want from me, aside from the obvious?”

Diana dropped into a chair. “I want you to explain to Wills that while we’re going to divorce as you no longer care for me the way a man ought to care for his wife, but that it doesn’t mean you love him any less. Reassure him that you and I are still capable of getting along as friends. Make sure he knows that Christmas this year won’t be affected, especially as Harry Potter will be joining us at Highgrove over the hols. Beyond that… I just don’t know right now, Charles. I’d like to think I’m reasonable about most things. In this case, my main concern is for our sons. However this gets done, I want their lives to go on as normally as can be managed given that the press is going to
have a field day.”

“Right, I can do that,” Charles nodded. “This is so… I don’t know exactly what to do myself. I just thought… well, Mother and Father always just lived their separate private lives, so I suppose I thought we’d do the same.”

Di shook her head wearily. “That’s where you made your biggest mistake,” she told him. “Thirty to forty years ago, the press respected the Crown, at least enough to not pry into the personal lives of the Royals the way they do today. Now they crowd around hoping to capture some sort of scandal, and likely enough would try to create one if they couldn’t find one. There’s no such thing as a truly private life anymore when you’re in a public figure, because there is always a photographer lurking about with a telephoto lens.”

“So I’ve learned,” Charles said sourly. “Well. You are the mother of my heirs, so whatever exactly gets decided, you’ll not end up too badly off. Since you’re not wanting to disrupt the boys’ lives, I expect you and they ought to retain the apartments here. I’ve mostly been staying at Highgrove or Buckingham Palace anyway, so that won’t change too much. Leaves them here where they have their school and such, yes?”

“Fair enough,” Di nodded. “And I believe we can manage to be cordial when I bring the boys and young Mr. Potter to Highgrove… I certainly wouldn’t ask you to remove yourself from your own estate while I’m visiting, but neither will I cancel the visit as it’s been planned for several months and I wouldn’t want to disappoint the children.”

Charles nodded and stood up. “Perfectly understandable. And, Diana? For what it’s worth, I am sorry. You really are everything a royal wife should be. If circumstances were different…”

Di gave him a sad smile. “I’d still be thirteen years younger than you, and we’d still have nothing in common. No. We both were foolish. I was a romantic little girl in love with love, and you were being pressured into choosing a bride and you selected me based on my qualifications instead of your feelings. Let’s just end things with as much dignity and grace as we can manage, and not waste time on what-ifs.”

“For someone who did so poorly in school, you’re a wise woman, Diana,” Charles said softly. “Despite everything, I’m glad it’s you raising my children.” He exited the apartment quietly.

Diana watched him go and sighed. Then she stood as well and moved to her office. It was a little earlier than she’d planned to write to Harry Potter about the plans for the upcoming holiday season, the Nutcracker performance as well as his visit to Highgrove, but she needed to concentrate on something cheery just now. If she didn’t, she knew she’d end up falling back into old patterns of coping with stress, and she’d fought too hard to break the cycle of bulimia to let herself become trapped once more. Sitting at her desk and pulling out her personal stationery, she started to write.

**Dear Harry,**

**To allow for school schedules, we’ll be going to the final performance of The Nutcracker, on Saturday 23 December. That way you and Wills won’t be up late one evening and then still have to get up early for school the following day! I’d like you, Sirius, and Stephen to come to Kensington Palace for tea so that my Harry gets to see you as well… he’s too young to sit through a ballet just yet… and then we can all get ready for the performance without needing to worry about meeting up anywhere. That’s always a bit harder to do when you’re in the Royal Box, after all! I’m enclosing a picture of Wills in the suit he’ll be wearing, so you can see what sort of outfit is appropriate for a young man of your age. Do me a favour, please,**
and let Sirius and Stephen know they should wear tuxedos.

Speaking of Sirius, would you write back and give me his address? I’ve made those tapes I promised him when we were chatting after our visit to Great Ormond Street Hospital, but I realised I don’t know where to send them, but I’d like him to get them as soon as possible.

Her Majesty wants a family holiday this year, but I’ll be taking you and my boys out to Highgrove on the 27th and we’ll return to London on the 30th. Princess Anne will bring Zara and Zara’s friend Sophie to spend the day on the 29th, so we can have that dance lesson I promised. Oh, and when you write back, make sure to give me some ideas as to what you’d like for Christmas! The boys and I are very much looking forward to seeing you again.

Hugs,
Diana, Princess of Wales

Di added her private-correspondence address at the bottom, so that when Harry wrote back, his letter wouldn’t be routed through the official mailroom and possibly missed by one of the undersecretaries whose duty it was to sort through the myriad of mail to the Royals. Given that Harry was a child, she worried that if a letter from him came through the public address, he’d be sent a form letter in return and she’d never even learn that he’d written. Finding the photo of Wills to send along, she slipped it into an envelope along with her letter and wrote Harry’s address on the front before tossing it into her outgoing mail basket for her private secretary to send out first thing on Monday. After that, she retreated to her bedroom and dropped a tape of her favourite dance club music into her stereo. *I haven’t been out in ages,* she thought as she started to move to the song Maniac from the film Flashdance. *But once it’s announced that Charles and I are divorcing, it won’t be nearly so problematic to be seen out having a good time at a club. No more worries about some unscrupulous reporter printing a story that I’m sleeping around. Well,* she amended to herself, *they’ll likely print stories that I’m sleeping with whoever they might spot me dancing with, but once I’m officially separated from Charles, my reputation won’t suffer too terribly badly. She let herself get lost in the music as she’d done as a girl, forgetting her pain and anger for a time.*

When Harry received the letter on Thursday after returning to Privet Drive from his tae kwon do class, his face lit up and he dashed up to his room to read it. Once he was done, he looked thoughtful, and pulled out his spiral notebook so he could jot down some ideas. He wasn’t entirely sure what was or wasn’t appropriate to request in the way of Christmas gifts, as he’d never gotten one before, so he wanted to write down a few things and then ask Stephen on Saturday. *Books for certain,* he thought as he tapped his biro against his lips. *Ones on medieval history, and maybe ones about snakes? More jigsaw puzzles would be nice, too, or more model aeroplanes. Oh, and a new sketchbook, as the one from the art kit that Uncle Sirius bought for me at Harrod’s Toy Kingdom that time is nearly full up.* He decided that was probably enough for the moment, and set the list aside in favour of getting his maths homework done and proofreading his book report of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

After finishing his schoolwork and packing his old backpack neatly, he opened his spiral notebook once more. It had occurred to him that if Princess Diana was going to get him a Christmas gift, he ought to get her something, and gifts for Wills and little Harry as well. *A slinky for Harry,* he thought, and wrote that down. He wrote down Wills’ name and Princess Di’s, although he wasn’t sure what to get them just yet. He also wrote down Stephen, Sirius, and Remus, plus Draco and Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy. And, after a long moment of consideration, he added Aunt Petunia and Dudley to the list, thinking, *If I don’t get them anything, Aunt Petunia might start being nasty*
again, especially if she knows I’m getting gifts for other people. I don’t want that to happen, so I’ll get her something… and if I get her something, I sort of have to get Dudley something or she’ll get upset. And no matter that he’ll complain about it at best, whatever ‘it’ ends up being. He looked over the list of names and wrote down ‘pretty scarf or handbag’ beside Petunia’s name, and after a moment of consideration, also jotted ‘pretty scarf’ by Di’s name but with a question mark beside it. Draco was easy, he wrote ‘Legos’ beside his friend’s name without hesitation. He left the rest blank for the moment, deciding to consult with Stephen… except for Stephen’s gift, he’d consult with Sirius for that. Finally, at the bottom of the page, he jotted down, ‘sweets to share with my friends… candy canes?’ Looking at the list, he smiled with satisfaction. It felt nice, knowing that this year, despite his cousin, he had friends.

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Sitting in her office at the Ministry, Amelia Bones sighed as she looked over the transcripts from Peter Pettigrew’s trial. She’d managed to sneak it into the Wizengamot’s docket without fanfare, knowing that it would be a huge circus if word had gotten out ahead of time, due to the connection with Sirius Black’s exoneration. She’d also managed, by scheduling it for the middle of the week during the school year, to keep Albus Dumbledore away from the trial as well, as he was still holding the Potter vote by proxy. She wasn’t entirely happy with that, as he really didn’t have the right to it now that young Lord Potter’s godfather was a free man, but Lord Black had asked her to let it go until he formally took his seat on the Wizengamot when the new session started come January.

When she’d asked why, his reply intrigued her: “I don’t trust Dumbledore very much right now. I think he’s got an agenda of his own, and that he knew full well I hadn’t gotten a trial back when. But there’s no way to prove it, especially if he pleads his age and the sheer volume of cases at the time as causing him to overlook mine in the shuffle. Anyway, I don’t want to rock the boat with him just yet, so I haven’t gone to him about taking custody of my godson or anything else. I’m hoping he’ll get the impression that I still think he’s the second coming of Merlin, like so many of us did during the war, and that I won’t think to question any of the decisions he’s made about Harry. With any luck, by the time I do approach him, he’ll consider me harmless.”

Of course, Amelia thought to herself, Dumbledore had been right about one thing: he’d insisted all along that He Who Must Not Be Named would return someday. Pettigrew’s statement about the horcruxes created by the dark wizard lends credence to Dumbledore’s claims, unless we can find and destroy them all before that happens. Maybe. She didn’t honestly know how that worked. Certainly You Know Who’s body had been destroyed on the night the Potters died, so he was presumably a disembodied spirit somewhere and would require help from one of his old followers to regain a body. Of course, that assumes the ones who aren’t in Azkaban would want to help him regain a body, she thought with a touch of humour. The Death Eater trials just after the war had revealed that You Know Who had ruled his followers through pain and fear, so it was quite likely that anyone who’d escaped imprisonment but hadn’t actually attempted to bring him back was actually pleased he was gone.

Well, the horcruxes were about to become public knowledge; at least, the fact of their existence was. Amelia had seen the face of the Daily Prophet’s courtroom correspondent, first when Pettigrew was brought out, and doubly so when he admitted to his crimes and to knowing that his master had created horcruxes, ‘more than one’ at that. What little description the ratlike man had given concerning the journal from He Who Must Not Be Named’s days as a Hogwarts student was going to be in the papers by morning, if there wasn’t a special edition published tonight. Right on cue, her secretary tapped on the door, admitting the Prophet’s reporter. “I just wondered if you had a statement, Madam Bones?” he asked.
Amelia nodded slowly. She had been planning to speak with Minister Fudge before speaking with the press, but that ineffectual duffer was hiding in his office in a panic over the thought that You Know Who really could return at some point, so she would just plan on making her apologies rather than gaining permission. “Obviously, learning about the steps taken by He Who Must Not Be Named to ensure his own immortality has taken us by surprise here at the DMLE,” she said carefully. “While the senior Aurors are aware that such things are possible, I believe I can safely say no one considered that he was that insane as to have done it at all much less multiple times, nor that he somehow discovered how even before he completed his Hogwarts education. Aurors are receiving additional training in recognising the magical signature of such artifacts, and in the use of the few spells and materials capable of destroying them. We of the DMLE would also like to say this: if any member of the public should turn in the journal described by Peter Pettigrew, or any other item that proves to be another of You Know Who’s artifacts, no questions will be asked. It is not, after all, a crime to keep an item safe for someone else upon request, no matter who made the request.”

“Do you think anything will be turned in?” the reporter questioned.

“I’ve no idea,” Madam Bones admitted. “On the one hand, I can’t quite picture anyone willingly entrusting such things to anyone else. On the other hand, keeping them all together would make no sense either, so I suppose it is possible that one or more of them came into the keeping of his followers. Or,” she added as a thought struck her, “the keeping of a relative of his followers. The properties and vaults of anyone convicted and sentenced to life in Azkaban or the Kiss would have been distributed to their named heirs if they had any, or split between the Ministry coffers and any surviving relatives if they either had no wills or their heirs were also dead or imprisoned. I’m aware the chances of recovering one in such a manner are almost nil, but I do feel nothing’s lost by trying.”

The reporter nodded. “True enough. Thank you for your time, Madam Bones.” He took himself out of her office and she pulled out a quill and started composing a notice to the entire department, letting them know she meant what she said about accepting any dark artifacts that might be turned in, no questions asked.

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When Dumbledore arrived in the Great Hall of Hogwarts for breakfast, the House tables were abuzz, and the staff table wasn’t much better. “Whatever is happening, Minerva?” he asked his deputy as he sat beside her at the table.

“Peter Pettigrew’s been caught,” the transfiguration professor said, handing him a newspaper. “And he was living here in the school for years, Albus! Years! Apparently Percy Weasley found him and kept him as a pet… sweet Circe, when I think what could have happened to the children, all because we had no idea he was anything other than a simple rat…”

“That explains why he came to school with an owl this year,” commented Septima Vector, the arithmancy professor. Percy was one of her favourite third-year students. “He did mention he received the owl as a reward for something, but he wasn’t forthcoming with what. I bet folks at the DMLE chipped in and bought him the owl for turning in the rat.”

As the teachers continued to discuss Pettigrew, Albus Dumbledore opened the paper to read the entire article and not just the headlines. He nearly choked on his tea when he reached the bit where Pettigrew spoke of Voldemort’s horcruxes. Oh, this was bad, he thought. Why wasn’t I told about the trial? I would have made sure nothing got out about the horcruxes… I didn’t want Voldemort to know I knew about them until Harry was able to deal with them. Now he’s likely to return
sooner than I’d anticipated, if only so he can keep any of his followers who might consider handing anything of his over to the Ministry in exchange for amnesty from doing just that. He looked up as Minerva nudged his shoulder. “I’m sorry, my dear, what was that?” he asked.

“With as many students as subscribe to the Prophet, Albus, there’s bound to be questions today, questions about… about horcruxes,” Professor McGonagall repeated. “You know as well as I do that there’s no stopping the talk that will happen, especially as Pettigrew indicated that He Who Must Not Be Named created one while still a student here himself. What do we tell the students when they ask?”

“Hmm.” Dumbledore stroked his beard. “I suppose the very simplest version of the truth possible,” he said. “That a horcrux is an object that contains a portion of a soul, a portion ripped away by the murder of an innocent, and its purpose is to prevent death by anchoring the person who created it to this world.”

The professors looked at each other and nodded. “That works well enough, I suppose,” Professor Kettleburn said. “I’m surprised you didn’t warn us this was coming, though.”

“He couldn’t,” came the acidic tones of Severus Snape from the far end of the table. “As Headmaster Dumbledore holds the Potter vote on the Wizengamot by proxy, Madam Bones would have seen to it that he wasn’t at Pettigrew’s trial. Conflict of interest and all that.”

Dumbledore shot a look at the younger man. “I wasn’t aware you followed the proceedings of the Wizengamot so closely, Severus,” he said mildly.

Snape calmly sipped his tea. “I don’t,” he said flatly. “But I do see my godson once a month even during the school year, and I was at Malfoy Manor last Sunday to visit with Draco and his parents. Lucius mentioned the coming trial, and that Madam Bones specifically excluded you on the basis of the Potter vote. Had you formally handed it over to Black when he was freed,” said with a sneer, “then you would have been notified of the trial. Black was excluded as well, given that he spent years in Azkaban due to Pettigrew’s actions, and Lucius excused himself based on Black being a relative so he wasn’t at the trial either.”

Albus had to look down at the paper for a moment, to hide the flash of annoyance in his eyes as the younger man’s words reminded him that he’d have to deal with Sirius Black sooner or later. Surprisingly, the man had yet to seek him out to demand custody of Harry… something that everyone and their aunt knew had been James and Lily’s wish… but it was bound to happen eventually. Damn Amelia Bones anyway, for being such a stickler for the rules. I never thought a former Hufflepuff would be so difficult to handle. He nodded slowly. “I see, well, that does make sense from an ethical standpoint, my boy. I should have remembered that myself. I just wish you’d told me when you returned from your visit.”

“As far as I’m concerned, it was nothing but gossip, which I refuse to perpetuate,” Severus replied with dignity. “It was nothing that affected the school, at least so far as I was aware, and so I felt it was unnecessary to mention it, the same as I didn’t consider it necessary to inform you when Narcissa gave some of her excess house elves to Black, as all but one of his mother’s elves had died and the one that was left had gone more than a bit mad.” He stood. “Anyway, it is time to deal with the dunderheads yet again. Why you insist on pairing Gryffindor with Slytherin for potions year after year is beyond me, and as if that isn’t bad enough on its own, I’m forced to put up with not one but two first-year Weasleys this term.” He turned in a swirl of robes and stalked off towards the dungeon stairs.

“Yes, I suppose,” Dumbledore nodded as the Potions Master departed. “Anyway, I should be going as well… this will likely cause Cornelius to go into shock, and he’ll likely seek my advice as soon
as he’s recovered.” The old wizard stood and bowed before vanishing through a door behind the teachers’ table. He had some planning to do.

Once firmly ensconced behind his desk and with a lemon drop in his mouth, he pulled out some writing paper and a quill. Since Sirius Black was going to want to take Harry in, the only way he could think to prevent that from happening, would be to demonstrate to the man that Harry was perfectly happy in his current home and shouldn’t be uprooted from it. He’d contact Black right away and offer to arrange for a meeting between him and the child. Presumably Arabella would allow him to borrow her sitting room for a couple of hours. He just had to make sure that Petunia would make Harry tell Black that he was treated wonderfully and didn’t want to leave his beloved cousin to live with a stranger.

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In Wiltshire, Lucius Malfoy opened the paper and took a bite of his toast. And then he spat it out, much to the utter shock of his wife and son. “Merlin’s hairy arse!” he exclaimed, further mystifying his family. Narcissa hadn’t seen or heard Lucius have such an outburst since early in his fifth year at Hogwarts, and Draco never had.

“What is it, Lucius?” Narcissa asked anxiously.

“Remember during the war, Cissa, when I returned home one night with a journal that I told you the Dark Lord wished me to keep safe for him?” Lucius looked much paler than usual. “Apparently at the trial yesterday, Pettigrew gave some information concerning certain of the Dark Lord’s belongings, and from the sound of it, that journal is more than likely one of them.”

Narcissa frowned. “Yes, but what is it, exactly?”

“They think it’s a horcrux,” he told her.

“Dear Circe… he was crazy enough to do that to himself?” she said in amazement. “That’s just… I don’t even know what to say.”

“What’s a horcrux?” asked Draco.

Lucius shook his head. “It’s utterly vile magic,” he said, “to cheat death. The being creating one has to quite literally split his soul and store a piece of it in an artifact. That anchors the soul to this realm, so that even if the body is destroyed, it is possible for the soul to either find or create a new one. Splitting one’s soul is an unnatural and abominable act, which can only be achieved through murdering an innocent.”

Draco went pale, then faintly greenish. “Killing someone splits your soul?” he whispered, horrified.

Narcissa shook her head. “Not exactly. An accident wouldn’t count, nor would killing another in self-defense. And from what little I know… and believe me, that isn’t much… there is some sort of ritual preparation that must be done prior to the murder.”

Lucius blinked at his wife. “I’m surprised you even know that much,” he said.

“I am a Black by birth,” she shrugged. “Uncle Orion used to show off some of the nastier books to me and my sisters when we were girls, just to see how badly he could scare us.”

“He would,” Lucius snorted. “I might not agree with your cousin about much, but I can’t entirely blame him for running away from home when he was sixteen. Walburga was even worse than
Orion.” Setting the paper down, he looked seriously at his family. “We have a decision to make, though. Madam Bones is offering to allow anyone the chance to bring in any artifacts that might have belonged to the Dark Lord, with no questions asked or fear of prosecution. However, if this news article is correct, it’s a certainty that the Dark Lord will return at some point.” He took a deep breath. “As much as I hate to act like a Gryffindor, I’m going to be blunt here. Being in his service was nothing even close to what I was led to believe it would be. He thought nothing of using Unforgivables on his supposedly trusted comrades when they told him anything he didn’t wish to hear. My father taught me that a Malfoy bows to no one, yet he knelt at the Dark Lord’s feet and kissed the hem of his robes and induced me to do the same, because supposedly the Dark Lord was going to return the wizarding world to its roots and traditions by eliminating the muggleborn. But I noticed he attacked just as many purebloods as muggleborn, and not just for supporting muggleborns either. I wanted out, but I couldn’t see a way to get out short of dying, or putting you two in grave danger, or both. When the Dark Lord returns, he will call. If I don’t answer, we will become targets, all the more so if I do turn in his journal. Yet if I do answer, we will be in nearly as much danger from his bad moods… if I give an answer he doesn’t like, he’s as likely to make me watch him torture one of you as he is to simply torture me. So… what do we want to do?”
Narcissa gazed between her husband and son for a long moment. Draco’s eyes were wide and horrified by the revelations, while Lucius looked distraught. She took a deep breath and said softly, “I think you should turn in the journal. We both know you were looking for a way out before, and only stayed to protect Draco and I when the death of Regulus Black made it perfectly clear that you could not simply break ties with that madman without bringing his wrath down upon us. Even if you were to go back to him upon his return, what guarantee is there that he won’t vent his anger upon you for not aiding him in returning sooner? For that matter, I recall you speaking of the petty infighting, with those of… lesser abilities… always trying to ingratiate themselves with him and gain an advantage over you and some others whose connections in the Ministry and elsewhere made you more valuable in is eyes because you could nearly always get him whatever information he sought. I certainly remember the day you returned from a raid you didn’t want to go on in the first place, shaking from the after-effects of being crucioed, because that Carrow brute mentioned that you merely stunned the muggles instead of tormenting them. No… if we’re going to be targets either way… which I think we are… I want us away from the ones we already know can’t be trusted.”

“You’re certain of this, ‘Cissa?” Lucius asked. “Because I frankly don’t trust Dumbledore and his bunch to protect us, even if I was to go to him for help.”

“Pfft. I don’t trust him either,” she said. “But the entire world isn’t made up of the Dark Lord’s followers and Dumbledore’s followers. Surely we can manage to protect ourselves, especially if Sirius is willing to help. I believe he would, between his own distrust of Dumbledore, and that his godson and Draco have become such good friends.”

Lucius nodded slowly. “All right, then. First thing on Monday, I’ll drop that journal at the DMLE with Madam Bones. If she’s right about it being a horcrux, I don’t want it in the house any longer than necessary. It needs to be destroyed. And even if it’s not a horcrux, it belonged to the Dark Lord and needs to be destroyed just the same.”

All three Malfoys jumped and turned to stare when something crashed in the corner of the breakfast room. A house elf, seeming oblivious to the mess he had just caused, stood amid the wreckage of what appeared to have been a tray-load of fresh toast, jam, and sausages. The food and smashed dishes surrounded his feet as he beat himself over the head with the heavy silver tray, wailing, “Oh, Kreacher bes a bad, bad elf! Kreacher’s old Master would bes upset with him, because Kreacher was not being able to destroy the thing Master said needs destroying!”

“Kreacher!” Lucius’ voice cracked like a whip. “Explain yourself before punishing yourself. What did Master Orion want destroyed?”

The house elf cringed before his new family. “Not Master Orion,” he faltered, his ears flattening down against his head. “Master Reggylus. Master Reggylus ordered Kreacher to follow him and Master Dark Lord, so Kreacher followed. Master Dark Lord makes Kreacher drinks lots of burning waterses, and puts a locket in stone bowl before he fills it with more burning waterses. Master Dark Lord told Master Reggylus to follow him and leaves Kreacher there, but Master Reggylus comes back laters and takes Kreacher home again. Months later, Master Reggylus comes home moaning...
and gives Kreacher locket from stone bowl and says locket must be destroyed and Kreacher must not be telling anyone. But Kreacher’s magic is not being able to destroy it! Bad Kreacher!” The elf yanked his own ears, muttering to himself.

Narcissa, remembering Regulus’ impassioned pleas to her regarding the Dark Lord’s madness… which started less than six months before he died so mysteriously, was the first to catch the implications. “Circe! You don’t suppose that Regulus learned about the horcruxes?” she said. “That would explain why he started telling us that the Dark Lord was mad and we needed to get out. The timing fits. Kreacher, where is the locket now?”

Kreacher hunched in on himself. “Kreacher bes nots knowing,” he admitted. “Kreacher’s old Mistress moved many shinies from Master Reggylus’ room to glass cabinet in drawing room after Master Reggylus died. Kreacher last sees the locket in glass cabinet, before Master Sirees be giving Kreacher to the proper and beautiful Malfoy wizards family. But Kreacher bes nots knowing if Master Sirees bes moving things.”

Lucius exchanged a glance with his wife and nodded. “Clean this mess and bring fresh food,” he ordered the elf. “I have a business meeting to get to, but Mistress Narcissa will decide how best to go about finding this locket and she’ll give you your instructions later today.”

“Yes, Master Luces,” Kreacher nodded. He bashed himself over the head with the tray one more time before snapping his fingers to make all the dish fragments and fallen food fly up to the tray once more. He vanished with a pop, returning a short time later with a different tray and the replacement food.

When Kreacher left again, Narcissa looked thoughtful. “I think I’m going to go to Gringotts today, as well as talk to Sirius,” she said. “The Dark Lord may have entrusted an artifact to Bella and Rodolphus, too. The Ministry had the estate sold when the two of them and Rastaban got life sentences, but that was just the property and the buildings. Furniture and household goods were added to the Lestrange vaults, which then were divided between me and Sirius as the only relatives on either side still eligible to collect.”

“Wasn’t Sirius in Azkaban before they were?” Lucius asked. “I thought they didn’t go after the Longbottoms until close to the end of November.”

Narcissa laughed. “He was, but since he’d not had a trial, he’d never actually been sentenced, so by law, he stood eligible. You know how the goblins keep to the letter of the law about such things.”

Lucius chuckled. “True enough. And you’re right, the Dark Lord did have several people to whom he gave a measure of trust, or at least considered closer than the rest… me, the Lestranges, Severus, Pettigrew, and the Crouch boy. Your cousin as well, at least up until the point that Regulus started that whispering campaign,” Lucius said. “And that would fit, too. If he entrusted Regulus with his secret and ordered him to help hide and protect one of the items… yes, I can see that knowledge horrifying anyone into wanting out.”

Draco, having been listening, thinking, and slowly growing paler than usual, ventured a question. “Father? Is it possible… can a horcrux… can it be a… a person?” he whispered.

Both of his parents stared at him. “Of course not. What makes you ask, Draco?” Lucius wanted to know.

“Harry,” the boy said simply. “He’s a Parselmouth, like the Dark Lord was. And that scar on his head, it’s so vivid still, but I saw the scar on his leg from when a dog attacked him a bit over a year ago, and that one’s faded much more than the one on his head.”
“Oh, that’s probably because the one on his head was caused by magic and not properly treated,” Narcissa said. “If you’re done with your breakfast, Draco, why don’t you run along to your studies? Your tutor will be here within the hour.”

“Yes, Mother,” the boy nodded. He grabbed one last piece of melon from his plate and hurried off, looking reassured.

Once the child was out of earshot, Narcissa shivered. “Actually, I can’t help but wonder if Draco might be right, as unlikely as it would be for anyone to make a horcrux out of another living being.”

Lucius frowned. “The Dark Lord had every intention of killing Harry that night,” he said.

“But if he’d intended making one that night, he’d have done the ritual… and he did kill James and Lily Potter first,” Narcissa pointed out, her face taking on a greenish tinge. “And his soul… whatever was left at that point… must have been unstable from being split previously…” She broke off abruptly and precipitously fled the breakfast room with one hand clamped over her mouth.

“Out of the mouths of children,” Lucius muttered. “I suppose it’s barely possible, given the way the Killing Curse rebounded off of Harry… and if the Dark Lord’s soul was already sundered and one piece ready to be placed in a vessel…” Realising he was thinking out loud, he gulped down the last of his meal and called for an elf to bring a cup of mint tea and a dish of dry toast, knowing from experience with previous pregnancies that those would help settle his wife’s stomach.

Narcissa returned to the table just after the elf brought the mint tea and toast. “Sorry about that,” she said. “And thank you for this.” She picked up the tea and sipped cautiously.

“It happens,” Lucius said with a nod. “This is obviously going to need some investigation. Under the circumstances, perhaps you’d be better off not helping with the research, though. It’s bound to be upsetting work at best, and you don’t want any additional stresses right now.”

“True,” she admitted. “But you won’t have time to do it all alone, either.”

He smiled wryly. “No, but Sirius will have time to help me, even when the Wizengamot opens the new session. He’s quite firmly decided against going back into the Auror Corps. He mentioned he’s considering a correspondence course to earn his teaching certification so he can try for a position at Hogwarts in a year or two. Maybe he can finally break the curse on the DADA post,” he added with a chuckle.

That drew a laugh from Narcissa as well. “If you’re going to bring Sirius in on the research, talk to Stephen as well,” she advised. “He’s also got an interest, considering that he was appointed by the Queen to look after Harry.”

“Very true,” Lucius nodded. “Are you going to speak with Sirius before or after going to Gringotts to check the vault you got after the Lestranges were convicted?”

“Before. He got a vault from them as well, so both ought to be checked.” Narcissa smiled. “And I’ll be fine. I know a legal spell that identifies soul magic. I might have to sift through a few sets of bonding rings and such, but if there is a horcrux in the vault, I’ll find it.”

“In that case, my dear, I’ll wish you good luck and good hunting,” Lucius said. “I have to go, lest I be late for my meeting. We want to get that wizarding studies curriculum finished before Mr. Lupin gets too far into writing the textbook for the course.” He stood up, gave her a gentle kiss,
and headed for the floo.

Narcissa continued to sip the mint tea and nibble at the dry toast until she was certain her stomach would behave, and then ventured a bit of melon and a few grapes as well. Once she was finished with her meal, she called for Kreacher.

“Kreacher bes here, Mistress,” the elf said as he popped in and bowed. “What may Kreacher bes doing for Mistress?”

“You will come with me to your former master’s home,” Narcissa said. “As I highly doubt my cousin outright disposed of anything that wasn’t damaged beyond repair, the locket you mentioned will still be somewhere in the house. However, neither he nor I would recognise it, so you need to identify it for us so that we can have it properly destroyed as Master Regulus wished.”

Kreacher looked torn between happiness at being told that his final instructions from Regulus would be carried out at last, and reluctance to have anything to do with Sirius, but he nodded. “Yes, Mistress,” he said. As she specifically said he was to accompany her, he walked with her to the floo and tossed the floo powder into the flames for her.

Stepping out of the hearth at 12 Grimmauld Place, she called out, “Sirius?” hoping that he was home.

He was. “Narcissa?” he replied, stepping into the room, a look of surprise on his face. “What brings you here on a Friday?”

“Have you seen the paper yet?” she asked in return.

“No, I prefer not to deal with anything annoying before lunch, and the news nearly always annoys me,” Sirius said, only half joking. “Why, what’s going on?”

“Pettigrew was convicted yesterday,” Narcissa told him, “although they haven’t pronounced sentence yet. More to the point, during the trial, he revealed that the Dark Lord created horcruxes… yes, more than one. He described one of them, although he said he didn’t know what the others were, and from the description, Lucius thinks it’s an object that the Dark Lord asked him to keep safe. If we’re right, it certainly would explain why he asked such a thing. Madam Bones issued a statement, saying that if anyone brings in an object that turns out to be a horcrux, no questions will be asked concerning how it came into their possession, so Lucius is going to collect the item and turn it in on Monday.”

“Damn…” Sirius shook his head. “But I don’t think you came here just to tell me all that, right? There must be something else or you wouldn’t have brought Kreacher along.”

Narcissa nodded. “You’re right, there is something else. Kreacher heard us talking, and his reaction to the conversation led us to believe that you might have a horcrux in your possession as well, thanks to your brother.”

Sirius blinked. “Are you serious?” he blurted.

“Completely,” she said. “It all fits. Kreacher, tell Master Sirius what you told me and Master Lucius earlier.”

Kreacher shot Sirius a look of loathing, but repeated his tale. “Master Reggylus ordered Kreacher to follow him and Master Dark Lord, so Kreacher followed. Master Dark Lord makes Kreacher drinks lots of burning wateres, and puts a locket in stone bowl before he fills it with more burning wateres. Master Dark Lord told Master Reggylus to follow him and leaves Kreacher there, but
Master Reggylus comes back laters and takes Kreacher home again. Months later, Master Reggylus comes home moaning and gives Kreacher locket from stone bowl and says locket must be destroyed and Kreacher must not be telling anyone. But Kreacher’s magic is not being able to destroy it and Master Reggylus is dead and Kreacher’s old Mistress moved locket and other shinies from Master Reggylus’ room to glass cabinet in drawing room.”

“Merlin,” Sirius muttered. “Half the trinkets out of that cabinet showed dark magic on them. I didn’t want to risk Harry or Draco getting hurt by accident, so I had the elves collect all the dark objects and stow them somewhere the kids wouldn’t likely find them until Remus and I find time to deal with them. Dobby!” he called.

The excitable elf popped in. “Yous called, Master Sirees?”

“Please fetch all those dark objects I asked you to store out of the way when this place got cleaned up,” Sirius asked. “I need to find something particular in that lot.”

“Yes, Master Sirees! Dobby be rights back!” Sirius had to smother a laugh as Dobby made a rude gesture to Kreacher before popping back out.

“Is Dobby working out all right for you?” Narcissa asked, hiding a grin of her own. “And the others as well?”

“Oh yes, they’re all doing a wonderful job,” Sirius nodded. “I can see where Lucius would have had a… personality clash with Dobby, but I’m fine with him as he is. I trust you’ve had no problems with Kreacher?”

“He’s settled in well, with other elves to share the work load and living people to care for,” Narcissa said. “So it seems as if our trade worked out to both our benefits.”

Dobby returned with a large sack. “Master Sirees be beings careful with these,” he warned. “Dobby brought Master Sirees’ dragonhide gloves, and he will be goings to wear them!” The elf handed the gloves to Sirius and glared at the man until he put them on.

Sirius did laugh as he pulled the gloves on. “Good thinking, Dobby, and thank you.” He looked at Narcissa with an upraised brow. “Have you got a spell to detect what we’re looking for, or are we just relying on Kreacher to identify the piece for us?”

“Well, we know it’s a locket,” Narcissa said. “So if there are several, set them aside and Kreacher can show us which one it is. I do have a spell, but it takes a bit out of me and I’m going to need to use it at Gringotts later… Lucius pointed out that it’s possible there’s another horcrux in the vaults you and I acquired when the Lestranges went to Azkaban, as they too were among the Dark Lord’s most trusted associates.” She giggled a little, adding, “So was the Crouch boy. Barty Crouch, Sr. lost his chance at the Minister’s position when it became known his only son was a Death Eater. I wonder if anyone will suggest to him that he look to his own vaults, in case his son stored anything of his master’s there before he got caught.”

Sirius laughed heartily at that as he dumped the sack of dark objects onto the table and started sorting through them. He found a total of five lockets in the lot, along with several rings, a couple of snuffboxes, two pocket watches, a bracelet, and a couple of things that he couldn’t identify, but which looked dainty and feminine. He set the lockets aside and swept the rest back into the sack for the moment. “Some nice stuff here, or it would be nice if it wasn’t cursed,” he commented. “I should pay Gringotts to have one of their curse-breakers clean it all up for me. I like the idea of passing along an engagement ring or the like from an older generation, but not with the spells I know are on a couple of these.”
“Fidelity spells with unfortunate consequences?” Narcissa asked.

“To say the least,” Sirius nodded. He gestured for Kreacher to examine the lockets and picked up a woman’s ring set with a very dark blue star sapphire to show Narcissa. “Engagement ring from the 14th century, given to Liesl von Hofstetten by our ancestor Caelum Black. It was not only charmed to alert her husband to any instances of infidelity, it punished her by branding the word harlot across her forehead… and also punished the man with the audacity to touch what belonged to a Black by amputating his offending body part while he was in congress with her.”

“Dear Merlin,” Narcissa shuddered. “I don’t think I even want to know how that was managed.”

“Neither do I. It’s a shame, though, because it is a perfectly lovely ring. I wouldn’t mind giving it to you or Andromeda or her daughter, just so it could be worn and seen, but not with those spells still attached,” Sirius said.

“Kreacher has founds the locket,” the wizened elf announced. He pointed at a heavy gold locket with a serpentine letter S in glittering green stones on the front.

“You’re certain of that, Kreacher?” Narcissa asked.

The elf nodded. “Kreacher bes very certain, Mistress. Master Dark Lord hids this locket and Master Reggylus took it for Kreacher to destroy.”

Sirius wrapped the locket in a silk handkerchief before placing it in a small box supplied by Dobby. “I suppose you’d like me to come to Gringotts with you right away, to check the former Lestrange vaults?” he asked Narcissa.

“If you would,” she said. “The more of these things we can get to the Ministry, the safer my family will be. At this point, we know the Dark Lord will return sooner or later, and when Lucius refuses to answer his summons, we’re going to be in danger. The sooner we figure out how many of these things he made and what they are and where they’ve been hidden, the happier I’ll be. Once they’re all found and destroyed, he’ll be just as mortal as any other wizard.”

“All right, let’s go then.” Sirius tucked his dragonhide gloves into the belt of his robe, in case he needed to move any questionable items within the vaults. He offered his arm to his cousin and led her to the floo. Once in Diagon Alley, he allowed her to set the pace for the walk to Gringotts. He also insisted on pausing at the apothecary for a stomach-soothing potion safe for expectant mothers, knowing that the carts were nausea-inducing under the best of circumstances.

Down in her vault of former Lestrange property, Narcissa looked around, suitably impressed by the age and value of the majority of the items she could see. Lifting her wand in a slow, sweeping motion, she intoned, “Magicae revelare animae!” Several objects immediately lit up with a bright violet glow.

Sirius pulled on his gloves and placed all the glowing objects into a bag. The cousins then proceeded to the vault he’d acquired from the Lestranges and repeated the process. After that, they proceeded back to Grimmauld Place to sort through what they’d collected. Many of the items appeared to be rings and bracelets to be used in soul bonding ceremonies: matched sets with no taint of dark magic about them. Two items were different, though, a small golden cup engraved with a badger, and a gold pocket watch engraved with an eagle in flight. He looked at Narcissa. “What do you think?” he asked.

She wrinkled her nose. “I think they should both be turned in, just in case,” she said. “The bonding rings and bracelets are just that, but these both show as being dark as well as being soul magic.
Will you go with Lucius to bring these things in on Monday?"

“If you want me to, I will,” Sirius nodded. “Is there any special reason you want me to go?”

“Well, the Prophet did quote Madam Bones as saying there would be no questions asked if anything got turned in, but I’d still feel better if Lucius didn’t go alone,” Narcissa admitted. “I know in my head that I needn’t worry, but I can’t help it.” She paused and looked uncomfortable. “Also… I want you to see if you can find out what spell or spells identify something as a horcrux. Draco said something this morning, and I hope he’s just imagining things, but if he’s not, oh Merlin and Circe, Sirius, if he’s not…” She hid her face in her hands as she stifled a sob.

Sirius looked alarmed. Jumping up, he awkwardly put his arm around his cousin, attempting to get her calmed enough to explain what had her so upset. “Narcissa… what is it?” he asked softly, gently rubbing her back.

“Harry,” she whispered. “Your godson. His scar. If… if the Dark Lord had planned on creating a horcrux that night… if he’d done whatever ritual ahead of time…”

“Merlin’s bloody bollocks!” Sirius swore, going white as he realised what she was suggesting. “I will absolutely find out how to identify a horcrux… and what to do about it, too.” He hugged her a little more tightly. “Thank you for telling me about this, Cissa. I know it can’t have been easy for you to think about, especially with Draco being Harry’s age and you expecting another. Thank you.”

Narcissa hugged back. “You’re family, and family comes first. Besides, Harry deserves much better than he’s had in his life thus far. The whole wizarding world thinks he’s being raised like Draco, when from the sound of things, his life has been closer to that of a house elf. Besides,” she smiled wryly, “the library here presumably still contains those books that Uncle Orion used to try to frighten me and my sisters with when we were young. I know there’s at least one that’s got information about horcruxes in it. Between you, Lucius, and Stephen, you’ll surely figure out some way of setting it right, if the worst-case scenario proves true.”

“Too bloody right we will,” Sirius said with determination. “I’m not letting anything happen to my pup now.” He carefully wrapped the cup and the pocket watch in swaths of silk before putting them in boxes. After that, he put them and the boxed locket into his safe to wait for Monday morning’s trip to the Ministry. Deciding that a change of subject was in order, he asked, “How are you at being persuasive with strangers? Especially in getting information from them that you’re not actually authorised to have.”

“That depends on if I can use magic or not,” she replied. “Why?”

Sirius smiled. “Well, remember back when I blood-adopted Harry and he and Stephen both had Heritage Traces done? Harry noticed something odd on his. It seems that his maternal grandparents only had one child. According to Stephen, in the muggle world, adoptions merely make a child the legal responsibility of the adoptive parents; they don’t have any way of doing the sort of bonding that a wizarding blood adoption does. He also said that it’s very possible that an adopted child might not be told that he or she is adopted.”

Fascinated… and welcoming the change of subject… Narcissa smiled. “And Lily was adopted?” she asked.

“Not Lily, Petunia,” Sirius said. “Which would mean the supposed blood wards to keep Harry safe with his mother’s blood, are completely worthless, because Petunia wasn’t born an Evans. But as far as Harry can tell, she doesn’t know she was adopted. We’re trying to get proof of this, as it will
be just another nail in Dumbledore’s coffin when we’re ready to make our move. Oh, I’m willing to allow that he might not be aware that Lily and Petunia weren’t related by blood… certainly Lily didn’t say anything to indicate that she knew, and as I said, it seems that Petunia doesn’t know either. Anyway, Harry’s done what he can on the muggle side of things, but the legal system there seals records on a regular basis when it comes to adoptions and such, so he’s hit a dead end.”

“And you want to get a look at those sealed records?” Narcissa asked.

“Not exactly,” Sirius said. “Harry did learn that Petunia was born at Cokeworth Hospital. He came up with the idea that someone near to Petunia in age go there with the story that your recently-deceased mother confessed on her deathbed to having had an illegitimate daughter that she gave up for adoption, and that she’d had that child there but had been admitted under a false name. You’re interested in finding your half-sister, so you’d be most appreciative of getting to look at the files of any girls born on that particular date so that you can narrow down the possibilities. He’d meant to ask about someone doing this a couple weeks ago, but that was the day you and Lucius asked about the pregnancy doctor and Stephen took the two of us shopping for our cars when you went to St. Mungo’s to get your medical records put into muggle form. Since it’s not an especially urgent question, it simply slipped all of our minds since then.”

Narcissa nodded her understanding. “So, it’s not actually legal, but it is the sort of thing that a sympathetic person might allow if it’s presented properly. And of course, a mild coercive spell would greatly help in that regard. Nothing too strong, just a little something to convince them that allowing me to see the information is harmless enough.” She considered, and then nodded. “I’ll do it, but not until I’m far enough along to show. It will help gain sympathy if I say something to the effect of having thought I was an only child all these years, so I want my coming baby to know his or her Auntie.”

Sirius laughed heartily. “Oh Merlin, Cissa, that’s priceless! I love it! And the timing isn’t a problem; we need to have a lot of proof of Dumbledore’s wrongdoing before I’ll be able to get custody of Harry, especially given how long I spent in Azkaban. Since Vernon Dursley’s death, Harry is in a much better situation, so we can afford to wait until the wizarding world in general gets used to seeing me as a productive citizen, rather than as someone liable to go mad at any moment due to my prolonged incarceration.”

“That makes sense,” she nodded. “Right, then, I need to get home and make sure Draco hasn’t managed to convince the house elves that bakewell tart and ice cream is an acceptable lunch.”

“You mean it’s not?” Sirius teased, putting on a shocked expression.

Narcissa laughed. “Prat,” she said. “We’ll see you for the boys’ lessons tomorrow.” She grabbed the floo powder and vanished in a swirl of green flames.

*Magicae revelare animae - reveal the magic of the soul*
On Saturday morning, Sirius woke up to a swift burst of light followed by an envelope dropping on his head. He grabbed for his wand before his sleep-fogged brain registered the combination of light plus letter as a delivery from Headmaster Dumbledore, using his phoenix as the carrier rather than one of the school owls. I really don’t want to deal with the old goat, he thought grumpily as he rubbed his eyes. Might as well see what he wants, though, and get it over with. Be worse if the old coot took it into his head to come calling in person, especially with Harry due over today. My wards are good, but if anyone could manage to break them, he’d be the one to do it. He called for Tally to bring him a cup of tea first, and rolled out of bed to visit the loo. He splashed some cold water on his face to bring himself to full alertness then headed back to his bedroom to take a few sips of the tea the little elf left on his desk before opening the letter.

Sirius,

I appreciate your wisdom, my boy, in taking the time to recover from your ordeal before throwing yourself back into normal activities. I’d honestly expected you to have come ‘round demanding custody of your godson before now. It pleases me that you realised you would do him more harm than good, had you contacted him when fresh out of Azkaban. That said, I hope you will think very long and carefully before trying to remove him from his home. He is doing well there, loved dearly by his aunt and with his cousin as his best friend. You know that despite your own desires, he’s better off with the family who has raised him all this time, than to be torn away from them and sent to live with a stranger.

In return, I would be happy to arrange for you to visit with Harry. Not at his home, as the blood wards protecting him there prevent any wizard save myself from finding it, but perhaps at the home of Arabella Figg, who you might recall from the Order of the Phoenix. She moved to the neighbourhood at my request, on the off chance any Death Eaters who managed to evade prison should discover that the boy was in fact placed with his muggle aunt, and perhaps loiter in the area to try to attack him on his way to school. As a squib, she is more comfortable in muggle areas anyway, but as a member of the old crowd, she would recognise any signs of Death Eater activity and be able to alert me if needed. This will, of necessity, have to take place on a weekend, as Harry does attend muggle primary school during the week. I’ll make the arrangements for your visit to take place one week from today, unless I hear from you that you would prefer to put it off until a later date.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore
Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry;
Order of Merlin, 1st class; Grand Sorcerer; Chief Warlock, Wizengamot;
Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards

Sirius crumpled the letter with a scowl. “So damned generous of him, graciously allowing me to see my godson for an hour or two, isn’t it?” he muttered. “All because I’m obviously unstable after being in Azkaban, but Merlin forbid he be arsed to have gotten me a trial himself years ago! Well,
at least I don’t have to worry about answering him right away for fear of him showing up if I don’t reply, he’ll just assume I’m good with visiting next week. I’m going to need to show this to Stephen when he and Harry get here.” He proceeded to get dressed and headed downstairs for breakfast.

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Stephen and Harry had just pulled out of Privet Drive onto Magnolia Crescent, headed for their yoga class, and Dudley was in the sitting room with Piers Polkiss, playing his favourite space battle video game, which allowed Petunia Dursley time to give the kitchen a proper cleaning. She frowned a little as she swept the floor; a spoon, sticky with ice cream residue, lay on the floor under Dudley’s seat at the table amidst a scattering of cake crumbs. Ever since she’d relieved her nephew of the household chores at the beginning of July, it had come to her attention that Duddikins seldom if ever made the effort to bring his dishes to the sink when he was done eating, let alone rinse them and put them in the dishwasher. She’d just bent over to retrieve the spoon when a sudden flash of light startled her. She straightened up in a hurry, to see a yellow envelope with her name written on it in green ink lying on the table.

Petunia flinched. *That’s the same writing as was on the note I found with the boy that horrible morning,* she thought. *What could those freaks possibly want with me now? I did as they asked and took the boy in, even though I wanted nothing to do with my freak sister’s freakish offspring, and then he promised we’d not be bothered again until it was time for the boy to go to that freak school.* Reaching out with a shaking hand, she broke the seal and opened it.

**Dear Mrs. Dursley,**

I must apologise for contacting you in this way when I’d said I would not do so, but circumstances have forced my hand. Please recall my original letter to you, in which I stressed that only by your taking in of little Harry, would I be able to protect you and your family from those who wish you harm. These protections will fall if your nephew leaves your home, as they are based in your familial connection with him.

Now, however, a complication has arisen. An old friend of James Potter’s, one whom I’d believed was dead, has reappeared, and he wishes to take the boy in, believing James would have wanted him to do so. This cannot be allowed to happen. If the boy even thinks he has a home other than yours, it will weaken the protections on your family. To this end, I require a bit of cooperation on your part. I need you to send Harry to Mrs. Figg’s house at noon one week from today, where I have arranged for his father’s friend to meet with him. Further, I need you to impress upon Harry the need to reassure this man that he is perfectly happy to remain with you in your home. Quite frankly, the man is somewhat less than mentally stable, and I believe that if Harry indicated an interest in going to live with him, he would jump to the conclusion that you were mistreating the boy, and seek revenge. This is also why I’ve arranged for them to meet at Mrs. Figg’s home, as I feel you and your family will be safer if he does not know exactly where you live.

**Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore**  
Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry;  
Order of Merlin, 1st class; Grand Sorcerer; Chief Warlock, Wizengamot;  
Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards

Petunia frowned as she read the note. _Something isn’t right with this, she realised, but I don’t know_
what. I think I need to speak with the boy’s tutor when he brings him back tonight. He’s going to a normal uni, as I recall, so he may not be completely caught up on whatever is going on with the rest of the freaks, but perhaps he’ll have some thoughts as to why Headmaster Dumbledore is so insistent that the boy stay with me. Folding the letter, she tucked it into the pocket of her dress and returned to her housework.

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Knowing that the first lesson on the day’s schedule was going to be with Narcissa, Harry had a question for Stephen as they left the yoga studio to head for London. “Can you transfigure some flowers and plants and make it permanent?”

“Sure, Harry, mind if I ask why?” Stephen answered.

Harry grinned. “Well, Lady Malfoy said this would be our last lesson about the flower language today, so I want to show her I learned something by giving her a message with flowers.”

Stephen smiled. “Nice! So, what do you need and what’s the message?”

“Well, since she’s having a baby, and Draco said she’s had problems before, I was thinking something to show her I’m wishing her the best. White heather for good luck, snowdrops for hope, sage for health, and wood sorrel for mother-love,” Harry said.

“Oh, she’ll love that,” Stephen nodded. He pulled into a small shopping centre when he spotted a sign for a florist. “Pop in there and buy an inexpensive bouquet, and then I’ll transfigure each flower into whatever you’d like.”

The boy did just that, returning with a small arrangement of daisies. Stephen transfigured them into the flowers and greens that Harry had requested. He also changed the plain paper wrapping the stems into a pretty doily wrap instead, and then they proceeded to 12 Grimmauld Place.

Harry entered the library a little nervously, clutching the bouquet awkwardly. Even though he knew no one here would hurt him, it still went against every instinct he had developed over the last eight years for him to purposefully make himself the focus of adults’ attention. “For you, Lady Malfoy,” he said softly, forcing himself not to duck his head although he couldn’t contain the colour flooding his cheeks. “I wanted to… to prove that I really have learned something during our lessons.”

“Oh, Harry… how sweet!” Narcissa exclaimed, growing misty-eyed as she read the message in the flowers. “And you thought of this all by yourself?”

“Yes,” Harry nodded. “I did.”

She hugged him tightly, while Draco looked on, his expression a mixture of amusement at his friend’s obvious embarrassment and chagrin that he hadn’t come up with the idea first. “I’m going to have to arrange a formal dinner at the end of our next set of lessons if I’m going to top this, aren’t I?” he said with a mournful pout, making his mother laugh.

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Meanwhile Sirius had grabbed Stephen and Lucius, showing them the letter from Dumbledore. Stephen read it, shaking his head. “Well, somehow I doubt there are any wards preventing other wizards from finding the place, seeing as I’ve been there every week since July. The real question seems to be, how good of an actor do we think Harry can be? And how good of an actor are you, Sirius?”
“Hmm? I guess I can manage well enough,” Sirius said. “I made them all think I’d lost my wits to the Dementors when I was in Azkaban, after all. Harry might need some coaching, though. If he’s too nervy, it might tip me off that things aren’t as Dumbledore wants everyone to believe. On the other hand, if Arabella’s been around him all this time, if he’s too enthusiastic about his aunt, she’ll surely wonder about the sudden change in him.”

Lucius tapped his chin thoughtfully. “Perhaps Harry ought to become angry with you, Sirius? Perhaps it wasn’t your fault that you were sent to Azkaban without a trial, but you did go after Pettigrew instead of staying to look after your baby godson. He can blame you for that part of it, and if you hadn’t gone after Pettigrew, you wouldn’t have been in a position to be sent to Azkaban in the first place. So, he can become upset and declare that he wants nothing to do with you… acting angry and upset is relatively easy, after all… and you can sadly depart this Figg woman’s home, hopefully leaving her with the impression that despite being heartbroken over Harry’s declaration, you’ll respect his wishes in the matter for the time being in hopes that perhaps when he’s older, he’ll be more willing to listen to your side of things.”

“I like that plan,” Stephen nodded. “And now I’m glad I made a point of never doing magic anywhere near the Dursley house, since we know for certain that Dumbledore has at least one spy in the neighbourhood.”

Sirius nodded as well. “It’s better than anything else I can think of,” he agreed. “And good point about knowing for sure there’s a spy. Given that the abuse was allowed to go on for so long, I bet she’s there more to let him know if they ever took it too far… whatever Dumbledore wants with Harry, it would do him no good if the Dursleys had managed to beat him to death before he was old enough to start at Hogwarts.”

“Allowing my father to draw me into the Dark Lord’s service wasn’t the smartest decision I’ve ever made in my life,” Lucius observed. “However, I think in some ways, I’d still rather follow him than Dumbledore. At least the Dark Lord was honest in his dealings with his followers, while it seems to me that Dumbledore manipulates situations so that he can step in and save the day at the last possible moment, like he did with Grindelwald.”

“What do you mean?” Stephen asked. “I know that all happened during what the muggles call the Second World War, so I rather thought that he simply hadn’t been able to get to Grindelwald any sooner, since the bombings would have made apparition over any distance hazardous at best, impossible at worst, if your destination was no longer there.”

Lucius snorted. “According to my grandfather, Dumbledore and Grindelwald were friends and possibly lovers when they were young. If anyone knew Grindelwald’s mind inside out and backwards, it was Dumbledore. There were opportunities in which he easily could have intervened long before the muggles started that war, or during the very early stages of it, but he didn’t. Supposedly it’s because he kept hoping his old friend would see the error of his ways, but I think he waited so that he’d be hailed as a hero. Stopping someone from becoming a dark lord generally won’t be noticed, after all, but stopping a feared and powerful dark lord would be.”

Sirius looked thoughtful. “Huh. I never considered that possibility. It does make a certain amount of sense, though. And even if the old goat really did wait in hopes that his old friend would see the error of his ways, I bet being hailed as a hero went to his head. I mean, who wouldn’t like being treated as though every word from his mouth was equal to a pronouncement from Merlin himself?”

“That wise and kindly if absent-minded grandfatherly act he puts on only helps with peoples’ perceptions of him,” Stephen observed. “Most people expect a degree of manipulation from shrewd businessmen and politicians, but not from sweet little old ladies or absent-minded old men.”
“Very true,” Lucius agreed. “I trust we’re in agreement that the best course of action is to explain the situation to Harry and coach him in the proper angry-at-Sirius response, for the benefit of the Figg woman and her presumed report to Dumbledore?”

“It does seem like the best idea,” Sirius nodded.

The plan agreed upon, the trio joined Narcissa and the boys in the library. After the normal lessons for the day were done, but before the boys were allowed to go out to the back garden to play, Sirius and Stephen showed Harry the letter from Dumbledore and explained their idea for handling the situation. They playacted the scenario a couple of times to give the boy an idea of what they needed him to do, although they didn’t want it to become too rote, lest Harry’s reactions when Mrs. Figg would be present seem rehearsed.

To lighten the mood afterwards, the Malfoys not only agreed to stay for supper, they let Harry and Draco choose the meal. Everyone agreed that the expression on Lucius’ face when confronted with pizza for the first time in his life was absolutely priceless. And when it came time for everyone to leave, Sirius gave Harry a pair of cassette tapes he’d made of various wizarding bands to send on to Princess Di, along with the address for the post office box he’d acquired following her promise to send him some of her favourite music.

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That evening, when Stephen pulled up in front of 4 Privet Drive to drop Harry off, Petunia stepped outside. “I need to speak with you, Mr. Coyner,” she said, sounding uncomfortable. “Please come inside.”

Concerned, Stephen did just that, following Harry into the house. “Is something wrong, Mrs. Dursley?” he asked.

Petunia didn’t answer right away, busying herself with making sure the front door was securely closed. “I arranged for my Dudley to spend the night with his friend Piers, so we can speak freely,” she said. “And I don’t know if something’s wrong or not. I think maybe it is, but I’m not sure how, if that makes any sense. I got a letter from the headmaster of that freak school today.” She held out her letter to Stephen.

He read it over, frowning slightly. Between the letter Sirius received and this one, he had proof positive that Dumbledore was indeed the man behind the curtain so to speak. But he still wasn’t sure why. Glancing at Harry, who looked uneasy, he sighed. “Your aunt’s letter has to do with what we discussed earlier,” he said. “Why don’t you go on up to your room and work on one of your models or something? I suspect you might find the talk I’ll be having with your aunt to be rather upsetting, and I doubt either of you wants to risk any accidental magic here. If it turns out there’s anything you need to know, I’ll meet you after your tae kwon do lesson on Tuesday.”

Harry nodded, noticing his aunt’s flinch at the word magic. “All right, Stephen,” he said. “Good night, then. Good night, Aunt Petunia.” He hurried up the stairs, perfectly willing to allow Stephen to handle the situation for now. He was still less than completely calm from the conversation earlier, and knew that if she started in on her usual tirade about freaks and freakishness, he likely would lose his temper.

After the boy vanished up the staircase, Petunia abruptly gestured Stephen into the kitchen. She poured two cups of tea and sat down. “All I ever wanted was a nice normal life,” she said bitterly. “But first I got stuck with a freak sister, and now her freak son. I wanted nothing to do with her, after she decided to throw her lot in with the rest of the freaks, you know. Vernon and I refused to attend her wedding to the Potter boy. He was an even worse freak than that awful Snape boy from
Cokeworth. He might have been a low-class, nasty little toerag, but at least he knew how to act amongst normal people. Vernon and I tried to take the boy to an orphanage, you know, but that freak headmaster brought him back and did something to Vernon that made him forget he wanted to be rid of the boy. That’s when he told me that my freak sister had got herself blown up, and that as long as the boy lived with us, we’d be protected in some way from having it happen to us too. He also promised not to contact us again until the boy was old enough to go to the freak school… although Vernon had been determined to stamp the freakishness out of him.” She looked sour. “Unfortunately, it didn’t work.”

“Magic is as much a part of someone who has it as is the colour of their hair and eyes,” Stephen said quietly. “There’s no way to ‘stamp it out’ of someone. As far as you being forced to take custody of Harry, I am sorry to hear that. Unfortunately, Headmaster Dumbledore is not only considered a hero in the wizarding world, but he’s also considered one of the wisest men in Britain due to his age and experience. To be blunt about it, few if any people would even believe that he would use magic against muggles, and most of those few would side with him anyway if he said he had good reason for doing so.”

Petunia frowned as she took this in. “So you’re saying that this other person really does want custody of the boy, but Dumbledore wants me to keep him, is that it? And that most fr… wizards would side with Dumbledore about it?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Stephen nodded. “Dumbledore wasn’t completely honest in his letter to you. The friend in question was not actually missing and presumed dead. He was in prison on false charges. I learned about it, and was able to secure the aid of his cousin in getting him exonerated and freed. We have reason to believe that Dumbledore purposefully left the man in prison, likely hoping he would die there, but we can’t prove our suspicions. He absolutely wants custody of Harry, but even if he was to go to the Wizengamot for it… in the wizarding world, that’s sort of a cross between Parliament and the courts; the members both vote on laws and judge legal cases… he knows he’ll not get it right now, simply because he’s so recently out of prison. That said, he is working towards the goal of taking Harry off your hands. It’s just that it’s highly unlikely that it will happen for at least a year and probably more like two years. He’ll need to prove to the world in general that he’s not about to go mad from his time in prison.”

“I suppose I can understand that much,” Petunia said with a disappointed sigh. “I remember that horrid Snape boy telling my sister all sorts of things about the fr… wizarding world, and I remember him talking about some prison with a name that sounded like ass-cabin, and some sort of demented things that guarded it and sucked the happiness out of the prisoners. Well, I do have to admit, the boy hasn’t done anything freakish around here since you started seeing him each week. He’s been much easier to put up with since summer… I suppose since I’ve dealt with him for this long, another year or even two shan’t matter. At least now I know I can look forward to getting him off my hands well before he’s done with school. My only real worry is about this protection gained by him living here… what exactly will happen if he thinks he might have another place to live? It’s not as though I could protect myself and my son from a freak… wizard… who wanted to blow us up.”

Stephen considered. “That, I don’t actually know,” he admitted. “Wards and protections are not anything I’ve studied extensively. And more to the point, I don’t dare use magic anywhere near here, especially now that we know your neighbour Mrs. Figg knows Dumbledore. You said yourself that Dumbledore made your husband forget he wanted to bring Harry to an orphanage. Given that, and a few other things I’ve noticed, I don’t want him to know that I’m acquainted with Harry, for fear he’ll then make me forget I know him. You may not have known this, but Harry is going to have quite a bit of political power in the wizarding world when he grows up. I believe Dumbledore is trying to keep him ignorant, so that he can set himself up as his most trusted
advisor… the power behind the throne, as it were. I do have an idea or two for learning more about the protections on you and your home without alerting Dumbledore that any wizards are nosing about, but it will take at least a few weeks to arrange.” He purposefully left out any mention of the Potter fortune, just in case.

Petunia nodded. “I understand, I think. At least, I understand enough to know I was correct in thinking from that letter that something wasn’t quite right. So I should just do as the letter says, and send the boy to Mrs. Figg’s house next week?”

“Yes,” Stephen said. “Harry and I have already spoken on the matter, and have a plan in place to handle this visit. At this point, since we have to think Mrs. Figg might be reporting to Dumbledore, we’ve worked out a rough scenario for him to follow that ought to keep the headmaster content, but at the same time won’t seem too obviously scripted. A bit of improvisational theatre, you might say.”

“All right,” Petunia said, standing abruptly. “You’ll let me know, when you find out about the protections and all? I may not particularly want the boy here, but I’d rather him be here, than lose Dudley to some fr… wizard who wants us dead.”

Stephen stood as well. “I will,” he nodded. “I’ll pick up Harry for our yoga session as usual on Saturday, only I’ll drop him back here after instead of taking him out for the day like normal.” He smiled a bit, and added, “and then I’ll meet him in the library whenever he’s done at Mrs. Figg’s, so you’ll have most of the day to yourself and Dudley as usual.”

Petunia gave a reluctant half-smile at that. “Thank you for your consideration,” she said. “Good night, Mr. Coyner.”

“Good night, Mrs. Dursley,” Stephen replied as he walked out the door.
Sirius got up early on Monday, dressing carefully to meet Lucius at the Ministry. He was anxious to be rid of the locket, cup, and pocket watch, and knew Lucius felt the same way about the journal left in his keeping. He flooed through with the questionable items in a messenger pouch, and met up with the aristocrat in the Atrium. The two headed off to the DMLE offices and asked to speak with Madam Bones.

Her harassed-looking secretary groaned. “What is this about?” she asked. “We’ve been positively flooded with hysterical people ever since Friday’s Prophet came out, all of them dead certain that they saw He Who Must Not Be Named lurking near their homes. Minister Fudge is being more ineffectual than usual due to his own fears, and we’ve had flocks of owls from people demanding access to privileged information. I’m not saying you can’t see her, mind, but I do need to know what sort of priority to give you.”

Lucius drew himself up to his full height, his Malfoy mask firmly in place. “Our business with Madam Bones is in regards to the Prophet article; specifically to the portion pertaining to those artifacts mentioned by Pettigrew. We believe we may have one or more of them to turn in.”

Amelia Bones gave them a nod. “Apparently it’s urgent enough that it put Fiona into even more of a tizzy than she’s been in all morning, so what can I do for you gentlemen?”

“We think we may have found some of You Know Who’s horcruxes,” Sirius said flatly.

Amelia blinked. “Well! Now I understand Fiona’s reaction.” She paused to activate the wards around her office, assuring them of privacy. “I know I did say ‘no questions asked’ in the paper, but I am curious,” she said, leaving it to the men to choose how much or how little to tell her.

“I was asked to keep this safe,” Lucius admitted, simply not saying who had done the asking as he set the old leather-bound book on her desk. “It does seem to fit the description which Pettigrew gave, of the old school journal.”

“This was in my family’s home in London,” Sirius informed her, pulling out the locket. “According to my old house elf, who’d seen You Know Who and my late brother hide it, Regulus stole it from its hiding place and died almost immediately afterwards. These other two items,” he set the cup and the watch out as well, “were found in the vaults Narcissa and I acquired following the Lestranges’ conviction. Since Pettigrew spoke under veritaserum and said he didn’t know where any of the horcruxes were hidden, I’d assume his vault is empty of any such objects. But I have it on good authority that he, Severus Snape, and Barty Crouch Junior were all given the same sort of trust as the Lestranges were, so it might be worthwhile to get a warrant to check their vaults,
just in case. It likely wouldn’t occur to someone like Barty Senior that his son might have placed something in there that he didn’t know about.”

“Merlin, he’d be livid,” Amelia groaned. “But you’re right, it’s worth looking into, just in case. Sirius, are you sure you don’t want to be reinstated in the Auror Corps?”

The animagus shook his head. “No, although I do thank you for the offer. But if you would allow it, I’d like to know the exact spell to identify a horcrux, and what to do about them. Like, is it possible to destroy the soul-bit without destroying the object it’s in? That journal might be just an old schoolboy’s journal, but I bet that cup, watch, and locket are all heirlooms of some sort. Maybe You Know Who stole them after killing whoever they belonged to, but if the family line survived, I bet they’d like their heirlooms back.”

Looking at the three metallic items on her desk, Amelia had to agree. “I’ve had people researching all weekend,” she said. “There is no way to destroy a horcrux without destroying the object itself, but there is a way to transfer the soul-bit to something else. Well, there would have to be, in order to bring back the person who created it, so we can transfer the soul-bits… assuming all three items are horcruxes, of course… into something that won’t be missed. And then we’ll destroy them with fiendfyre. Nasty stuff, that, but it’s that or basilisk venom or possibly acromantula venom.”

Both men shuddered. “Nasty is right,” Lucius said. “May we observe what you do with these items?”

“I don’t see why not,” Madam Bones agreed. She re-wrapped the four objects in silk and replaced them in their boxes before gathering them into a satchel. “Come with me, we’ll need to go to the shielded workroom in the Department of Mysteries for safety’s sake, not to mention, I’ll need the help on an Unspeakable or two.” As they passed through the DMLE back to the lifts to go to the DoM, she tapped a senior auror on the shoulder. “Rufus, I need you and one other to come with, please. Someone capable of keeping quiet.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the leonine auror, whom Sirius recognised as Rufus Scrimgeour, replied. He gazed across the cubicles. “Savage, come with me,” he called to a rather nondescript man with sandy brown hair. The group proceeded to the lift and down to the Department of Mysteries. Two Unspeakables, androgynous and unidentifiable in hooded robes, silently joined the party, escorting them to a bare stone chamber.

Amelia took charge. “These all need to be tested, to confirm whether they are horcruxes, and if so, whose soul they contain,” she said, unwrapping the objects once more. “Assuming the watch, locket, and cup are horcruxes, we want to transfer the soul piece within them into something else, so that we can identify the items and return them to their proper owners.”

Both Unspeakables nodded. The aurors picked up the locket and performed a complex bit of wand-work over it. Moving on to each of the other objects in turn, they repeated their actions. Sirius watched closely. “Will you show me that, please?”

Savage chuckled. “Why, do you think you might find another one?” But despite his joking words, he stepped over to show Sirius the wand movements. “It’s nonverbal… if it’s a horcrux, your wand will vibrate. Try it on the journal.”

Sirius did so, and was rewarded with a definite vibration in his wand. “So, this is one for sure.”

“It’s a horcrux, yes,” Scrimgeour nodded. “The locket and the cup are also, but the watch isn’t. These folks can hopefully identify whose they are, and then do the transfer for the locket and cup so we can destroy the horcruxes without destroying those particular items.”
“Can you figure out what exactly the watch is?” Sirius asked. “It has a definite feel of dark magic about it, and it did show as being soul magic of some sort even if it isn’t a horcrux. Not something I’d want around even if it is a rather nice watch, unless I can get it cleaned up, you know?”

“We can do that,” one of the Unspeakables said. Even the voice gave no clue as to gender, being low for a woman by high for a man. The one who spoke wrapped the watch and boxed it, tucking it into a robe pocket. “Return on Friday and we will have the information you seek, as well as having the watch purified if at all possible.”

“Thank you,” Sirius nodded.

The other Unspeakable picked up the locket and set it down away from everyone. He placed a smooth piece of polished jet atop the locket and began a soft chant intended to draw the piece of soul from the locket and into the stone. But the results startled everyone. A cloud of oily black rose from the locket, but instead of moving directly into the polished jet, it drifted up and slowly took the shape of a shadowy man. “Abraxas,” the smoke-shape said. “I am most pleased to see you seeking to return me to a body, as apparently some fool believes he managed to kill me.” The figure paused and seemed to peer more intently at Lucius. “You are not Abraxas! What have you done with him?”

Lucius moistened his lips and took a deep breath. “Forgive me, my lord, but I am Lucius, son of Abraxas. My father passed on several years ago.”

The smoke-shape considered this. “When I sealed myself in the locket, it was the year 1957. How much time has passed since then?”

“Thirty-two years, my lord, it is now late 1989,” Lucius replied.

“So long,” the smoke-figure mused. “What of my other horcruxes?”

“If my father left a record of them all and where they are, I have not seen it,” Lucius said truthfully. “It was mere chance that I learned of the locket, the journal, and the cup.” He silently prayed that the others would remain silent, if not pretend to be loyal followers, at least long enough for them to get whatever information they could from this abomination of a spirit before them.

The figure waved a negligent hand. “I expect they’re safe enough. My ancestor’s ring is well hidden in my grandfather’s home. And not even that sanctimonious fool Dumbledore knows about the Come and Go Room at Hogwarts. I took the opportunity to hide Ravenclaw’s diadem there when the old coot refused my application to teach Defense.” Despite not having actual facial features, the figure seemed to frown. “I always intended to create a sixth horcrux, to divide myself by seven, the most powerful magical number. But I cannot think of what I might have used. I had hoped to lay my hands on the Sword of Gryffindor whilst at Hogwarts, so as to have something from each of the Founders, but I was unable to do so,” it elaborated, seeming unconcerned about or possibly unaware of the amount of information given out.

“Well hidden indeed, my lord,” Lucius said smoothly, his mind racing. “But if I might make a suggestion?”

“You may speak,” the figure nodded.

Lucius reinforced his occulmency shields and said, “As people other than your faithful have become aware of the cup and locket, there has been a clamour for them to be put on display. For safety, I humbly request that you allow us to transfer your horcruxes from those two items into simple gemstones which will attract far, far less attention. While I believe I understand your
reasoning for using these particular items, now that so many people at the Ministry have become aware of them, I cannot guarantee that they will remain with your faithful. As the law stands, the Ministry currently has the ability to simply confiscate them and do with them as the Minister wishes.”

“A valid concern,” the figure acknowledged. “As you obviously are not yet prepared to restore me properly, I will permit this.” The figure glanced about. “I see from your ages that all of you must have joined me at some point after I sealed myself in the locket, but it is good to know that even now, my chosen ones remain faithful. Call me forth from the cup, that I may assist you in coaxing me into the stone you’ve chosen, lest you have to waste time convincing me a second time.”

At Lucius’ nod, the second Unspeakable pulled out another polished piece of jet and laid it on the cup before starting the same chant. This time, when the oily cloud of smoke started to pull away from the cup, the smoky figure hissed something in Parseltongue. Instead of forming a figure, the cloud from the cup swirled over the stone and sank into it. “It is done, my lord,” the Unspeakable said, having caught on to Lucius’ desperate ploy to placate the manifest soul fragment and keep it from attempting to possess anyone.

The figure nodded graciously. “As more time has passed than I expected, I cannot say who might currently hold the knowledge of how to restore me. Since you are obviously trying to do so, however, I will tell you that you can find the information hidden in the Riddle manor.” With those parting words, the smoky figure lost definition, resembling a cloud once more before sinking into the piece of jet still sitting on the locket.

Savage and Scrimgeour immediately pulled out their wands and checked the stones and the cup and locket. “The transfer worked,” Scrimgeour reported. Setting the journal with the two stones, Savage cast fiendfyre at the items while Scrimgeour shielded everyone and everything else in the room. A trio of unearthly howls filled the air and what appeared to be ink poured from the journal as the flames consumed it and the two pieces of jet.
And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

“Dear Merlin,” Amelia Bones breathed when Savage and Scrimgeour ended the fiendfyre spell. They checked the ashes left behind and nodded in confirmation that the horcruxes had been destroyed. “I don’t think any of us expected anything like that to happen.”

“Yeah,” Sirius agreed, sounding shaken. “But at least he… it… whatever… was stupid enough to give us information. Cryptic information maybe, but information all the same. We know we’re looking for a ring, and Ravenclaw’s diadem. We also know that the diadem is somewhere at Hogwarts, and the ring is in his grandfather’s house. I don’t suppose anyone might know someone who knows the name of his grandfather?” he joked weakly.

Lucius looked thoughtful. “No, I don’t. I may, however, know where to find information about the Riddle manor, including its location.”

Amelia peered at Lucius for a long moment. “I think I don’t even want to know. As I recall, you were found not guilty of supporting Him voluntarily, due to being under the influence of the imperious curse,” she said. “I’ll be honest, Lord Malfoy, in saying that some people wondered if that verdict was unbiased, or if perhaps the wheels of justice might have been greased with a liberal application of galleons. However, your actions just now have convinced me that whatever the truth of the matter might have been eight years ago, you have no wish to see Him return to power now.”

“My father was not one who took ‘no’ for an answer, particularly from his heir,” Lucius said. “And especially not concerning a course of action that he believed would bring the family more power. You are completely correct in thinking that I absolutely do not wish to see him return.”

“Still, that was a clever dodge, making that thing think you were in charge of trying to bring him back,” Scrimgeour put in. “Especially given what the cup and the locket are.”

“Huh?” Sirius looked a little confused at that apparent non-sequitur. “What about the cup and the locket?”

Scrimgeour raised a brow. “I realise it’s been years since you’ve done any work as an auror, but weren’t you paying attention? That thing said it wanted the Sword of Gryffindor so it would have an item from each of the Founders of Hogwarts for his horcrux collection. Take a good look at both objects, and you tell me who each of them belonged to.”

Sirius raised a brow at the leonine senior auror, but did as he was told. And then his jaw dropped as he realised exactly what he was seeing. “This cup… belonged to Helga Hufflepuff,” he said, “and the locket must have been Salazar Slytherin’s.”

“Yes,” Amelia nodded. “I’ll bring both items to Gringott’s myself, as the goblins are bound to have some notation in their records as to which family line inherited them, and therefore who they now belong to.” She picked up the two objects carefully and wrapped them up once more before tucking them into her satchel for the trip to the bank as soon as she was able to leave the Ministry for the day. “I trust that no one will mention the details of this incident in public.”

“You trust correctly,” Lucius nodded.
“I’ll not request any oaths, then,” Amelia said. “If anyone needs to reveal anything of what happened today in an attempt to discover the identity of that being’s grandfather, or perhaps to learn more of this Come and Go Room at Hogwarts that it mentioned, all I ask is that you use extreme caution. I plan to announce that the journal was turned in anonymously and destroyed, but I don’t want headlines screaming about the cup and locket. Fudge really would try to confiscate them for himself based on his position as Minister of Magic.”

All of the men chuckled ruefully at that as they left the workroom, knowing it was true. For that matter, Fudge would most likely try to take credit for finding the items in an effort to enhance his reputation.

As they left the Department of Mysteries and headed towards the floos, Lucius said to Sirius, “Come to the Manor with me for lunch, so we can let Cissa know what happened.”

“Sure,” the younger man agreed.

The two men flooed through to Malfoy Manor, where they found Narcissa already at lunch with Violet Parkinson, Cordelia Greengrass, and Katherine Nott. As Narcissa was telling her guests about her visit to the muggle healer, Lucius and Sirius quickly made their escape again before any of the women noticed them. “I think we might be safer with lunch on trays in my study,” Lucius said.

“I think you’re right,” Sirius laughed. They paused in the breakfast room where Draco was practising his own hosting skills over lunch with Pansy Parkinson, Daphne and Astoria Greengrass, and Theodore Nott, and greeted the youngsters before moving on to enjoy their own meal in peace. As they ate, Sirius asked, “Do you suppose Snape might know anything of this so-called Come and Go room at Hogwarts?”

Lucius looked thoughtful. “I’ve no idea. But I do recall hearing a tale of a door that would appear somewhere on the seventh floor, most often when a student was desperate to avoid being caught out after curfew and given a detention. One version claimed it led to a passage to the dorms, which never quite made sense to me as there are four different dorms that aren’t anywhere near one another. Another version called it a well-hidden broom closet, but one that was more than large enough for the miscreants to hide from whichever teacher was about to catch them in their misbehaviour.”

Sirius couldn’t help but grin. “I wish I’d known about a place like that when I was there. I could have used it a time or two. It sounds as though it’s a place that only shows up if someone has a particular need of it, though. I wonder if the person using it really has to be desperate, or if there is some sort of trick to getting into it if you’re not desperate.”

“It’s certainly something to mention to Severus the next time he comes to dinner,” Lucius said. “Although that won’t be for another few weeks. He’s generally unable to get away more than once a month during the year, and he was here just over a week ago, right before Pettigrew’s trial.”

Sirius nodded. “I’ll leave approaching him to you. Merlin knows he probably wouldn’t listen to me anyway.”

Lucius nodded. “Do you blame him?” he asked quietly.

“Not at all,” Sirius admitted, “but it does make things a bit difficult at times. I’m just grateful that he was willing to listen to my apology and grant enough of a truce to keep Draco from being caught in the middle. I’m hoping that maybe the fact that Draco and Harry are friends will help keep him from taking out his animosity towards me and James on Harry.”
“I'll see what I can do in that direction,” Lucius offered. “I shan't make any promises, though. Severus does nurse his grudges.” Changing the subject, he asked, “Are you prepared for the charade on Saturday?”

“As prepared as I'm going to be,” Sirius nodded. “Stephen said he'd meet Harry at the local lending library once he 'runs away' from me at Arabella Figg's place, and I'm to meet them in muggle London an hour or so later. Harry wants to do his holiday shopping, and he also mentioned that Stephen and I will need muggle tuxedos for when we attend the ballet with Her Royal Highness.”

“What in Merlin's name is a muggle tuxedo?” Lucius asked.

Sirius shrugged. “I haven't seen one for myself yet, but Stephen said it's sort of the muggle equivalent of formal dress robes. Traditionally, the outfit consists of black trousers and a black jacket, worn with a white shirt and accentu with a matching bow tie and cummerbund. Those should either be black, or of a colour that matches the dress of the lady being escorted. So I guess Stephen and I will go with black, unless we're told otherwise beforehand. As I understand it, we've both met the Princess of Wales once each, and I've no idea if either of us have met whichever of her ladies-in-waiting might also be accompanying us that evening. I know neither of us have any idea as to what colours they might be wearing.”

Lucius nodded. “The description makes it sound reasonably elegant. You'll have to tell Narcissa and I all about the ballet afterward,” he said. “Music and drama may have crossed over from the muggle world to the wizarding world far enough into the past to be considered as much wizarding as muggle. But for whatever reason, ballet never caught on with us.”

“Maybe it's because ballet more or less evolved as a performance art after the Statute of Secrecy took effect?” Sirius suggested. “Purebloods would have ignored the development as being a muggle thing, and while I understand that many muggle children take ballet lessons when they're very young, a muggleborn witch or wizard would not be able to continue such lessons once they started at Hogwarts. So then there just aren't any witches or wizards qualified to teach ballet, much less to assemble and manage performing companies.”

“I hadn't thought of that,” Lucius said. “It does make sense, though. Well, as I said, do tell us about it after. It sounds as though it might be enjoyable to watch, and as long as I'm putting up with the indignities of muggle healing practises, I'd like to find something muggle that I can enjoy.”

“What, you didn't like the pizza?” Sirius teased.

Lucius laughed. “That was one of the most bizarre culinary creations I've ever eaten! It actually was tasty, but Merlin's beard it was difficult to eat without becoming covered with it.”

“It just takes some practise,” Sirius laughed. “Getting back to the topic of the upcoming hols, though, what have you got planned this year?”

“You'd have to ask Cissa,” Lucius admitted. “She's the one who handles that part of our social calendar. Why?”

Sirius smiled. “I want to do a Yule celebration for Harry, as he's never had one, at least not that he can remember. Not that he's ever really had a muggle Christmas, either, but he at least has some notion of what muggles normally do. Quite a bit of it is similar to Yule, actually, at least as far as celebrating with friends and family, and exchanging gifts. I'd like to introduce him to wizarding traditions this year as well.”

Lucius nodded. “Get with Cissa on that,” he said. “I don't recall if we're supposed to be hosting
anything this year or not. But depending on what you do and when, I'm sure she'd love to help you out, and I know Draco would enjoy it as well.”

“I'll do that,” Sirius nodded. Grinning, he added, “As soon as all those women go home.”

Lucius laughed and agreed.

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On Saturday, Harry peered nervously at Stephen as they headed back to 4 Privet Drive from the yoga studio. “So, Aunt Petunia will drop me at Mrs. Figg's, I greet Sirius as if he was a stranger, and then when he tries to explain who he is to me, I'm to get angry and yell that I don't want him talking to me and run off to the library.”

Stephen reached over and squeezed his shoulder. “That's right. And I'll be there waiting, and we'll drive to London to do the gift shopping like you wanted. Sirius will meet us at Harrod's.”

Harry nodded. “I hope I can do this properly. I don't want Dumbledore to realise you and Sirius know me, and decide to obliviate you so you'll forget about me.”

“You'll be fine, Harry, we trust you. You already told me that Mrs. Figg thinks I'm a muggle university student, and that she doesn't know my name. So there's no way she could possibly tell Dumbledore about me. As for Sirius, he agrees that it's better to do it like this so that Dumbledore thinks he's not a threat, than to wait and have Dumbledore maybe put someone to watching him for fear he'll try to contact you, right?”

“Right,” Harry nodded. “I'm still nervous, though.” He sighed as they pulled up outside his aunt's house. “Well, I guess I'll see you at the library soon.”

Stephen smiled. “I'll be waiting.”

Harry got out of the car slowly and headed inside to change out of his yoga pants into a pair of nice trousers and a school shirt, figuring that he would be expected to make an effort with his appearance when meeting a new adult.

Petunia was waiting for him when he got back downstairs. “You look presentable,” she said shortly. “You're meeting your tutor at the library after?”

“Yes, Aunt Petunia,” Harry answered.

“Come along, then,” she said, unexpectedly giving him a small smile. “You're far more clever than I used to think. You'll do fine.”

Harry blinked. “Thank you,” he said, giving her a small smile in return as he settled into the back seat of the car.

Dudley was already in the front seat with his hand on the wireless dial, waiting for his mother to start the car so he could try to find some music he liked. Petunia frowned a bit when he found a song and turned the volume up full. “But are you gettin' it - armageddon it! Really gettin' it - armageddon it!” Dudley sang along… badly… with the wireless as he played air guitar.

Harry didn’t mind putting up with the noise, though, as it meant his cousin was too busy to bother pestering him. “Thanks again for the ride,” he told his aunt as she pulled up at Mrs. Figg’s house to drop him off before heading out to whatever she had planned for herself and Dudley for the day.
“Just behave yourself,” she said as he climbed out. He shut the car door and she drove off. Letting his shoulders droop slightly, as if disappointed that he wasn’t going with his aunt and cousin, he trudged up the walk and knocked on Mrs. Figg’s door.

Inside, Sirius looked up. “That must be him?” he said hopefully.

Mrs. Figg glanced out the window and nodded as she moved to the door. “Yes, that’s Petunia Dursley’s car pulling away. Remember, he’s being raised muggle, so mind what you say to him.” She opened the door, saying, “Come in, Harry. You must see the newest pictures I’ve taken of Tibbles and Tufty! Also, I have another guest today, someone who’s been looking forward to meeting you. Come meet Sirius Black.”

Harry looked up, his eyes wide. “Me?” he asked. “Why would anyone want to meet me?”

“Because you’re my godson, Harry,” Sirius announced, stepping into the sitting room. “I only wish I had been able to get to know you as you grew up.”

“Aunt Petunia never told me I had a godfather,” Harry said, sounding a little suspicious. “If you’re my godfather, why haven’t I met you before now?”

Sirius tilted his head, looking troubled. “Maybe your aunt didn’t know about me?” he offered. “Mrs. Figg tells me that she and your mum didn’t get along so well. I remember Lily saying her sister and she had fought and mostly didn’t speak to one another. If that’s the case, it’s possible that either your mum never told your aunt that you had a godfather, or that your aunt didn’t pay enough attention when she was told and so it slipped her mind. As to why I never came to see you before now…” He sighed. “What do you know about how your parents died, Harry?”

“It was a car crash, Aunt Petunia told me,” Harry said. He held himself tensely, as if suspicious of this man’s motives. He edged slightly towards Mrs. Figg, who patted him awkwardly on the shoulder.

“That’s the simple version, Harry,” the old woman told him. “Your father and Sirius here, they were best friends in school, and they were both in a... police training together, too. Your parents died due to the actions of a terrorist.”

“A car bomb?” Harry looked surprised.

“Try to understand, Harry,” Sirius said, “your dad and I were looking into a string of minor incidents. And when I heard he’d been killed, I couldn’t believe it was an accident.” He purposefully didn’t answer Harry’s question about the car bomb, but mentally applauded the boy for asking it. “I started looking into the cause of it, and that’s why I never came to see you before now. You see, I had a suspicion as to who might have been behind it all, and went looking for that person to arrest him and get some answers. He faked his own death and made it look as though I was to blame, so I’ve been in prison even though I was innocent. I only just managed to prove in court that I hadn’t done it, and got turned loose again.”

Harry continued to regard Sirius with suspicion. “So why are you here now?”

“Well, I wanted to see you, of course, Harry,” Sirius said. “You’re my godson, after all, and I should have been here for you all along. I know your dad wanted me to raise you, if ever anything happened to him.”

Now Harry looked vaguely concerned. “I don’t want to leave my school, or my friends,” he said. Which was true enough, he thought, now that he was no longer in a classroom with his cousin, and
had managed to make some friends. “Besides, you weren’t there for me all along, and now you come and want to be my best mate because you and my dad were friends?”

Sirius looked distressed in his turn, noting that Mrs. Figg was looking between the two of them as if she was watching a tennis match. “I don’t expect us to be best mates right off,” he said, “but I do want to get to know you, yes! If I hadn’t been framed up, you’d have been living with me!”

“And if you hadn’t gone after your suspect on your own, you would have been there for me like you say you want!” Harry retorted. “So it’s your own bloody fault you weren’t there! I’ve gotten on just fine without you all this time, because you were so selfish as to want all the glory of catching your man all on your own. Well, fine, you’ve seen me and I’m doing well enough without you and I don’t bloody well need you!”

Mrs. Figg looked shocked. “Harry, language,” she remonstrated gently. “Sirius has been worried for you all this time, you know.”

Harry just looked angry. “Well, now he’s seen for himself that I’m fine, so he can just go ahead and vanish again.”

Sirius stepped forward and gently laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Harry,” he pleaded, “won’t you give me a chance to get to know you? Please?”

“No,” Harry snapped. “I won’t. Just… go away!” He wrenched himself away from the hand on his shoulder and darted out of the house, running up the road towards the Little Whinging library.

Sirius started to go after him, but Mrs. Figg grabbed his hand. “Let him go,” she advised. “There’s nothing to harm him in this neighbourhood, and he’ll either work off his temper and come back, or else he’ll take refuge somewhere, most probably in the library. He does spend quite a bit of time there these days, now that he’s old enough that Petunia doesn’t think he needs a minder all the time. And she did tell me he was likely going to go to the library after visiting here for a while.”

“Are you sure?” Sirius sounded terribly upset. “I just want to get to know him, really.”

“He’s a child, Sirius. Give him time to get used to the idea. Remember, he didn’t know he even had a godfather until just now,” the woman suggested. “If he’s not back within an hour, then you can go look for him if you insist. But perhaps it might be better if you were to simply write to him for a time, get to know him that way first? As I said, let him get used to the whole idea of you.”

Sirius frowned, rubbing a hand over his eyes as if to try to hold back tears. “Maybe you’re right. Merlin, I hope he’ll come around… I don’t want my own godson to hate me.” He sighed. “Maybe I should just go.”

Mrs. Figg reached up and patted the animagus on the cheek. “That’s up to you, of course. If you think it will help, I’ll be glad to put in a good word for you the next time the boy comes over.”

Sirius nodded, wanting to get away before he accidentally did anything to make her suspicious. “I would appreciate that, thank you,” he said. “And thanks for letting me come over to meet him in the first place. I just wish it had gone better.” He apparated out before she could answer.

A second crack of apparition sounded from the dining room, where a smirking and satisfied Albus Dumbledore had watched the entire meeting from underneath the invisibility cloak that had once belonged to James Potter. The old man strolled up the path from the gates of Hogwarts and through the castle to his office, nodding affably at the few students he encountered along the way and offering them lemon drops.
Meanwhile, Harry was firmly ensconced in the passenger seat of Stephen’s car, telling the young man about the meeting as they drove towards London. The two headed straight for Harrod’s, and into the Food Hall, where Sirius was waiting for them by the fancy cakes.

He caught his godson in a hug with a grin. “That was perfect, pup!” he declared. “You handled that beautifully!”

“So did you,” Harry said with a smile, returning the hug. “You think we’re safe now?”

“I think so, yes,” Sirius said. “Let’s go do that holiday shopping.”
And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

On Friday the 22nd of December, Harry bounced out of bed and looked over at his packed suitcase and the carton of gaily wrapped gifts beside it. Stephen would be collecting him after school, and bringing him to Sirius’ home in London. He’d stay there for the entire holiday break from school, save the few days he’d be off to Highgrove with Princess Di and Wills and Harry. All the gifts he’d purchased for the three of them, as well as for the Malfoys, Sirius, Remus, and Stephen were tucked into that carton. His gifts for Aunt Petunia and Dudley were on his desk beside his old backpack, which already held a box of little mince pies destined for his class party this afternoon, and wrapped books of Mad Libs for Lucy, Surya, and Paul, along with his lunch. In keeping with his original idea, the ribbons around each wrapped gift were tied with a candy cane and a foil-wrapped chocolate in the shape of Father Christmas.

Picking up the backpack and the two gifts, he headed downstairs. His aunt entered the kitchen as he was pouring milk into his cereal. “What’s this?” she asked, looking at the two wrapped packages with a puzzled expression.

“Christmas gifts for you and Dudley,” Harry answered. “Since Stephen will be fetching me right after I get home from school to make sure I’m out of the way before Aunt Marge arrives, I wanted to bring them down now so that I’d not forget to do it later.” He dug into his breakfast, hoping to finish before his cousin made his appearance.

Petunia blinked. “I see,” she said slowly. “That makes sense.” Looking slightly flustered, she bustled around the refrigerator and the cupboards, assembling Dudley’s usual lunch of three jam sandwiches; today’s afters consisted of chocolate chip biscuits and half a dozen squares of gingerbread. She looked at the plate of gingerbread remaining after she finished, debated with herself for a moment, and then selected a large square and wrapped it separately. “Here,” she said, thrusting the single piece at her nephew. “Put it away before Diddy sees you’ve got it.”

Harry smiled. “Thank you, Aunt Petunia.” He didn’t hesitate to deposit the gingerbread with the rest of his lunch before quickly finishing his breakfast and rinsing his bowl.

“Haven’t errands to run this morning,” Petunia said abruptly. “So I’ll drop you and Duddikins at school, since I need to go that way anyway.”

“All right,” Harry nodded. He pulled a battered library copy of The Best Christmas Pageant Ever from his backpack and sat back down at the table to read until it was time to go.

Dudley slouched in, whining because he’d forgotten to tell his mother before she did the marketing that he was almost out of his Honey Monster Sugar Puffs, and he only had enough left for a half a bowl and had to add plain cornflakes to the sugary cereal in order to have enough to eat to hold him until lunch. Petunia promised to buy more since she needed to run to the store for something else, so he subsided. She hurried out of the kitchen, returning with a tote bag in hand just in time to see Dudley shove back from the table so hard that it shifted back and hit his cousin. She hid a frown,
unable to tell for certain if it had been an accident or not. Handing her son his packed lunch, she picked up her handbag and tote bag once more. “Time to go, boys.”

As was becoming normal, Harry settled into the back seat and quietly belted himself in while his cousin ran for the front seat and started fiddling with the wireless. When they pulled up in front of the school and saw several of the other children carrying boxes or platters or bags of crisps, Dudley informed his mother, “Everyone is supposed to bring something for the party this afternoon. What did you pack for my party?”

His mother frowned. “I didn't pack anything, Diddyums, because I didn't know you were supposed to bring something. But since I have to run to the store for your cereal anyway, I can pick up some gingersnaps or sugar biscuits and drop them at the school on my way home.”

“They better be good ones,” Dudley said, “with lots of icing on them. And make sure the staff knows it's for me, so they don't keep them for themselves.” He got out of the car without another word.

Once his cousin was out of the way, Harry unbuckled and started to climb out of the car. His aunt's voice stopped him as she asked, “Are you also supposed to bring a snack for your class? I... don't mind picking up something for you as well if you need me to.”

The dark-haired boy smiled. “Thank you, Aunt Petunia, but I stopped off on my way back from tae kwon do class yesterday and bought something with my pocket money. I thought you'd appreciate it if I didn't ask you to spend the extra for my sake.”

“Oh... well, that was very thoughtful of you, Harry, to consider that money is a bit tighter than it used to be,” she said awkwardly. “Have a good day, then.”

“You too, Aunt Petunia,” he replied as he hopped out of the car. Only as she was driving off did he realise that for the first time in his memory, she'd called him by his name.

The day flew by. Right after lunch, the school went into assembly, and Father Christmas made an appearance. He passed out candy canes and colourful green and gold crackers to everyone, recited “A Visit From St. Nicholas” and led the school in singing several carols before the children were dismissed back to their classrooms for their individual class parties. Without his cousin blocking him from the food tables, Harry enjoyed several treats new to him, including a bit of plum pudding with custard sauce. He, Paul, Surya, and Lucy sat together to eat and exchange gifts, and laughed to discover that he, Paul, and Lucy had all bought Mad Libs for their friends. Surya was the only one who gave something different; her gifts to her friends were little carved ivory four-armed elephant-headed figurines that she said represented the Hindu god Ganesha, and that were supposed to bring luck and happiness. After that, the foursome crossed arms in a circle to pull their crackers. Harry got a silver paper crown which he put on, a miniature plastic slinky, and a joke that read:

It was Christmas and the judge was in a merry mood as he asked the prisoner, "What are you charged with?"
"Doing my Christmas shopping early," replied the defendant.
"That's no offence," said the judge.
"It is if you do it before the shop opened," countered the prisoner.

The four all giggled at that. Lucy put on her purple crown and asked, “What’s an ig?” reading the riddle from her cracker.

Paul, wearing a green crown, got the answer first. “It’s an Eskimo house without a loo! Why is Cinderella such a poor footie player?”
“Because she runs away from the ball,” Surya laughed as she adjusted her red crown on her dark hair. “What’s a mum’s favourite Christmas carol?”

“Silent Night!” Lucy and Harry exclaimed together with more laughter.

Lucy pulled out one of her new Mad Libs books and the snowflake-decorated pencil she’d gotten from her cracker, and the four of them spent the remainder of the party playing the silly word game. When the dismissal bell rang, Paul and Harry shook hands as they wished each other a Happy Christmas, while Surya and Lucy hugged both boys as well as each other. With promises to spend time together after school on the first day back after the holidays, the friends headed off to their respective homes.

When Harry arrived back at Privet Drive, he headed straight upstairs to bring his suitcase and his carton of gifts down to the sitting room to wait for Stephen to pick him up, feeling grateful that his cousin had gone over to Piers Polkiss’ house after school. His aunt walked into the room and looked at the two gifts he’d brought down that morning, which were currently under the tree.

“What did you get Dudders, if you don’t mind me asking?” she said.

“A set of Legos,” Harry replied. “I figured I couldn’t go too far wrong with that.”

Petunia nodded. “Yes, you’re probably right about that. Here,” she said, thrusting a wrapped package at him. “Stick that in with what you’re taking with you, and open it Christmas morning. And… have a good time,” she added as Stephen’s little Mini pulled up out front.

Harry looked stunned. “Thank you, Aunt Petunia,” he said with an astonished expression. “I will. You too. And Happy Christmas.” He took the gift and added it carefully to the carton as Stephen knocked at the door.

His aunt let his tutor in. “Happy Christmas, Mr. Coyner,” she said.

“Happy Christmas, Mrs. Dursley,” Stephen replied. “Ready to go, Harry?”

“All ready,” the boy chirped. “Goodbye, Aunt Petunia. See you at the end of the holidays.” He picked up his suitcase as Stephen lifted the carton of gifts.

“Goodbye, Harry, and Happy Christmas,” Petunia said as they headed out the door. Once she’d closed it behind them, she couldn’t resist going over to the tree and giving her own gift from Harry a quick shake in an attempt to guess what he might have gotten her.

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

At Grimmauld Place, Sirius and Remus were just finishing up preparations for the planned evening’s Yule celebration when Stephen and Harry arrived. As the actual solstice had been the night before, and as Harry had no experience at all with wizarding traditions, Sirius hadn’t wanted to do a full formal ritual celebration, but he did want to introduce his godson to the concept. With Narcissa’s help, he and Remus had worked out a scaled-down version of a traditional Yule. They would do a candle lighting in token that the days would lengthen once more and then light the Yule Log, as well as planting seeds with written wishes for the coming year and performing the battle between the Holly King and the Oak King. Sirius and Remus had taught Harry and Stephen the song for the candle lighting on the previous Saturday. The drawing room was decorated with holly, ivy, and mistletoe and the Yule Log was ready and waiting in the hearth along with a piece of the Malfoy’s Yule Log from the previous year. The house elves Dobby and Konder were ready to bring in the seeds and the plant pots when needed. Lixy and Tally, the other two elves, were putting the finishing touches on the food for the celebration. After hugs of greeting from Sirius and
Remus, Harry brought his carton of gifts into the drawing room and piled them neatly alongside the packages already waiting there while Stephen sent his suitcase upstairs to his room. The Malfoys arrived perhaps fifteen minutes later, also bringing a number of wrapped presents to add to the stack.

As Harry and Draco greeted each other happily, Lucius moved over to speak with Sirius. “Severus was able to get away for our Yule ritual last night,” he told the animagus. “He’s agreed to look for the Come and Go Room that was mentioned, and for the item hidden within it. He’s also going to take Narcissa into his Gringotts vault at some point over the hols, to let her check for anything that he wouldn’t want in there, although he doesn’t recall being asked to safeguard anything back in the day. Besides which, if he really was a spy for Dumbledore as the old man claims, presumably if he had been given anything, he’d have turned it over to Dumbledore back then. Have you checked Harry yet, on the chance that Draco’s suggestion is true?”

Sirius shook his head. “No, I’m waiting until after he’s back from his visit to Highgrove before I check,” he said. “I refuse to lie to him about anything, and he’ll most likely want to know why I’m casting a spell on him that isn’t the glamour for a trip to Diagon Alley. The last thing I want is for him to be worrying about something like that when he’s finally getting a chance to experience something like other kids his age. So, Yule ritual tonight, ballet tomorrow, the muggle Christmas Eve and then Christmas Day right after that. One day to relax and then he’ll be off to Highgrove for a few days with Her Royal Highness and the little princes. And then back here for the remainder of the winter hols before he’ll need to go back to school. Once he’s back from Highgrove, I’ll check him over, and if, Merlin forbid, it’s true, I’ll get with you and Stephen to decide how to deal with it. Whether to alert Madam Bones or whomever, I mean, and if we do, how to do it in a way that won’t get back to Dumbledore.”

Lucius nodded. “I see your point, and it does sound like you’ll be having a busy few days before he’s off on his visit to Highgrove. In that case, are we eating first or doing the ritual first?”

The animagus chuckled. “The meal first, then we’ll do the candle lighting and Yule Log ritual. Remus and I will enact the battle between the Holly King and the Oak King, and after that we’ll plant our wishes for the coming year. Then it’s time for sweets and biscuits while we open our gifts.” He looked over at Stephen, Narcissa, and Remus deep in their own conversation, and the two boys who were peering intently at the collection of wrapped gifts and he grinned. “Who’s hungry?” he called.

“I am!” Harry and Draco spoke simultaneously, then laughed as they elbowed each other.

“Well, let’s get the party started, then,” Sirius chuckled. “Off to the dining room!”

The meal itself contained mostly foods in sun colours of red, orange, and yellow: acorn squash and sweet potato soup as a starter; with a rosemary-roasted chicken, cranberry sauce, glazed carrots, and a tomato and mozzarella salad along with bread rolls for the main course. Instead of the everyday stick or tub of butter, individual sun-shaped pats of butter were arranged on a serving dish. In deference to Narcissa’s condition as well as the youth of Harry and Draco, a non-alcoholic version of wassail punch was served, along with plain apple cider and pumpkin juice.

Afterwards, everyone returned to the drawing room. Sirius handed each of them a candle and they arranged themselves in a circle before he drew his wand and extinguished all the lights. He gave them all a moment to become fully aware of the darkness and then he spoke. “In the longest night, the sleeping earth dreams of the warmth of spring, the light begins to grow and blossom, and new life springs forth from the cold of the winter. So may it be for all our lives. Blessed Be.”

Sirius flicked his wand, lighting his candle, and started to sing. He turned to his left and lit Harry’s candle so that the flame would be passed along in a sunwise direction around the circle as they all joined in the song.

“Spark of light, in the night
Pass the flame, burning bright.
Heart to heart, let it dart
Pass the love, let it start.
Darkness fly from the sky
Pass the flame, burning high.
Warming glow, let it flow.
Pass the love, let it grow.”

Harry, as the youngest person present, was the one to light the Yule Log. As he’d been coached by Remus the previous Saturday, he knelt in front of the hearth and touched his candle to the remnant of old Yule Log, saying, “As the phoenix is reborn from the ashes, so too is the Yule Log. Life from death, renewal from the old, so mote it be!”

“So mote it be!” everyone responded as he stood up again once the flames had caught. They all placed their candles into holders, and then Harry, Stephen, and the Malfoy men took seats. Narcissa charmed Remus’ clothing into a fur-trimmed red tunic and trews and placed a wreath of holly on his head and a holly-adorned staff in his hand, and then charmed Sirius’ clothes into a leaf-green tunic and placed a wreath of oak atop his dark hair and an oak leaf and acorn-bedecked staff in his hand before she joined her husband.

The two men faced each other and launched into a mock duel, striking lightly at one another with their staves. Remus fell back under the ‘assault’ and with a final blow, Sirius ‘killed’ him. Remus dropped to the floor and Sirius stood over him with the end of his staff planted on Remus’ chest in a victorious pose. He proclaimed, “Now at the depth of winter is the waning of the year over, and the reign of the Holly King is finished. The sun is reborn, and the waxing year begins anew. My brother the Holly King is now dead, and has left us to rest in Caer Arianrhod until the Summer Solstice when he shall return to rule again. May the Wheel of the Year continue to turn, the seasons continue to change, and the sun always shine upon us. So mote it be!”

“So mote it be!” the others responded.

Sirius offered his friend a hand up, which Remus accepted with a smile, and Narcissa stepped up to end the spell on their clothes. Dobby and Konder popped in, bringing seven plant pots and a sack of potting soil, as well as a packet of tomato seeds. Sirius moved over to the desk to pull out seven small pieces of parchment along with quills and ink bottles. He passed out the parchment and told everyone, “Write a goal for the coming year on your parchment, and then place it into the bottom of a plant pot before filling it with soil and planting a seed. As your tomato plant grows and blooms, so will your progress towards your goal. You can share it or not, as you prefer.”

Narcissa was the first to write down her goal, which she read aloud before she took a plant pot. “My goal is to follow all of the doctor’s instructions and have a healthy baby,” she said. She tucked the slip of parchment into the pot, scooped some soil on top, and pressed a tomato seed into the loose soil.

“My goal is to learn as much as possible about the wizarding world while making sure Dumbledore doesn’t know I’m learning,” Harry said firmly before planting his parchment and seed.
“My goal is to do the best possible job on the Wizarding Culture textbook,” Remus said. With a grin, he added, “And maybe to get asked to revamp the Muggle Studies texts, too.”

Lucius chuckled at that. “My goal is to find ways to promote proper wizarding culture and traditions without actually alienating or belittling those who are muggleborn or muggle raised.”

Stephen smiled. “You’re doing pretty well already,” he commented. “My goal is to learn more of wizarding culture and my wizarding ancestry.”

“My goal is to lay the foundation for eventually getting custody of Harry, and to do so without Dumbledore finding out,” Sirius stated.

“And my goal is to learn as much as I can about the muggle world and culture, so that when I go to Hogwarts, I can be helpful to the muggleborn students, instead of unknowingly being a part of the problem Stephen says they’ve had so far,” Draco said.

When everyone’s seeds were planted and lightly watered, they placed them in a circle and Sirius said, “The seeds of the new year are planted. May they take root and grow strong within as without. Blessed be.”

“Blessed be,” the group chorused.

Dobby and Konder popped away with the extra soil and seeds and Sirius grinned. “Good Yule, everyone. Who wants presents?”

Draco practically flew over to the gift pile, pulling Harry along behind him. “We do!” he said.

Sirius laughed as Tally and Lixy popped in bearing platters of fried honeycakes, gingerbread, and a chocolate cake ‘yule log’ with a buttercream filling and decorated with marzipan holly leaves and candied cherries for the holly berries, along with more of the wassail punch. He quietly poured a dollop of firewhiskey into his punch, and offered the bottle to Lucius, Remus, and Stephen as Narcissa started passing out the gifts they’d brought.

“How shall we do this?” she asked. “By age, youngest first? That’s what we usually do at our celebrations,” she explained.

“That seems fair enough,” Sirius agreed. “So, Harry first, then Draco. Stephen’s next, then Moony, me, you, and Lucius is last.”

“As usual,” the blond man said with a chuckle. “Well, let’s get started, shall we?”

Harry ducked his head shyly when he realised everyone was looking at him, but picked up the top package on his pile. “From Uncle Remus,” he said, carefully unwrapping a large illustrated collection of stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. “Oooh, thank you!”

“Muggles know about King Arthur and Merlin?” Draco asked.

“The same way they ‘know’ about dragons and unicorns,” Stephen said. “As legends, fictional stories. Although muggles are aware that there is some historical truth to the Arthurian legends, they don’t know how much is truth and how much is embellishment on the part of various writers.”

Draco thought about that for a moment. “Oh… so they believe there was a King Arthur, but that Merlin was imaginary?”
“Something like that, yes,” Harry told his friend with a grin, picking up the next present. “From Lord and Lady Malfoy,” he said as he opened a large box to reveal a custom tailored suit in a light charcoal grey, of exactly the style suggested by Princess Diana as being appropriate for the ballet. “Oh, this is amazing! How did you know the size and all?”

Narcissa laughed as Draco made a face. “Well, we had a bit of help,” she said. “We went to Harrods for it, but Sirius had supplied us with a few of your hairs so that we could polyjuice Draco to look like you for the fitting and colour selection and such.”

“So you better like it,” Draco added with a mock glare. “Polyjuice potion is nasty!”

“I do like it, very much,” Harry assured his friend. “I like having nice clothes to wear, instead of my cousin’s humungous castoffs. And this is even nicer than anything I’ve worn before.” He set the cover back on the box to protect the suit and reached for the next gift. “This one is from Stephen.” It proved to be a round jigsaw puzzle of jellybeans sorted in rainbow order from red to light purple, with the words Jelly Beans spelled out with very dark purple jellybeans over the top of the rainbow-ordered jellybeans. “Thanks, Stephen!” He picked up the next present and grinned. “From Uncle Padfoot,” he laughed as he unwrapped a broom servicing kit. “Brilliant!” Finally he picked up the last present in the pile. “This one’s from Draco.” He opened it to reveal what looked like a journal bound in green leather, along with a quill and a bottle of ink.

“That’s one half of a set,” Draco said. “They’re enchanted so that what gets written in one shows up in the other as well… I have the other one. This way, we can write to each other whenever we want, or at least, whenever we can, in between the times we get to see each other.”

Harry smiled. “What a brilliant idea! Thanks, Draco. Now I can tell you all about my school and stuff, and you’ll be able to ask as many questions as you want without either of us forgetting any of them. And you can tell me all about your lessons with your tutor and I can ask you all the questions I want without forgetting them or anything.”

Draco smiled back. “I hoped you’d think so. But there’s something else under it, in case you didn’t.” He reached into the box and lifted the journal to show a copy of Hogwarts: A History. “Since you like history, I thought you might like to know the history of the school we’ll be going to in a couple of years.”

“You’re right, and thanks again,” Harry said. “Your turn now.” He sat back to watch as the other boy grabbed for his presents.

Draco received books from both Remus and Stephen; a set of Roald Dahl books from Stephen and a history of aviation from the werewolf. Sirius gave his young cousin a broom servicing kit identical to the one he’d given his godson, and Harry gave his friend a knights and castles themed Lego set. The two boys helped themselves to some of the fried honeycakes and sat back to watch as the adults started opening their gifts.

Harry had decided to get Stephen a yoga set: mat, blocks, and strap plus an instructional videotape since his tutor had occasionally mentioned that he was meaning to buy one so he could work out at home as well as at their weekly lesson. For Remus, Sirius had helped him owl-order a subscription to a Chocolate of the Month programme offered by Honeydukes sweet shop. Harry’s gift to Lucius was an accounts ledger with a monogrammed leather cover along with a set of refillable silver fountain pens, while Narcissa received a delicate gold locket that opened to hold three pictures, and into which Harry had placed pictures of Lucius and Draco along with the fuzzy ultrasound image of the coming baby. And for Sirius, Harry had gotten an assortment of music, including cassettes from Def Leppard, Aerosmith, Led Zeppelin, Bon Jovi, and the Lost Boys soundtrack.
After all the presents had been opened and everyone had eaten their fill of the treats, Harry brought out one of the Mad Libs books he’d gotten from his school friends and with a bit of help from Stephen, convinced the entire group to play the word game. By the time he’d finished reading the ridiculously silly story they’d all contributed words to, even Lucius was laughing out loud. Eventually, though, it grew late enough that the Malfoys made their farewells and flooed home to get Draco into bed. Remus and Stephen, who was staying the night, settled in beside the hearth to talk more about the Wizarding Culture textbooks, while Sirius made sure the house elves had the cleanup under control and then escorted Harry up to tuck him in for the night as well.

The animagus smiled at his godson as the boy flopped into bed. “Did you enjoy yourself tonight, pup?”

“It was brilliant,” Harry said through a yawn. “I had lots of fun, Uncle Padfoot.”

Sirius chuckled and hugged the boy. “Get some sleep, pup.”

“G’night, Uncle Sirius,” Harry mumbled as he rolled over and settled comfortably. “See you in the morning.”

Chapter End Notes

Portions of the Yule celebration have been borrowed from the Midwinter Festival described in Mercedes Lackey's *Foundation*, including the bulk of the candle lighting song. Other portions have been taken from past Yule rituals in which I've participated.
The residents of 12 Grimmauld Place indulged in a pleasant lie-in the morning after the Yule ritual, and a full breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, grilled tomatoes, mushrooms, and toast with a choice of orange marmalade or strawberry jam, plus pumpkin juice and tea for the men and milk for Harry. Feeling somewhat lazy after such a big meal, all four of them decided to pass the time working on Harry’s new Jelly Beans puzzle together.

They’d gotten the puzzle about halfway finished when they decided to stop and have a snack. As they enjoyed their chicken salad sandwiches, Sirius brought up the possibility of Stephen eventually going to work for the Ministry of Magic after all, once he’d completed his muggle university degree. “I never pictured myself as playing the political game,” the animagus said. “But, between me and Lucius, we'd be able to sponsor you into whichever department you might care to work in... and more to the point, with our backing, you could be the... the...”

“The face of the changes that Dumbledore claims to want, but does nothing to bring into being?” Remus suggested. “It might not be a bad idea, you know. With luck, some of the more intelligent people might think to ask why the old man never did anything to help any muggleborns with political ambitions despite his most public stance as their champion. And if nothing else, you’d be making some valuable contacts for yourself, Stephen. I'll grant it might take a while before you're completely welcomed into the club, as it were, but you'll gain at least a modicum of acceptance from nearly all of the pureblood factions as Lucius Malfoy's protégé.”

Stephen nodded. “It's not a bad idea at all,” he agreed. “But I do have another year and a half of uni, and as I’ve already put in as much time and effort as I have, I don't want to simply quit now. Still, I might be able to reorganise my schedule at the end of next term; take evening classes and such, so that I could start an entry-level position in the Ministry. It's certainly something to bring up to Lucius and see what he thinks of the possibilities.”

“That reminds me,” Sirius said, “At some point I want to introduce you to young Percy Weasley. He's the lad who'd found Pettigrew in his rat form and kept him as a pet. Third in a family of seven children, and he's got some political ambitions of his own. His father Arthur is a good man, if more than a bit henpecked, but he's happy enough in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department, and Percy has designs on the top job. Arthur says the boy is a bit of a misfit at home; he's quiet, scholarly, and a bit fanatical about following the rules, while the rest of the kids are boisterous pranksters who seem to love seeing just how far they can push the line without actually crossing it. I thought when I met him that he's a lad who could very much use a mentor of sorts who can understand his ambitions. Arthur means well, but he doesn't care about advancement, as his current position allows him to do what he loves best: examine muggle items on a regular basis.”

“Well, I don't mind meeting the boy sometime,” Stephen said. “But not before summer or thereabouts. Harry is my first priority, and during the school year, I just don't have all that much time to spare outside of classes and time with Harry on the weekends. That, and I do know from the last war that the Weasleys are staunch supporters of Dumbledore, so keeping my connection with Harry from them is a must.”

Sirius made a face. “True enough. If it was just Arthur, I might be willing to trust him with the
secret. But Molly hangs on Dumbledore's every word as if it was holy writ from Merlin himself. I learned from Lucius that Dumbledore is giving them reduced fees at Hogwarts, as Arthur frankly doesn't earn enough to cover tuition for as many children as they have there all at one time and still support the family, so that's probably why Molly is so firm in her views. She'd have to find some sort of paid employment to help with expenses otherwise, and she's one of those old-fashioned sorts who thinks a woman's proper place is at home with the children."

"Not that there's anything wrong with that, if that's what a woman wants to do and can afford it," Stephen said. "But I remember one boy I was in primary school with, who had to give up plans to go to Eton when his father died in an accident, because his mum refused to get a job afterwards. The survivors' benefits were enough to support the family, but not enough to cover the fees to Eton, so he had to go to the local council-run secondary school instead."

"I wonder if Aunt Petunia is going to get a job," Harry said, looking thoughtful. "Although I think there's a school trust fund for Dudley to go to Smeltings already in place. At least, I think that's what the solicitors said, right after Uncle Vernon died. I heard some of the business they talked about, before Aunt Petunia moved me out of the cupboard and into Dudley's second bedroom.

Remus and Sirius both had to hide their reactions to that little tidbit about the cupboard, but Remus shrugged. "I don't know. Neither of us ever met Petunia. But from the few things Lily said about her sister, I got the impression that Petunia is the sort who likes to make a good impression on others. The right clothes, the right house in the right neighbourhood, the right car, all that rot. Which would include the right husband. If she does look for a job, I'd bet she looks for one that will give her the chance to meet the right sort of man, with an eye to finding a new husband; one with the same sort of social standing as Vernon Dursley had. Because as a widow, she'll be rather on the outside now, especially if most of their socialising was with Vernon's work associates."

"It was," Harry confirmed. "They mostly thought themselves a bit above the neighbours. It was fine to say hello in the street, or even to have one or two over for tea now and again. Mostly the ones they did socialise with are the parents of Dudley's friends. But other than that, and Aunt Marge, it was all people Uncle Vernon worked with."

"Could go either way, then," Sirius said with a shrug of his own. "She might decide she needs to concentrate on raising her son the way his father would have done, or she might decide to try landing another husband so that she can afford to spoil her son the way she’s done until Vernon died."

Stephen snorted. "If Dudley behaves the way he normally does the first time his mother has a gentleman caller, whoever that poor man is will most likely do a runner and count himself lucky for the narrow escape. I can’t see any decent man putting up with that boy’s nastiness and bullying ways. On the other hand, from what Harry’s said and I’ve seen, Petunia is starting to realise that her son isn’t the perfect angel she’s always thought, so maybe she’ll make him toe the line if she thinks his behaviour will cost her in some way."

Remus and Sirius chuckled appreciatively at that, and Harry grinned. "I’ll start hoping she meets someone nice, then."

"Hope away," Stephen said, looking at his watch. "But we’d best start getting cleaned up and dressed to meet up with Her Royal Highness and the Princes for tea before the ballet. Are you bringing their gifts today, or waiting until you go to Highgrove?"

"She said when she wrote last that we’d exchange gifts at Highgrove," Harry replied. "That way, Wills and I won’t open whatever and then have to leave it to go to the ballet. She said the gift-giving would be better done when we’d have time to enjoy them."
“Smart lady,” Sirius laughed. “Merlin knows Draco would go spare if he received a new toy and was told he’d not be allowed to play with it until the next day.” He stood up as Lixy popped in to start clearing the dishes. “Moony, will you be working on the books all evening?”

Remus nodded. “That’s my plan, anyway. It’ll be good to have some time to work without you poking me because you’re bored and want to set up a prank of some sort,” he teased his friend with a grin.

Sirius good-naturedly gave the werewolf the two-finger salute. “You’re going to insist that I grow up and be responsible one of these years, aren’t you?” he asked with a laugh.

“Absolutely,” Remus laughed back. “You don’t want to get custody of Harry and discover he’s more mature than you are, right?”

The animagus heaved a theatrical sigh, shaking his head. “Maturity is overrated,” he said mournfully. “I might have to get older, but I refuse to grow up any more than absolutely necessary.” He blew a raspberry at his friend and added a very childish-sounding, “So there!” as he left the room.

Harry, Stephen, and Remus all laughed as they also got up and headed off to start getting ready.

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At Kensington Palace, Harry and the young Princes greeted each other enthusiastically, while Princess Diana’s welcome to Stephen and Sirius was more sedate, although no less warm. “It’s lovely to see you both again, and Harry as well,” she said. “I trust you had no major difficulties in getting outfitted for this evening?”

“None whatsoever, Your Royal Highness,” Sirius told her with a smile. “I just let Stephen tell me where to go and what to buy.”

That earned a chuckle from Diana. “It’s good that you have a mentor, then,” she said, bringing them to the table and getting everyone seated while she poured tea. “As Charles will not be accompanying us this evening, I’ve invited my father and stepmother along as well as Lady Caroline Astley, one of my ladies-in-waiting,” she said. “I might not get along overly well with Raine, but as the paparazzi these days tend to put the most scandalous spin possible on everything, I’d prefer to have my father along so as to prevent any accusations of impropriety. Obviously, if he’s along, so is his wife.” She sighed and added, “Especially now, as it’s become public knowledge that Charles has been unfaithful. We’ve agreed not to tell the boys before the holiday, but it will be announced in perhaps a month that we’ll be divorcing. Please don’t mention this to Harry just yet, as I don’t want to risk him saying anything to my sons when we’re at Highgrove next week.”

“We won’t say anything,” Stephen said.

Sirius nodded agreement with the younger man, adding, “And you have our condolences, Your Royal Highness. It must be awkward at the very least.”

“It is, but I’ll manage,” Diana said firmly. “In all honesty, Charles and I have never been especially well suited for each other. I can think of at least one silver lining to this particular cloud: once the separation is official and public, I’ll be able to go out dancing in clubs once in a while, without needing to worry about how it will affect the House of Windsor if I find photos of myself plastered all over the papers together with accusations that I’m conducting an affair of my own with whoever I might have danced with. The paparazzi being what they are, those accusations will still happen,
but at least there won’t be anyone screaming too terribly loudly for my head once it’s clear that Charles and I will not be reconciling.”

“Harry mentioned you like dancing,” Sirius said. “Which clubs do you favour?”

Diana smiled. “I’ve been to Annabel’s with Sarah,” she said, referring to her sister in law the Duchess of York. “Not often, of course, as we have to mind our reputations, but we have been there. And no one knows this, but last year I dressed up as a lad and went to the Royal Vauxhall with Kenny Everett and Freddie Mercury. We didn’t stay long, but I can tell you the disguise worked. No one knew it was me.” Her eyes danced with mischief.

Stephen laughed. “Oh, that’s rich! No wonder you’re keen on keeping that one under wraps!” To Sirius, he explained, “The Royal Vauxhall is a gay bar… a place for blokes to pick up other blokes. Definitely not the sort of place anyone would expect to find any member of the Royal Family!”

“Oh Merlin!” Sirius laughed. “We are definitely going to have to trade stories of pranks and tricks we’ve played.” He nodded his head sagely, and in an imitation of the voice of Yoda added, “Sense I do that the Marauder Spirit is strong in this one,” which caused both Diana and Stephen to laugh.

Harry, Wills, and little Harry looked over at the laughter. “Uncle Sirius, did you just do Yoda?” Harry asked in surprise.

“Yes, pup, I did,” the animagus replied. “Your mum dragged your dad and Moony and I to the cinema with her to see The Empire Strikes Back, right before you were born. And we saw Star Wars, too, during the winter hols in sixth year.”

“Did you ever see Return of the Jedi?” Stephen asked.

“No, I haven’t,” Sirius answered.

“Oh, you really ought to,” Diana put in.

Stephen nodded. “Definitely. We’ll have to do a marathon before the hols are over and Harry has to go back to school. I’ve got a VHS player for my telly, and all three of the films as well, so we can cram into my flat, order takeaway, and make a day of it.”

Di looked wistful. “I’m almost tempted to ask if the boys and I could join you, but there’s no way we’d be able to manage. I have too many commitments as it is.”

“We’ll come up with something that you and the boys can join us for,” Sirius said with a determined nod. “I’m sure you or Stephen can come up with some other films that might appeal to all of us.”

“And I do have a VHS player for my telly,” Diana said with a grin. “I’d have you all here, to make it easier all around. What with Stephen being in uni still, I’m sure his flat is quite small, and I know you don’t have a telly, Sirius, much less a VHS player.”

“Mister Black, you don’t have a telly?” Wills asked. “Whyever not? I thought everyone had a telly.”

Sirius laughed. “Not quite everyone,” he said. “My house is very, very old, and my family didn’t update it at all the way your family updated the palaces over the years.” He glanced at Stephen in a silent plea for help.

“In other words, what little wiring exists in Sirius’ home, isn’t up to the workload a telly and VHS player would put on it,” Stephen said. “So until he is able to get that changed, he’ll not be able to
That’s strange,” Wills said.

“What films do you like, Wills?” Harry asked, hoping to keep the younger boy from asking anything more about why Sirius didn’t have a telly.

“I like Willow,” the younger boy answered promptly. “Because I like the magic in it. I think it would be cool if you really could turn someone into an animal with a wand.”

Sirius grinned. “I suppose it would be,” he agreed. “But don’t tell me more. I haven’t seen that one yet myself, but I’ll make sure I do, since you recommend it.”

Wills laughed, and little Harry put in, “I like Willow too, even with some scary bits.”

“Scary bits, hmm?” Sirius asked, hiding a smile. “Well, maybe you can hold my hand if we end up watching it together, so I won’t get so scared.”

“I can do that,” little Harry said. “Or Mummy can hold your hand. She held my hand so I wouldn’t be scared the first time I watched it.”

Di reddened slightly. “Somehow, I don’t think Mister Black will need his hand held, Harry, but it is nice of you to think of it all the same.” She turned to the door of the sitting room as someone tapped on it. “Yes?”

“The Earl and Countess Spencer are here, Your Royal Highness,” the young woman at the door said.

“Show them in, Caro, and join us for introductions. It’s nearly time to go anyway,” Diana told her. To the others, she added, “That’s Lady Caroline Astley, the one I invited along this evening.”

When the young woman returned with an older couple, she made the introductions all around before ringing for little Harry’s governess to come take him off for the night.

The group headed out to the limousine for the ride to the theatre. When they arrived, Sirius observed Diana’s father helping his wife from the car, and offered his hand to Diana in turn as she stepped from the vehicle. Wills and Harry clambered out next, followed by Stephen and Caro, and the entire group paused for a few photographs before making their way inside to the Royal Box. While the Spencers, Di and Caro all seemed accustomed to their surroundings, Wills and the three wizards peered around in awe.

Once they were seated and waiting for the performance to begin, Di gave a quick overview of the story for Wills, Harry, and Sirius. She also promised to answer any questions about the show to the best of her ability either during the intermission or afterwards. Not long after, the house lights dimmed and the curtain rose.

Sirius looked amused at the opening scenes, especially when Fritz snatched the nutcracker away from Clara and broke it, and had to stifle a laugh when Harry and Wills both bounced excitedly and cheered under their breaths during the battle with the Mouse King. He had to admit, though, the ballet was much more enjoyable than he’d expected. He couldn’t help but be impressed with the skill and grace of the dancers. After the final curtain, while Harry and Wills debated whether the Russian Dance or the Arabic Dance was better, the animagus looked over at Diana as her father and stepmother fussed with getting their coats on. “I really enjoyed this. This one is older, right? From, um…” he looked in the programme before continuing. “From 1892. Are there any ballets that use modern music?”
Diana shrugged a little. “Well, I’ve seen some choreography utilising various ballet steps set to rock songs, if that’s what you mean. But never a whole production, not like The Nutcracker or La Sylphide.”

“Someone ought to do one,” Sirius said. “Introduce a whole new audience to ballet.”

“Maybe someone will,” Di said with a laugh. “It certainly would be intriguing to watch.”

“Are we ready to leave yet?” Raine Spencer interjected a little querulously. “It’s quite a drive back to Althorpe, after all, and we’ve got to return to Kensington Palace first to get our own car.”

“Yes, Raine, we’re leaving,” Diana said. “Wills, Harry, come on, it’s getting late.” She started herding the boys towards the exit of the box. “You’ll have plenty of time to continue your discussion in the car.” Turning back to Sirius as they made their way out, she added, “You might be interested in going to see Cats, then. It’s a bit hard to explain, but if you like the dancing and all sorts of music, you’ll get plenty of it there. It’s been at New London Theatre in the West End for some years now.”

Impulsively, Sirius asked, “Would you and your boys like to come along as well when I bring Harry?”

Diana looked pleased. “I can’t promise, at least not just now. But I would love to, as long as there are no schedule conflicts.”

“I’ll look into getting tickets,” the animagus said, “and we’ll figure it out from there. Are there any dates best avoided?”

“I’ll have to check my calendar once we’re back at Kensington, if you don’t mind waiting for a bit. I know it’s late and you’ll want to get Harry home and into bed soon.”

“True enough, but I don’t mind waiting,” Sirius told her.

Once back at Kensington Palace, the Spencers took their leave and Caro escorted Wills off to the nursery once he’d said his goodbyes to Harry, Stephen and Sirius. Diana flipped through her appointment calendar and suggested either the last two weeks of March or the first two weeks of April as being free from any major obligations. She also suggested a matinee, as a couple of the numbers in Cats were known to be done in a racier manner for the evening shows and if little Harry was going, she didn’t want to have to explain some of the innuendos. Sirius laughed at that and agreed. Di then hugged Harry farewell, and said she’d see him in a few days at Highgrove, and the three wizards left for Grimmauld Place.

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Stephen left after breakfast, to spend Christmas with his own family. But Sirius and Remus took Harry out to buy a Christmas tree, a stand, and decorations for it; Remus having researched muggle traditions so they could do it up properly for their pup. In addition to an assortment of multicoloured glass balls and gold tinsel garland, they each picked out seven unique ornaments. Sirius picked a little silver drum, a gold violin, a miniature wooden nutcracker doll, a spun-glass seahorse, a funny white glass owl, a scarlet locomotive that he said looked like the Hogwarts Express, and a bright red feathered bird that Remus said was a North American Cardinal. For his part, Remus contented himself with a set of six delicate silver snowflakes and a shiny green glass pickle which he said was traditional. Harry decided he really liked the spun glass ornaments, so he chose a stag, lily, wolf, dog, hummingbird and a wreath with a holly sprig. For his last choice, he found five clear glass bells nested together, so that when it was hung, they cascaded down in tiers
Before they returned to Grimmauld Place, Sirius stopped to pick up fresh batteries for his boom box, and asked Harry to select some tapes of traditional Christmas music. Once they’d hauled all their purchases into the house, he popped in one of the tapes before he and Remus tackled the task of getting the tree into the stand. Harry laughed when Sirius swore up and down that since this was muggle Christmas, they had to put the tree up the muggle way, even though Remus kept suggesting to just use their wands to get the tree straight in the stand. But they eventually succeeded in getting it up.

After taking a break for tea, all three of them decorated the tree. They ate a light supper and then Sirius cast the one charm he was willing to allow on the tree, to produce twinkling lights amid the boughs. The elves brought in hot cocoa with marshmallows and a plate of assorted biscuits and they sat admiring their handiwork while enjoying the treat. Remus, being much more familiar with muggle traditions, pulled out “A Visit From Saint Nicholas” and read it aloud, and followed it with the story of the Nativity. He then jokingly suggested that Harry leave a mug of cocoa and some biscuits out for Father Christmas before they went to bed. Harry laughingly complied.

Harry also woke up his godfather and Remus early on Christmas morning, teasing that it was traditional for the kids to get the families up at the crack of dawn. With some good-natured grumbling, the two men ambled down to the sitting room and the gifts under the tree. As they’d wanted Harry to have both a Yule and a Christmas, they had saved most of their presents to the boy for today.

Harry got a wizarding chess set, a deck of exploding snap cards, a huge assortment of Honeyduke’s sweets, and an album meant to hold a collection of the Famous Witches and Wizards cards that came inside chocolate frog boxes. And best of all, his first ever gift from his aunt: a photo album filled with muggle pictures of his mother from birth to her marriage.
Wills and little Harry greeted their older friend enthusiastically when Harry arrived at Highgrove on the morning of the 27th. “Did you have a good Christmas?” Wills asked with a grin. “We did! Well, the service at St. Paul's was kind of boring except for the music, but Mummy said we had to go and behave ourselves anyway because we're royalty so people look to us as an example. But after, that was brilliant! Grandmother had all our aunts and uncles and cousins and everyone for a family dinner and presents...”

Little Harry interrupted his older brother with a giggle, “And Auntie Sarah sicked up on Uncle Andrew's shoes. A little bit, anyway. She tried to be sick into the rubbish bin, but some missed.”

Diana shook her head with a rueful laugh. “Harry, that's not something you go 'round telling people, no matter how entertaining you think it was.” To her young guest, she explained, “If you didn't see it in the tabloids already, Harry, Sarah and Andrew are expecting their second baby, and a common symptom of early pregnancy is a touchy stomach. Poor Sarah's been having a bit of a rough go of it this time around, unfortunately.”

“Oh... I hope she feels better soon,” Harry said “I had a wonderful Christmas, though. Aunt Petunia even gave me a present! A photo album, with lots and lots of pictures of my mum in it, from when she was a baby all the way up until she and my dad got married.”

“Didn't Father Christmas bring you any toys?” little Harry asked, sounding concerned. “He brought me and Wills lots.”

“He did,” Harry smiled. “Puzzles and games, mostly, because that's the sort of toys I like best. What did he bring you and Wills?”

“Bicycles!”Wills exclaimed with a grin. “And I got a football and a science laboratory set with a microscope and a polo stick of my very own! I got a fishing pole and building blocks,” little Harry added. “And a toy lorry.”

“It sounds as though we all had a good Christmas, then,” Harry said with a grin. “And I've got gifts for you all, too. I just don't know when your mum wants me to give them out. Or even where they are just now,” he laughed, “since the security men who escorted me here said they'd take care of my things.”

Diana chuckled at that. “I imagine everything is in your room by now,” she said. “I thought we'd exchange gifts after tea. That way you boys would have time to go for a ride or play with the dogs or whatever whilst it's still daylight, and we'll have the whole evening to play games or watch movies on the telly or whatever else we might decide to do. Just be sure to dress warmly and remember helmets if you go riding!”

“Yes, Mummy!” Wills and little Harry chorused before tugging their older friend out of the room.
That evening, after a very satisfying tea which included the special treat of scones with clotted cream and jam, one servant brought in Harry’s carton of gifts to his hosts, while another unloaded a second carton full of their gifts to him. Seeing how many gifts had his name on them, Harry was glad he’d decided to get more than one gift each for his hosts. He looked at Princess Di and asked, “Do you have a tradition for how you open your holiday gifts? Like, do we go ‘round each opening one at a time or does each person go through all their presents before the next person goes or what?”

“Oh, we usually just have a free-for-all here,” she told him with a smile. “Once everyone has their pile, we all just dive in and say our thank yous when everyone is done.”

He grinned back. “That sounds like fun,” he said as he handed her two gaily-wrapped packages. Then he passed three gifts to little Harry and three more to Wills before sitting back down by his stack of presents.

Diana pulled out three more packages down from a high shelf but held onto them for the time being. “All right, then,” she told them. “You may start opening on my mark… ready, steady, go!” She laughed as Wills and little Harry both cheered and started tearing paper from their gifts. Harry Potter opened his presents a little more quietly, but just as enthusiastically as her boys. Sitting back down, she opened her gifts from the young wizard. “Oh, Harry, love, how beautiful!” she exclaimed, holding up the silver and carved amber rose pendant on a silver chain and the matching earrings.

Harry looked up with a big smile, a book about the Second World War in his hands. “Oh, I’m glad you like them,” he said happily. “And thank you so much for this!” He turned to look at little Harry as the younger child squealed.

“Slinky! Thank you, Harry!” The younger prince bounced over and gave his older friend a hug. “How did you know I wanted a Slinky?”

“I guessed well,” he laughed. “And thank you for the sketchbooks!”

“This is a really cool Lego set,” Wills chimed in. “I don’t remember seeing one you could make dragons with before.”

Harry beamed. “I thought you’d like it.”

“I do!” Wills assured him.

Fifteen minutes and a huge pile of torn wrapping paper later, Diana smiled at the three boys. Her second gift from Harry was a pashmina shawl in a soft mint green. Wills bounced excitedly over his Legos, a Batmobile and several Batman character action figures to go with it, and a Rubik’s Cube. His younger brother was already making his Slinky walk down a stack of boxes while hugging a My Pet Monster and giggling over a set of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles action figures. Meanwhile their guest looked almost overwhelmed by his pile of gifts; in addition to the WWII history book and the sketchbooks, Harry received a book about snakes, another history book about William the Conqueror, a puzzle showing knights jousting on horseback, a model of a Spitfire, the game Risk, and the game Battleship. “All right, lads,” Diana said. “I’ve one more gift for each of you, and these are very special gifts, as they’re not yet available here in Britain. Fortunately, I have some American friends who were willing to do me a bit of a favour.” She handed them the packages she’d retrieved just before the gift-opening frenzy.

Intrigued, Harry tore open the wrapping, to find something called a Game Boy, along with a package of batteries and cartridges for the games Tetris, Baseball, Tennis, and Super Mario Land.
“Oooh!” he breathed, looking up to see that Wills and little Harry also had Game Boys.

Diana grinned at his expression. “I believe these are supposed to be released over here sometime next year,” she said. “But they’ve been out since summer in the States, and I thought you boys might like them. So, I pulled a few strings. I asked for all the games they could get, too, as I don’t know when more will be out.”

Wills and little Harry tackled their mother with hugs. “Thank you, Mummy!” they chorused.

“Yes, thank you so much,” Harry chimed in shyly.

She reached around Wills to tug the young wizard into the group hug. “You’re all very welcome. Happy Christmas.” She smiled as Harry awkwardly returned the hug. “Now, how about a film before it gets to be bedtime?”

“Can we have popcorn, Mummy?” Wills asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Di answered. “I know we decided to save Willow and Princess Bride for a time when Mr. Black can join us along with Harry, so what shall we watch instead?”

“Superman!” “WarGames!” Wills and Harry spoke simultaneously.

Diana laughed. “Well, we’ve not got time for both tonight, but we can watch one tonight and the other tomorrow.” She moved over to a shelf holding several board games and pulled out a single die. “Wills, odd or even?”

Wills thought for a moment. “Even, because Harry’s the odd one.”

“I am not!” little Harry protested.

Harry tried not to laugh at the sibling rivalry, while Diana rolled the die. “Three,” she called over to her sons. “It’s Harry’s pick tonight.”

Little Harry blew a raspberry at his brother. “Ha! We’re going to watch Superman!”

Wills shrugged. “And we’ll see WarGames tomorrow, like Mummy said. We’re having popcorn either way, so I don’t mind waiting.”

Diana just shook her head with a grin. “All right, you boys get settled and I’ll ring for the popcorn and drinks before putting the film in.”

After the movie and a debate as to whether Superman had done the right thing by reversing the Earth’s rotation to gain enough time to save Lois Lane, Diana got the trio of boys settled into bed. They spent the next day in much the same manner only without the gift-opening frenzy: the boys went riding and played with the puppies, followed up with a game of Uno together with Diana before tea, and afterwards they watched WarGames. Harry was quite intrigued at what could be done with the computers, and resolved to research them a little more thoroughly once school started back up after the holidays.

As Zara and her friend Sophie were to arrive by mid-morning of the following day, Diana asked Harry and Wills to forgo riding after breakfast. They agreed, and pleased little Harry by playing Candyland with him until the girls turned up. When they did, little Harry vanished to play with the corgis while the older boys greeted the two girls. Harry bowed and kissed their hands when they were introduced to him, causing them to giggle while Diana smothered a smile.
“What’s that for?” the sturdily-built Zara asked him.

Harry chuckled. “Well, I’ll eventually need to be able to bow gracefully and all that, so I thought I’d practice on you two.”

Sophie, a pixie-like blond whose hair was up in a messy bun that made her resemble Disney’s Tinkerbell, giggled in response. “I don’t mind. It makes me feel grown up, like I’m a proper lady.”

“But I don’t want to be a proper lady,” Zara grumbled. “I want to ride on the Olympic team, like my dad.”

“You can be an Olympic athlete and a lady both, Zara,” Diana put in with a grin. “And you know full well you’ll be expected to know how to dance when you’re grown. I’m sure even Olympians attend balls on occasion.”

Zara sighed. “I suppose you’re right, Auntie Di. But I’d still rather practise my dressage.”

Wills stuck his tongue out at his cousin. “And I’d rather learn polo than dancing. But maybe if we get done early enough, Mummy will let us all go for a ride together this afternoon. So let’s just get on with it.”

Zara brightened at the thought of going for a ride. “All right, then.” She looked between Wills and Harry. “Who is dancing with who?”

“How about you start out dancing with Harry, Zara, whilst Sophie partners Wills,” Diana suggested. “And then you’ll switch after a few songs.” She popped a cassette of slow songs into the stereo and hit play.

Remembering his previous lesson at Balmoral, Harry offered his hand to Zara, placing his other hand on her waist when she took it. As the music started, he attempted to steer her in a bit of a circle, only to wince as she also tried to lead and stepped on his toes. “Oh, sorry!” she exclaimed.

“It’s all right,” he replied.

“Relax, Zara, let Harry lead,” Diana called softly. “Wills, despite the photos you’ve seen of Uncle Andrew and Auntie Sarah dancing together, you’re supposed to leave a bit of space between yourself and your partner, so you don’t trip each other,” she added as Sophie’s knee collided with the younger boy’s, causing them both to stumble. She paused the tape and stepped over to nudge the four youngsters into the proper positions. “Ready?” At their nods, she hit play once more. This time, both couples managed to get through an entire song without incident. “Excellent! One more song, and then we’ll swap partners.”

When the next dance ended, Harry grinned and gave Zara a bow. “Thank you kindly for the dance, my lady,” he said.

Zara rolled her eyes but bobbed a curtsey in return. “Thank you as well, good sir,” she said, and then asked, “Do you actually like to dance?”

Harry laughed. “I don’t dislike it, anyway,” he said. “But I’ve heard from several people that I’ll not only need to be able to dance decently when I’m older, but also that I’ll have an easier time impressing the girls when I’m of an age to want to do so if I can dance.” He shrugged. “I suppose if most girls like dancing, they’d like a bloke who can manage not to look stupid dancing with them. Either way, if I need to learn it, I might as well do my best, right?”

“Huh, good point,” Zara nodded. “And I know lots of girls do like dancing. Sophie takes dance
lessons; it’s why I invited her. She’s the only one of my friends who prefers dancing to horses.”

“Because I’m allergic to them,” Sophie put in. “They make me sneeze.”

“Really?” Zara said, surprised. “I didn’t know that. I just thought you were scared of them or something. I mean, I know some people are, because horses are so big and all.”

“What sort of dance lessons do you have, Sophie?” Harry asked.

“Ballet and also swing dancing,” the girl told him.

Harry smiled. “Her Royal Highness gave me a swing dancing lesson once, although I don’t know how well I did. Still, since you’re allergic to horses, maybe she’ll give the two of us another swing dancing lesson when Zara and Wills go riding later on?”

“Oh, could we?” Sophie asked with bright eyes and a glance towards Diana.

Di smiled. “Of course,” she told them. “Three more songs, and then we’ll have lunch and figure out the rest of the day from there. Ready?”

Wills grabbed Zara’s hand while Harry offered his to Sophie. “Ready,” they all replied once they were in position.

Diana started the tape again. Unlike Zara, Sophie had no trouble following Harry’s lead as they slowly revolved around the room. Wills, on the other hand, had a bit more trouble, as his cousin kept trying to lead. But despite a few squashed toes, they got through the three songs without any disasters. Diana grinned as she surveyed the four children; Wills and Zara looked visibly relieved that the lesson was over with, but Sophie looked slightly disappointed. “Time to eat,” she told them, leading them to the dining room, where they were provided with tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches.

“Are you sure you won’t come riding with us after we eat, Harry?” Wills asked.

Harry shook his head. “Sophie can’t ride,” he reminded his younger friend, “and it would be rude if we both ran off and left her alone. I know, you didn’t know she was allergic to horses when you first suggested going riding, so that was all right. And I know you and Zara both want to ride. I think riding is fun, but it’s not something I can do most of the time anyway, so it’s no big deal to me if I don’t ride with you this time.” He grinned, adding, “I don’t want to ride in the Olympics or play polo, after all. That seems too much like work to me.”

Wills laughed, but Zara nodded. “It is hard work, to get good enough to be in the Olympics,” she said seriously. “But Daddy did it and I want to do it too. He didn’t medal as an individual competitor, but he did earn a gold as a member of the three-day eventing team back in 1972. Maybe I can do the same.”

“If that’s your goal, by all means, work as hard as you can towards it,” Diana told her niece. “At least you’ll not have to worry about outgrowing your goal the way I did.” Looking at Sophie, she explained, “I wanted to become a ballerina when I was younger. But I grew too tall by the time I was fifteen, so I ended up working as a nursery teacher instead.”

“Oh, that’s too awful,” the girl said with a shake of her head. “I mean, it would be horrid to work and work and be told you just aren’t good enough. But worse to know that after working and working, you didn’t even get a chance to try because of something outside your control.”

Diana shrugged a bit. “Well, it’s all water under the bridge now. Are you hoping to enter ballet as a
profession?"

Sophie shook her head. “No, I’m not. I enjoy it, but I want to be a computer programmer when I grow up. Mum works with computers and she has an older Acorn Archimedes at home that she bought when her offices replaced their computers with new ones. I can email to my auntie in Cumbria now, and play games when Mum doesn’t need to do work. She says by the time I’m done with my A-levels, computers will be everywhere, so I ought to get familiar with them straightaway.”

“That sounds quite sensible of your mum,” Diana nodded. “Not that I know anything of computers aside from the fact that my secretary uses one. But if you’re interested in them, by all means, make computer programming your goal. Harry, what is your goal right now?”

Harry froze for a split second as he was suddenly put on the spot, but recovered quickly. “Well, I’m not sure yet,” he said. “I found out that I’ve got a bigger estate than I thought I did, and I’ll have to learn some business management in order to administer that properly. And I do enjoy doing p… chemistry with my godfather and my tutor. But I don’t know if I want to do that for my life’s work, either.”

Diana smiled. “There’s nothing wrong with not knowing what you want to do yet,” she said. “You do have a few years to think about it, before being asked to sort out what you’d like to do with your life so that you can choose you’re A-level and uni classes. I’m sure you’ll decide on something before you’re at the point where you need to pick something.”

“May we go riding now, Mummy?” Wills asked, indicating himself and his cousin.

“Yes, go along,” Di told him. The two got up from the table decorously enough, but started running even before they were out the door. Di chuckled and turned to her two young guests. “Well, since I doubt either of you wants to bounce around so soon after eating, how about we watch a film of some swing dancers so you can get an idea of the moves before I start coaching you in them?”

“I’d like that,” Harry said, as Sophie nodded.

Di brought the two over to the telly and popped a tape into the VCR. The cheery trombones and clarinets of Glenn Miller’s ‘In the Mood’ sounded out as they watched the dancers. “It looks a lot harder than it really is,” she told them. “So long as you don’t go trying any of the lifts and throws just yet.”

Sophie laughed at that. “I’m not sure I’m ready to be tossed about like that anyway,” she said. “No offense, Harry.”

“None taken,” he grinned. “I’d just as soon start with the basics before getting fancy.”

“Which is generally a good thing,” Di put in. “Ready to try it for yourselves?” She rewound the tape to the beginning of the song as Harry and Sophie took their positions. When she started the tape playing again, they launched into a clumsy attempt at the dance. By the third try, they had the basics down and Harry figured out how to dip Sophie without overbalancing or dropping her. They were laughing happily together on the couch when Wills and Zara came back in from their ride.

“What’s so funny?” Zara asked.

“Harry dipped me and I wasn’t expecting it,” Sophie said, still giggling.

“What’s dipped you?” Wills wanted to know. He started giggling as well when Harry simply
pulled Sophie back to her feet and demonstrated rather than trying to describe it. “That is funny looking.”

“Well, since it’s nearly teatime and you all have been exerting yourselves, I think you should all go clean up and change before we eat,” Diana said briskly. “Zara, you take the room you usually stay in when you’re visiting here. Sophie, why don’t you use the room just across the hallway from Zara. Off with you now, and I’ll see you in the dining room with my Harry when you’re done.” She made little shooing motions at them with her hands and grinned when they scattered.

After a thoroughly satisfying tea, they gathered back around the telly to watch The Dark Crystal before the girls had to leave. The boys got to see one more film, letting Harry choose this one. He picked The Wizard of Oz. Little Harry, also seeing it for the first time, asked his mother, “Is it true that only bad witches are old and ugly?”

Diana chuckled. “As I’ve never met a witch, at least as far as I’m aware, I don’t believe I can answer that question. But if I ever find out, I’ll be sure to tell you.”

“Oh… well, if I ever meet a witch, Mummy, I’ll be sure to tell you, too,” little Harry said, to a snort from his brother.

“Right then, it’s off to bed for you boys,” Di told them. “You’ll have time for a short ride in the morning as long as you’re up early enough, but remember that we’re leaving for London at ten. So you’d best get right to sleep.” She walked them to their rooms and got them all tucked in for the night. “Have you had a good time, Harry?” she asked her young guest.

“Absolutely brilliant,” Harry said with a big smile. “Not just here, at the ballet as well, and over the entire hols. I only wish I wouldn’t have to go back to Aunt Petunia’s after.”

Diana tilted her head in concern. “I get to see Stephen’s reports, and I thought things were better for you now?”

Harry nodded. “Oh, it’s much better than when Uncle Vernon was alive,” he hastened to reassure her. “Dudley still tries to beat me up when he can, but I’m used to avoiding him. Aunt Petunia not only gave me a Christmas present, she called me by my name, twice! She’s never done that before. And now that I’m not in the same class as Dudley anymore, I have friends at school, and I don’t have to do poorly in lessons so as not to get better marks than him either. But still… now that I know Uncle Sirius wants to raise me, it almost feels worse being at Aunt Petunia’s.” He frowned, trying to find the right words to describe how he felt. “Before, even though I was in the cupboard and not fed and all, I didn’t ever hope for things to be different. Now I know I have something better coming, but it’s going to take time before I can have it, so even though I get food and have a proper bedroom now, I have Uncle Sirius caring about me even though he can’t get custody of me just yet and that makes me, I don’t know, notice it more, that Aunt Petunia doesn’t treat me like family.”

“I think I understand,” Diana said softly. “When you know what it feels like to be loved, it’s hard having to live where you aren’t loved.” She sighed, her eyes growing sad. “And worse when it gets rubbed in your face that you aren’t loved.”

Harry sat up. “You… you’re not talking just about me anymore, are you?” he asked perceptively.

She shook her head. “Stephen mentioned that your aunt reads the tabloids,” she said. “I suppose you’ve either seen the headlines or else heard your aunt talking about Charles being photographed kissing his girlfriend?”
“Yes,” Harry said simply.

“Don’t mention it to Wills and Harry, as Charles and I haven’t spoken to them yet, but we’ll be getting divorced. We’re going to be telling the boys after we get back to London, as we didn’t want to spoil the holiday for them, and the official announcement will come in about a month or so,” Diana said.

Impulsively, Harry leaned over and gave Diana a hug. “I’m sorry, Your Royal Highness.”

Diana hugged back, touched. “I’ll be all right, Harry, thank you for caring. Sirius and Stephen already know; I mentioned it to them the night of The Nutcracker, as it’s well-known that I don’t get along at all well with my stepmother. I chose to deal with her presence so that if any tabloid photographer tried to accuse me of improper behavior with either Stephen or Sirius, I could quite truthfully respond that my father was among my guests for the evening and that I would hardly misbehave with him chaperoning me.”

Harry pulled back, looking puzzled. “What do they think you might be doing wrong?”

“Erm…” Diana looked flustered, not having expected that particular question from the child. “Well… I suppose you know that once people are married, they’re not supposed to have girlfriends or boyfriends anymore? But plenty of people like to assume the worst of others, especially of well-known people such as rock stars and royalty. As it’s become obvious that Charles has a girlfriend despite being married to me, all those people who like to assume the worst would be quick to think that I’d found myself a boyfriend in order to get back at Charles. Or something like that, anyway.”

“Oh… people are silly,” Harry said, lying back down with a yawn. “I don’t know why so many of them make such a fuss over other people’s boyfriends and girlfriends anyway.”

“Neither do I, Harry, neither do I.” Di tucked him back in again and brushed the hair back from his face. “Sleep well, sweet dreams.”

Chapter End Notes

And now, AO3 is all caught up with what’s been written so far. Expect slow updates from here on in, as my writing time is limited at best.
Happy 1990... Hopefully.

And now for the disclaimer... I'm not JK Rowling and I do not own the character. I just like to play with them for my own entertainment and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

Back at Grimmauld Place in time for lunch, Harry chattered excitedly to Sirius and Remus about Highgrove and showed off his Game Boy and other gifts. Sirius was fascinated by the toy, astounded that muggles were able to shrink down their arcade games into such a small device. Remus was interested in what Sophie had said about computers, as the manager at Waterstone’s had been talking of getting one for the store, before he’d left his job there to work full-time on writing the wizarding culture textbooks. He was using a dicta-quill for the book writing, but he was intrigued by the idea that a machine could somehow save the words inside itself and so not require storing rolls and rolls of parchments and keeping them organised. They spent the rest of the day just relaxing, Sirius taking over the Game Boy while Remus and Harry finished the Jelly Beans puzzle.

While Harry had been at Highgrove, Sirius had gotten together with Stephen and they’d decided to celebrate New Year’s Eve with their planned Star Wars marathon, and they invited Draco along as well. They would all spend the night at Stephen’s flat, as they would be driving to get there and wanted to avoid any problems with traffic and drivers who might have indulged too heavily. When Draco flooed through to Grimmauld Place, he looked both excited and nervous at the thought of actually spending the night in a muggle home.

Harry was quick to reassure his friend as they piled into Sirius’ car. “You’ll love the movies, Draco, they’re amazing! And really, there isn’t all that much difference between a wizarding home and a muggle one, except that a muggle house uses electricity for lights and stuff, and there aren’t any house elves. But we’ll be ordering all sorts of takeaway and having popcorn and stuff. Uncle Sirius and Uncle Remus shrunk down enough mattresses for all of us to sleep on, so even though Stephen’s flat is small, we’ll be comfortable. I slept there one time already, but just on Stephen’s sofa since I’m small enough to fit.”

Draco nodded. “Is this the sort of thing muggles usually do for New Year’s?” he asked.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. Usually I had to stay out of sight if Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had guests over, so I don’t know what they might have done. And if they went anywhere, they’d send me to stay at old Mrs. Figg’s house.”

Remus smiled. “Muggles usually get together with friends to celebrate New Year’s,” he told the boys. “Among the younger adults, that’s often enough at pubs and dance clubs, but the people around the age of your parents, Draco, are more likely to either host or attend parties in the home. Usually there’s music and talk, and then just before midnight they’ll often count down the last few seconds of the old year and ring bells or otherwise make some sort of cheery noise to welcome in the new.”

Draco nodded again. “Huh, that sounds a lot like what wizards do, too. Mother and Father either host a party or attend one elsewhere… they’re going to the Greengrass’ this year… and I just stay home since they say I’m too young to appreciate that sort of party yet.”

Harry laughed. “They’re probably right, too. This will be loads more fun.”
“Better than staying home with the house elves, anyway,” Draco said with a laugh of his own. “Will we have pizza? I thought it was brilliant when we had it that time.”

Sirius grinned. “I’m sure we can have pizza. And probably Chinese food, too. Have you had that before?”

“I don’t think so,” Draco said.

“Oh, you’ll love it!” Harry said. “There are dishes with rice or noodles and all kinds of vegetables and meats in sauce, and the starters are the best! My favourite is the mixed platter. It’s supposed to be for sharing, and has a bunch of different tidbits so everyone can have what they like. But a lot of times I order that as my meal, just so I can have several different things at once.”

“I can’t wait to try it,” Draco said. “These films we’re going to watch, is there a special reason we’re watching them together?”

Remus nodded. “Yes, it’s because they’re what’s called a trilogy. Three separate films, but each one is a part of a much bigger story. You could watch them out of order, but seeing the whole story from first to last makes it much better.”

“What’s it about?” came Draco’s next question.

“Well, it’s science fiction,” Remus explained. “The overall story is about good vs. evil, but it’s set in outer space, and… eh, I’m making hash of explaining it. You’ll just have to see for yourself.

Sirius jumped in for a moment. “Part of why muggles like science fiction, Draco, is that it a lot of ways, it gives them something to work toward. Quite a bit of what they thought was impossible fifty or a hundred years ago is now commonplace. Take aeroplanes for example. A hundred years ago, muggles would have said that it was impossible for people to build a flying machine. Now there are aeroplanes that can carry a hundred passengers or more, and can fly between London and New York City in America in half the time it takes the Hogwarts Express to get from London to Hogsmeade. For that matter, I remember Lily talking about the Americans sending men to walk on the moon, as unbelievable as that might seem.”

Harry nodded. “Oh yes, the Americans went to the moon for the first time in July of 1969. I did an essay about it for school.”

“And so muggles like this science fiction stuff, because they try to make it come true?” Draco guessed.

“Pretty much,” Sirius told him. “Muggles figure that just because something is a mere flight of fancy today, doesn’t mean someone or other will figure out a way of making it true tomorrow. Anyway, the special effects in the films are brilliant! Um… special effects are something like glamours or illusions or both, tricks done on film to make something look different than how it really is.” He turned the car into the alley behind the house Stephen lived in and parked beside the younger man’s car. “Harry, he’s got the upstairs flat, right?”

“Yes,” Harry said. Once they’d all clambered from the car, he led the way up the stairs to knock on Stephen’s door.

Stephen opened it with a smile. “Hello, it’s good to see you all. Come on in and let’s get everything sorted for comfort before we order some food and start the films.”

Draco peered around curiously at the lights and light switches, as well as at the telly. Harry walked around the flat with his friend, explaining how to work the lights and to be sure he closed the
refrigerator properly if he got a drink from it, to keep the cold air in and the warm air out. The three
men busied themselves rearranging the furniture in the sitting room to give enough space to lay out
mattresses so they could all lounge comfortably while watching the films. Once everything was
settled to their satisfaction, they decided to get pizza first and to order Chinese later on. Stephen
supplied a menu for the local pizza place and phoned in the order once everyone decided what to
get. That done, he turned on the telly and popped Star Wars into his VCR. Draco was so enthralled
by the film that he didn’t notice when the food arrived, at least not until Harry actually stuck a
paper plate with a slice of pizza on his lap. He ate absently, eyes glued to the screen. He gasped
when Han, Chewie, Luke, and Leia got trapped in the trash compactor, cheered when Luke and
Leia escaped the storm troopers by swinging across the chasm, and loudly cried, “No!” when Darth
Vader struck down Obi-Wan Kenobi. And then turned bright red when he realised he’d done that,
which made the others chuckle.

“I did the same thing the first time I saw this one,” Harry said.

“Me too,” said Stephen, “and I was in a crowded cinema at the time. But I wasn’t the only one.”

Draco laughed at that, and returned his attention to the film. After it was over, he asked, “Is the
Force the same as magic? Some of it seemed kind of like magic, but not all of it.”

Stephen shrugged. “I’m not sure, in all honesty. It’s just something that George Lucas, the creator
of the films, made up. I think it’s part magic, part religion, and part mental powers. Some muggles
believe that one can do all sorts of things by concentrating hard enough on it happening. It isn’t
anything I know much about.”

“Neither do I,” Remus put in, “but I remember at Waterstone’s, we had a whole section of books
that dealt with such things. If you care to learn about it, we can always include stopping there the
next time there’s a London excursion planned.”

“No, it’s not something I really need to know about muggles, right?” Draco said. “I mean, not like I
need to know what a policeman looks like, or to watch for cars before crossing a street. Whatever
the Force is, all I need to know is that it’s a thing in these films, right?”

“Right,” Stephen agreed.

The five sat and discussed Star Wars for a while before putting in The Empire Strikes Back.
Following that one, they ordered out for Chinese food, getting into more of a discussion of the two
films while waiting for the food to arrive and continuing it as they ate. Deciding that a break was in
order, Stephen pulled out the game Monopoly and explained the rules to his wizarding guests.
Playing turned out to be a riot, as Sirius kept trying desperately to buy Park Place and Boardwalk
from the two who’d initially bought the properties, while Remus very quietly collected the three
orange properties and put up two houses on each before Sirius even noticed that he owned them.
Draco was fascinated by the game tokens, as he’d never seen anything but wizarding chess pieces
before. Once Remus succeeded in bankrupting the rest of them, Stephen demonstrated the art of
making popcorn to Draco, and they all changed into their pajamas before settling in with cokes and
the popcorn to watch Return of the Jedi.

After the end, a sleepy Harry commented, “I like how Darth Vader turned good at the end, to save
his son.”

Draco nodded his agreement. “Me too. The Emperor was just creepy.” He yawned and shifted to
get more comfortable. “But it was funny how the little fuzzy things thought C3PO was a god. I
wonder what they’d think of wizards?”
Stephen chuckled as he finished rewinding the videotape and ejected it from the VHS player. “Since the Ewoks don’t really exist, there’s no way of knowing. Is everyone ready to go to sleep?” When the others all nodded, he turned out the lights except for a dim night light in the loo, just in case anyone needed it before morning. “Happy New Year, everyone. Sleep well.” He settled back down on his own mattress to a chorus of, “Happy New Year, g’nite!”

They all had a good lie-in, not getting up until nearly ten on New Year’s Day. Harry astonished Draco by taking charge of cooking breakfast, making sausage, mushroom, and cheese omelets with sausage links, hash browns, and toast. He’d realised that muggles had to cook for themselves, but it amazed him that a boy his own age could put together such a good meal. Harry just grinned. “Cooking is like potions,” he told his friend. “Only the ingredients are different. But you have to add just the right things at the right times and heat it at certain temperatures for the right amount of time, or you’ll ruin it, just like potions.”

“Huh,” Draco said. “Could I learn to cook, do you think?”

“Of course you can,” Harry told him. “Anyone can learn to cook, although some people are better at it than others are. I know your parents are expecting you home early today, but maybe next time we have lessons together, you and I can make biscuits or something after. Or even dinner for everyone, if you want to. I don’t know anything fancy, mind, but I can do a brilliant shepherd’s pie and apple crumble, and those are easy enough for me to show you.”

Sirius grinned. “Best clear that with the house elves, Harry, you don’t want to drive them spare by taking over the kitchen without warning them first. Otherwise they might think they’re not doing their jobs properly, since you’re doing the cooking for yourself.”

Harry shook his head with a laugh. “Really? Well, I’ll make sure to bring it up, because I do like cooking sometimes. Not all the time, mind, but sometimes.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Remus put in with a nod. He took another bite of his omelet and smiled. “And I have to say, this is brilliant as well. I don’t think I’d have thought to put mushrooms in with the sausage, but I love it.”

Harry blushed. “Oh… well, Aunt Petunia makes omelets like that, because it’s her way of getting some veg other than potatoes into Dudley. Sometimes she does chopped onion with gammon too.”

Stephen snorted. “And then I bet she lets him have a bowl of ice cream after, right?”

“Right,” Harry laughed. “Or biscuits, or toast with so much jam that the toast falls apart. Anything sweet, really.”

“No wonder the kid is so fat,” Stephen said, shaking his head. “I wonder if she’ll ever come to her senses about that boy.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harry said. “Have we got time for another go at Monopoly before we have to take Draco home?”

Stephen looked at the clock and shook his head. “I’m afraid not. But we can take the game over to Grimmauld Place if you want, and maybe we can even get Narcissa and Lucius to join us in a game the next time we’re all together.”

Draco giggled at the thought of his parents playing the muggle board game. “Mother might be willing to play, but I don’t know about Father.”

“Oh, I bet we can persuade him to give it a go,” Sirius said with a sinister grin.
“I’ll make sure to lay in a supply of popcorn for the rest of us, for when you try it,” Remus chuckled. “Let’s get Stephen’s flat sorted and then get going, so we can have Draco home when we said we would.”

Nodding at that, the three men started shrinking the mattresses back down and putting the furniture back where it belonged, while Harry pulled Draco into Stephen’s kitchenette and had his friend help load the plates into the dishwasher while he did the washing up of the skillets and other cooking utensils. Afterwards, Stephen accompanied them back to Grimmauld Place, bringing Monopoly as he promised. Sirius floo-called Narcissa to make sure they were there and awake before sending Draco home. The blond boy made his farewells to everyone and reminded Harry that he definitely wanted to cook the next time they got together before stepping through the green flames to Malfoy Manor.

Sirius shooed everyone into the sitting room so Stephen could see the tree they’d decorated before it got taken back down. He puttered about for a few minutes, sending the mattresses back to where they belonged and calling Dobby to bring them all some tea and biscuits. After fussing with his tea for a moment, he looked at his godson and cleared his throat awkwardly. “Um, Harry?” he said. “I… there’s a spell I’d like to cast on you, if you don’t mind. There’s… well, there might be a… problem… with your scar, and I’d like to be sure one way or the other, so I know if I need to be worried or not.”

Harry immediately looked concerned. “What kind of problem, Uncle Sirius?”

The animagus bit his lip. “Er… it’s kind of hard to explain, but… well, it’s been discovered that You Know Who made things called horcruxes, which hold a piece of his soul. They’re meant to keep him from dying properly… as long as at least one exists, he can’t actually die, even if he’s not exactly alive in the proper sense of the word either. Part of making one involves murder, and well, there’s been speculation that… because of the way the killing curse rebounded off you when you were a baby… that he might have accidentally made you into one, since he’d already killed your parents.”

The boy grew very still. “Can this… horcrux thing… can it hurt me, do you know?”

“I don’t know,” Sirius replied honestly. “There’s not much written about them, because they’re considered some of the vilest magic out there. I mean, even the killing curse can be used for good if you think about it, despite it being banned by the Ministry and classed as an Unforgivable. Like, if you had a horse that broke its leg and needed to be put down, the killing curse is a lot less painful than cutting its throat, or even using a muggle gun on it. But splitting one’s soul is about as unnatural an act as anything out there, and the fact that making a horcrux not only splits the soul but also involves the murder of an innocent… well, you can see why there wouldn’t be much written down about it. What little I’ve been able to find only mentions a horcrux as an inanimate object. I don’t think anyone would have intentionally made one from another person, for fear of that person dying and thereby destroying the horcrux as well.”

“What do you have to do?” Harry whispered. Stephen and Remus both looked horrified at Sirius’ words.

“I don’t know how, but we will do it,” Sirius promised. “We’ll find a way, pup. I promise you that. Lucius might be able to help with that. Let me do the spell to see if it is one first, though. No point fretting if we don’t need to, right?”

“Right,” Harry said, a little shakily. “What do you have to do?”

Sirius pulled out his wand. “It’s a wordless spell,” he told his godson. “Wormtail described one of
the horcruxes at his trial, and it turned out that You Know Who had given it to Lucius for safekeeping. Not only that, I had two in my possession… one was in the vault I acquired when my cousin Bellatrix was sentenced to life in Azkaban and the other had been stolen from You Know Who by my brother, only he died before he could tell anyone about it. He was barely able to order our old house elf Kreacher to destroy it before he died. I traded Kreacher to Narcissa for Dobby and the others after I was freed, because Kreacher hated me and admired her, and somehow or other, that bloody elf managed to let her know that he’d been unable to fulfill my brother’s order to destroy the thing, so she brought him over here to identify it. Lucius and I took the things to the Ministry, as Madam Bones of the DMLE had put out a statement that no questions would be asked of anyone turning in any object that might be a horcrux.” Noting that Harry was relaxing slightly, he kept talking. “I believe she phrased it that it wasn’t illegal to keep care of an item at someone else’s request, no matter who made that request. The aurors showed me the spell that detects a horcrux. If I make the movement and then my wand vibrates, it’s detected one.”

Taking a deep breath, the animagus carefully cast the spell at his godson’s forehead as Harry, Remus and Stephen watched. All four stared with sinking hearts as Sirius’ wand clearly started to vibrate in his hand.
What Now?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

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“Now what?” Harry asked in a small voice.

Sirius swept his godson into a reassuring hug. “Now we figure out what to do next,” he said. “I’m going to be optimistic here; that thing has been there since you were a baby and nothing terrible has happened to you because of it, so I have to think that it can’t harm you for whatever reason. It certainly hasn’t made you go evil or anything like that.” He grinned a bit despite the seriousness of the situation. “Merlin’s beard, you’re about as far from evil as it’s possible to be… and the proof of that is that you’ve not hexed that cousin of yours, even with your accidental magic.”

Everyone had to chuckle a bit at that, and Stephen put in, “I have to agree that it’s not harmed you, at least not aside from leaving you with that scar. Jase… Healer Abbot didn’t mention anything amiss when he saw you that time. The only thing he’d mentioned being wrong was the malnutrition and the weakened bones that he gave you those potions for.”

Harry nodded. “I guess. So what are we going to do?” Remus seconded that question with a nod.

“Well, I think we’d probably best consult with Lucius,” Sirius said slowly. “When the Unspeakables transferred the soul-bits from two of the items we’d found… they were Salazar Slytherin’s locket and Helga Hufflepuff’s chalice, and so no one wanted to destroy them in order to destroy the horcruxes… You Know Who sort of manifested in some way. I’m not really sure what happened, but it assumed we were his followers trying to bring him back, and it gave us some information. It helped that Lucius was smart enough to pretend that was exactly what he was doing, when that manifestation spoke to him. Anyway, it told us where he’d hidden his notes on the subject, and Lucius said afterwards that he might have some information as to where exactly that place is. That would be quite helpful; Circe knows I’ve scoured the library here and not found anything especially helpful.”

“Did you also learn the spell to transfer the soul-bit into something else?” Remus asked.

Sirius shook his head. “No, I didn’t. I would have liked to, but I didn’t want to raise any questions by asking to learn as I did for the one to identify a horcrux. I’m not an auror anymore, nor an unspeakable, so I figured I was pushing my luck enough by asking about the identification spell, you know?”

Stephen nodded. “True enough. But that means we’ll likely have to involve the DMLE and the Unspeakables, doesn’t it?”

“Probably,” Sirius agreed. “I don’t like it, as that’s more people who will know that we’re spending time with Harry, but I don’t see a way ‘round it either.”

“Well, since the Malfoys wanted Draco home early so they could bring him along on the calls they were making today, we won’t likely get hold of Lucius before tomorrow,” Remus said. “So I suggest we come up with something fun to do to get our minds off it for a bit. How about we figure
out one of the games you got from Princess Diana, Harry?"

“All right,” Harry said. He ran up to his room to grab the game Risk, and the four spent an enjoyable couple of hours battling for control of the world.

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The next morning, Sirius and Stephen flooed over to Malfoy Manor to consult with Lucius while Remus and Harry worked on a potion. After listening to what they had to say, the aristocratic man frowned thoughtfully. “So, even a healer found nothing odd about the scar, and even I can see that the boy is in no way evil or power hungry. We may want to hold off on involving anyone else, at least until we’ve located the ring and the diadem that we heard mentioned, not to mention those notes. I think the biggest risk in getting the horcrux out of Harry will be to keep the spirit from possessing him, so it may be that with the notes, we’ll have an easier time preventing that.”

“Oh, you’re right,” Sirius said. “I hadn’t thought about that part.”

“Well, that’s understandable enough,” Lucius said. “But also, it might be best to get rid of the other two first, since that would presumably weaken the remaining pieces of the soul. We might also want to start teaching Harry the rudiments of occlumency. I know he’s quite young for it, but he’s a fairly quiet and introspective child from what I’ve seen, so he may show a knack for it. If he gains the ability to close off his mind from intrusion, it will be far less likely for the spirit to succeed in possessing him if it tries, and you know it will most probably do just that. Especially if it realises that Harry is the baby he’d tried to kill on that night.”

“Merlin,” Stephen muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose. “So you’re saying that for now, we just pretend the horcrux isn’t there? Go on as we would if we didn’t know about it?”

“Exactly,” Lucius agreed. “We monitor the situation, but from what you’ve said, it seems that the soul piece has walled itself off in some way within Harry; it’s not affecting him in any way that we can see. So for the time being, we simply continue on as we have been, and only after the other two have been dealt with do we attempt to do anything about this one.”

Sirius sighed. “Well, I don’t like it, but I don’t see that we’ve much choice either,” he said. “But you’re right that we’re just not prepared to deal with it at the moment. Not until we manage to locate those notes and the other horcruxes. Especially as we need to return Harry to his aunt’s this evening, as his school resumes classes tomorrow.”

“Draco is looking forward to hearing more about Harry’s school,” Lucius said with a smile. “Would you believe he said this morning that he’d like to have muggle history and science lessons along with his usual tutoring? It had something to do with those films you showed him when he stayed over at your place for New Year’s Eve, Stephen, although I wasn’t quite sure what he was on about. Something about muggles being able to fly to the moon already, and that’s due to them trying to turn their fictions into reality… it didn’t make much sense to me, but then again, I’m fairly certain he left out several relevant points.”

Stephen chuckled. “Very likely. It has to do with muggles seeing fiction as something of a challenge… that just because something isn’t currently true doesn’t mean that someone can’t find a way to make it true. Sirius used aeroplanes as an example… that a hundred years ago, muggles thought it was impossible to build a machine that could fly under its own power. Eighty-six years ago, a pair of Americans, the Wright brothers, managed to build a powered flying machine. Sure, that one only flew for a minute or so, and a few hundred feet, but it was a start. Today we have aeroplanes that can carry a hundred passengers or more from London to New York City in America, and they can do it in about half the time it takes the Hogwarts Express to get from King’s
“Cross Station to Hogsmeade.”

“Really?” Lucius looked surprised. “I mean, I never took Muggle Studies, but I knew from housemates who did that muggles had some sort of flying machines although I was under the impression that they were fairly small and couldn’t go all that far.”

“Well, that’s why you need to get Remus to do an upgrade on the Muggle Studies textbooks, once he’s done with the Wizarding Culture texts,” Sirius chuckled, always willing to put in a good word for his best friend. “I understand they’re still using the ones from when we were in school, and I remember Lily looking at James’ and my books and being disgusted at how out-of-date they were even back then. About fifty years out of date, from what she said. Persuading Dumbledore to hire an actual muggleborn to teach the class would likely help as well, since they’ll have personal knowledge of the muggle world and won’t just be teaching from the books.” He paused as a thought occurred to him. “Stephen, how difficult would it be to get Draco into Harry’s school, do you know?”

The younger man tilted his head in thought. “Well, he’d have to live… or at least appear to live… within the neighbourhood. Mind, not necessarily right near where Harry lives, as we wouldn’t want to risk the Figg woman seeing him, but mostly it would be a matter of filling out some paperwork. Since he’s been homeschooled, he’d need to be tested to determine which form he’d be placed in… he might have to go in with the younger students if he hasn’t got high enough marks in everything, just so he wouldn’t have trouble keeping up. Why, what are you thinking?”

“Assuming you’d agree, Lucius, maybe between us all, we could get Draco caught up in time for next school year and figure out some way of letting him attend that last year of muggle primary school with Harry,” the animagus suggested. “I bet it would do quite a bit of good once he’s at Hogwarts, too, if he as the son of a respected pureblood family can get along well with muggleborn students. It might even push some of… well, look… I know how you feel about things now, but I don’t know who if any of your, um, your former associates… if any of them feel the way you do now, or if they’ve still got the same views as back then. Maybe this is stupid of me, but I can’t help but hope that if their kids see Draco being nice to muggleborns, those kids will do the same, or at least not be berks towards the muggleborns. You know, follow his example, especially as even I know you’re still a power to be reckoned with in society and within the Ministry… once the kids start following Draco’s example, maybe their parents will start following yours.”

Lucius narrowed his eyes as he considered the possibilities. “Well, I do know that since Narcissa told her friends about the muggle pregnancy healer and how there’s something to be done to help bring this one to term, at least three of them are looking into doing the same if she delivers successfully. Obviously that’s not all of my former associates, but it does appear that at least some are willing to rethink their views. Perhaps all that was needed was someone willing to be the first to make the change and go public with it. I don’t want to make a decision on the matter just yet, but would you two and Remus be willing to help Draco with his studies so that he could be in Harry’s form?”

“Oh of course,” Stephen answered promptly. “I do have my own classes at uni to consider, but I’m sure I can schedule in some time for tutoring Draco, especially as I don’t need to try to hold down a job at the same time now that I’ve claimed the Brevin inheritance.”

Sirius grinned. “Well, I don’t know how much help I’ll actually be, given that I don’t know all that much about the muggle world, and what I do know is more practical than book learning. But I don’t have anything aside from taking my seat on the Wizengamot when it opens for the new session. And I’m sure Remus will pitch in as well. Since he worked at that bookstore, I do know that he’ll know the best books for Draco to study from to get him caught up to where he’ll need to
“And the cost of such books is not an issue, of course,” Lucius said. “All right, well, ask Remus if he’d be so kind as to pick out some books to get Draco started in muggle science and history, if you would, and tell him to save the receipts so I can recompense him for them. If Draco hasn’t lost all interest in learning such things in two or three months, we’ll look into the possibility of enrolling him with Harry. Also, and partially relating to this discussion, would you be willing to do some traveling, Sirius? As you’re the one of us with the most time to spare at the moment.”

“I don’t see why not, as long as it won’t interfere with seeing Harry on the weekends,” Sirius said. “Where am I supposed to go and what am I doing once I’m there?”

“I want you to look over magical schools outside of Europe. Particularly the ones in other English-speaking parts of the world, but I’d like to get something of an overview for the Hogwarts board, of what’s being taught elsewhere. I’ve heard some rumblings about some coming changes to the curriculum at both Durmstrang and Beauxbatons in an effort to stay competitive, yet Dumbledore seems content to leave things as they’ve always been at Hogwarts. As respected as the man is,” Lucius sneered, “it’s next to impossible to get people to consider that he even might be wrong on anything. Even I won’t deny that the old man has done quite a bit for our world,” he said grudgingly, “but I don’t want my son getting a substandard education because one doddering fool can’t see past his bowl of sweets to notice how bad things are becoming. The issue with the Defense teachers over the last few decades, for example.”

“It was a bit patch-worked, wasn’t it?” Sirius said thoughtfully. “New teachers every year for whatever reason. Not that I thought much about it back when we were in school, mind, but looking back… no, it wasn’t the best situation. Of course, when we were there, that’s when You Know Who was really starting to push his agenda, so I think most of us just figured Dumbledore was doing the best he could with what he could find. That’s still going on, then?”

Lucius snorted. “Merlin, yes! It’s to the point where the board members are wagering as to what will cause each year’s candidate for the post to leave. Oh, sometimes we know going in that whoever will be teaching is only there for the year, as various aurors have taken a leave from the DMLE to teach for a year. But you name it, it’s pulled teachers away from the post… better job offers elsewhere, family crises, personal illness or even death, legal issues ranging from thievery to the teacher in question being caught in flagrante with a student. No actual paedophiles, thank all the gods; both times it happened, the student in question was a seventh year and of age. But still. That’s not something any responsible person wants going on in a school! Especially as one of those instances involved the teacher in question offering ‘extra credit’ to the students he found attractive, in exchange for sexual favours.”

Sirius and Stephen both frowned at that. Stephen shook his head as he asked, “Doesn’t the wizarding world do background checks on the teachers? Muggle schools do, at least as far as checking with the police to be sure the applicant for the post hasn’t got a criminal record. Or at least, hasn’t anything more serious than a few traffic violations.”

“I never heard of anyone doing background checks,” Lucius said. “Certainly not as far as going to the DMLE or the aurors and asking if the person in question has a criminal record. For the most part, when Dumbledore says he trusts the person, enough members of the board give their approval that said person is hired, because they trust Dumbledore. You know how that goes. He’s been headmaster for so many years now that it never occurs to anyone that the old man might make the easy choice rather than do his very best to do what’s right for the school.”

Sirius shook his head. “The more you talk, Lucius, the less pleased I am at the thought of Harry
going to Hogwarts. And that’s leaving aside the fact that we know Dumbledore is the one behind Harry being placed with his aunt’s family and not getting me a trial and all that.”

“So, help me fix things,” Lucius told his wife’s cousin. “That’s the whole point of sending you abroad. I particularly want to know about the American and Canadian schools, but I’m also curious about the schools in Australia and New Zealand. For that matter, I wouldn’t mind if you picked up any information about schools in Asia and South America, but it’s the English-speaking schools I most want to know about. As I understand it, the culture in those countries is close enough to ours that it would be much easier to adapt what they are doing in their schools to suit our needs here in Britain.”

“I should think so,” Sirius nodded.

A house elf popped in just then. “Master Lucees, sir? Mistress Narssi bes asking Sudee to bes telling him it bes time to leave for muggle healers, sir,” she said.

Stephen smiled. “I take it you’re comfortable going to the doctor without me in tow now?”

Lucius smiled. “The doctor said they would be doing that ammo-centistis thing today, and putting in that circle-lodge thing. Cissa thinks she’ll be fine even without you there to translate, though.”

Stephen chuckled. “Amniocentesis, and a cerclage,” he corrected the older man. “But that’s good that she feels comfortable enough now. I wish you both the best. Are you going to find out if you’re having a boy or a girl?”

Lucius chuckled. “Thank you, and I don’t know. I told Cissa it was up to her if she wanted to know what we’re having, but last I knew, she hadn’t decided.”

“Well, good luck with it,” Sirius said as he headed for the floo with Stephen behind him.

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Back at Grimmauld Place, Stephen and Sirius praised the forgetfulness potion Harry had made under Remus’ tutelage, and filled in the pair as to what Lucius had advised. Remus made a list of books that Harry would find useful for learning occulmency, although as none of the three were proficient in the art, actual lessons would have to come from Lucius. The werewolf then made a second list of books to help Draco pass muggle school placement exams well enough to be put into Harry’s form, assuming that he would be interested in attending school with Harry the following year. After promising Harry that they’d pick up the beginning occlumency books before they saw him next, they had some lunch and then played a round of Monopoly, which Stephen won.

Soon enough, though, it was time for Harry and Stephen to depart, as they had to stop by Tesco before returning to Privet Drive, to restock Harry’s food supplies. After hugging Remus and his godfather goodbye, Harry reluctantly climbed into Stephen’s car. As they pulled onto the motorway, Stephen asked, “Are you all right?”

Harry sighed. “Well… I don’t want to go back to Aunt Petunia’s, of course. And even though you and Lord Malfoy and Sirius all say it isn’t causing a problem, I can’t help but worry about that horcrux thing in my head.”

Stephen reached over and ruffled the boy’s hair. “I can’t say I blame you on that. On either of them, really. I can only imagine how awful it must be to know that you’ve got a loving home waiting for you, but you can’t move into it just yet. And honestly, the whole idea of horcruxes just gives me the collywobbles, so I’m sure it’s much, much worse for you.”
“Exactly,” Harry agreed. “I mean, I guess it makes sense that it’s not doing anything bad to me, since it’s been there all along. But… yeah, collywobbles.”

“What you need, is something to take your mind from it,” Stephen said. “Do you think your aunt would allow you to have a caged pet in your room? I know a cat or a dog would be right out, as they’d be too likely to make a mess in the house. But maybe a gerbil or some such?”

The boy considered this. “I don’t know… I don’t think she’d say yes if I asked, but maybe if you did? Although… Dudley hasn’t got a pet, so I don’t know if she’d let me have one when he doesn’t. He hates it when he thinks I’m getting a privilege he isn’t. The only reason he’s not upset about me going off with you each weekend, is that he thinks you’re giving me lessons like an extra day of school.” He grinned a bit. “He’d go spare if he knew what sort of fun we have.”

Stephen chuckled. “I believe it! Well, here’s a question then; would you be willing to buy him a pet as well? As your aunt is feeding you properly, you’ve used much less than we first budgeted for your food, so you’ve got quite a bit more in your account than we’d figured at this point. You can always call it a late Christmas gift, since you wanted to clear it with her before buying it for him.”

“I suppose I could,” Harry said with a shrug. “I hate to, because I don’t think he’ll take proper care of it, but the money part doesn’t bother me.”

“Maybe you’ll be lucky, and he’ll want a goldfish,” Stephen said with a grin. “They’re hard to kill off.”

Harry chuckled. “You’ll ask Aunt Petunia with me, then?”

“Absolutely. And who knows? If she likes the gifts you got her and your cousin, it might make her more inclined to say yes,” Stephen said.

In Surrey, they stopped off for curry, then went to Tesco, where Harry bought more bread and sliced meats and cheese, granola bars, and apples. When they reached Privet Drive, Stephen helped him carry his grocery bags, suitcase, and cartons of gifts up to his room. Then they headed down to the kitchen, where Petunia was just finishing the washing up after her evening meal. Dudley could be heard in the sitting room, playing a new video game and whining loudly every time he lost.

“Mrs. Dursley?” Stephen said.

Petunia turned. “Yes, Mr. Coyner?”

“Harry was thinking about getting some sort of small pets for himself and Dudley, with your permission, of course,” Stephen said. “He had thought about getting them as Christmas gifts, but didn’t want to give his cousin a pet only to find out that you didn’t want pets for some reason or other.”

She frowned. “Dudders does want a pet,” she said slowly. “But the cost… it isn’t just the pet itself, but food and veterinary care and the like. As it is I’ve had to cut back on some of the snacks Dudley likes, because I’m simply not as well off as before Vernon’s passing. I don’t know that I could afford the upkeep.”

Harry spoke up. “A small animal like a gerbil or a goldfish wouldn’t cost that much, I should think. I’ll buy the food for Dudley’s pet as well as for mine out of my stipend,” he offered. The more he’d thought about having a pet, the more he wanted one, and didn’t want his aunt to object.

“You would?” Petunia was struck once more by her nephew’s generosity. The Lego set he’d given Dudley for Christmas was a large Star Wars themed one, and the boy’s gift to her was a beautiful
DKNY handbag; one which she had circled in a catalogue back in the spring, although she’d given up on any thought of getting it after Vernon died. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” Harry said with a smile. “The pet, whatever it needs to get set up at first, and food.”

“All right, then, Harry, you and Dudley may get pets,” she decided. “When do you intend to get them?”

Harry looked at Stephen, who smiled. “My uni classes don’t resume until next week,” he said. “I can come here tomorrow when the boys are due home from school, and take them to a pet shop then, if that’s all right with you, Mrs. Dursley.”

“That’s fine,” Petunia said. “Let me call Dudley in to give him the news.” She moved to the doorway of the kitchen. “Diddyms, come in here for a moment.”

“Aww!” could be heard over the sound of the video game. “I almost beat that level! Why’d you have to interrupt?” Dudley came stomping towards the kitchen. “And why are the freak and his teacher here?”

“Harry lives here,” Petunia pointed out to her son, “and Mr. Coyners is dropping him off from his holiday. As for why I called you, Duddikins, Mr. Coyner is going to take you and Harry out tomorrow so each of you can get a small pet.”

“Really, Mummy? I thought you said we couldn’t afford a pet,” Dudley said eagerly.

“Really, Diddy darling,” she said. “It’s a late Christmas gift, as Mr. Coyner wanted to be sure I didn’t mind before he took you shopping.”

“Great,” Dudley grunted. “I want a rat. Piers has a rat, and I think it’s brilliant.” He waddled back to the sitting room without waiting for an answer.

Stephen refrained from shaking his head at the fat boy’s lack of manners. “All right, then, Harry, I’ll see you here after school tomorrow. Take care. Mrs. Dursley, good night.”

Petunia gave the young man a small smile. “Good night, Mr. Coyner,” she said as he left. “And Harry? Thank you for that lovely handbag,” she said awkwardly.

“You’re welcome, Aunt Petunia,” Harry said with a smile. “And thank you for the photo album. I especially like the pictures of you and my mum together as girls. Good night.” He headed up to get ready for bed so that he could retreat to his room before his cousin came upstairs.

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Earlier that same day…

Narcissa held her husband’s hand tightly as she lay on the exam table at the doctor’s. “I’m so scared,” she whispered.

“You’ll be fine, Cissa, I’m sure of it,” her husband soothed. “Dr. Gardner will make sure of it.”

As he spoke, a gentle rap sounded on the door just before it was pushed open. “Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy,” Dr. Gardner said cheerfully as she stepped into the room followed by two nurses. “Are we ready for the amniocentesis and the cerclage?”

“As ready as I can be,” Narcissa said, her voice a little shaky.
The doctor smiled and patted Narcissa’s free hand. “You’ll be fine. We’re going to do the ultrasound first, so we can see where there’s a good pocket of fluid for the amnio. I’ll use a topical anesthetic, so while you might feel some pressure when I stick you, it won’t hurt. As soon as I draw the sample, it’ll go straight to the laboratory for the testing. Whilst the technicians are doing that, I’ll put the cerclage in place. Then you get to relax until the tests are done, which shouldn’t be more than half an hour from the time I’m done doing the cerclage.” Her smile widened. “And did you decide if you want to know the sex of the baby?”

Narcissa nodded. “Yes, I do want to know.” She gave her husband a small smile, adding, “We have to know what to try for next time, assuming everything works out well this time.”

The nurse spreading the ultrasound gel on Narcissa’s slightly rounded belly gave a chuckle. “I see you’re being ambitious,” she said.

“And why not?” Lucius asked. “I think we’d both like to see this baby with a sibling close in age. And while I know my wife would like a daughter to dress up like a little princess, I think our son would like a little brother that he can mentor and teach sports and such.” He fell silent as the other nurse shut off the lights and everyone turned their attention to the screen of the ultrasound machine. “It looks a lot more like a baby now, doesn’t it?” he commented after a moment.

That drew a laugh from all three of the medical personnel. “Yes, it does,” Dr. Gardner agreed. “Oh, there’s a good pocket… hold it right there,” she told the nurse holding the stick to Narcissa’s belly. The other nurse rubbed a different gel onto Narcissa’s belly and then opened a sealed packet containing a very large needle. Dr. Gardner prodded Narcissa with one gloved finger. “Does that hurt?” she asked.

“No,” Narcissa answered.

“Good,” the doctor said. Taking the needle from the nurse, she carefully and slowly plunged it in, keeping her eyes on the monitor in case the baby moved. Once she was satisfied, she attached a test tube to the back end of the needle, filling it with the amniotic fluid. After handing the test tube off to the nurse, she gently withdrew the needle and dropped it into the sharps disposal box while holding a gauze pad over the puncture to stop any bleeding. As the nurse vanished with the test tube, Dr. Gardner stuck an elastoplast over the gauze. The other nurse shut off the ultrasound machine and turned on the lights before helping Narcissa reposition herself with her feet up in the stirrups. “This will be a bit uncomfortable,” Dr. Gardner warned. “Even with the local anesthetic, most women say they feel some soreness, probably due to the speculum.” She inserted the instrument and did the usual exam before injecting the anesthetic. Narcissa clutched her husband’s hand more tightly as she tried to stay relaxed, staring fixedly at the ceiling, where a poster of a kitten dangling from a tree branch and captioned, ‘Hang in there, kid!’ was mounted. For his part, Lucius kept his attention on his wife’s face, for once in his life not wanting to know the details of what was happening at the other end of the table. The doctor and nurse murmured the occasional word to each other as they worked efficiently together, and in just over thirty minutes, Dr. Gardner removed the speculum. “All done. But don’t try to move just yet, the anesthetic likely has your legs a bit weak for a bit.” She pulled the sheet back over Narcissa’s legs. “Just relax for now. You’ll probably be ready to move just about the same time as your amnio results are in.” She stripped off her gloves and tossed them in the bin and wrote something on Narcissa’s chart before exiting the room.

The nurse pattered around, cleaning up the debris from the procedures before helping Narcissa shift to a more comfortable position on the exam table with her feet back out of the stirrups. She checked her watch and said, “Your results are probably up now. How are you feeling?”
Narcissa took stock. “A little shaky and sore, but otherwise fine,” she said.

“All right, then, why don’t you try sitting up? Slowly, though, in case you get dizzy,” the nurse said.

With Lucius’ help, Narcissa sat up carefully and took a deep breath. “All right, I still feel fine.” She wiggled her toes and flexed her ankles. “My legs seem all right as well.”

“Go ahead and dress, then,” the nurse said, providing a towel to remove the ultrasound gel from Narcissa’s abdomen. “I’ll go see if your results are up whilst you do.” She bustled out of the room.

A few moments after Narcissa had gotten her clothes back on, Dr. Gardner tapped at the door and stepped in, her expression pleased. “Good news,” she told them. “There’s no signs of any genetic abnormalities, nor of any other physical issues. As of right now, your little girl seems to be in perfect health.”

“Our… little girl?” Lucius said in a husky voice, placing a gentle hand on the slight swell of his wife’s belly. “We’re having a daughter? And she’s really all right?” Narcissa sagged in relief, tears springing to her eyes as she placed her hand over his.

Used to this sort of reaction, Dr. Gardner just smiled. “Yes, you’re having a daughter. And since I know you’re barely hearing anything else right now, here’s a list of instructions to follow for the next couple of days.” She handed Lucius a folded sheet of paper. “Mostly, it’s just what symptoms to watch for, in case there are any complications with the cerclage, not that I expect any. Take paracetemol if you’re in any discomfort for the rest of the day, and take it easy. You don’t have to actually stay in bed, Mrs. Malfoy, but don’t walk around much for the next couple of days, and sit with your feet up whenever possible.

“Do you… do you have a better idea when she’ll be born?” Narcissa asked tremulously.

“Well, ideally, she’ll be born somewhere between the end of June and the middle of July,” the doctor replied. “However, the cerclage isn’t a complete cure-all when it comes to an incompetent cervix, so it’s likely that even with that, she’ll come a little sooner than that. Our goal is to keep her right where she is until at least the first week in June. We’ll be keeping an eye on you both the whole time. And of course, if she needs it, we’ve got the foremost NICU centre in Britain. Obviously we’d all prefer she doesn’t need it, but it is there just in case. As I recall from your history, your son was about eight weeks early, yes? And he’s healthy now, even without modern medical support as an infant. Our NICU has helped babies born as much as fourteen weeks early, most of whom are thriving now, without any major medical issues. I don’t want you doing that much walking today, but if you’d like, the next time you’re in for a checkup, I can arrange for you to tour the NICU so you can see for yourselves just what we can do.”

Narcissa considered that offer. “I don’t know,” she said honestly. “Part of me wants to, for the reassurance. And part of me is scared to, because I don’t know how I’ll react. I still have bouts of nervousness just coming in here, as I’m so unused to modern medicine in general.”

Dr. Gardner patted her shoulder. “Well, think about it, you don’t have to decide right this moment. I’m going to ask you to start coming in every other week instead of once a month, so we can monitor things with the cerclage. So there’s plenty of time for that tour, if you decide you want it. Set up your next appointment on the way out, and either I or Dr. Fenton will see you then.” She smiled and stepped out.

Lucius and Narcissa stopped at the reception desk to make the next appointment, and headed out to the car in silence. But when they were almost home, Narcissa suddenly smiled. “A girl, Lucius.
As usual following a holiday, school was rowdier than normal, with friends who had not gotten to see one another as often over the hols greeting each other boisterously and showing off various gifts they had received. Harry was not immune to the general silliness, greeting both Surya and Lucy by spinning them into a few dance steps as Paul laughed so hard that he had to hold onto his desk to keep from falling out of his seat. Ms. Beckett, knowing that not much work would get done on this first day back, nevertheless tried to get them to settle down by promising the class a couple of extra fifteen-minute breaks during which they could move about and talk quietly to one another… if they sat and paid attention for the rest of the time. The class succeeded in earning the extra breaks, and the foursome took full advantage of the added time to tell of their various holiday happenings.

Surya had the quietest holiday of the four. While her family had gotten into the habit of exchanging gifts on the 25th when her older brothers were children so that they wouldn’t feel left out when their school friends talked about their Christmas presents, Christmas itself was not a holiday for them as they were Hindu. She spent most of the break learning to cook traditional Indian dishes under her mother’s tutelage, but she had also gotten a couple of chances to go play at Paul’s flat, and Paul had visited her house a couple of times as well. Paul’s family tradition included going to a midnight service on Christmas Eve, and to the pantomime on Boxing Day. Lucy’s oncologist had pronounced her fit for travel, so her parents had taken her up to Yorkshire to visit with her grandparents for a week. Harry, of course, told them about going to see The Nutcracker and then his visit to Highgrove. Surya and Lucy enjoyed hearing about the dance lesson, while Paul was more interested in hearing a retelling of the conversation about computers being a coming thing. All three were excited for Harry when he mentioned that his tutor would be taking him out to buy a pet after school.

“What are you going to get, Harry?” Lucy asked, bouncing a little. “I want a cat, but Mum was worried about one being underfoot when I was doing chemotherapy. She said maybe I can get one once I’ve been in remission for a full year.”

Harry shook his head. “No cats and no dogs either,” he said. “I don’t think Aunt Petunia is keen on pets at all, so whatever I get has to be something kept in a cage. My cousin says he wants a rat… Stephen figured that Aunt Petunia would be more likely to allow me to have a pet if Dudley got one as well… but I don’t know yet what I want.”

“Paul has fish,” Surya volunteered. “A big aquarium with lots of different fish, and a tiny little bowl with a bright red goldfish with droopy fins, too.”

“It’s a betta,” Paul said. “Not a goldfish at all. The other name for them is the Siamese fighting fish. If you put two male bettas in the same bowl or tank, they’ll fight to the death. Bettas don’t bother other fish, though.” He grinned. “In fact, it’s more likely that other fish will bother them, because they have those droopy fins and they swim slowly. It’s why the betta is kept in his own bowl and not in the aquarium. We’ve got cardinal tetras, harlequin rasboras, bronze corydoras, and swordtails in several colours.”

“Lucy and I will have to come and see the aquarium sometime,” Harry said with a smile. “It sounds brilliant.”
Paul shrugged a little. “It’s all right. I really wanted a budgie, but Mum didn’t want anything that might make too much noise when the baby is sleeping.”

“Well, that makes sense,” Lucy said. “I know I’d go spare if I’d just got a baby to sleep and then something made a lot of noise and woke it up again.”

“And the noise is why I’m not thinking about a bird of any sort,” Harry chuckled. “I am thinking about a snake, though. I got to handle a corn snake at the zoo, and the zoo worker said I was really good with it. Snakes don’t get noisy, and what’s more, Dudley is scared of them, so he’ll stay out of my room if I have a snake in there with me.”

“Oh, I agree with Mum’s reasons,” Paul said. “I do like budgies, though. My cousin in Guildford has one that’s blue with a yellow face, and it can talk. It says ‘hello,’ and ‘pretty birdie,’ and ‘I talk, can you fly?’”

They all laughed at that and Surya nodded. “My cousins in Delhi have a bird that can talk, too, a mostly green bird called an Indian ring-neck parakeet. It’s lots bigger than a budgie, though, and it can bite pretty hard if it wants to. My cousin Raj was showing off and teasing it, and it bit his hand hard enough to draw blood. Both my mum and his mum said it served him right, though, as Raj knows better than to poke at the bird when it’s eating.” She grinned at Harry. “And my cousins took me to see a snake charmer in the marketplace. It was like something out of a book or a film; this old man just sat there and played an instrument called a pungi, and a cobra slipped up from the basket in front of him and flared its hood and swayed to the music.”

“That would be interesting to see,” Harry said with a smile.

“Not to me,” Paul said. “Cobras are poisonous. I’ve played with the corn snakes at the zoo in London before and that was fun. But I don’t want to go near anything like a cobra.”

“What about you, Lucy?” Surya asked. “Would you want to see a snake up close?”

Lucy grinned. “I’ve held a python that was longer than I am tall,” she said. “One time when I was in hospital for my chemo rounds, a troupe of Bollywood dancers came ‘round to entertain the pediatric wards, and two of the dancers used perfectly enormous pythons as props in their dancing. They let anyone who wanted have the snakes in their beds for a few minutes. I’ve got a picture that Daddy took of me with the snake and the dancer. I’ll try to remember to bring it tomorrow to show you.”

“That sounds brilliant,” Surya said. “And I do think you should get a snake, Harry. Especially since Pig-boy is scared of them.” That made everyone laugh again, but before they could continue the conversation, Ms. Beckett called the class back to order for the remainder of the school day.

After school, the four friends walked out together and up the block to where Lucy’s mother was waiting in the family car to pick her up as usual. “Will you all come over after school tomorrow?” she asked before getting into the car. “You know, so we can get caught up properly.”

“I can,” Harry nodded. “Tae kwon do class won’t resume until next week.”

Paul smiled. “Sure, Mum never minds as long as I let her know ahead. She only frets when she expects me home and I’m late, because she worries about my asthma. You know, that maybe I’m late because I had trouble breathing and got taken to hospital for it or something.”

“I’ll check with my mum, but I’m sure I can,” Surya said.

“Brilliant!” Lucy said, hugging each of them. “See you tomorrow!” She clambered into the car
Paul headed towards the centre of Little Whinging where his family’s flat was located, while Harry and Surya strolled off towards Magnolia Crescent, once again chatting about the snake charmer the girl had seen while visiting India. Dudley was with his gang just ahead of them, but for once was ignoring them both. Instead, he was bragging to his gang about the rat he was going to buy and then train to bite the freak on command. Harry and Surya, hearing this, just looked at each other and rolled their eyes. “Good luck at the pet shop,” Surya said with a grin as she turned up the walk to her house.

“Thanks!” Harry called back with a wave. “See you tomorrow!” He proceeded on to Privet Drive.

Stephen was waiting out front as he walked up just behind Dudley. “Hi, Harry,” the young man called. “Are you ready to go shopping?”

Harry smiled. “Hi, Stephen,” he called back. “I’m ready when you are. I just need to put my books in my room.”

“I’m hungry,” Dudley said. “We can go after I’ve had a snack.” He walked into the house without waiting for an answer from either of the other two.

Harry chuckled and shook his head. “You might as well come inside, then,” he invited. “I don’t think Aunt Petunia will mind too much.”

“All right,” Stephen answered, falling in beside the boy as they headed into the house. They could hear Dudley in the kitchen, whining about how hungry he was, while Petunia fluttered around trying to placate him with snack suggestions. “Is he always like that?” he asked Harry in an undertone as they went upstairs to stow Harry’s schoolbooks in his room.

“Usually he’s worse,” Harry said with a shrug. “He left me alone after school today, because he was too busy bragging to his friends about the pet he’s going to get.” He chuckled. “He intends to get a rat and train it to bite on command.”

Stephen laughed. “That ought to be interesting to watch him try! Rats can be rather clever, as I understand it, but they’re not attack dogs either. Have you decided what you might like to get?”

“I was thinking maybe a snake,” Harry admitted with a grin. “Since I can talk to them and all. Not to mention, because Dudley is scared of them. The only other pet that I think I would like is a budgie or something like that, but I figured that Aunt Petunia might be upset by the noise so I thought it would be better to get something quieter.”

“I should have known,” Stephen grinned. “And that’s good reasoning behind not choosing a budgie. No point in annoying your aunt now that you’ve got things so much better around here, right?”

Harry nodded. “Exactly,” he agreed. “I know she doesn’t want me here, and it’s not as if I’ve ever thought of this house as my home, because it’s not. It’s just the place I have to stay. But ever since Uncle Vernon died, and even more since you talked with her about that bit with Uncle Sirius and Professor Dumbledore, she’s gotten a lot more, I don’t know, tolerant of my presence here.”

Stephen nodded. “I think you’re right about that. I’m pretty sure that at first it was mostly to keep me from saying anything bad about her in my reports to Her Majesty, but I also think that once she got out of the habit of resenting you, it got easier for her to see you as a person and not just as a burden foisted off on her.”
Knowing that Dudley would be eating for at least another fifteen minutes, Harry pulled an apple out of the cold storage compartment of his trunk and offered Stephen one as well. “Maybe. I’m just glad that it’s better and want to keep it that way, you know? It’s only another year and a half until I’ll be off to Hogwarts, after all, and with any luck, Uncle Sirius will be able to get custody of me by then.”

“I’m sure he will,” Stephen reassured the boy. “If not before school starts, then for certain by the end of the year. And you know you’d be spending the winter hols with him either way.”

“That’s true,” Harry said, brightening a bit. The two wizards munched their apples in companionable silence and then headed downstairs to collect Dudley and go to the pet shop.

Fortunately for Stephen’s sanity, Dudley made a point of putting on his angel act since they were out in public and he was in the charge of his freak cousin’s tutor. He didn’t want to risk being told he couldn’t get a pet after all, and since Mr. Coyner did seem to treat the little freak as if he was a normal person, he vaguely realised that it was possible the man would take exception to him behaving the way his late father had taught him was the proper way to handle freaks. He couldn’t resist one good poke at his freakish cousin when the smaller boy was given the front seat in Mr. Coyner’s car, but aside from that and pouting because he was in the back seat, he kept his hands to himself and refrained from expressing his dissatisfaction aloud.

On his part, Stephen decided to stick to Dudley when they arrived at the pet shop. He trusted Harry to behave and to listen to the shop help if they told him to do something, but he did not trust the fat and spoiled boy to do the same. “Are you sure it’s a rat you want?” he asked as they headed towards the rodents. “Is your mum all right with that?”

“It’s my pet, not Mummy’s,” Dudley said. “She always gives me what I want, as long as she can afford it. And I want rats. Piers says they do better if you have two.” He peered at a large cage containing a dozen rats in assorted colours and patterns. A soft grey rat and a white one with a black head and shoulders plus a stripe down its back shared the exercise wheel, running side by side as if racing. A pale gold rat kept sniffing around the entrance to the hideaway and the tail which stuck out of it. And two more black and white rats were nibbling on sunflower seeds in the corner. “Piers has got black and white rats, so mine have to be different.”

Stephen sighed to himself but nodded since the informative signs on the rat cages also said that they were social animals that shouldn’t be kept alone. “All right, then, how about we figure out what you’ll need in the way of a cage and bedding and such, and then you can decide which ones you want.”

“You do that, stuff like that is boring,” Dudley announced. “Anyway, I want to see all the rats before I pick them.” He started tapping on the cage in an effort to make the ones hiding in the shelter come out, and ignoring Stephen completely.

The wizard sighed again but proceeded to locate one of the shop assistants and gather up all the necessary equipment to give a rat a good home. He glanced over at Harry on occasion, but saw that the younger boy had found another shop assistant to help him with the snakes and was doing fine on his own. At one point in the conversation, he noticed Harry gesture briefly in his direction, and took care to give a smile to the person speaking with the boy.

The shop assistant with Harry returned Stephen’s smile and looked down at the boy again. “Right, so you’ll need the aquarium and locking screen lid, a heating mat, a sturdy water dish, and a climbing branch or two. Use some shredded up butcher paper or paper towels in the cage bottom for the first few months. It’ll not look so nice, but it’s better for the snake when it’s still young. A couple of hiding spots are needed as well, but you can make those yourself, from empty snack
boxes or butter tubs.”

Harry nodded. “You have books on snake care? Or at least an information pamphlet?”

“Of course,” the assistant said with a nod. “And good on you for thinking of it. Most kids your age don’t even think about books on caring for their chosen pets, much less actually researching the pet they want. We just got in some new colour varieties of corn snake, would you care to take a look at them?”

“Sure,” Harry said with a smile. “I wanted a corn snake anyway, in part because I like how they come in so many different colours.”

The assistant unlocked the door to the section where the snakes and other reptiles were kept. “It’s a precaution against escapees,” he commented. “If one gets dropped or something, it’ll still be stuck in this room so we can catch it again.” He gestured to the tanks containing the snakes. “We just got a new lot in after the holiday. For the corns, we got a couple of butters, a bloodred stripe, a caramel, a peppermint, and a pewter.”

Harry peered at the snakes with interest. The butters and the bloodred looked similar to the ones he and Draco had handled at the zoo. The caramel was pale tan with caramel markings, while the peppermint was pink markings on white. The pewter looked almost metallic silver, its markings present but not as defined as on the other snakes. “Oh, I like that one,” he said, pointing to the pewter. “May I handle it?”

The assistant unlatched the tank cover and scooped up the snake. “Here you go. You say you’ve handled snakes before?”

“Not often, but yes, at the zoo and once at home when my cousin pranked me by putting a smooth snake in my bed,” Harry said with a chuckle. He happily accepted the pewter corn snake from the shop assistant, letting it coil around his fingers. “Do you know if it’s a boy or a girl?”

“Let me check the records,” the assistant said, moving off to a corner of the reptile room and pulling a book off a shelf.

Taking advantage of the moment more or less alone with the snake, Harry quietly hissed, ::What’s your name?::

The snake in his hands froze and then reared up to stare at him. ::You sspeak!::

::Yes, I do::, Harry said. ::And I would like to take you home with me, if you would have me as your human::.

The snake let out a hiss of laughter. ::I think any of uss here would be pleassed to have you for our human, Sspeaker. I am Suliss.::

::And I am Harry::, the boy told her, falling silent again as the shop assistant looked up from the book he was flipping through.

“According to the records, the pewter is a female,” the young man said. “How do you like her?”

“I think she and I will get along quite well,” Harry said with a smile. “May I stay here with her until you’ve gathered up everything I will need for her?”

The assistant dithered for a moment. “Well… I’m not supposed to let anyone be in here alone. But we’re a bit shorthanded today, and there’s no point putting her back in the tank just to take her out
again in five or ten minutes. You’ve shown that you understand responsibility, too, so all right, I’ll bend the rules for you. Just promise that you’ll stay right here with her until I come back with the carrier.”

“I promise,” Harry agreed. When the man left the reptile room to start collecting the needed supplies, he noticed all the other snakes in the place looking at him. ::I am sorry I can’t take all of you home with me,:: he told them. ::But I can ask, are you treated well here?:

The biggest snake in the shop, whose tank identification card listed him as a ball python, acted as spokesman. ::For the most part, yes. There are some who are rougher in handling us than others, but I believe it is ignorance and not malice that causes it. We are warm enough, and fed well, but the humans here cannot speak with us.::

::Good,:: Harry said. ::I will return often, to get the proper food for Suliss. When I do, I will come and visit you all, and you can tell me if anything changes about how they treat you, so that I can tell the ones in charge of the problem.::

::That is fair,:: the ball python agreed. ::We thank you, Speaker.::

The shop assistant returned then, bearing a small clear plastic carrier. “Are you ready then? It looks as though your tutor and cousin are about ready as well.”

“I’m ready,” Harry said with a nod. He carefully set Suliss into the carrier and latched the lid. “And so is she.” He followed the shop assistant to the counter, where an irritated-looking Stephen was waiting to pay for everything.

Dudley was holding the carrier containing his chosen rats, a medium ginger male with a creamy underbelly and ruby red eyes and a pale grey with black eyes. He was also grumbling. “I don’t see why I have to do everything! Why can’t Mummy or th... or HE do it?” he whined, indicating his cousin. “Daddy wouldn’t have made me do it!”

Stephen rolled his eyes. “Dudley, if you have a pet, you have to be responsible for it. Your pets depend on you for food and shelter and proper care, which includes setting up their home. Harry is going to be busy setting up the habitat for his own pet, so you have to set up the habitat for yours.”

“Fine,” Dudley sulked. He looked at the carrier in Harry’s hand and sneered. “I should have known a freak like you would pick something stupid like a snake. You can train rats, you know. Piers trained his to sit up and beg for a treat. You can’t do that with a stupid snake. Anyway, I get two pets and you only get one.”

“I don’t care, and I like snakes,” Harry said with a shrug. He truly didn’t care what his cousin thought of his choice of pet. The larger boy subsided when he wasn’t able to get a reaction from his cousin. He grumbled again when Stephen handed him two bags of rat supplies to bring out to the car in addition to his pet carrier, ignoring the frown the man directed at him. He only quieted when he saw Harry loaded down with three bags along with his pet carrier, while Stephen himself wrestled with the large and bulky aquarium needed for the snake in addition to the lighter but equally bulky rat habitat.

The trip back to Privet Drive was uneventful, and Stephen brought the aquarium and the rat cage up to the boys’ respective rooms. Petunia looked less than thrilled at the sight of Dudley’s rats and outright flinched at seeing Harry’s snake, but since she hadn’t thought to disallow anything other than dogs and cats, restrained herself to commenting, “I did hope that one of you might have chosen a budgie or a canary.”
Harry blinked at that. “Really? I had thought about a budgie, but I understand they can be rather noisy and I thought you wouldn’t like that, so I went for something quieter.”

It was Petunia’s turn to blink. “Oh… I wish I had known you were thinking that way. My gran had a budgie when I was young, and I rather liked it. And one of my friends from school, her mum raised canaries. Birds can be messy, Gran always said she had to Hoover around the cage every day, but I always thought they sounded so… cheerful.”

Harry shot Stephen a look, and the young man grinned, understanding what was on the boy’s mind. “Well, Mrs. Dursley, I suppose that since the boys have pets, you deserve one as well. If your budget can spare the ready until Saturday, you can go out tomorrow when Harry and Dudley are at school, and get yourself that budgie or canary and whatever it needs. Save the receipts, and then we can recompense you for the expense.”

“Really?” Petunia looked flustered. “Vernon always refused to even consider… thank you!”

“You’re welcome,” Harry said. “I’d best start getting the tank set up for Suliss.” He picked up the heating mat, looking at the instructions before arranging it in the bottom of the tank.

“Suliss, is that your snake’s name?” Stephen asked, as a still-flustered Petunia went to go help a whining Dudley with his cage set-up.

Harry nodded. “Yes, she told me her name is Suliss. Isn’t she pretty?” He grinned. “And while Dudley’s rats might be cute and all, and he might think he got the better bargain for getting two animals when I’ve just got one, corn snakes can live up to twenty years, but rats only live for maybe three. So I think I got a much better deal today.”

Stephen laughed. “You did, and yes, she is very pretty. Once she’s used to living with you, perhaps you can bring her with us some weekend and show her off to Draco.”

“I’d like that,” Harry grinned. “He loved getting to see the snakes at the zoo. And when it warms up in the spring, if Seren comes ‘round again, maybe I can introduce the two of them. He’s the smooth snake that Dudley put in my bed back in the summer.” He repeated that last bit in Parseltongue for Suliss’ benefit.

::I would be pleased to meet your first snake friend,:: Suliss agreed, sounding amiable about it. ::I do not think I have met a snake of any sort but my own. I trust he will not be aggressive towards me, sir since I am your friend?::

::I will make sure he is not aggressive,:: Harry reassured his new pet. ::The only one I do not trust around you is Dudley… the fat boy with the rats. He would hurt you if he thought he could get away with it.::

::I may not have venom, but he will discover that I have teeth if he takes it into his head to come after me,:: Suliss replied.

Harry laughed and relayed the conversation to Stephen, who had been listening with an expression of intense interest. The young man also laughed. “Good for her. Do you need help with anything else?” he asked.

“I need to shred up enough paper towels to cover the cage bottom,” Harry said. “I wish I’d known about that before going to the pet shop, I could have had you do it the easy way before picking us up this afternoon.” He gave a little swish of his hand as if holding a wand to show what he meant by ‘the easy way’ of shredding the paper towels.
Stephen nodded. “Well, I know you’ll need more on a regular basis, so I can do some for you this week and bag it up to give you this weekend, if that will help.”

Harry smiled. “It would, and thanks.”

“All right, then, I should probably get going for…” Stephen started to say, when Petunia appeared in the doorway of Harry’s room once more.

She cleared her throat a little nervously and said, “I… I’d be pleased if you’d stay for supper, Mr. Coyner. As a thank you for taking the boys out for their pets today. I’ve made lamb stew.”

He smiled. “If you’re sure it’s no trouble, I’d be happy to stay. I’ve not had a lamb stew since I moved into my own flat. Thank you for asking me.”

The meal was slightly awkward as Stephen and Petunia attempted to find some common ground for conversation that did not speak directly of the wizarding world. Dudley, as usual, was too busy inhaling his food to participate in the conversation at all, but Harry tried to ease things a little by talking about his visit to Highgrove. He knew better than to mention his gifts so as to avoid making Dudley jealous, but he talked about going riding and watching films and having a dance lesson with Prince William, Zara Phillips, and Zara’s friend Sophie. Stephen spoke a little about his university courses, and Petunia mentioned that she was thinking about taking a few courses herself. She said she was considering the possibility of seeking a job once Dudley was off to Smeltings and would no longer need his mummy to be at home for him, but that she knew she would be at a disadvantage for having been a housewife for so long. That’s when Harry brought up what Sophie had said about computers and suggested that if his aunt was going to take some courses, an introductory computer course might be just the thing to give her an advantage in the future. She looked surprised, but agreed that it was something to look into.

After a dessert of bakewell tart, Stephen took his leave and Harry went up to his room, where he settled in for a nice conversation with his new pet as he and Suliss got to know one another.

Chapter End Notes

I’m not sure exactly when all the color variants of corn snakes that I mentioned were developed, as only a couple of the sites I looked at in researching them mentioned any sort of time frame. Caramel was first noted and bred for in 1983, but none of the others gave dates. For the sake of my story, I’m saying that the ones I described would have been available in the pet trade by late 1989/early 1990.

Virtual cookies to anyone who knows where I came up with the name of Harry’s new pet.
Gathering Information

For Harry, life quickly settled back into a routine of school, tae kwon do, and weekends with Stephen, Sirius, Remus, and the Malfoys. By the end of January, Sirius bought the wizarding version of the snake habitat for Harry’s room at Grimmauld Place so that his godson could bring Suliss with him whenever he wished, and also put a permanent heating charm on her carrier to keep her comfortable when in transit. He even got permission to bring her to show to his class one day, as they were covering reptiles in their science lessons. During the week, Harry usually allowed Suliss out of her tank to coil around his arm or neck once he was in his room for the evening. Aunt Petunia, bringing his clean laundry back to his room, shuddered when she saw that, but simply told him to be very careful that his pet didn’t escape from his room, for fear that the snake might eat her new budgie. He smiled and promised that he would be careful. Harry thought it rather amusing that his aunt now doted on the talkative little green and yellow bird even more than she doted on Dudley. Perky the budgie had better behaviour than his cousin most of the time, too. He would hop up on Petunia’s hand on command and had already learned to say ‘Pretty Perky’.

Dudley, however, was quite displeased with his life. His bedroom smelt awful much of the time because his mother was too busy playing with that stupid bird to clean his rats’ cage for him, and told him to do it for himself. She even refused to make the freak do it for him! Worse yet, the stupid rats wouldn’t go bite the freak the way he wanted them to. He’d let them out of their cage since he was going to have to clean the thing to get rid of the stink, and pointed them toward the freak’s door, but they seemed more intent on exploring his room than on leaving it. One of them had already gnawed a chunk from one of the books he’d never bothered reading; he didn’t care so much about the book, but he thought it ill-done of his pets to destroy something of his. It was only after he shoved them back into the shoddily-cleaned cage and flopped down onto his bed that he discovered that one of the rats had wet on his pillow. His shriek of dismay brought his mother running, but she merely looked exasperated and told him that he shouldn’t have allowed the rats on the bed in the first place, and that he’d just have to sleep without a pillow tonight, as it was far too late to start another load of laundry. When he protested, Petunia told him bluntly that he should be grateful that his pillow could be washed, as she couldn’t afford to replace it with another of the same quality. She took it away to the laundry hamper, leaving him to stomp into the bathroom to shower and wash his hair since it was now damp and smelly from the soiled pillow. Certain that this was somehow the freak’s fault, he fumed to himself as he washed, vowing to find a way to make the smaller boy pay for turning both his pets and his mother against him. He wasn’t sure how, but he would do it.

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During the first week of February, Stephen took a day off from his classes to drive Narcissa to Cokeworth for their attempt at finding Petunia Dursley’s birth certificate. She had originally intended for Lucius to bring her, but Stephen pointed out that Cokeworth was very much an industrial town where the Malfoy’s Rolls Royce would stand out like a rose in a field of clover. He also said that it was very possible that the locals would be inclined to be suspicious of, and less helpful towards, anyone they perceived as ‘one of the toffs’, and so offered to accompany her himself. She accepted, knowing that Lucius had a much harder time than she did with dropping the Malfoy Mask and being casual.

As Stephen turned his Mini into the car park of Cokeworth Hospital, he gave her a glance. “What is the plan for this?” he asked. “I mean, it’s your show, but I need to know how to be supportive and all that.”
Narcissa considered for a moment. “Um… you’re a friend from uni? Since the whole point of the story we came up with is that my mum left me a letter in her will, telling me about the baby girl she had and gave up for adoption before she met and married my father. Since my husband and I are both only children, I want to find my half-sister if possible, and try to establish some sort of relationship so that my baby will have an auntie.” She grinned. “Unless you’d care to be my husband for the visit?”

Stephen considered that but shook his head. “No, stick with me being a friend from uni. That would make a lot of sense… your husband works, and so you asked me to drive you here on one of our non-class days to save him from needing to take a day off to bring you himself.”

“Fair enough,” she said with a nod. Pulling a piece of muggle stationery from her handbag as they got out of the car, she showed him the letter she had written. “What do you think?”

He skimmed it over and grinned. “Perfect,” he told her.

She took the paper back and nodded. “Good, just let me put a couple of charms on it before I start showing it about. One to make them trust me and want to help, and one to obscure it in their memories once we’ve left. Not to obliviate them completely, just to make the details fuzzy if they’re asked about us.” She did so quickly and gave a satisfied nod. “All right, as Sirius would say, it’s showtime.”

Stephen offered her his arm and escorted her inside and over to the small information desk. “Excuse me, where might the records office be?” he asked.

“Down one floor and to the left, just follow the signs,” the distracted volunteer at the desk said with a vague wave towards the lifts as two different telephones rang and three more people approached from different directions. She picked up one phone, saying, “Cokeworth Hospital, please hold.” Pressing a button which started a little light flashing, she repeated her action and words with the second telephone and then looked at the newcomers behind Stephen and Narcissa.

“Thank you,” Narcissa said politely as they turned and made their way to the lifts. The volunteer just gave another vague wave as all three people started talking at once.

Stephen shook his head as they got into the lift. “That poor woman. My own mum did some volunteering at our local hospital, and she always said there was either nothing to do or it was overwhelmingly busy. No middle ground at all.” They got off the lift on the lower level and looked at the directional signs, following them to the left. The records office was neatly marked and fairly quiet, staffed by a couple of file clerks.

“Um, hello,” Narcissa said uncertainly. “I was hoping to get some information?”

The two clerks looked up and smiled. “Sure, what do you need?” the younger of the pair asked.

Narcissa handed them the letter. “I, um, I’d always thought I was an only child. But it seems my mum had a baby girl that she gave up, back before she was married. I only found out after she and my dad were killed in an accident… she left that letter for me. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do when I first found out, but… well, now that I’m having a baby of my own, I thought it might be nice if I could maybe find my half-sister, so that my baby will have an auntie. If she’s willing to meet me and all that, of course. I know from Mum’s letter that she was born here and when, but that’s all I know.”

The older clerk frowned a bit. “Information like that is confidential for a reason…”
“Oh, stow it,” the younger one interrupted. “Go for a cuppa if you’d like. You know most adoptees are looking for their birth families nowadays, if for no other reason than to find their familial medical histories. The worst that can happen is the adopted woman won’t want anything to do with, um…” she glanced down at the letter again and continued, “with Narcissa here. And Narcissa will at least have a name, so she can make sure her kids don’t grow up and accidentally marry their unknown cousins one day.”

The older clerk snorted at that. “You sound like a soap opera, Mel, but on your head be it. I’m off for a cuppa.” She heaved herself out of her chair and left the office.

The clerk called Mel grinned at Narcissa. “I suppose I do sound like a soap, but whatever. I’m not really supposed to let you see the records, but it won’t be the first time. Just promise me you’ll not harass your half-sister once you find her, yeah? Make the contact and leave it up to her if she wants to connect or not.”

“I promise,” Narcissa said. “And thank you for this.”

“No worries,” Mel smiled. “I’m adopted myself, and I met my birth mother just about a year ago. I won’t say things weren’t a bit awkward at first, but I’m glad I went looking and that she was open to being found. We get together for tea every month now and sometimes my mum… my adoptive mum… comes along too. I don’t like it so much when Mum comes with,” she added with a laugh, “but that’s because she likes to tell my birth mother all the embarrassing stories from my childhood.”

Stephen, hovering quietly in the background, chuckled. “Let me guess, the ones that involve you mashing your birthday cake into the dog’s fur or your own hair?”

“Among others,” Mel admitted cheerfully as she opened a drawer and started skimming through the file folders within. “Hmm… looks like there was just the one girl born here on that date… who was adopted by a couple called Robert and Daisy Evans, and named Petunia.” She smiled at Narcissa. “So, you’re looking for a Petunia Evans, and I wish you all the best in both your search for your half-sister and your own impending motherhood. I’d best get the files back in place before Annie gets back from her break.” She quickly ran Petunia’s birth records through a photocopier and handed the copy to Narcissa.

“Thank you once again,” Narcissa said hesitantly, blinking a bit at the ease with which Mel had made the copy without the use of a spell and trying not to peer at the machine like a muggleborn on a first visit to Diagon Alley. “Er… do I need to pay for this paper or anything?” she asked, uncertain of the protocol.

Mel shook her head with a smile as she returned the file to its place and shut the drawer again. “No charge, since I technically wasn’t supposed to give you that at all. But if it makes you feel better, drop a few quid in the donations box on your way out. That money goes towards equipment upgrades and the like so that we can offer better services than what standard funding supplies.”

Stephen smiled as he guided Narcissa gently towards the door of the records office. “We’ll do that, and thanks.” Shutting the door of the office behind them, he led her towards the lifts as he explained, “Quid is a slang term for pounds, muggle money. Plenty of hospitals take donations to supplement the government funding and get better equipment and facilities for their staff and patients.”

Narcissa nodded as they emerged back up on the ground floor. “What sort of donation is appropriate?”
Stephen shrugged. “Anything you feel is right,” he said. “I’ve seen small children drop a few pence in the box after being treated in A&E for a bad cut or sprain, and I heard of one bloke who put in five hundred pounds in thanks when his dad recovered from a major surgery. Every little bit helps, after all.”

She smiled and rummaged in her handbag, pulling out a twenty-pound note. “This is about four galleons, right? That seems fair, I think. We only took about ten minutes of her time, and from the sound of things, it wasn’t even such an unusual request.”

“Yes, at the current exchange rate, that’s about four galleons,” he said with a nod. “And yes, that went much more smoothly than I’d expected, not that I’m going to complain.”

Narcissa chuckled. “Nor am I,” she agreed as she slid the note through the slot in the donations box. As they headed back out to the car park, she looked at the copy in her hand. “I can’t believe how quickly this was made. Even a copy spell would take a good minute or so to write all of this down. How is it done?”

Stephen laughed. “I have no idea,” he confessed. “I was never too interested in finding out how copy machines work; I was only interested in how well they worked if I needed to copy something. I know that schools use them often, to make copies of worksheets for the students to practise on, or to give each of them a copy of a news article or something that the teacher wants them to read but knows that many of them won’t have access to.”

“Huh. The more I see of muggle technology, the more impressed I am with it.” Narcissa examined the copy in her hand for a moment and then commented, “You know, I think some of the papers I had to fill out at Rosie Hospital before my first visit with Dr. Gardner might have been copies.”

“They probably were. Most places that have standardised forms for whatever reason use copies like that. Job applications, doctors’ registration forms and such. Assuming Draco chooses to try a year in Harry’s school, you’ll have several forms to fill out for him there, too,” Stephen said.

Narcissa nodded and changed the subject. “Well, we confirmed that Petunia Dursley is adopted,” she said. “I suppose Harry will be told when we see him next? What are you going to do with the information?”

Stephen shrugged a bit. “Well, knowing this for certain just means it will be that much easier once Sirius is in a position to request custody of Harry. I mean, Dumbledore’s supposed reason for keeping him with his aunt is based on their blood relationship, and with proof that there isn’t one his reasoning is right out the window. It does make it more imperative that I have the goblins check the wards at their house, though. I want to know for sure exactly what wards are there and active, because Mrs. Dursley thinks she’s being protected from danger by Harry’s presence in her home. I’d like to be able to reassure her that she is indeed being protected, even if the reason isn’t what she thinks.”

“I guess I can understand that,” Narcissa said after a moment of thought. “Now that you’ve managed to get her to accept Harry’s presence to a degree, the last thing you want is for her to feel that she’s being deceived in some way.”

“Oh, she knows that Dumbledore hasn’t been fully honest, given what he wrote to her about Sirius,” Stephen said. “But as she put it, she’d rather allow Harry to stay with her, than to risk losing her son to some wizard intent on killing him. I’m just interested to know what sort of wards are there. I might not know a whole lot about wards and warding, but I’m certain there would be more than just ones based on blood.”
“You don’t suppose there are any wards there to warn Dumbledore about the presence of goblins, do you?” Narcissa asked.

Stephen shrugged a bit. “Well, anything is possible, but I doubt it. Goblins aren’t likely to go traipsing about in muggle areas for the fun of it, nor are they likely to wish harm on a boy who is one of their biggest account holders. That’s why I’m hiring a goblin wardsmith to check the Dursley house, because goblin magic doesn’t register on anything but anti-goblin wards. I figure Dumbledore most likely has some sort of accidental magic alert ward in place, and probably something to bar anyone with a Dark Mark from the property. Whatever he has got up isn’t set off by the mere presence of a wizard, or he’d have learned about me by now, but I’m also not risking use of my wand at any time when I’m there, just in case the alert ward is for any magic use and not just accidental magic.”

Narcissa nodded. “I suppose that makes sense. Not that I know all that much about wards,” she said ruefully. “My mother discouraged me from studying anything that might suggest I would have to work for a living after my NEWTs, especially since I was already betrothed to Lucius by the time I started Hogwarts. She wanted me to study up on etiquette and social graces instead, so I rounded out my NEWT classes with History of Magic. Binns was useless as a teacher, of course, but it was easy enough to study independently to pass the NEWT in it.”

“Does that bother you now?” Stephen asked curiously. “I mean, did you ever want a career?”

“No really,” Narcissa admitted. “I mean, I grew up knowing I’d never need to work even if I didn’t marry. You might say I was the… the most conventional of the Black sisters. Andromeda did go on to healer training at St. Mungo’s after being disowned for eloping with Ted, but Herbology is the only non-core NEWT class needed for that, and it is an acceptable class option for a lady of breeding. Puttering about one’s gardens and greenhouses is an acceptable hobby, although ladies are expected to do more along the lines of flower arranging and to merely direct the house elves in the actual physical labour. And Bella…” She frowned, giving a sigh. “Bella was drawn in by the Dark Lord long before she was out of school. Rodolphus was her husband in name only; he didn’t want her any more than she wanted him, but they were betrothed as children and he felt it improved his standing for his wife to be the Dark Lord’s lover. She always had that cruel streak like Aunt Walburga’s, and as much as I hate to admit it, she enjoyed the idea of hurting muggles just because she could. As for me, I was in love with Lucius and just looked forward to being the best wife and mother that I could be.”

Stephen smiled. “Well, there’s nothing wrong with that. I’d only wondered, because I’ve noticed in recent years, more and more women want to have a career in addition to a family. Either they put off having a family until they’ve established themselves in their chosen field, or else they go back for further education once the children are in school themselves. Petunia Dursley is considering that, in fact. With her husband gone and knowing that her son as well as Harry will be off to boarding school soon, she’s thinking of ways to keep herself occupied once she’ll be alone in the house for the majority of the year.”

“Not something I’ll need to worry about for some time,” Narcissa said with a chuckle, giving her gently rounded stomach a pat.

“Have you and Lucius considered names yet?” Stephen asked.

Narcissa laughed. “Considered, but we’ve not come to an agreement yet. We are going with another astronomical name to go with Draco for her first name. I favor one thing, but Lucius likes something else. Either way, we have agreed that her middle name will be Verina, for Lucius’ mother. Draco has suggested Cassiopeia, but both Lucius and I want her to have something that
she’ll be able to spell easily, not to mention, a name that isn’t easily shortened.” She gave a slight shudder. “I can just imagine the poor child being called ‘Sassy Cassy’ or something equally undignified if not outright awful.”

“Understandable,” Stephen said as he pulled into a car park near the Leaky Cauldron. They would be going their separate ways once they entered Diagon Alley; him to Gringotts to talk to the goblin wardsmiths about getting #4 Privet Drive inspected, and Narcissa to start choosing a maternity wardrobe. “I’ll see you this weekend,” he said as they stepped through the archway into Diagon Alley and parted ways.

“Goodbye, Stephen, see you soon,” Narcissa replied before slipping away with a wave.

Two days later, a pair of rather short but otherwise nondescript men turned up on Privet Drive with surveyors’ equipment, schematic drawings of the sewer and gas lines, and clipboards. They fussed with their tripods and other gear, setting up just in front of Number Four and making their readings and taking copious amounts of notes before climbing back into their vehicle and departing again. None of the residents of the street took any particular notice beyond hoping that their presence would not mean the street would be torn up anytime soon. And that same evening, Stephen received an owl from Gringotts, containing the report on the wards on the Dursley home.
The Uncomfortable Truth

And now for the disclaimer. I'm not JK Rowling, and I don't own the characters or settings. I just play with them for my own enjoyment, and I promise to put them back neatly when I'm done.

When Stephen arrived to pick up Harry for yoga on Saturday, he paused to greet Petunia. “Good morning, Mrs. Dursley, is Dudley home right now?”

“Hello, Mr. Coyner, and yes, he is,” she replied.

“I was able to get that information you requested,” Stephen said. “The results were… interesting, to say the least. May I return after dropping Harry with a friend of his following yoga practice? I’m sure that you’ll need some explanations and you’ll probably have some questions. I can’t guarantee having the answers, but I will do my best.”

Petunia nodded. “Your class lets out about eleven, yes? So you could perhaps be here at noon? I can make sure Duddikins goes over to play with Piers or Gordon and he’ll stay there for lunch.”

“Noon is perfect, and I’ll see you back then,” Stephen said. He walked up to Harry’s room, telling the boy, “Bring a change of clothes and whatever you want to take to Grimmauld Place. I’m going to talk to your aunt after yoga, so I’m going to apparate you there from the alley behind the studio, come back to talk to her, and then drive into London to join you this afternoon.”

“All right, Stephen,” Harry said as he got up from his desk chair with Suliss coiled around his wrist. “Oh, guess what? My class is going to have a Valentine’s party this year, and Ms. Beckett says she’ll bring in some music so we can have a dance. He smiled and hissed something to his pet before replacing her into her habitat and depositing a thawed baby mouse just outside of her favourite hiding spot. “I was going to wait to feed Suliss until we got home tonight, but since she can’t come to yoga with us, I told her she might as well eat now if she wants as she’ll have to remain home today. She doesn’t mind, though, as she knows there are places she isn’t allowed to go for whatever reason.” He gathered a change of clothes and his Gameboy, along with his science book from school. “I’m ready.”

Stephen grinned. “I’m glad she accepts the situation,” he said with a chuckle. “Let’s go.” He led the way out to his car and they headed off to yoga. On the way to the studio, he let the boy know what had happened with Narcissa in Cokeworth, and also what the report on the wards contained.

After a quick apparation to London with Harry following the class, plus a quick detour to his own flat to shower and change, Stephen popped back to the alley behind the yoga studio and headed back towards Privet Drive. Petunia greeted him cordially, bringing him into the kitchen and setting a plate of sandwiches on the table along with the teapot.

“Dudley is off with Piers for the day,” she said, “so we have until whenever you must leave to bring the boy back for the night, although I hope it won’t take quite that long for you to explain it all to me.”

Stephen nodded. “That’s good to know. All right, for the good news, this house is warded quite securely. There’s protection from fire and a theft deterrent ward as well as one which alerts Dumbledore to any instances of magic… that one is most likely there in the event that Harry did any accidental magic that needed reversing or caused injury or damage. For example, many
magical children summon their favourite toy with their accidental magic when they’re small and upset over something. But if they’re upset enough, that toy might well break through a closed door or window if there is one between it and the child.”

Petunia frowned a bit. “So this Dumbledore person would have known whenever the boy did something freakish?”

“Probably,” Stephen said. “The report simply says there is a monitoring ward, but… hmm. This is a rather odd analogy, but it’s the best I can think up at the moment. If the monitoring ward is the equivalent of your clothes washer, there are a number of settings on it, yes? For hot or cold washes, or for sturdy or delicate clothes. Someone peering in the window might see that you’ve got a washing machine, but not what setting you’re using at any given moment. The ones checking the wards can see the ward, but because the actual alerts go somewhere else, they can’t tell what the setting is at any given moment. My best guess is that there would be some sort of alarm in the case of damage or injury, but otherwise just something like the clock chiming the hour or the oven timer buzzing when Harry does something magical. Possibly not even that much.”

The woman looked thoughtful, nodding slightly. “And since it’s expected for fr… magical children to do things, this Dumbledore person would more than likely just leave him to it as long as no one was hurt. I suppose it wouldn’t occur to him that such things are disruptive and even frightening in a normal household. And considering that I did grow up with my sister, I suppose the barmy old man thinks I would find such things normal, or at least that they wouldn’t bother me. What else?”

Stephen knew he’d have to tread carefully at this point. He didn’t want to give her any reason to be angry with Harry, but he felt she deserved to know something of the truth, too. “Well, then there are, or at least, are supposed to be, some other protective wards. One that is there keeps anyone bearing the Dark Mark… that’s a sort of magical tattoo created by the evil wizard who killed Harry’s parents which he used to mark his followers… it keeps anyone with that tattoo from setting foot on your property.”

“Well, that much is good, I suppose,” Petunia said. “But you said ‘supposed to be’ some other wards. What do you mean by that?”

“The ones doing the check found evidence that some other wards had been, hmm, given framework might be the best analogy. But the wards themselves never took,” Stephen explained. “I believe Dumbledore assumed that you would be happy to raise your sister’s child and that you would welcome him as family. I know you said that when you tried to take Harry to an orphanage, Dumbledore made your husband forget that he wanted to be rid of the boy… he probably assumed that you had only gone along with that plan out of your feelings for your husband, but that deep down, you really wanted to keep Harry. Anyway, one of those wards was supposed to keep anyone with ill intent towards Harry from finding your home at all.”

Petunia snorted. “As I said, the old man is barmy. The last thing I wanted was to deal with a fr… magical child wreaking havoc in my home, not that I was given any choice in the matter. You might hate me for it, but I’ll admit that if some freakish wizard was threatening to hurt me unless I gave him Harry, I’d make the trade in a heartbeat.”

“I can’t say I admire you for that choice, but I can’t really fault you for it either, given that you never wanted him in the first place,” Stephen said, trying to remain neutral as he remembered one of his political science teachers commenting that if you wanted to work international politics and diplomacy, you had better get used to acting like the best friends of people you’d not willingly invite into your home. With just the one bomb left in his report, he decided to go ahead and drop it. “There is one other thing that came up, but, well… if you don’t already know what I’m about to
tell you, it’s probably going to be rather upsetting. Just… don’t make Harry your scapegoat for this.”

Now the older woman looked concerned. “That bad? Very well, whatever it is, I’ll not take it out on the boy.”

“Have you ever seen your own birth certificate, Mrs. Dursley?” Stephen asked.

“No, I don’t believe I have,” Petunia said slowly, looking confused. “I’ve had my passport since I was a girl and the family went on holiday to France and Monaco, so that was always sufficient as identification when I needed to get my driver’s license and when I got married and such. What has that got to do with anything?”

“The last ward framework, which ought to be the strongest ward of all of them, is based on blood, specifically on blood kinship. That one never took either. Also, when I had a sort of a magical family tree made for Harry, it showed that Lily Evans was an only child,” Stephen said quietly. “I got a friend to help me do some investigating on the sly, and it seems that you actually have no blood kinship to Harry, which is why that ward never took. You were adopted.” He set a copy of the paperwork he and Narcissa had retrieved from Cokeworth onto the table.

Petunia picked up the papers. Her face drained of colour as a look of fury swept over her features. Her voice brittle, she told him, “I’ll remember my promise, but you need to leave now, Mr. Coyner.”

“Thank you for listening to me,” Stephen said as he made his escape. He was just at the front door when he heard what sounded like one of the teacups shattering along with a wordless shriek. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, he quickly slipped out and closed the door behind himself.

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When he arrived at 12 Grimmauld Place, Stephen was greeted by a smiling Harry. “Did your talk with Aunt Petunia go all right? Uncle Padfoot and Uncle Moony taught me a spell to fold my clothes and put them away, and they’re arguing between curry or sushi for dinner tonight.”

“Who is arguing for which?” Stephen asked with a chuckle.

“Uncle Moony wants sushi,” Harry giggled, “because he says the air is toxic around Uncle Padfoot after curry.”

Stephen laughed. “And do you have a preference?” he asked.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t really care,” he said. “Any food is good, when I’m with all of you.”

Stephen reddened slightly. “Thank you for the compliment, Harry,” he said. “I think you’re right, that good company makes one’s food taste better. And speaking of company, good or otherwise, your aunt is likely to be pretty unhappy still when you get back there tonight.”

“You talked to her then, and told her that she’s adopted,” Harry said with a nod. “I guess she didn’t know already. Was she very angry at you?”

“I don’t think she was angry so much at me, as at finding out in this way,” Stephen said. “And since your grandparents are both dead, she can’t even find out from them why they never told her the truth.” He sighed. “She did promise not to take it out on you, but she was screeching and I suspect throwing things as I was leaving. I’m pretty sure I heard a teacup hitting a wall.”
Harry frowned. “I really, really wish I didn’t have to go back.”

Sirius, who had entered in time to hear the last parts of the conversation, patted Harry’s shoulder lightly. “I wish you didn’t have to go back too, pup. But at least we have our Saturdays, right? And it’s only a year and a half until you start at Hogwarts, and surely by then I’ll be able to get proper custody of you.”

Harry gave his godfather a hug. “I know. And there’s plenty that we’ll be doing besides just Saturdays, too, I know.” He grinned at Stephen. “We’re going to see a show called Cats in a few weeks, and Her Royal Highness and Wills and Harry are coming with us! Uncle Sirius told me earlier today. And there’s more shows we might go see if we like Cats, too.”

“What other shows?” Stephen asked. “And did you ever agree on food?”

Sirius gave his bark-like laugh. “Moony won the dinner discussion, only because Andromeda and Ted are coming for dinner tomorrow, so we’re having sushi tonight. As for the other shows, Her Highness suggested Phantom of the Opera and The Starlight Express, at least if I plan on taking Harry along. Maybe Les Miserables, too, but she said that Miss Saigon is definitely not one for the kids.”

Stephen raised a brow. “I know you invited her to Cats with you, that night at The Nutcracker, but I didn’t think you were all that familiar with her.”

Sirius blushed. “Eh, well, we both enjoy music, so we’ve been keeping in touch. Besides, she’s a mum, so I can ask her for advice when I’m clueless about anything with Harry.” Changing the subject abruptly, he asked, “Have you been able to see about getting the evening classes for your next term at uni, Stephen? I’ve been keeping a low profile on the Wizengamot so far, as plenty of them aren’t quite sure what to make of me yet, but Lucius told me that there are going to be several entry-level positions opening up within the Ministry come August, and at least two of them are in the Department of International Magical Cooperation. That is something along the lines of what you’ve been studying to do on the muggle side, isn’t it?”

“It is and I have,” Stephen said with a nod, choosing not to comment on the blush or the quick change of subject. “And that might give me an opportunity to meet that Weasley boy you mentioned, the one who’d had the pet rat and who you described as a bit of a misfit in his family.”

“Less of one than I was, but yes,” Sirius said. “Percy seems like a good kid, even if he is walking around with a wand stuck up his arse. I swear to Merlin, he’s more prim and proper than Narcissa at her worst, yet most of the rest of his family are known for being boisterous.” He blinked and realised what he’d just said in front of his godson. “Er… you didn’t hear that bit in the middle, right, Harry?”

Harry put on his best innocent expression, savouring the chance to take the mickey out of his godfather. “Which bit, Uncle Sirius, the bit about Percy Weasley having a wand stuck up his arse, or the bit about Lady Malfoy being horribly prim and proper?”

“Why you…” Sirius sputtered as Harry darted towards the kitchen, laughing. He was laughing as well, proud of the boy for getting up enough courage to tease him.

Stephen followed, snickering.

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Later that evening when Harry arrived back at Privet Drive, he found his aunt in the sitting room
with Perky on her finger, repeating, “Perky’s a good birdie!” to the little budgie. She paused when he came in, glancing at him with red-rimmed eyes. “Oh, you’re back. Dudley’s spending the night with Piers. I assume Mr. Coyner told you everything he told me today?”

“About the wards, yes,” Harry said with a nod. “And the other stuff, too.”

Petunia stiffened. “So you know, then. I don’t want Dudley to know… or Marge either. I’m glad Vernon will never know, as he likely wouldn’t have married me if he’d known.”

Harry, who’d had time to think about the whole adoption issue since Sirius had blood-adopted him, shook his head. “That would have been his loss,” he told her. “Think about it this way, Aunt Petunia… your parents definitely loved you and wanted you to be part of their family. They probably thought they couldn’t have a baby for whatever reason, and they picked you to be their baby. But I won’t say anything to Dudley or Aunt Marge anyway.”

She blinked. “I… hadn’t thought about it that way,” she admitted. “I wish they’d told me, though. Finding out from a… well, I suppose Mr. Coyner isn’t exactly a stranger, but still. I wish I knew why they kept it a secret from me.”

“Maybe they didn’t want you to feel any different,” Harry suggested. “Especially once my mum showed signs of being a… what she was… they wouldn’t have wanted you to feel as though you were any less their child.”

“I… maybe,” Petunia said, softening. “Well, you go on upstairs and wash up now. And, Harry? Thank you.” Without waiting for a reply, she got up carefully so as not to jostle the budgie perched on her hand, and moved off in the direction of the bird’s cage.

“Good night, Aunt Petunia,” Harry replied as he started up the stairs.

Up in his room, Suliss greeted him with a sleepy hiss. ::Hello, Harry. Wass your day pleassant? Mine wass noissy; I think the fat one forgot to feed hiss ratss again. They rattled their bowl against the barss all day.::

Harry shook his head with a sigh. ::My day was fun, and I’m ssorry to hear that the noisze bothered you. Thosse poor rats. Thank you for telling me, I’ll go check them now.:: He headed for his cousin’s room, where he found the rats not only out of food, but also out of water. Wrinkling his nose a little at the stench from their habitat, he filled their water bottle first and then loaded up the food dish while they were busy drinking. Returning to his room, he saw that Suliss had curled up in her favourite hiding spot with just her head poking out. ::Sleep well, Suliss:: he told her softly.

He showered and changed for bed, settling in with his notebook and ledger to work out how much money to spend on Valentine cards and maybe gifts for his friends and classmates. I think I’ll just get the standard packaged cards that everyone seems to give one another, he thought. I don’t want to stand out too much or look as if I’m showing off or something. But maybe a little something extra for Lucy, Paul, and Surya. Those cherry heart lollies, maybe? They’ll probably enjoy those. Since there’s going to be dancing, I wonder if it might be nice to get flowers for the girls? I bet they’d like that, but then again, flowers might be a bit much yet. They most likely wouldn’t know the meanings behind them anyway. Besides, this isn’t a proper dance, it’s just a class party at school. That decided, he set his notebook aside and turned off the light, settling in to do his meditation exercises and work on building up his occlumency protections. With only a couple of lessons behind him so far, he was just barely starting to get the idea of it. He couldn’t yet even come close to actually pushing Lord Malfoy out of his mind, let alone defending himself against an actual attack, but he had at least gotten to where he could recognise when someone was using legitimancy on him. Eventually he relaxed and drifted off to sleep.
In another room, Petunia Dursley also prepared for bed. But before settling in for the night, she did something she hadn’t done since well before her marriage to Vernon Dursley: she pulled out the packet of letters that she’d never quite been able to bring herself to throw away, and started reading through them. Letters that Lily had written to her from Hogwarts.
On Valentine’s Day, Princess Diana woke up feeling rather depressed. Now that the separation and the pending divorce were official, Charles had vacated their Kensington Palace apartments in favour of living at Highgrove, or staying in the family wing of Buckingham Palace if he needed to be in London for any length of time. Their relationship had been on rocky ground for quite some time, to be sure, but still had been cordial enough for them to have exchanged small tokens for the holiday.

Her spirits rose considerably when Wills and little Harry came barreling into her room and leapt up on the bed for a rambunctious Valentine greeting.

“Mummy, Happy Valentine’s Day!” little Harry crowed. “Look, Mummy, I made you the bestest Valentine ever in school yesterday, isn’t it pretty?” He held out a large card of pink construction paper that was liberally decorated with glued on lopsided hearts of red and white. The inside featured more of the hearts glued into place around the carefully printed message ‘I LOVE YOU MUMMY’ in brilliant purple crayon.

“Oh, Harry, it’s lovely, thank you so much!” Diana gushed as she grabbed her younger son into a big hug. “And you wrote the words all by yourself, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did,” the child said proudly.

“I made you a card as well, Mummy,” Wills said, holding out his offering, a red card decorated with gold and silver glitter hearts and lettering done in puffy white paint which read, ‘Happy Valentine’s Day to the best Mummy in the world! Love, Wills.’

Diana pulled Wills into a big hug of his own as she told him, “I adore it! Thank you so much, Wills.”

After joining the boys for breakfast and dropping them off at school for the day, she returned to Kensington Palace to find two surprises waiting for her there. Harry Potter had sent her a lovely bouquet of snowdrops and multicoloured pansies with sprigs of ivy, along with a store bought card that read, ‘Thinking of you on this Valentine’s Day.’ Inside, there was a brief note which read:

Your Royal Highness,

I don’t know if Lords and Ladies in the muggle world still use the language of flowers as still happens in the wizarding world. In case you don’t know them, here are the meanings behind the flowers I chose. Pansies are for pleasant thoughts, snowdrops are for consolation, and ivy is for friendship. So I’m saying I’m glad you’re my friend and that I hope you will feel better soon. I know this first holiday apart from your soon to be ex-husband must be a bit of a wrench so I hope my flowers brighten your day a little.

Affectionately,
Harry Potter

Diana had to blink back tears at the child’s thoughtfulness, and hoped that he would enjoy the surprise she had arranged for him later today. It was difficult to remember, sometimes, that the lad was only nine years old. But between the abusive environment in which he’d lived for most of his life, and the revelations about his wizarding heritage and the sort of position he would hold in that
society in less than ten years, he was quite mature for his age and determined to learn everything he could before he actually started at that magical school. Her correspondence with Sirius Black had shown her that. It had started out as a simple exchange of cassette tapes, to be sure, but then Sirius had asked for her advice as to what sorts of toys muggle boys enjoyed so that he would have some ideas as to what to give Harry for Christmas. And it had gone on from there; as Sirius was only known to her society as the godfather of the young princes’ friend, Diana felt safe in venting to him about Charles and his infidelity and her own turmoil at the whole situation. She figured that even if the man was ever approached by the press when accompanying Harry, her boys, and herself on any sort of public appearance, the press would be asking questions more along the lines of how he felt about his godson making two such potentially influential friends. Not only that, but Sirius had offered in his letters to swear some sort of magical oath not to divulge anything she told him without her express permission. She had thanked him but declined the offer, telling him that the offer alone showed that he was to be trusted to not go running to the press. His reply had her laughing, as he pointed out that the only press he even knew how to contact was the wizarding newspaper and wizarding wireless news, and that neither of them would be bothered with reporting anything to do with the Royal Family, as the bulk of the wizarding population considered even the Royals simply to be privileged muggles and generally irrelevant to wizarding society.

And speaking of Sirius, her second surprise was from him; a huge arrangement of two dozen Sterling Silver roses. Her cheeks coloured faintly as she inhaled their heady fragrance. She wouldn’t have thought about it but for Harry’s note with his flowers, but she wondered if there was a particular meaning for lavender roses, and thought that she might have to find out.

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Harry woke early on Valentine’s Day to pack his bag with everything he would need for the day… the packet of cartoon Valentine cards for his classmates, a small heart shaped box of chocolates for Ms. Beckett, and a pack of four cherry heart lollies for Lucy, Surya, Paul, and himself. Plus his lunch and his homework, of course, and at the last moment he tucked in one of the books of Mad Libs his friends had given him at Christmas. They might want to play a round or two at recess or during the party.

He picked up the bouquet of cheery red and yellow tulips he’d bought for his aunt and smuggled up to his room the previous night so that he could surprise her, and headed down for breakfast. He’d selected the tulips knowing that they were his aunt’s favourite flower, rather than for any message behind them, guessing that Petunia would be less than pleased by an explanation that he was learning the meanings of flowers because it was a skill he would eventually need in the wizarding world. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Aunt Petunia,” he said as he walked into the kitchen.

His aunt looked over from the cooker and her eyes widened. “Oh, tulips! They’re beautiful, Harry, thank you.” She turned her attention back to the bacon sizzling in the skillet and then looked back over at him. “I was making a good fry up for Dudley’s Valentine’s Day breakfast, so you may have some also. Would you like two or three slices of toast?”

“Two, please, and thank you, Aunt Petunia,” Harry replied.

“Two it is, and would you put the tulips on the table please? And move the fruit bowl I usually keep there to the hall table,” she requested as she cracked the eggs into a second skillet.

Harry did as he was asked and returned to the kitchen to find a plate with four rashers of bacon, two sausages, two eggs, beans, mushrooms, black pudding, a grilled tomato, and two pieces of toast cut into heart shapes stacked up at his usual place at the table. He sat down and dug happily into the meal while his aunt loaded another plate with easily double what was on his own before calling for
his cousin to hurry downstairs.

“Diddy, darling, Mummy’s got a proper fry up for you this morning for Valentine’s Day,” she called. “Hurry down to eat whilst it’s still hot.”

“Coming, Mummy,” Dudley hollered. “Did you get the cards for my class party today?”

“Yes, Duddikins, I did,” she answered. “And I put them in the envelopes and marked them with all your classmates’ names, too. They’re in your backpack along with your lunch.”

Dudley came galumphing into the kitchen and plopped into his seat at the table, frowning when he noticed his cousin eating already. “How come you served the freak first, Mummy? Do you love him better than me now that his tutor bought you that stupid budgie?”

Petunia pursed her lips as a fleeting expression of annoyance crossed her face. “I made sure to have all of your favourites for Valentine’s Day, Dudley, and if you had been down here first, you would have been served first. That’s the only reason Harry got his first, because he was here before you. What’s more, I made plans with your Aunt Marge to take you out for a special Valentine’s Day dinner tonight as well, which Harry will not be going to.”

“Really?” Dudley looked partially mollified by that news. “Where are you and Aunt Marge taking me?”

“Well, you know how Aunt Marge likes her curries, so we thought we’d go to Panahar in Greater Whinging tonight, won’t you like that? And then we can go for ice creams afterwards, too.”

“And the freak won’t be there?”

“No, you know Aunt Marge doesn’t like your cousin,” Petunia replied.

“Neither do I,” said Dudley as he started shoveling food into his mouth.

Petunia served herself some of the breakfast and sat down. “You needn’t like Harry,” she said, “but you really ought to try to be a little nicer, Diddyums. At least use his name instead of calling him the freak all the time. Remember what I said about what other people might think?”

Dudley heaved a put-upon sigh. “Other people might not realise that there is anything freakish about him, so if I don’t want to sound rude, I mustn’t refer to him as a freak because they won’t know I mean him anyway,” he repeated in a sing-song voice.

“That’s right, precious darling, and Mummy wants you to sound nice and polite all the time. Even Harry can be nice and polite when he wants; do you see the flowers on the table this morning? He bought them for me for Valentine’s Day. It’s the sort of thing Daddy would have done for me if he were still alive, you know, and so it’s not freakish at all, is it?”

Dudley frowned as he thought about that for a moment. “I guess not,” he muttered, looking unhappy.

Harry, who had made a point of staying very, very quiet during that exchange, finished his meal and put his plate into the dishwasher. He slipped out of the kitchen and into the hall to grab his backpack. Petunia followed him out. “Harry, this is for you,” she said, pulling a ten pound note from her handbag. “I was going to give this to you after school but I know you sometimes go to your tae kwon do school for extra practise even when you haven’t got lessons there. Marge rang me up with this plan last night, and she did refuse to have you along. But you can get yourself some fish and chips or a takeaway curry in the village and I’ll leave the spare key under the mat
for you. All right?”

Harry accepted the money with a small smile. “It’s fine, Aunt Petunia,” he said. “I’d just as soon not see Aunt Marge anyway.”

Petunia chuckled at that. “I rather thought you might think that way. Just don’t let Dudley know I gave you that money. He’ll be happier if he thinks you’ll be stuck here eating a sandwich when he’s out having a good time.”

“I won’t,” he promised as he pulled on his coat and shouldered his backpack. “If I don’t see you after school, have a good time tonight.” He headed out the door and made it to the safety of the school playground before his cousin and gang could catch up with him.

Ms. Beckett collected the Valentine cards from her students as they entered the classroom. “All right, children, we want to settle down and get everything done before lunch so we can enjoy our party afterwards with no guilt for undone work.” The day passed with only a little bit more than the usual amount of whispering and giggling, and when they got back from lunch, Ms. Beckett had sorted the Valentine cards and set them in neat stacks on their recipients’ desks. She also had heart shaped iced biscuits and red punch in paper cups laid out on the table at the back of the classroom. “Happy Valentine’s Day, everyone,” she said as she set out a boom box and dropped in a cassette. She pressed play, and the rich tones of Elvis Presley singing Love Me Tender filled the classroom.

Most of the students dropped cards or small gifts onto Ms. Beckett’s desk before they hurried to grab their Valentines and gather with their friends to open them. Harry and Paul joined Surya and Lucy at the girls’ desks since the two of them sat next to each other, and all four pulled out treats to share amongst their little group. Harry passed ‘round the cherry heart lollies, Paul brought chocolates, Lucy handed each of them a fairy cake with pink icing, and Surya doled out what Harry recognised as jalebi, also made into heart shapes. “I made these myself, well, mostly,” she told her friends proudly. “Mum helped with the frying part. But I mixed the dough myself and made the syrup, too.”

Lucy sampled hers. “They’re delicious,” she said. “My mum made the fairy cakes, but I did help ice them.”

The two boys grinned. “We bought the sweets,” they chorused. “It was much easier,” Paul added, to giggles from the girls.

The foursome ate their treats and looked over their Valentines, and played a couple of games of Mad Libs. After that, Harry asked Surya if she wanted to dance. Ms. Beckett’s tape was a mix of slow and fast songs, and he noticed that while some of the girls were dancing to the fast songs, no one had yet danced to a slow song.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “I’ve never really danced with a boy, you know.”

“It isn’t that hard,” Harry told her. “But if you want, I’ll dance with Lucy first so you can see what to do. If you’re willing, of course, Lucy?”

“I’d be happy to dance with you, Harry,” Lucy replied. “I’ve never danced with a boy either, but I’ve my parents dancing so I think I know what to do.”

Harry took Lucy’s hand with a smile and led her to the space designated as the dance floor just as the haunting strains of Unchained Melody started. He guided her easily around the open space, not noticing that nearly the whole class had turned to watch them until the song was over and they got a spontaneous round of applause from their classmates.
“Will you dance with me next, Harry?” asked Megan, one of the prettiest and most popular girls in the class.

Harry blushed. “Um… I promised Surya the next dance,” he said. “But I can dance with you after, if you want?”

“And me after Megan!” three or four other girls called out at once.

Harry looked over at the rest of the boys. “How about some of you lot come and help me out?” he suggested to them. “Or are you too scared to dance with girls?”

Paul stepped up first. “W-w-will you dance with m-me next, Lucy?” he asked his friend, who smiled and nodded, moving to join him as Surya came out to take her place with Harry.

Toby, the best footie player in the class, grabbed Megan’s hand. “I’ll dance with you this time since Harry’s busy,” he said.

A few other boys also got brave enough to claim a partner and try dancing when The Beatles’ And I Love Her came on. A few of them even stayed on the floor since Harry did, bouncing around to Chantilly Lace and La Bamba. After that, Megan claimed her turn with Harry, dancing to the Penguins’ Earth Angel.

Just before the party ended, the headmistress knocked on the door and stepped inside with a look of awe on her face and a large manila envelope in her hands. “This just arrived by special messenger,” the headmistress announced as she passed it to Ms. Beckett. “And it’s got the seal of the Princess of Wales on it!” The envelope was addressed to ‘Harry Potter’s class,’ in care of Ms. Beckett at the school. Ms. Beckett opened the envelope, which was full of Valentine cards, one for each student in the class as well as one for herself. She passed them out as the headmistress watched; each card was not only addressed to its recipient by name, but each one also had a personally written greeting from Princess Diana. It was a laughing and chattering class that spilled out of the school when the final bell rang.

As usual, Harry, Surya, and Paul walked Lucy to her mother’s car before saying goodbye and heading in their separate directions. Harry jokingly told Surya that if her father’s restaurant in Greater Whinging was called Panahar, she should warn him that he’d be having some problem customers in for dinner as his aunt and her sister in law were taking Dudley there as a Valentine treat. She laughed and said that it was and so she would do just that before she turned towards home. With the ten pounds from his aunt in his pocket, Harry headed towards the dojang for some extra tae kwon do practise. He spent a pleasant couple of hours there working out, and with a smile at Master Soong, made use of the showers before putting his school clothes back on and walking to the pizza place to buy himself some dinner.

By the time he got back to Privet Drive, it was nearly seven o’clock, and quite chilly. He let himself inside quickly, and headed up to his room to check on Suliss. She was curled up beside her water dish, still comfortably sleeping after a meal, so he let her be and went down to the kitchen to get a drink before starting his homework.

When he got into the kitchen, though, he thought he heard an odd rattling by the back door. He hesitated, but decided to look, just in case one of the bins had fallen over and needed righting and re-filling, so he flipped the switch for the back light. To his horror, Dudley had tossed his rat habitat out back, with the rats still inside of it. The poor animals were desperately trying to escape the fallen exercise wheel and presumably find some sort of shelter from the cold weather.

Harry hurried outside and righted the habitat first thing. Most of the droppings and dirty litter had
fallen out of the cage when it landed on its side, so he simply picked it up and hauled it up to his room. The two rats huddled together in one corner, shivering. ::Suliss, wake up:: he hissed to his pet.

::What iss it, Harry?: Suliss asked, lifting her head up sleepily.

::Iss it going to make you ssick if I take you out of your cage?:: Harry asked in return. ::Dudley put hizs ratss outsside in the cold, and I need to get them warm quickly. I want to put them into your cage sso they can take advantage of the heating mat while I clean their cage. But I don't want to rissk you or them by having you all in there together::

Suliss considered that for a moment. ::Lay your handss flat in the cage, and let me climb onto them sso you can lift me that way and sset me on your bed. Lift me the ssame way again when it iss time to put me back again::

Harry did as Suliss suggested, keeping her as flat as possible while lifting her so as not to give her any digestive problems. Once she was settled comfortably, he carefully lifted the rats into her cage, where they huddled together once more, but directly over the heating mat at one end of the cage. When he was sure they were as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, he methodically disassembled their habitat and gave it a thorough cleaning. He put it back together and substituted some of the shredded paper towels he used in Suliss' tank for their litter, and then popped downstairs for a couple of scoops of his aunt's budgie food to tide the rats over until he could get to the pet shop and purchase them the proper kibble. As an afterthought, he included a bit of apple and a small stalk of celery as well, knowing that they were a healthy supplement to a rodent's diet. By the time he was finished, the rats had perked up considerably, and were beginning to explore the tank, so he settled them back into their own habitat and cleaned the snake tank since it was currently empty. He put Suliss back and finally sat down to do his homework just as he heard his aunt's car pulling back into the driveway. He had the distinct feeling that he had just acquired two more pets.
At school the next day, a giggling Surya reported that her father actually had seen the Dursleys at the restaurant the previous evening, but that despite complaints from ‘Pig Lady’ about the slowness of the service and the portions being too small to properly satisfy her strapping young nephew, they hadn’t proven to be any worse than any other chronic complainers the staff had handled. Harry laughed. “That’s high praise for your father’s restaurant, then,” he told her. “Aunt Marge is worse than Uncle Vernon was at finding fault over any little thing. If the only things she managed to complain about were slow service on one of the busiest possible nights for restaurants, and that Dudley wasn’t full up on one helping, it means she couldn’t find any real problems to complain about.”

“Well, my father was glad to see them go, but he said that was mostly because Pig-boy ate so much that he was afraid he’d be sick there in the dining room. I told Father that Pig-boy almost always eats enough for three or four people at lunch every day and never gets sick from it,” Surya said.

“No, he just makes everyone else sick just thinking about eating that much food at one go,” Lucy chimed in with a laugh of her own.

“Very true!” said Harry. “What’s really awful, though, would you believe he binned his pet rats last night? I found the cage out back when I got home; the poor things were half frozen, so I rescued them. I was going to keep them, but I think I’m going to find them a new home instead. Dudley might have decided he doesn’t want them anymore, probably because he’s tired of taking care of them, but he’ll throw a huge wobbler if he thinks I have them. He’s good about staying out of my room, so I kept the door shut and I doubt he’ll notice that they are in there, but that won’t last forever. As long as I can keep them out of his sight until Saturday, I can take them to my godfather’s house.”

Surya hesitated, but asked, “Harry, if your aunt doesn’t want you, and you have a godfather, why aren’t you living with him?”

Harry frowned. “I wish I could,” he said. “But my godfather was in prison on what turned out to be false charges. He’s been exonerated, of course, but no court is going to give him custody of a child just yet either, you know? But I see him most weekends now and he’s quietly putting things in place for an easy transfer of custody from Aunt Petunia to him in about a year and a half… basically, once we start secondary school. He reckons that by then, the courts will figure that if he was going to run mad due to his time in prison, he’d have done so by then and so they’ll consider it safe for a child to live with him. And all the more so when that child is going to be away at school ten months of the year anyway.”

His friends all chuckled at that. “Where will you be going to school anyway, Harry?” Lucy asked. “As long as I stay in remission, my name is down for Sweetbriar Academy.”

“I don’t remember the name,” Harry said sheepishly. “Just that it’s a rather exclusive place somewhere in Scotland. As I understand it, the majority of its students are the children of alumnae, although there are a certain percentage of places held for invitees. I’ve not heard the criteria for being chosen to get an invitation, though.”

“Wow, that sounds nobbier than Eton,” Paul commented. “I’m going to miss having a friend around at S-s-stonewall High.”

“We’ll all write,” Harry promised. “What about you, Surya?”
“Actually, I’ll be attending Stonewall, too,” she said. “I hope. Father was considering sending me to my cousins in Delhi to go to school there and hopefully attract a rich husband by the time I’m done. But Mum wants me to stay in England, because she thinks I’ll find a better husband here than in India.”

Lucy wrinkled her nose. “You’re not even ten yet,” she said. “Why are your parents so keen on you finding a husband?”

Surya shrugged. “We are Indian,” she said, as if that explained everything. But at her friends’ puzzled looks, she elaborated. “It’s traditional in India for the man to very much be the head of the household, and for the wife to be just that: a wife and mother. Indian girls in poor areas often aren’t educated at all, and even among wealthy families, a girl who goes on to university is there as much to find a husband as to get an education. Arranged marriages still happen a lot, too… Father has gotten quite a few inquiries asking him to consider making an arrangement between the asker’s daughter and one of my brothers, especially Anand since he’s a doctor. Mum told me she made Father promise not to consider arranging a marriage for me unless I got all the way through uni without any prospects.”

“Wow,” Harry said. “That just seems so odd in this day. I knew from some of my reading that it still happens in India and other places, but I guess I just didn’t think that people from India living here in Britain might still do it. I’m glad your mum got that promise from your father, so at least you’ve got time to try to find someone you think you’ll be able to live with.”

“I’m glad, too,” Surya said. “I’m with Mum that I’d rather find a husband here than in India anyway, since men raised here are less likely to mind if I want to do something besides raise babies.”

Paul, blushing painfully, stammered out, “W-w-would you h-h-have to m-marry a-a-a… s-someone Indian?”

Surya looked surprised by the question, and blushed as well. “Um… I know Father expects I will. But he’s never said it right out that I have to marry an Indian man either. I suppose if someone who wasn’t Indian got interested in me at some point, I’d introduce him to my parents and see what came of it. Mum probably wouldn’t care, so long as she thought he’d treat me well and that I’d be happy with him, you know? And then she’d likely enough work on Father, if Father objected for any reason.”

Harry and Lucy both grinned but refrained from teasing… for the moment… when Paul smiled and said, “Well, I’m a-also going to h-h-hope you come to S-stonewall, Surya. Then we’ll b-both have a f-f-friend when we’re there.”

Surya smiled back. “We will that,” she agreed.

After school, Lucy’s mum gave Harry a lift to the dojang as it had started raining quite hard. As she laughingly put it when he tried to decline, she felt it was her duty to keep her daughter’s friends from becoming ill if possible so that they wouldn’t have to avoid Lucy and her still less than healthy immune system until they were better. When it was phrased that way, he felt it would be ungrateful to refuse the offer. He stayed an extra half-hour after his lesson to practice the new hyungs and then walked to the pet shop to pick up the proper food and litter for the rats.

He managed to get his purchases up to his room without his cousin noticing, and changed the rats’ cage and filled their food dish, petting the little creatures as they happily stuffed themselves with their kibble. “Dudley never named you, did he? I’ll have to change that,” Harry said to them, laughing when the grey coloured one looked up and squeaked. “Hmm… I think I’ll call you
Stilton, Stilton Von Cheeseworth the First,” he told it. Reaching over to scratch the ginger rat behind the ears, he said, “And you, I’ll call you Colby.”

He washed up and headed downstairs for dinner. After the meal, and once Dudley was firmly ensconced in front of the telly for the evening, he approached his aunt and requested, “May I ring up Stephen, Aunt Petunia? I have a question about this coming Saturday.”

Petunia looked perturbed. “You aren’t going to cancel your usual plans, are you?” she asked in return.

“No, Aunt Petunia,” Harry told her. “But something came up today in school that I might need more information about in the future, and I wanted to ask Stephen right away, before he makes the final plans as to what we’ll be doing, to see if he can work it in or if it will have to wait a week or two.”

She pursed her lips in thought but nodded. “Very well, you have got his number, I hope?”

Harry nodded. “Right here,” he said, holding up his old spiral notebook that was now labeled ‘Stephen’s Lessons’ in neat letters on the cover.

“Try to keep it short,” she said as she left the kitchen to let him make his call in privacy. He thought she most likely didn’t want to hear any sort of discussion of magic and assumed that’s what he’d be calling Stephen about. Under the circumstances, though, he was just as glad for the privacy. He dialed in his tutor’s number and hoped the young man would be home.

“Hello?” Stephen answered on the fourth ring.

Harry smiled. “Hello, Stephen,” he said. “I’ve… acquired a bit of a problem, and I’m going to need your help in fixing it.”

Stephen frowned. “It’s not your cousin, is it? Has he beaten you up again?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that!” Harry was quick to reassure his tutor. “Although it does involve him.” He lowered his voice slightly as he continued, “Dudley has whinged about having to take care of his rats from the first, as you know. Well, Aunt Petunia gave me a few pounds to get some takeaway on Valentine’s Day because Aunt Marge wanted to take her and Dudley out for a special dinner without me, so I got back here rather late from tae kwon do class and they were already gone. But I heard something odd out in the back garden and discovered that Dudley had chucked his rat cage out by the bins, with the rats still inside.”

“Oh for… I take it you rescued them?” Stephen asked.

“Right in one. I felt horrid for the poor things, out there in the cold and all. But I can’t keep them here, not for any length of time. He might not want them anymore, but if he learns I’ve got them, he’ll toss a massive wobbler, set his gang on me, or most likely both. I’m guessing Uncle Sirius will let me have them at his place so long as I promise to clean the cage each Saturday, but I have to get them out of this house first, without being noticed. Is there anything you can do that won’t trip the wards, to let us get them out the door without Aunt Petunia or Dudley noticing? I mean, I’m pretty sure I can keep them hidden until then, but just because my cousin has been good about keeping out of my room so far, it doesn’t mean he’ll not go into it for whatever reason if he thinks he’ll get away with it, you know? As it is, I’m having trouble believing that he never noticed the cage gone from where he’d chucked it.”

“Oh for… I take it you rescued them?” Stephen asked.

“Right,” Stephen said. “I have an idea or two, but I want to talk to Sirius before I make definite
plans, only because he might have a better one. But I promise, we’ll get the rats out of there one way or another when I come to pick you up on Saturday. We’ll most likely have to skip yoga, though, as it would draw attention if they were to be in the car when we were in class. Sure, I could put a warming charm on the cage, but any passersby would just see two helpless creatures left out in the cold and might even call the RSPCA about them.”

“I don’t mind,” Harry said. “We can always bring our mats and do a session at Uncle Sirius’ place once we’re there.”

“True enough, and he and Remus might even join us. I’ll see you Saturday then, Harry.”

“See you then!” Harry hung up the phone, glad that neither his cousin nor his aunt had been paying any attention whatsoever to his conversation.

On Saturday, Stephen showed up carrying a large briefcase which he carried up to Harry’s room. “Hi, Harry, how are you today?”

“Glad to see you, that’s for sure,” Harry laughed. “I’m pretty sure that Dudley is still clueless, but I’ll still feel better with these two out of here and safe. He’s off with his gang already, so it’s only Aunt Petunia to worry about seeing us smuggling the habitat out of here.”

“And I have a solution for that, thanks to a little help from a couple of Marauders,” Stephen grinned. “Sirius pointed me to a place where I could get wizarding space put into my briefcase… like the hidden compartments in your trunk. And then he and Remus both helped me add spells to keep it light no matter how much I put into it, and also to make sure there will be enough air for the rats to survive driving to London.”

Harry grinned. “Brilliant,” he said. “No one would ever consider that there could be something as big as the rat habitat in your briefcase.”

“Which is the whole point,” Stephen said with a chuckle of his own. “Go dump out their water bottle for the trip, though. They’ll not die of thirst in an hour, and while I don’t mind cleaning any spilled food or litter, I draw the line at spilled water inside my briefcase.”

Harry promptly did as he was asked and then lifted the cage into the wizarding space inside the briefcase.

Stephen picked up the briefcase while Harry rolled his yoga mat to take with them. “That’s still so amazing to see,” Harry said once they were out in the car and on the motorway. “Watching you put something as big as the cage into your briefcase. I can’t wait until I learn to do things like that.”

“What, adding wizarding space and such? That’s a rather specialised spell as I understand it,” Stephen told him. “At any rate, it’s not anything I learned at Hogwarts, which is why Sirius had to suggest going to a shop that does such things.”

“Oh… well, I suppose I’ll have to find out what sort of magical careers exist, won’t I?” Harry asked. “I mean, I know about healers because of your friend, and you said my dad was an auror, and there are teachers and shopkeepers and craftsmen, right? What else is there?”

Stephen chuckled. “Well, politics for one, which is where I’m heading. Really, for any sort of career you might consider in the muggle world, there’s something comparable in the wizarding world. Like, muggles have archaeologists who go dig up ancient ruins and look for treasure… and the wizarding equivalent is the curse-breaker, which does pretty much the same thing, only with the ability to break or counter plenty of especially nasty curses that might have been left behind.
Honestly, I think the only place where there’s more variety on the muggle side is the world of sports. Wizards have quiddich, and American wizards play something called quodpot as well, but that’s about it for team sports. Muggles, on the other hand, have footie and rugby and cricket and tennis and golf and volleyball and any number of other games.” He chuckled, adding, “And even in muggle sports, Americans have to be different... they call football ‘soccer’ you know, and what they call football makes no sense at all since it hardly ever uses the feet. Mostly they toss the ball about, and it’s not even a proper ball at that, but looks more like an egg with pointy ends. It’s an interesting enough game... some of my friends from uni talked me into hitting the pub with them to watch a broadcast of the big championship game that happened a couple weeks back... but it’s much closer to rugby than to proper football, that’s for sure.”

Harry just laughed. “I can’t even picture it. But who knows, maybe I’ll get a chance to see it sometime.” He looked up as they pulled onto Grimmauld Place and parked as close to Number Twelve as they could get. “Aside from settling the rats, what’s on the schedule for today, do you know?”

“I think the Malfoys want to know more about your school,” Stephen replied. “I know Remus has been picking up some muggle history and science books for Draco, and I understand they’re thinking of sending him to school come autumn to give him a taste of muggle education.”

“Really? Brilliant!” Harry exclaimed. “As long as Draco wants to do it, of course. He’s not used to having to sit still in a hard chair all day, and from everyone’s descriptions of Hogwarts, we won’t actually be doing so there either. At least, not for as long at a time as in muggle school.” He grabbed his yoga mat and Stephen’s as well, letting the young man handle the enchanted briefcase containing the rats’ habitat.

Sirius was waiting in the doorway as they made their way up the steps. “Were you able to get the rats out of that house all right?” he asked. “I made space for their habitat in your room, Harry, right near the tank for your snake.”

Harry greeted his godfather with a hug. “We did, and thank you, both for letting me keep them here, and for suggesting Stephen get wizarding space in his briefcase to get them out of there with no one the wiser.”

“It’s no trouble at all, pup, the house elves are all falling over themselves in joy at the thought of taking care of your pets when you can’t be here,” Sirius chuckled as they headed up to Harry’s room. “The space is large enough, isn’t it?”

Stephen opened his briefcase and carefully lifted the rats’ habitat out of the wizarding space within. “That ought to fit nicely,” he said, setting the cage down where the animagus had indicated. The two rats almost instantly popped out of their hideaway and made straight for the front bars of the cage to investigate their new surroundings.

“Cute little things, aren’t they?” Sirius said. “I was a little worried one might look like Wormtail, but even though the one is grey, it’s a much prettier colour than that traitor was.”

“They grey one is Stilton Von Cheeseworth the First,” Harry said with a grin. “And the ginger one is Colby. I don’t think Dudley ever named them, and they seem pleased enough with my choices.”

“And why wouldn’t they?” Remus joined the conversation as he moved into the room. “They might not know English, but they certainly know who treats them well and brings them food, so I’m not surprised they seem pleased enough with anything you might do.”

Harry and Sirius both laughed at that. “The one good thing Dudley did with them is that he handled
them often, so they’re quite tame. He just never cleaned their cage properly and forgot to feed them often. It’s best if they can come out of the cage to explore and play daily, but the pamphlet that came with them said that just means to set up a safe place for them to do that, kind of like a play park.” Harry grinned as he said that, adding, “Dudley binned the pamphlet straightaway, but I grabbed it because I was pretty sure I’d end up doing at least some of their care no matter that they were supposed to be his responsibility. Anyway, since my room here is so big, I thought maybe we could set up a table as their play park, you know, put small empty boxes and empty paper towel tubes and such on it, for them to climb about and explore. If you and Uncle Remus can’t mind them when they’re out, the house elves would, right, Uncle Sirius?”

“Probably not Lixy, as she’s the cook of the lot,” Sirius said. “I’d prefer to keep animal care and food preparation separate. But Dobby, Konder, and Tally should have no problems with it. Dobby,” he called.

The elf popped in. “Yes, Master Sirees, yous called Dobby?”

Sirius nodded. “Yes, Dobby, my godson Harry acquired a pair of pet rats but he can’t keep them at his aunt’s house, so they’ll be staying here. The rats will need to be let out of their cage for a time each day, and if Remus and I aren’t home to do so, we’re going to need you to do it. Or Tally or Konder, whichever of the three of you is most comfortable handling the rats.”

“They’re quite tame,” Harry put in, “and enjoy being handled.” He lifted the grey rat out of the cage and ruffled the fur on his back. Stilton Von Cheeseworth the First responded by wriggling happily in the boy’s hand, leaning into the caress before climbing his arm to perch on his shoulder. Colby sat up on his haunches in the cage and gave an imploring squeak while gazing up at the humans and elf in the room, quite obviously wanting his share of the attention.

Dobby looked from the grey rat on Harry’s shoulder to the ginger rat in the cage and carefully reached in to lift Colby the way Harry had lifted Stilton. The house elf relaxed when the rat merely sniffed at his fingers before confidently climbing onto his hand. “Dobby can be taking care of Master Harry’s pet ratties,” he said with a vigourous nod that set his ears flapping. “Does Master Harry haves any special instructions?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Dobby, can you read?” he asked. “If you can, it might be easier to just get a book on proper rat care, as I’ve rescued these two when someone binned them like rubbish, and I don’t know all I need about caring for them yet myself, so I can’t give you all the information you might need.”

Dobby nodded again. “Oh, yes, Master Harry, Dobby and the other elveses can be reading! We is being taught as little elflings, so we cans be reading shopping lists for our families! Dobby is being happy to be reading books telling how to take care of Master Harry’s pet ratties!”

“Done, then, and thank you, Dobby,” Harry said. “We’ll make sure to get a book by the end of the day. For now, just refill their water bottle and they’ll be fine.” He returned Stilton to the cage as he spoke.

“Master Harry is thanking Dobby! Dobby is taking the bestest care of Master Harry’s pet ratties!” the excitable elf exclaimed as he followed Harry’s example and placed Colby back into the cage. He popped out with the empty water bottle and popped back in to place the now filled bottle into its holder before popping away once more.

Remus, Sirius, and Stephen all took a turn at giving the rats some attention before they all trooped back down to the sitting room to await the arrival of the Malfoys. Lucius and Draco arrived as Harry was telling the others about the Valentine’s Day party at school and how surprised everyone
had been to receive Valentines with personal messages from the Princess of Wales.

“‘You have parties at your school?’ Draco asked as he settled down beside the other boy.

“‘Sometimes,’” Harry said, “‘for holidays and the end of term. Most of the time we have to sit quietly
and do our lessons. But there are breaks in the day, we go out for recess and there’s time at lunch to
talk with people.’”

“I’ve been studying muggle history and science,” Draco said. “Father said that he’d find a way to
send me to school with you if I want to go next year. I think I’d like to try it. Will you tell me more
about those friends you keep mentioning?”

The two boys chatted happily, with Harry describing Paul, Surya, and Lucy and the typical day at
his school. The men listened with half an ear as they engaged in their own conversation.

“So he’s decided then, and you’ll be having him sit the placement exams for going to muggle
school?” Sirius asked.

“Yes,” Lucius said. “I think Draco’s been rather lonely, all things considered, although he’s not
complained. It isn’t easy for me to admit that I may have been wrong, but… I’m beginning to see
that just because the traditional ways work doesn’t mean that other ways are wrong. Our best
healers couldn’t help Narcissa carry another child to term, yet Dr. Gardner, a muggle healer, firmly
assures us that this one will be born with few or no problems. Draco has been tutored privately as
befits our station, but until he met Harry and started to learn muggle ways, he had no real friends.
Even when he has had the opportunity to socialise with the children of my associates, they were all
more concerned with keeping up the proper appearances than with truly getting to know one
another.”

Sirius nodded. “And doing things the traditional way is likely worse for more of Draco’s
generation than ours, simply because so very many of them are only children for one reason or
another. I know you were an only child, Lucius, but I had Regulus to play with as a child. True, we
didn’t always get along, but at least until I left for Hogwarts, we had each other as friends. I’d
wager Cissa would tell you the same thing with regards to her sisters.”

“She has, yes,” Lucius admitted. “And that, with Draco’s eagerness to attend school with Harry, is
what is making me really think about tradition and change and how to strike some sort of balance
between the two.”

Stephen nodded. “I personally think you’re doing quite well thus far. I quite enjoyed the Yule
celebration, and I’m just sorry the timing prevented me and Harry from participating in your
Imbolc rites as well. I know I’m enjoying learning wizarding traditions right along with Harry, and
I only wish something like the new class you proposed had been offered when I went through
Hogwarts.”

“That reminds me,” Remus chimed in, “I have the first draft of the textbook done, if you and the
others on your committee would like to read it over to be sure I’ve covered everything in the way
you’d like.”

Lucius nodded. “If you have copies of that, I’ll take them with me. Our next meeting is set for
Monday, so the timing is perfect.”

“And I’ve got a trip to the US laid on for a week from Monday,” Sirius said, “with visits to five
wizarding schools there… the Salem Institute of Witchcraft in Massachusetts, the Smokey
Mountain School of Magic in eastern Tennessee, the Laveau Academy in the Louisiana bayous, the
Sacajawea School near Yellowstone in Wyoming, and the Redwood Wizarding Academy in northern California. I’ll get information packets from each school, along with their standard curriculum to compare with Hogwarts.”

“I’ll be interested in seeing that information myself,” Stephen said. “I’ve tried to find information on magical schools other than Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang, and aside from a few names being mentioned in one travel guide in Flourish and Blotts, I’ve been unable to find anything. It makes me wonder, though, is magical Britain so afraid of competition elsewhere that such information is suppressed? Or is it just that magical Britain is so convinced that it is the best in the world that it can’t be arsed to notice anything outside of its own shores?”

“Probably a little of both,” Remus said. “I spent a few months in France several years ago, and I have to say that I was tempted to stay, mostly because I found quite a few of the French laws to be much more enlightened than British law. Unfortunately, that same British law forced me to choose… had I tried to become a permanent resident of France, I would have been unable to return to Britain ever because of my condition. At the time, my parents were still alive, so I didn’t want to risk being unable to go and see them if anything happened to them, you know?”

Sirius nodded. “I can understand that. Even though I ran away from home back during our Hogwarts days, I still would have liked to have the option to see my parents one final time before they died. Although I’m not quite sure if I would have tried to make some sort of peace, or if I’d have rubbed their noses in my life as an auror and an opponent of You Know Who.”

All the men chuckled at that and the conversation turned to lighter topics as they collected the boys and headed in to lunch.
Reaping What Was Sown

Back at Privet Drive that evening, Harry was in his room reading when Petunia tapped at the door, bringing up a load of clean clothes to put away. He collected his things from her and started arranging them into his wardrobe as she proceeded on to Dudley’s room.

“What in the world…?” she said, sounding both startled and confused. Then she called down the stairs, “Duddikins, whatever happened to your rats?”

Dudley’s video game played the sound indicating that he’d died his final death of the game as he hollered back up to his mother, “The stupid things stunk because you wouldn’t let me make the freak clean the cage, and they wouldn’t even go bite him like I wanted them to, so I binned them.”

“You did what?” Petunia screeched. “Dudley Vernon Dursley, you go bring those poor animals inside right now before they freeze to death!”

The sounds from the video game indicated that Dudley was trying again. “They’re gone already,” he called. “I put them out before the dustmen last came round to empty the bins.” The video game sounds increased in volume immediately after that.

Harry peeked out of his room as his aunt stalked towards the stairs, an expression of disbelief warring with anger on her face. “Dudley Vernon Dursley, you stop that game this instant, young man!” she snapped as she marched down towards the sitting room. Harry opened his door a little wider to listen in more easily.

“But, Mum, I just started this level,” Dudley whined as the game sounds cut off abruptly. Harry thought Petunia must have shut off the telly. “Anyway, it’s not like you cared about those stupid rats. You didn’t even like them.”

“Whether or not I liked your pets is irrelevant,” Petunia said firmly. “They were your pets and your responsibility. If you no longer wanted them, it was your responsibility to find them a new home. Instead, you binned them out in the cold and they probably did freeze to death. I can’t believe you were so cruel to those poor rats. No more video games tonight, Dudley, and no sweets at all tonight or tomorrow either.”

Harry could only imagine his fat cousin’s expression as Dudley sputtered and protested. “What? No game and no sweets? Mummy, don’t you love me anymore?”

Petunia sighed. “Yes, Diddy, I do. I love you enough to make sure you understand just how wrong it is to harm a defenseless animal, especially when that animal is your pet. No video game and no sweets.”

Dudley burst into loud wails at that, kicking his chair and stomping, but for the first time, Petunia stood firm. She unplugged the game console and took it with her as she made her way into the kitchen, leaving her son to his tantrum. She had just sat down with a cup of tea to steady her nerves when the wailing from the sitting room cut out abruptly, only to be followed by a huge crash and a pained scream. She rushed out of the kitchen to see her son pinned beneath the fallen entertainment centre and bleeding heavily from several cuts on his face and hands.

“Oh my God, Diddy!” Petunia screamed. “Hold on, baby, Mummy’s coming!” She raced over, heedless of the glass and plastic shards from the broken telly, and struggled to lift the heavy piece of furniture off her son, but was unsuccessful.
Harry came charging down the stairs at Dudley’s initial scream, took in the situation at a glance, and promptly picked up the phone and dialed 999. “Hello, there’s been an accident in the house, the entertainment centre fell somehow and my cousin is pinned under it… Number Four Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey… he’s nine… yes, he is bleeding, I’m pretty sure the telly got smashed up when the thing went over… my aunt is trying to lift it, but it’s a massive piece, should I try to help her? I’m also nine… I’ll tell her, hold on.” He called over to his aunt, “There’s an ambulance coming, Aunt Petunia, and they’ll be able to lift that off Dudley without hurting him worse. The 999 operator says for you to stop trying to do it before you end up hurting yourself as well. Or making Dudley’s injuries worse.”

Petunia looked frantic as she continued to struggle with the unit. “But Dudley’s trapped!”

“Aunt Petunia, listen,” Harry said, trying to break through her panic. “The operator said you could hurt Dudley worse by moving it! If one of the shelves broke a rib and it moves, it could make the rib puncture his lung. There’s an ambulance on the way, and they know how to do things like this safely.”

Her face grew pale. “Are you sure?”

Harry nodded. “That’s what the 999 operator said. You should try to keep Dudley as calm and still as possible, so that he doesn’t make any injuries worse.”

His aunt stopped trying to lift the entertainment centre and started stroking her son’s hair.
“Mummy’s here, darling, try to be brave until the ambulance comes.”

Dudley, whose sobs were genuine for once, moaned softly. “My leg hurts, Mummy. Make it stop!”

“Just hold on, Diddyums, the ambulance will be here in a bit,” Petunia said. “They’ll get the entertainment centre off of you and then take us to Casualty to make you better.”

Harry returned to the phone. “Right, she’s stopped tugging at it now and is doing her best to get him calmed. He says his leg hurts.” After listening to the operator, he called over, “Dudley, can you move your toes on both feet?”

“Why do you care, freak?” Dudley snapped.

“Because the 999 operator wants to know, so he can relay the information to the ambulance medics,” Harry answered calmly.

“Oh… I can move my right foot, but my left foot is pinned down,” Dudley said. “It hurts a lot and I can’t tell if it’s moving or not.”

Harry relayed that information and added, “I think I hear the ambulance coming, hold on so I can open the door for them.” He set the phone down and headed for the door as the siren and flashing lights heralded the approach of the ambulance. Once the medics were inside he picked up the phone once more. “All right, they’re here now; thank you for your help,” he said to the operator. “Good night.” He stayed back by the telephone but turned to watch the proceedings with some interest.

The two medics looked over the situation quickly and frowned at the sheer size of the entertainment centre. “How’d this thing go over, kid?” one asked as he and his partner took up positions on either side of the piece.

Unwilling to admit that he’d pulled it over in a temper, Dudley sniveled. “I tried to get something from the top shelf and slipped,” he said. He figured it was the freak’s fault anyway. After all, he
reasoned, if the freak had just taken care of the rats like his father would have made him do, then he wouldn’t have had to bin them and his mum wouldn’t have taken away his game.

The two medics grunted as they lifted the unit straight off Dudley before setting it back upright against the wall. “Kid your age ought to know better than to climb up shelves like that,” the older-looking of the pair said as the younger one hefted the smashed telly off Dudley’s left leg and foot. “Even if the thing had been properly anchored to the wall, you’re heavy enough to overset it.” He began his examination of Dudley, taking his vital signs and putting a splint on his left leg.

Dudley pouted, tears running down his fat cheeks at the reprimand. Petunia protested mildly, fluttering as the medics lifted her son onto the gurney. “Dudley’s just big-boned, like his father was,” she said.

The medic looked pointedly at a photo of the Dursleys featuring the three of them dressed up in preparation for their audience with the Queen. “Judging from that picture and your use of the past tense, I venture to guess that your husband either stroked out or had a heart attack that killed him, yes?”

Looking flustered, Petunia nodded. “Unfortunately, yes, he did,” she confirmed.

“I’m sure the doctors in hospital will say the same,” the medic said. “Your son here weighs more than plenty of fully grown men I’ve picked up on call. If he doesn’t lose weight, he’s headed for a heart attack of his own before he’s out of his twenties. Now, are you riding with us or driving yourself?”

“Erm… I’d rather… but there’s Harry… and…” Petunia dithered, still looking flustered.

“You go with the ambulance, Aunt Petunia,” Harry spoke up. “You know you’ll want to be with Dudley in hospital and he’ll likely need to stay overnight. I can ring up Stephen to come stay over, if that’s all right, so you won’t have to bring me home tonight or to school tomorrow.”

“You don’t think he’ll mind?” Petunia asked. “I’m sure Mrs. Figg would have you.”

Harry shook his head. “Stephen won’t mind,” he said. “Anyway, I would rather stay here than with Mrs. Figg if it’s all right with you. Her cats like to sleep on my clothes whenever I have to sleep at her house, and I don’t want to be all over cat hair at school.”

Even the medics grinned at that, and Petunia nodded. “All right, ring your tutor then. But promise you’ll go to Mrs. Figg if he can’t come over for some reason.”

“I promise,” Harry said, passing his aunt her handbag. He watched the medics lift Dudley and the gurney down the steps and roll it to the waiting ambulance. The older one followed it into the back and offered Petunia a hand to help her climb in after him while the younger one shut the door behind them and got behind the wheel. The ambulance pulled away, lights still flashing although without the siren screaming. Harry noticed several neighbours watching from behind their curtains as he shut the door with a sigh. Moving on suddenly trembling legs, he slowly climbed the stairs to get his notebook with Stephen’s number and then headed back down to the telephone. Hoping his tutor had arrived home, he dialed the number.

To his relief, Stephen answered after a moment. “Hello?”

“Stephen?” Harry said, his voice shaking a little. “I know you probably just got in, but could you come back? To stay the night, I mean,” he added.

Stephen’s voice took on a note of concern. “Harry, what happened? Are you all right?”
“I’m fine,” Harry hastened to reassure him. “I… I don’t know what happened for sure, only the results. Dudley managed to pull over the entertainment centre and got pinned under it. He’s gone to hospital by ambulance and Aunt Petunia’s gone with him. She wanted me to go over to Mrs. Figg’s house, but I really, really didn’t want to sleep over there so she said I could ring you up and ask if you’d come stay with me instead.”

“Of course I’ll come over, Harry,” Stephen said warmly. “Will you be all right until I arrive?”

“I think so,” Harry said. “I called 999 and even managed to get Aunt Petunia to stop trying to push the thing off him by herself, but now that they’ve gone I’ve gotten shaky.”

“That’s a fairly normal reaction,” Stephen said. “I don’t know if you’ve ever heard the term ‘adrenaline rush’ before, but it’s something that can happen to people when there’s a crisis happening. It makes one very alert and clear for a bit, but when the crisis is over, it bleeds off rapidly and the body reacts to that,” he explained. “Just sit down and try to relax until I arrive… it won’t take but a moment to load up an overnight bag and then perhaps half an hour to drive over. And don’t try to clear up the mess, either, not until I get there and see how bad it is. I don’t want you accidentally cutting yourself if anything got broken.”

“The telly got smashed,” Harry confirmed. “I think it broke Dudley’s leg, too. There’s bits of glass and plastic everywhere.”

“Well, definitely stay away from that, then. I’ll see you in a little while,” Stephen said.

“All right, Stephen,” Harry said. “See you soon.” He hung up the phone and headed for the kitchen, already feeling a little bit better for knowing his tutor was on the way.

Just over half an hour later, Stephen’s little Mini pulled up behind Aunt Petunia’s car. The young man whistled at the damage as Harry let him into the house. “Your cousin certainly made one massive mess,” he commented. “Have you any idea what brought this about?”

“The rats, I think,” Harry said. “Aunt Petunia was putting away laundry and noticed that the rats were gone. She gave him a good rollicking when she heard he’d binned them, and told him she was taking away his video game for the night and no sweets tonight or tomorrow. He tossed a huge wobbler over that, but Aunt Petunia stuck to her word and didn’t give him the game back. Next thing I knew there was this huge crash and Dudley was screaming for real.”

Stephen shook his head. “There’s no telling if he pulled the entertainment centre down on purpose or by accident, but it sounds as if he punished himself pretty well. Not just the injuries, but also, I’d guess that your aunt won’t be able to replace the telly too quickly since she’ll have to save up the money for it out of the household account.

Harry chuckled. “And there’s no way she’ll spend less on groceries, or to be more specific, on Dudley’s snack foods.”

“Let’s just hope that this time he’s learned his lesson,” Stephen said. “Although I admit I don’t hold out too much hope of that.”

“Neither do I,” Harry admitted. “Although anything’s possible, I suppose. Aunt Petunia did punish him, after all.”

Stephen laughed. “True enough,” he said. “But all speculation aside, I imagine your aunt would appreciate coming home to a clean house. Where does she keep the hoover?”

Harry showed Stephen where to find the hoover and the dustpan and brush, and together they
cleared up the mess in the sitting room. The telly was a lost cause, as the tube had been thoroughly shattered, probably by Dudley’s foot. The game console appeared to be intact, but some of the game cartridges had cracked. Several knickknacks, including the teacup and saucer set that Harry had bought for his aunt when he’d holidayed at Balmoral just before school started, were also smashed beyond any hope of repair. The boy made a mental note to ask Princess Diana if she’d send him a replacement and let him pay her back for it afterwards. After that, they had themselves a light snack and Stephen popped his head into Harry’s room to say good night to Suliss before retiring to the guest room for the night.

In the morning, Stephen dropped Harry off at school and then made his way to the hospital to see if there was anything Petunia might need, be that a ride home or a change of clothes. She accepted his offer of a ride.

Once at the house, she looked at him quietly. “Thank you, Mr. Coyner, both for the ride and for staying with Harry last night,” she said.

Stephen smiled. “It was my pleasure, Mrs. Dursley. Harry’s quite like a younger brother to me, you know.”

“I hadn’t realised… but you’ve done him a world of good,” Petunia told Stephen. “Perhaps I was… blinded by my… my resentment… but he’s not as awful as I used to think. I never thought I would say this, but I actually admire how he conducts himself when I have to drive him anywhere. He sits quietly and doesn’t disturb me at all, whereas Dudley likes to play the wireless at top volume if he’s not kicking the dashboard. I wish I could get him to sit more quietly in the car.”

“Perhaps some sort of reward system?” Stephen suggested. “Although as I am not a parent, I wouldn’t blame you in the slightest if you were to take any advice I might offer with a heaping spoonful of salt.”

Petunia gave a reluctant chuckle at that. “Well, I suppose your idea of a reward system has some merit to it. I’ll have to think of a suitable reward for Diddy to work towards.”

“Maybe the reward can be replacing some of his video game cartridges,” Stephen mused. “Harry and I cleaned the sitting room for you last night, and I noticed that close to half of the games had also gotten broken along with everything else.”

“How… how bad is it?”

“Pretty bad,” Stephen said. “The telly is a lost cause, as the tube is smashed beyond repair, as are several decorative items. The game console appeared to be intact, but of course is useless without the telly.”

“And it will take me some time to save for a replacement,” Petunia said with a sigh. “Well, thank you again for the ride. If it’s not too disruptive to your own plans, I’d appreciate it if you’d come and stay over for a few days, as I’m going to be spending quite a bit of my free time in staying with my Dudley. He’s to be in hospital for at least five days.”

Stephen thought about his schedule. “Sure, I can do that, Mrs. Dursley. I don’t live all that far from here after all, so it’s no trouble to simply drive to uni from here instead of from home.”

She smiled once more at that. “In that case, I imagine I’ll be seeing you back here this evening,” she said as she opened the car door.

“You will,” Stephen said with a smile. “I hope Dudley gets better quickly.”
“Thank you, Mr. Coyner, and I’ll pass along your good wishes.” Petunia shut the car door behind herself and headed up the walk to the house.

Stephen waited until she’d let herself in before pulling away and heading to his university for his day’s classes.
Lessons

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone had a lovely December holiday, whatever you celebrate, and here's to a Happy New Year as well!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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By the following Monday, Dudley Dursley was more than ready to go home from hospital. The doctors there all gave him lectures about his weight, and how he needed to lose at least two stone and three would be better, and they gave orders to the nurses forbidding them from bringing him second helpings or snacks between meals. And even though they didn't ban pudding completely, they did restrict him to one measly portion of plain vanilla custard or strawberry jelly per day. No biscuits, no cakes, no sweets, and no ice cream at all. It was horrible. The doctors also kept telling him that once his leg healed up, he was to start exercising every day.

Just the thought of getting away from the doctors and their lectures improved his mood enough that he only pouted when he realised he'd have to ride in the back seat, as the cast went from above his knee to just before his toes, and so he'd have to ride with his leg stretched out on the seat beside him. He was just sorry that the freak was in school; he would have liked to have someone to adjust the wireless for him until something good came on, as his mother's favourite station was dead boring.

For her part, Petunia was both pleased and concerned about Dudley's return home. She wondered now if it might have been better to have warned him that the telly wouldn't be replaced for at least another month, perhaps longer. With luck, Diddy would be happy to know that his game console was intact, even if half of his games were broken. She reflected that it was lucky she'd taken the console and not just the controller into the kitchen with her on the day he'd gotten hurt, otherwise the game console would most likely have been smashed with everything else.

When they arrived home, Stephen's little Mini was parked out front, and the young man was waiting to take Dudley's bag while Petunia helped her son inch his way out of the car and get balanced on his crutches.

“Thank you so much for your help this week, Mr. Coyner,” Petunia said as she escorted her son to the door.

“It was my pleasure, Mrs. Dursley,” Stephen replied with a smile. He held the door open for the pair, and then brought the bag upstairs and unpacked it, putting the dirty clothing into the laundry hamper and stowing the bag neatly under Dudley's bed. He returned downstairs to a confrontation already in progress.

“But how am I supposed to watch footie and The Great Humberto or even stupid shows like Changing Rooms and Ground Force without a telly?” the spoiled boy demanded, sounding appalled.
Petunia seemed to be approaching the end of her patience. “You just have to live without for a little while, darling, until I can afford to replace the telly. You know money has been tight since Daddy died.”

“Make the freak pay for a new telly, since the Queen gave him all that money,” Dudley sulked. “It’s all his fault anyway.”

Stephen couldn't help but put in his own tuppence worth at that. “How on earth is it Harry's fault that the telly got smashed?” he asked in a reasonable tone. “As I understand it, Harry was upstairs when it happened, so it's not as if he'd knocked over the entertainment centre.”

Dudley sneered. “Sure, one freak stands up for another one. If he'd just cleaned out the stupid rat cage like Daddy would have made him do, I wouldn't have had to bin them. And if I hadn't binned them, Mummy wouldn't have taken my game away, and I wouldn't have had to p... climb up to try to get something, and I wouldn't have gotten hurt. That's why it's his fault.”

Petunia pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. “Diddyums, I know Mr. Coyner explained to you that your rats were your responsibility and not your cousin's. If you had come to me or Harry or both and said that you didn't want them anymore, I'm sure we could have come to some temporary arrangement in which Harry would have cared for them just until you found them a new home. But you chose to get rid of them in a particularly cruel manner and that is why I punished you. Furthermore, whether you meant to do it or not, you are the one who pulled over the entertainment centre and smashed the telly. Not Harry. As far as I'm concerned, you've meted out your own punishment... you no longer have a telly to watch until such time as I can afford to buy one. You have books to read, games to play, and the wireless to listen to, so you can just live without a telly for now.” She sighed. “I am sorry, Duddikins, but I just cannot afford to replace it right now.”

Dudley heaved a put-upon sigh. “Fine, be that way. At least I’m home and away from those horrid mean doctors who wouldn't let me eat anything good.”

“Yes, well, about that,” Petunia said a little awkwardly. “The doctors spoke with me and showed me some of your test results, Diddy. They told me flat out that if you don't lose weight, and I do mean a lot of weight, that you'll most probably be dead of a heart attack like your father, even before you turn 30. So you'll be following the doctors' guidelines for your meals from now on. I don't want to lose you the way I did your father, you know.”

Now Dudley looked horrified. “Mummy! You can't mean that I'm to have nothing but that stupid rabbit food and no sweets! Hospital food was awful, and now you want to give me what they did there? I'll starve to death!”

Petunia looked at Stephen helplessly; the young man could see that she was torn between the guilt she felt at denying her beloved child something he wanted, and the knowledge that by not denying him, she'd be contributing to his early death or disability. He decided to step in. “Dudley, what do you know about the dangers of being overweight?” he asked.

“Why do you want to know?” the boy replied suspiciously.

“Because I'd like to try to explain this to you in a way that you'll understand easily,” Stephen told him. “I am a tutor after all; it's my job to explain things to people.”

The fat boy shrugged. “The doctor kept saying I'd have a heart attack, but kids don't have heart attacks, so I don't believe him.”
Stephen nodded. “Well, it's true that most kids don't have heart attacks, not unless there's something already wrong with their hearts. But, being overweight can damage your heart and your arteries. Fatty deposits build up inside of them, so that they have to work twice as hard to pump only about half as much blood as they're supposed to. You get a bit short of breath going up to the second floor of a building, don't you? Maybe even going up to the first floor?”

“Sometimes,” Dudley admitted grudgingly. “So what?”

“That shows that you're already doing some damage to your heart,” Stephen said. “And eventually that damage will get bad enough that it will cause you to have a heart attack, if you don't lose weight and start correcting the damage now. Being overweight can cause other problems, too, such as joint damage in your knees and ankles, and it's a risk factor for diseases like diabetes. Believe me, you don't want diabetes. You'll have to give yourself injections of medicine before every meal you eat, and you can never have anything like sweets again, because things with too much sugar can kill someone with diabetes.” The young man knew perfectly well he was laying it on pretty thick, but he guessed that the idea of no desserts for the rest of his life might get through to the spoiled brat if nothing else did. If it took some exaggeration... even some outright lies... to keep Dudley from laying the blame for the new diet on his cousin, he'd do it.

And it seemed to have worked, at least to a point. “No sweets, ever?” Dudley asked in a strangled whisper. “Oh no! I don't want to get diabetes! Mummy!”

Petunia stroked her son's hair comfortingly. “Well, darling, if you follow the diet, you won't get diabetes. I know that means you have to cut back on some of your favourites, but we don't have to cut them out altogether. And the doctors gave me a new recipe book, with healthier versions of plenty of foods you like in it, so it won't be all salads, lovey.”

Dudley heaved a quavery sigh. “All right, Mummy, I'll do it.” He looked around the sitting room. “When does school let out? Maybe some of my friends will come over, if the fr...” he glanced at Stephen and quickly amended, “…if Harry doesn't scare them off.”

Stephen chuckled at that. “Well, if what Harry's told me is at all accurate, Monday is the day that he and his friends get together for a study group after school, so he probably won't be back until close to supper time. You shouldn't have to worry about him scaring your friends off.”

“A poofter, a sickie, and a filthy Paki, perfect friends for a freak,” Dudley snickered. “At least it keeps them from trying to be friends with normal people.”

“A... sickie?” Petunia asked hesitantly. She didn't want to risk Harry catching something nasty and then passing it along to Dudley, after all, especially if it involved the digestive tract going out of order. Dudley wasn't able to move all that quickly on his crutches, so the last thing she needed was for him to become ill with something that would have him urgently needing the loo every few minutes.

“Harry's friend Lucy is in remission from leukemia,” Stephen told her. “The chemotherapy left her quite thin, of course, and caused her hair to fall out. Add to that some other medication making her face go puffy, the poor girl did look rather unwell at the start of the school term. But Harry said she's getting on quite nicely so far; her hair is coming back, she's gained a bit of weight, and her doctors let her travel up to Yorkshire to visit her grandparents over the hols. At any rate, it's nothing anyone can catch from her, even if she does relapse at some point.” He paused for a moment and added, “As to the other two friends, Harry's described Paul as a nice boy who has asthma and a stammer, which makes him rather shy and self-conscious. And Surya is Indian, and in fact, her family owns the restaurant where you had your Valentine's dinner.”
Petunia looked surprised at that. “Oh? Harry knows the people who own Panahar? I wish I had known that before we went there. I’d have tried to stop Marge from finding fault with every little thing, as I’d prefer not to give the neighbours any fodder for gossip. I hope they didn’t recognise us.”

“Why do you care what some filthy Pakis think, Mummy?” Dudley asked. “It’s not like anyone worth knowing will listen to them, you know. They shouldn’t be living around here anyway, that’s what Daddy always said. They ought to go live with their own kind.”

Petunia tried to deflect the conversation back to less controversial areas. “You know, Diddyums, if all the Hindus and Pakis left, there’d be no good curry restaurants around. So they rather have to stay, don’t they? Anyway, that doesn’t matter right now; what would you like for tea when your friends come round to see you after school lets out? I bought some sugar-free jam for sandwiches and some fruit cups, too. You may have your choice of pineapple, mandarin orange, or peach.”

Stephen gave Petunia a wave and slipped out the door as Dudley put his mind to the serious question of what to eat at tea. He toyed with the idea of popping in to see Sirius and Remus, but remembered that this was the day the animagus had planned to leave for the States, and his visits to the magical schools there. Instead, he pulled on a set of robes when he arrived back at his own flat, and then apparated out to Diagon Alley. Now that he was spending much more of his time in the wizarding world, and had both Sirius Black and Lucius Malfoy recommending him for a Ministry position that he’d once thought unobtainable, he thought he ought to invest in a post owl of his own.

He took his time in Eeylops Owl Emporium, knowing that the best owl-wizard partnerships usually developed when the owl in question initially took a fancy to a particular wizard, or otherwise indicated its interest in being purchased. He strolled along the aisles, pausing by any cage or perch with an owl that appeared to look him over. As he neared the end of the middle aisle, a long-eared owl started bobbing excitedly on its perch, softly hoo-hoo-hooing at him. Stephen smiled as he approached the bird, whose erect ear-tufts and distinctive white facial markings gave it a look of perpetual surprise. “Well, hello there,” he said to it, holding a hand out in question.

The own promptly hopped onto his arm and gave a quiet bark as it leaned forward to preen his hair. Stephen laughed. “So, you’re my owl, then, are you?” he asked, laughing again when the owl bobbed its head as if in agreement. “All right, let’s get everything you’re going to need, and let me find out if you’re a male or female so that I can name you appropriately.” A shop assistant approached, informed him that the owl was a male, and helped him gather a perch, travel cage, and the appropriate food supplements for when the owl would be unable to hunt for whatever reason. Shrinking the packages and putting them in his pockets, Stephen headed towards the Leaky Cauldron with his new owl on his shoulder. He got to know his newfound feathered friend over tea, with several bits of bacon from his sandwich used to cement the friendship. By the time tea was done, he’d decided to call his owl Glimfeather, after the talking owl character from *The Silver Chair* in the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

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After shaking off the disorientation from the trans-Atlantic portkey, Sirius followed the signs from his arrival point in a secluded area of Boston’s Logan Airport to the Magical Customs and Immigration Station to officially enter the United States. The bored-looking inspector who stamped his documents asked whether he was visiting for business or pleasure.

“Business of a sort,” Sirius replied. “I’m working with a couple of members of Hogwarts’ Board of Governors who are trying to push through some updates to the curriculum, and I’ve been asked to
visit a selection of American magical schools to see what is considered usual over here, and to see if we might adapt anything for our own use.

The customs inspector gave a slight snort at that answer. “I wish you luck with that. Merlin knows we’re sick of British expats who come over here thinking they’ve had the world’s best education at Hogwarts only to learn that they’ve got between two and four years of studying to do here before they even qualify for university or an entry level position.” He handed the stunned Englishman a wizarding tourist guide and directed him to the correct areas to exchange galleons for dollars and to pick up the portkeys to the various schools he would be visiting over the course of the next few days.

Sirius collected his portkeys, exchanged enough galleons to give himself $500 cash, and on the advice of the young lady at the currency exchange counter, transfigured his robes into a simple grey business suit before activating the first portkey which would take him to the Salem Institute of Witchcraft. He soon discovered that Salem was a co-ed school despite the name, as he met with John Hannah, the vice principal and teacher of Advanced Potions and Basic Healing for the school, who took him on a tour of the campus and gave him an overview of the typical course load per year.

The animagus was astonished to learn that in the United States, all children started their schooling at the age of five or six, muggle and wizarding alike. Furthermore, their magical studies progressed alongside their muggle studies, giving them the opportunity to pursue either magical or muggle university degrees and careers. They learned muggle history along with History of Magic, chemistry along with potions, and scientific theory right beside magical theory.

“…we’ve found that by starting their magical studies at a young age, occurrences of accidental magic drop dramatically,” said Vice Principal Hannah, as Sirius tried desperately to keep from gaping at everything he was hearing. “Now the US still follows the British standard of not letting children younger than eleven have their own wands. But the school provides learner wands during lessons, which allows the younger students the opportunity to practice their spellwork in a controlled environment, plus it allows them to feel the flow of their magic when they use it purposefully. That helps them to recognize the feel of their magic, which then helps them to control it when it reacts to their emotional state. Oh, it doesn’t prevent accidental magic completely, of course, but it does happen far less frequently.”

Sirius nodded. “That does make sense. I suppose it’s easier on the families of the muggleborns as well, since they’ll get their introduction to the wizarding world that much sooner?”

Vice Principal Hannah shrugged. “That’s a little more difficult to answer, although I would guess so. Here in the States, we try to work closely with the families of magical children born to muggle parents; the Department of Magic assigns a nearby wizarding family to act as mentors whenever a new muggleborn is recorded, so there are people for the muggle parents to turn to with their questions and to ask for help if the child accidentally does something that requires fixing.”

“What about the Statute of Secrecy?” Sirius wanted to know.

“Oh, we don’t have one, not like you folks have across the pond,” Hannah replied. “Don’t get me wrong, we’ve got secrecy laws in place, but we don’t go in for wholesale obliviation of muggles who get a glimpse of magic, either. One thing to understand, probably three quarters of muggles who do witness magic being performed will rationalize it away. Call it an optical illusion or sleight of hand or whatever, and considering that at least a couple of wizards have been quite successful as stage magicians and entertainers… well, it’s folks like that Doug Henning who retired from performing a few years back, and David Copperfield who vanished the Statue of Liberty and
brought her back again on television, who make muggles assume that magic is nothing but smoke and mirrors.”

Sirius looked gobsmacked. “Are you having me on? Wizards perform for muggles as stage magicians, and that makes muggles assume that any magic they see is fakery?”

The American chuckled. “Well, it’s not quite that simple, but it certainly helps, yes. That, and as a whole, wizards here in the States don’t keep nearly as hidden as you Brits do. Sure, we’ve got some magical shopping areas tucked away here and there, much like your Diagon Alley in London. But our way of schooling the children gives them the option of going for a magical or muggle career as they please. Well, take me as an example; I love sports but I don’t like heights, so I was never any good at quodpot or quiddich, but I did football… American football… and wrestling all through school and then played professionally for the New England Patriots. I just retired a few years back, after Super Bowl XX. Would’ve been nice to have gone out with the ring, but, man, no one could stop the Fridge and the Bears’ D-line that year.” Hannah’s eyes grew distant as he reminisced. “No one even figured on us being in the playoffs, as bad as that season started, but we ended up 11-5 and grabbed a wildcard slot. Won us three on the road to become the AFC champions, but the Bears just rolled all over us in the Superdome.” He shook his head. “But you’re here to learn about the school, not listen to an old jock relive the glory days,” he said, giving a wry chuckle at himself.

“Oh, that’s quite all right,” Sirius said politely, although he had no real idea what the older man was talking about. “It’s always nice to hear people talk about their interests. How did you happen to go from football to teaching?”

Hannah laughed. “Well, a lot of players, both muggle and wizard, look for teaching credentials so they can get into coaching at the high school level and work their way up from there. Um, high school is kids that are generally between fourteen and eighteen years old… I know your schools work differently, so I’m not quite sure if you even have an equivalent. Anyway, it’s pretty rare for any but the wealthiest private high schools to be able to afford to pay a coach to do nothing but be a coach, so you need to be able to teach something. My family tends to be talented in various types of healing magics, which helped during my playing years, so I got certified to teach basic healing and potions, plus I coach the football team. And I just got tagged as vice principal this year, when my predecessor retired.”

Sirius looked a little more intrigued by that. “So you’ve got teams for muggle sports as well as wizarding sports? How does that work?”

“How does any sport work?” Hannah asked in return. “For the muggle sports, we’re simply known as the Salem Institute, a private high school, and we compete with other schools in the area… the Salem public high schools as well as those in Beverly, Danvers, Marblehead, and Peabody, among others. The kids ride to away games on a school bus just like the muggle schools do, the only difference being that our buses are charmed for a little extra comfort and safety. Quodpot and quiddich teams portkey to other magical schools for their away games, since most states only have one, maybe two magical schools. About the only problem we’ve ever had is with the athletic overachievers who want to play both quodpot and one of the muggle sports, usually football, soccer, or baseball. We do insist that they choose between doing muggle sports and magical ones simply because there’s too much overlap in the schedules.”

“Understandable,” Sirius said with a nod. “What’s your average year-group size, and how do you divide the kids into groups? I mean, surely each year-group isn’t so small that they can all be in the same class, or can they?”
Hannah laughed. “Merlin, no! We probably average 65 or so students per graduating class. We do start with the kindergarten here; at that point, the youngsters are separated on a random basis, although if parents request it, we’ll try to keep ‘best friends’ together or make sure that a child who’s been bullied is in a different class from his tormentor. By the end of that year, we have a fair idea of where they all are from an academic viewpoint, and they go into first grade classes based roughly on ability. That way, the brightest ones don’t get bored and into mischief while the ones who don’t always catch on right away are being helped along by the teachers. There will still be the odd switch… some kids are just late bloomers, after all, and once they get a year or two of school under their belts, it all kind of clicks for them and they’re off and running, so to speak, so we’ll put them into a more challenging group. Conversely, there are a few who start off showing great promise, but who have trouble keeping up after a while. It might be that they’re dyslexic, or they have trouble with reading comprehension or something, and so they need to be moved to a less challenging group. Anyway, we have three groups per year from kindergarten through fifth grade. Sixth grade is when they get their own wands and the learning switches from heavy on muggle subjects with a sprinkling of magic, to just about half and half between wizarding and muggle subjects. At that point, while the size of each lesson-group only rarely exceeds one-third of the whole class size, they’re not kept in completely separate groups anymore as their schedules will differ according to their elective courses.” He handed Sirius several pamphlets describing the school, pointing out the one that described the electives and showed a couple of sample schedules for both OWL and NEWT level students.

Sirius gave each pamphlet a once-over before putting them into the inner pocket of his suit jacket to peruse in more depth later. He followed Vice Principal Hannah on a tour of the campus, and was invited to sit in on a couple of lessons; one in Charms and one in the muggle subject of World History. By the time he shared a pleasant dinner in the teachers’ lounge and retired to his assigned room in the school’s small guest house, he didn’t know whether to be impressed by Salem’s operation or depressed at how poorly Hogwarts measured up in comparison.

And the other four American schools he visited were much the same, at least as far as their academic programs went. The Laveau Academy and the Sacajawea School, he thought, could almost be considered denominational schools, given that the magical portions of their programs were based around Voodoo and the shamanistic practices of various Native American tribes respectively. The Redwood Wizarding Academy, the newest and most innovative of the schools he visited, even had a NEWT-level elective in wandless casting which was one of the most popular in the school. He was shocked to learn that something close to ninety percent of the students took the class, and that at least eighty percent of those who took it proved capable of at least casting simple spells such as ‘lumos’, ‘nox’, and ‘wingardium leviosa’ wandlessly by the end of the year, and that well over half of them could manage more difficult spells like ‘accio’ and even combat oriented spells such as ‘protego’ and ‘reducto’.

It was a sober and thoughtful animagus who portkeyed back to England with a bag full of school brochures and several parchments full of notes, as well as five vials containing the memories of his visits. He’d learned far more than he’d expected and wanted to make sure Lucius got every bit of information. Muggle academic subjects taught alongside of magical subjects, fine arts, music, and sports both magical and muggle in nature… he truly didn’t know how they would ever manage to bring Hogwarts up to date! He wondered if the Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand schools would be as advanced as the American schools seemed to be, and looked forward to finding out.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: John Hannah, for anyone wondering, really did play guard for the New England Patriots, for his entire 13 year pro career. He was #4 in the draft in 1973, and he did retire following the 1985 season and Super Bowl XX, in which the Pats lost to the Bears 46-10. Considering that he only missed five games (out of 191) due to injury over the course of his pro career, I thought it was appropriate to have him come from a family especially talented with healing magic when I borrowed his name for my story. :-(
Politics and Plays

By the end of March, Sirius had learned that the only real difference between Canadian schools and American schools was that in Canada, quiddich was more popular than quodpot and the muggle sport of choice was ice hockey. But in general, wizarding Canada tended towards the ‘hide in plain sight’ attitude of wizarding America, and ran their schools in a similar manner. Wizarding Australia followed the British structure in that students began their formal magical education at the age of 11, but that seemed to the animagus to be as much a condition of the sheer size of the country in contrast to its relatively low population as anything else. Prior to attending one of the schools of magic, children either attended the local primary school or else were homeschooled using a standardised correspondence curriculum set by the state. The Australian magical schools, while not nearly as focused on keeping the students up-to-date with their non-magical classmates from primary school, did offer enough muggle academic subjects that magical school graduates would be able to move on to university if they wished, without needing much if anything in the way of remedial tutoring in order to qualify. It also seemed to be taken as given that students at the magical schools would continue with their correspondence courses for their muggle qualifications. His host at the Southern Australia Academy of Magic said that plenty of muggle children in more remote areas got their entire educations via those correspondence courses simply because they lived several hundred miles from the nearest town with a proper school, so none of the muggle officials in charge of such things found it odd. New Zealand’s magical educational system was quite similar to Australia’s, with only minor differences in the curriculum and a much larger percentage of students attending muggle primary schools.

After returning from his last trip, Sirius gathered up all of the literature from the various schools he’d visited, as well as his notes and memories, and headed out to the Ministry, knowing that he’d most likely find Lucius there at this time of day on a Friday. Sure enough, Lucius was with Walter Traverton and Octavius Beltren in the latter’s office; Lord Beltren not only being a member of Hogwarts’ Board of Governors but also worked for the Department of Magical Education.

“I see I’ve come at a fairly opportune moment,” Sirius said, leaning against the frame of the open door. “Lord Beltren, your department as well as the Board of Governors will be quite interested in everything I learned on my trips abroad.”

Lucius stood up, holding out a hand to take the folder of literature from the animagus. “I take it from your words that Hogwarts has fallen a bit behind the times?” he asked. The other two men looked on attentively.

“Oh, it’s worse than that,” Sirius said. “Assuming that the information we have on Durmstrang and Beauxbatons is accurate, Hogwarts is still just barely the premier school in Europe. However, European schools in general are slowly but surely becoming a laughingstock in the rest of the world.”

“Surely you’re joking,” Walter Traverton said, looking shocked.

“Unfortunately not,” Sirius replied. “According to ICW information, all of the schools in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States have averaged higher OWL and NEWT scores than European schools over the last fifty years or so, and the gap is only growing. Even the bloody Yankee customs inspector made comment about the number of British wizarding immigrants who go over there thinking they’ve had the world’s best education only to find out they’ve got a minimum of two years’ worth of further studying to qualify for an entry level position there.”

“Dear Merlin,” Lucius said, shaking his head. “I knew Hogwarts could stand some improvement,
but I didn’t think it was quite that bad. Is there anything that all these schools have in common that might help us?”

“More teachers and more classes,” Sirius said promptly. “I have to say that the American and Canadian systems impressed me the most, although they’ll be the more difficult to switch to simply because they start the children’s magical education when the children are only five or six. But in all four countries, they hold to fairly strict student-teacher ratios; something like twenty-five students per teacher, so that the teachers aren’t overwhelmed and the students all receive a goodly amount of individual attention as necessary.”

Lord Beltren blanched. “Bloody hell, and Hogwarts hasn’t got but thirteen teachers plus Madam Pince, Madam Pomfrey, and Hagrid for close to a thousand students. Even counting those three, that’s not but one teacher for something over sixty students. And even then, Binns is a ghost!”

Sirius nodded. “Yes. And the other thing is that all four countries teach muggle academic subjects alongside magical subjects. They feel that in general, giving wizarding students a muggle education makes them that much less likely to accidentally breech the Statute of Secrecy. The Americans and Canadians in particular seem to operate under the premise they call hiding in plain sight, at least for the most part. They have a few magical shopping areas similar to Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade, but they’re far more likely to do their shopping in regular shops which have a hidden magical section… a bookstore, for example, which any muggle can see and shop in might have a section that only wizards and witches can see, where they can buy magical books.”

“Merlin’s bollocks, I don’t know how we’re going to get this information through the collective heads of the Board of Governors, not to mention the Department of Magical Education,” Lucius groaned. “Half of them already want to get rid of the divination class as a cost-cutting measure.”

Sirius snorted. “I’ll agree that getting rid of divination isn’t all that bad of an idea, but much more because aside from a few parlor tricks, it can’t truly be taught. Either one has the Sight or one doesn’t. But that said, I know from having read Hogwarts: A History that there used to be quite a few classes that are no longer taught, such as enchanting, spell crafting, fencing, and basic healing, and that’s just what I remember off the top of my head. I understand that Madam Pomfrey does offer a one-term basic healing course if there are enough interested students, but it’s not an official class and it doesn’t qualify the students in any way. The others are long since vanished. So what’s changed so very much that the school can’t afford these other classes anymore?”

“Ministry budgets for one,” Walter Traverton put in, a sour expression on his face. “I swear the last three or four Ministers have come up with some reason or other to decrease the amount of funding Hogwarts gets from the Ministry each year, Fudge being no exception. And it’s getting difficult to even find a qualified defense teacher willing to take the job anymore, what with the rumors of the position being cursed. We’ve had to pay premiums there, especially to aurors who take a year’s leave to teach since they’re already less than pleased at losing a year in their careers. They’re not willing to take a pay cut on top of the loss of seniority and possible missed promotions, and teachers’ pay is quite a bit lower than even junior aurors’ pay.”

“Mmm, well, I don’t know what to suggest regarding the defense problem,” Sirius acknowledged. “But as far as the budget goes, now that people are getting used to the idea of me sitting in my own Wizengamot seat, I can start trying to drum up a few allies with an eye to educational reform. For that matter, it might be time for me to remind Dumbledore that legally I’m the one supposed to be holding the Potter proxy vote, and not him.”

“How did he end up with it anyway?” Lord Beltren asked.

Sirius shrugged. “Well, I wasn’t exactly in a position to protest, given that no thanks to him, I was
sitting in Azkaban without a trial. But the Potter proxy should have gone to me along with custody of my godson, and if not to me, the Longbottoms were next in line for custody… Alice is Harry’s godmother… and there were a few other magical families in line as well. I think… and this is just a guess on my part… that between the general celebratory craziness when You Know Who went down, and the fear that the more fanatical among his followers might try to kill Harry in revenge, Dumbledore used his status as Chief Warlock to simply declare himself Harry’s guardian and no one disputed his right to do so just because he’s Dumbledore.”

Lord Beltren frowned. “That… is unfortunately probably exactly what happened,” he admitted with some chagrin. “The man has earned his reputation fairly, I will say that much. But he’s also brilliant at getting people to do exactly what he wants them to, while making them think it was all their idea in the first place.”

“Well, be that as it may, I refuse to worry about it before Monday,” Sirius said. “You all have the informational literature from all the schools I visited, you have my notes, and you have my memories as well; may you have the joy of making some sort of sensible proposal out of all that. I intend to go home and try to convince myself of what the local time is so that I get a good night’s sleep, as I have tickets to a muggle musical play that a friend suggested I might enjoy and I’m sure I’ll like it better if I’m not exhausted.”

Lucius raised a brow. “Not another ballet? Narcissa hasn’t stopped talking of possibly going to one of those, you know, since you told us about that one you saw back around Yule.”

“I’m told that there is a lot of dance involved in this particular show,” Sirius said, “but it’s what’s called modern dance, and that the story is carried more by the singing than by the dancing.” He tried to recall what Princess Diana had told him about Cats in her letters. “If I’m remembering this all correctly, some writer fellow back in the 1930s wrote up some fanciful poems about cats to amuse his godchildren, and then later published them in a book. Then about ten years ago, a composer called Andrew Lloyd Webber took those poems and set them to music and turned them into this play. As I understand it, Cats has been performed onstage in the West End… muggle London’s theatre district… nonstop since 1981.”

Walter Traverton laughed. “Muggles wrote a play about cats, and it’s popular enough to have been performed for nearly nine years straight? I’m not sure if that’s brilliant or insane!”

Even Lucius had to chuckle at that comment. “Indeed. If you would, Sirius, when you see your friends tomorrow, ask about upcoming ballet performances and what they recommend? Hopefully something in the near future, as I’d like to treat Narcissa to an evening of some small adventure before she’s too close to her confinement for it to be safe.”

“Absolutely,” the animagus promised. “Not that there’s all that much in the way of adventure, in going to a ballet performance. I just can’t promise what shows might be scheduled or when.”

“Understandable,” Lucius said. “Come for luncheon on Sunday to tell us about it?”

“I’d be delighted,” Sirius replied. “Until Sunday, then, Lucius. Good day, gentlemen,” he added, giving a half bow in the direction of Lord Beltren and Walter Traverton before making his way out of the office.

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By the time Stephen and an excited Harry arrived at Grimmauld Place the next day, the judicious application of a mild sleeping draught and plenty of tea along with a good breakfast had Sirius feeling well-rested and just as eager to see the show as his godson. Stephen had a couple of papers
due for his university courses and so chose to remain at Grimmauld and work on them while Remus did the final edits of the wizarding culture books, and the weather was remarkably mild for the end of March, so Sirius pulled out his motorcycle for the trip to Kensington Palace to meet with Her Royal Highness and the young princes.

As the trio of boys greeted each other boisterously, with Wills and little Harry expressing envy that Harry got to ride on a motorcycle, Princess Diana gave Sirius a warm smile. “Hello, Sirius, it’s good to see you again. I hope you and Harry will stay for tea after the play, and maybe for a film as well? I know my boys have wanted to have you over to watch Willow with them since you first met.”

Sirius smiled in return. “We’d love to, Your Highness. Oh, and before I forget, my cousin and her husband are interested in seeing a ballet performance, preferably in the near future. Are any ballets scheduled to be shown anytime soon?”

Di thought for a moment. “You know, I’m not sure off the top of my head. It’s the problem with having one’s life scheduled out anything from six months to a year in advance. But I’ll have Caro look into it and she’ll have the information for you by the time we’re back from the matinee.”

“Oh, she isn’t going with us this time?” Sirius asked.

“There’s not such a need anymore, not now that the separation and pending divorce has been announced in the press,” Diana said. “Besides which, even the most obnoxious reporter would find it difficult to persuade anyone that something questionable was going on when we’ve got three young boys with us. Your godson would be considered old enough to be discreet, and even Wills might be, but my Harry is only five. Still more than young enough to be blunt as only a small boy can.”

Sirius laughed at that. “Good point! I hadn’t considered that the kids might work as chaperones just as easily as your parents or one of your ladies in waiting.”

Di nodded. “Well, they wouldn’t have before, mind, but it doesn’t matter nearly as much now.” She glanced at the clock and then called over to the boys, “All right, you lot, go visit the loo and then it will be time to leave for the theatre.”

The boys hurried off with little Harry grumbling, “Why does Mummy always say that when we’re going anywhere?”

Wills poked his brother. “Because you always complain that you’ve got to go when we’re halfway there if she doesn’t tell you to go before we leave!”

“I do not!” the younger boy protested before slamming the door in his brother’s face.

Wills just laughed. “He hates it when I’m right,” he told his older friend. “And he knows it, too.”

Harry just shook his head with a grin. “Maybe, but I bet you did the same thing when you were his age,” he pointed out. “I imagine you two do enough traveling that he’ll get used to thinking of it on his own soon enough.”

“I guess,” Wills replied as little Harry came back out still pouting.

Once all three had taken their turns and rejoined Sirius and Diana, the adults herded them down to the limo for the ride to the theatre. Sirius had gotten excellent seats quite close to the front, Diana saw with pleasure as they filed into place about fifteen minutes before curtain time.

As the trio of boys flipped through their programmes, looking at the photos and particularly getting
the giggles over one ensemble shot from “The Awefull Battle of the Pekes and the Pollicles” just because they thought it was hilarious that people were dressed up as cats pretending to be dogs, Sirius asked Diana, “Have you seen this one before?”

“No, but I’ve heard one of the songs on the wireless,” she replied. “Barbara Streisand did a version late in 1981 that did quite well on the charts. Unfortunately, Charles was never interested in going to things like this if he could avoid it, and since it premiered back when we were in the midst of the final preparations for our wedding, he used that as an excuse not to attend. So naturally, I couldn’t go either.”

Sirius nodded. “That’s a shame, you’d think he’d have welcomed a chance to take a step back from the fuss and just go on a date with his fiancée like a normal person. Not to mention, it doesn’t seem to me that spending a couple of hours at a performance that you know your lady wants to attend is such a huge sacrifice.”

Diana smiled a little sadly. “Well, I agree with you, but I was quite young back then and more inclined to believe him when he said the schedule was already quite full, and of course I wanted to please him when he said he’d prefer a quiet night in, you know?”

“I suppose, but you’d think he’d have learned the fine art of compromise, too,” Sirius said. “I remember Lily blowing up on James more than once when he forgot to take her preferences into account when making plans for something or other…” He glanced up as the lights flickered and started to dim. “I guess that’s the signal to stop talking?”

“It is, yes,” Diana told him, before nudging her sons to also quiet down.

The performance itself was amazing to all of them. Naturally, the boys’ favourite parts were the battle between the Pekes and the Pollicles, and the fight between Macavity and Munkustrap and Alonzo… the scenes with the most action. Sirius noticed Diana sniffling a bit when Grizabella sang “Memory” and instinctively wrapped his arm around her shoulders as he offered her his handkerchief. He reddened a bit and hastily removed his arm as the house lights came up at the end of the show, not wanting her sons or Harry to notice anything unusual.

For her part, Diana felt a twinge of disappointment when Sirius took his arm away. It had been quite some time since anyone but her children had offered her the least bit of physical affection and she’d missed it. But she also knew that Sirius was trying to be a gentleman and not put her into a difficult position with the press or the Royal Family. She quickly smoothed over any potential awkwardness by asking the boys which of the cat characters they thought they would be.

“I wanna be the Great Rumpus Cat!” little Harry exclaimed immediately, throwing his arms out in exuberance. “All the other cats will think I’m a hero, and the dogs will all run when they see me!”

“I’d rather be Munkustrap,” Wills said. “Old Deuteronomy might be the wise elder that everyone looks up to, but Munkustrap is really the one in charge of the Jellicle Cats. What about you, Harry?”

Harry grinned. “I want to be Mr. Mistoffelees, and be magical. I like the Rum Tum Tugger, too, but he’s more Uncle Sirius than me.”

Sirius snorted. “Maybe ten years ago that was me, kiddo, but not anymore. I’m all respectable and responsible now, or at least I’m trying to be. I’ll be Bustopher Jones as long as I don’t have to be fat.”

Harry laughed. “I think you should be Jemima, Your Royal Highness,” he told Diana, “because you care about everyone and try not to judge them before you know them.”
Di reddened. “Why thank you, Harry, what a sweet compliment! I do try my best. Anyway, let’s get going, so that we’ve plenty of time for tea and watching Willow before you and your godfather have to leave.” She started herding the boys back out of the theatre and to the waiting limo for the ride back to Kensington Palace.

After a pleasant tea, Di got the boys settled in front of the telly and popped in the video cassette. Sirius smothered a grin when little Harry took his older friend’s hand, murmuring, “One of the scary bits is right at the beginning.” Harry just smiled at the younger boy and didn’t try to pull his hand away.

The entire group quickly found themselves caught up in the fantasy story, with the trio of boys cheering the action scenes, and Sirius cracking up over the actions of the brownies, and Madmartigan’s magically-induced infatuation with Sorsha. By the end, they were all smiling.

Wills bounced excitedly. “See what I told you? I want to have a wand and turn people into animals!”

“I want to have a sword like Madmartigan’s,” little Harry chimed in. “I want to be just like him! What part do you think was the best, Mr. Black?”

Sirius snickered. “I’m just mean enough to want to conjure a bird that will poop on people who were mean to me,” he told the boy, to Di’s amusement as well as exasperation.

“Really, Sirius?” Di asked him. “An eye for an eye just leaves the whole world blind, you know.”

Sirius nodded. “Which is why I just want to embarrass, or maybe gross out the mean people. Getting pooped on by a bird might be yuck, but it doesn’t do any real harm now, does it? Who would you be?”

“I guess you have a point. And I’d like to be Kiaya, and live happily ever after with my family,” she said decisively. “What about you, Harry?”

“I think I’d like to be Willow;” he replied thoughtfully. “I’d like to have some adventure, but when it’s over, I like the thought of happily ever after with my family. Even better, I like the thought of coming home to someone who missed me while I was gone.”

“Another year and a half, and you’ll have that,” Sirius promised softly as the boys moved off to put the video away and choose what they wanted to watch together whenever they’d be able to visit again.

“The courts can’t move any faster?” Diana asked.

Sirius shook his head. “It might be possible, but Harry and I agree, it’s better we handle this slowly and cautiously, to prevent any political maneuvers that might try to prevent it. As much as we’d both love for me to take custody straightaway, by waiting until we’ve come up with an answer for every possible objection, we’ll have a much better chance of avoiding interference by the Ministry or anyone else.”

Diana reached out and gave his hand a squeeze. “I can understand why you’re going about it that way, even though I wish for the both of you that it could be different.”

“Thank you, Diana,” the animagus murmured, using her name for the first time in person. He caught himself starting to lean forward and pulled back a little before things became awkward. “I suppose I ought to get Harry back,” he said with a sigh, “even though it’s been a perfectly lovely day that I hate to see end. Oh, did your lady in waiting write up that schedule of coming ballet
performances?"

Di found herself oddly disappointed when Sirius let go of her hand. “Um… I didn’t check the desk when we arrived… it ought to be there, though.” She moved over to the desk and picked up a sheet of notebook paper. “Here it is. I hope your cousin enjoys whichever one she attends.”

“Thank you very much, and please thank whoever wrote this up for me,” Sirius said with a smile. “And I hope we’ll get to spend some more time together with the boys soon. I had a great time today.”

“As did I,” she murmured. “I’m looking forward to the next chance we have to get together as well.”

Sirius called to his godson then, and they made their farewells. As they drove back to Grimmauld Place, Sirius found himself humming “The Moments of Happiness” from the musical they’d just seen.
When Sirius arrived at Malfoy Manor for luncheon the next day, he was still smiling and humming various tunes from *Cats*. Narcissa laughed at him. “I take it you enjoyed the play,” she teased lightly, “since for once you’re not singing that horrible and incomprehensible thing that starts out with ‘Hey, hey, Mama,’ and otherwise sounds like so much noise.”

The animagus blew a raspberry at his cousin, causing her to laugh harder. “I’ll have you know, that song is a Led Zeppelin classic, and furthermore, Lily decreed it to be my song from the moment she met Padfoot… the song is called ‘Black Dog’. But yes, I did enjoy the show yesterday, and I also made sure to ask about upcoming ballet performances for you. So be nice or I won’t tell you about them,” he added with a teasing grin of his own.

“Ah, but if you deny my wife her heart’s desire, I shall be forced to take drastic measures,” Lucius drawled as he stepped into the room. “I shall take Narcissa on holiday and leave Draco in your charge.”

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing,” Sirius laughed. “Or do you want him turned into a motorbike-riding Griffyndor?”

Lucius wrinkled his nose. “Certainly not! I would never permit a son of mine to become such a hooligan.”

“Then why would you go on holiday and leave me in charge of him?” Sirius had to ask.

The blond aristocrat opened his mouth and then closed it again, looking chagrinned as Narcissa laughed again. “My cousin does have a point, Lucius,” she pointed out. “If we were to leave Draco in his charge for any length of time, he’d probably encourage our son to take up pranking others as a pastime. Not to mention, they’d probably subsist upon nothing but pizza and ice cream.”

Sirius wrinkled his nose. “Hey, I’m not that bad!”

“Yes you are,” Narcissa countered. “Sometimes, anyway, at least when it comes to pranks. I suppose you would try to do the right thing, but face it, Sirius, you don’t have it in you to teach Draco how to portray himself the way we do. You’re quite able to put on a dignified façade when you need to, but you’re far from subtle in your reactions to pretty much anything. Not that there’s anything wrong with being open, mind, it just isn’t the Malfoy way.”

“Well, as long as you’re not calling me an idiot for being open,” Sirius said with a nod.

Lucius shrugged. “Not for being open, anyway,” he deadpanned. But his mask slipped just a little when the animagus good-naturedly flashed him the two-fingered salute.

Narcissa decided to step in before Draco turned up for lunch. “Both of you, save it for later. I’m still waiting to hear about the ballet performances that we might be able to go see.”

Draco hurried in just then. “Hello, Cousin Sirius,” he said with a smile. “What’s a ballet performance?”

“Ballet is a muggle performance art, a kind of specialised dancing,” Sirius said. “Remember Harry told you about seeing *The Nutcracker* back around Yule? Your mother was interested in attending a performance and I got a list of coming ballet shows from a muggle friend yesterday.”
“Oh, that’s right,” Draco said with a nod. “I remember Mother saying something about that. Are we all going as a group, with Harry and perhaps Stephen and Remus as well?”

“Actually, Draco, I wanted to take your mother alone,” Lucius said. “At least for the first time we go. Sirius and Stephen both warned us that most ballets are… something that boys your age don’t usually enjoy, with The Nutcracker being an exception. Besides which, I believe your mother deserves a special evening out before the baby comes and she won’t be able to go much of anywhere for a time.”

Draco thought about that for a moment and nodded. “All right, Father. But if there ever is a ballet that you think I might like, I do want to see it.”

“Maybe we can all go to see The Nutcracker together, when we get close to Yule this year,” Sirius suggested. “It’s something of a holiday tradition for the muggles, and it performs every year in the month of December. Certainly the baby would be old enough to be left with a nanny elf for the evening by then, so all three of you could go.” Turning his attention back to the elder Malfoys, he told them, “As for performances in the immediate future, there will be half a dozen performances of something called The Sleeping Beauty in the middle of April, and in late April and early May there will be a dozen shows of Swan Lake.”

“What do you know about those two shows?” Narcissa asked.

Sirius shrugged a little. “They’re both based on what muggles would call fairy tales or folk tales. Swan Lake is about a prince who falls in love with a girl who’s been cursed to live as a swan by day, only reverting to her human form at night. Supposedly the curse will break if a faithful man falls in love with her, but the evil wizard who cursed her has a daughter of his own and tricks the prince into betraying the swan maiden with his daughter. Something like that anyway. And The Sleeping Beauty is about a princess who was cursed by an evil fairy who felt insulted by the king and queen. The princess was supposed to cut her hand on a spindle… whatever that is… and die. But a good fairy managed to partly block the curse, so that when the princess cut herself, she would have a hundred-year-long nap instead, and be awakened by her true love’s kiss. I can ask Moony to help me find out more this week, if you want me to.”

“Please do,” Narcissa said, “so we can decide which one would be better. I assume Lucius will need one of those tuxedo things to be properly dressed? And will any of my dress robes do, or will I also be better off getting something muggle? I noticed when we were at Harrods that the more conservative muggle dresses looked rather similar to dress robes.”

“Definitely go for the tuxedo,” Sirius said. “I’d get a nice muggle formal gown for the occasion if I was female, but that’s just my opinion. I do know that stores such as Harrods carry clothing especially designed for mothers-to-be, so you can be up to the minute in fashion and still be comfortable.”

“That’s good to know,” Narcissa said with a smile. From there, the conversation turned to Draco’s studies and how he was progressing in his muggle history and science lessons as they enjoyed their luncheon.

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In Surrey, Harry was just lifting Suliss from her tank to give it a good cleaning when his aunt tapped on his door. “Harry?” she said a little tentatively. “May I speak with you for a moment?”

“Sure, Aunt Petunia, come on in,” he invited. “You can sit at the desk if you want, so that Suliss won’t bother you by mistake.” He gently set the silvery reptile onto his bed, stroking lightly along
her back as she hissed in pleasure.

Petunia stepped inside and sat stiffly at the desk, eyeing the snake a little nervously. “I, er, wanted to make sure that you’re still getting enough to eat, what with Dudley’s new diet,” she said awkwardly. “I know you really haven’t eaten the sweets that he has, but…” She trailed off with a helpless little gesture.

Harry smiled as he scooped the used paper towel litter from the snake tank. “I’m fine, Aunt Petunia, but thank you for asking. Stephen showed me some pamphlets on proper nutrition when he first started coming ‘round to spend time with me, and honestly, the foods you’re making now are much closer to what was listed in the pamphlets than before. You know, more veg and less fried stuff and sugary stuff.” He paused for a moment and then asked, “Um… are you willing to see something you’d call freakish, if I can promise it won’t hurt you in any way?”

His aunt looked uncomfortable, but nodded. “I suppose,” she said, visibly steeling herself.

Moving to his trunk, Harry opened the padlock and then opened the cold storage compartment. “When Stephen bought me this trunk, he had one section enchanted to be like a little refrigerator so that I could keep snacks for myself in my room where Dudley wouldn’t see them. But since I’d read those pamphlets, I wanted to make sure my snacks were as healthy as possible. I don’t know if Dudley would like anything like this, but it’s something you might try giving him for snacks now, if he’ll eat them instead of his usual crisps and biscuits.” He pulled out his packets of baby carrots and hummus dip, granola bars, and his latest find of apple slices packaged with peanut butter dip.

Petunia couldn’t help but gasp a little as Harry pulled open the hidden cold compartment in his trunk, but peered interestingly at the snacks he pulled out of it. “Where do you get those?” she asked.

“Tesco, usually,” he replied, replacing them back into the compartment and closing it again.

“So the snacks are just normal, then?” she asked. “It’s just the trunk that’s freakish… er, magical?”

Harry chuckled. “Well, the trunk, and some of what I keep inside it,” he said before he closed the main compartment. “Wizarding photos move, sort of like little clips from cinema films, and the box you gave me had a photo album in it as well as a frame with my parents’ wedding picture and another of them right after I was born.”

Petunia looked shamefaced. “I… didn’t go to their wedding,” she admitted. “Vernon had met the Potter boy at our wedding, and hated him. Partly for being a fre… a wizard, and partly because… well, they were like two dogs both trying to be the pack leader, you know? The Potter boy thought Vernon was a pompous stuffed shirt, and Vernon thought the Potter boy was an arrogant hooligan who needed taking down a notch or two. Vernon flat out refused to attend their wedding, and I didn’t want to do anything to upset him especially so soon after we’d gotten married ourselves, so I stood by his decision and stayed home as well. I wish now that I hadn’t; I’m sure my refusal hurt Lily as well as our parents.”

“It’s just the one wedding picture,” Harry said, “but you’re welcome to look at it if you want.” He pulled the frame from the trunk, opening it to show the photos within.

Petunia took the frame, gazing at the two pictures as the figures within turned to wave at her. The wedding couple spun around in another kiss, while the new parents pointed towards the camera and then lifted the infant Harry’s tiny hand to make him ‘wave’ as well. Her eyes glistened as she softly said, “They looked so happy.”
“I’m told they were,” Harry said. “Stephen’s managed to introduce me to some of their friends, including my godfather. He’s the one who was in prison even though he was innocent, and is the one who’s going to hopefully get proper custody of me once I start at Hogwarts.”

“Is there anything I can do to help with that?” Petunia asked. “I mean… I don’t mind that you’re here so much anymore, but… well, as much as I hate to admit it, I took out my… my resentment of your mother… on you, and let Vernon treat you horribly. I’m trying to keep Dudley away from you since he treats you the way Vernon taught him to, but he’s so used to getting his own way… I just… I realise now that you deserve a good home as much as anyone, and I also know that this house isn’t it.”

Harry paused as he scooped more shredded paper towels into the snake tank. “I don’t think there’s anything you can do right now,” he said carefully. “But I do appreciate that you want to help. I suppose when the time comes, if you’re willing to sign something saying that you’re willing to give me up to my godfather, that might be useful. Right now, though, we’re still working on keeping Dumbledore from knowing that I’m in contact with any wizards at all. We still don’t know what he’s got planned, but since he left me here like he did, and also didn’t make sure my godfather got a trial… well, something’s not right.”

Petunia nodded. “I know. Vernon did take you to an orphanage once, right after you were left here. Someone… that Headmaster Dumbledore… brought you back and did something to make Vernon forget he wanted you gone. But he didn’t do anything to make Vernon treat you nicely, either.”

Harry shrugged a little as he replaced the climbing branches and butter-tub ‘caves’ into the snake tank before retrieving Suliss from his bed and setting her back inside. She hissed her pleasure as she slithered along a branch. “I don’t like it, but there’s not much to be done,” he said.

“Well… I suppose not, but… I’d like to try to make up for the past, at least a little bit,” Petunia said. “I… I’ve come to see that you’re as much a victim of Dumbledore as I am. I just… don’t know you, do I? Even though you’ve lived here all this time. I never let myself see you as anything but an obligation, at least not until the last couple of months or so.”

“Maybe you could tell me a bit about my mum?” Harry asked hesitantly. “My godfather knew her, of course, but he’d been friends with my dad for much longer, so most of the stories he tells me are of him, or of both of them after they started dating. I’d like to know more about my mum.”

Petunia’s eyes softened a little. “I can do that, yes. She and I were close once, when we were much younger. Before that horrid little Snape boy from Spinner’s End caught her doing something fr… magical in the play park, and told her about magic. His dad was normal but his mum was a witch so he knew all about magic and Hogwarts and such even though his family lived in the normal world. And then of course Lily got her acceptance letter to Hogwarts when she turned eleven and I had to keep on with normal schooling at Cokeworth Secondary and that’s when I started resenting her. She’d been my best friend for years, and looked up to me… and then she was off learning things I couldn’t hope to do and leaving me behind. That’s how it felt at the time, anyway. I know better now, but… well, I let myself be blinded by my feelings then.”

“Mummy!” Dudley called from downstairs. “I’m thirsty!”

“I’d better go for now,” Petunia said. “I don’t want Dudley to try to carry a drink with him still on crutches. I’ll be glad when he gets the cast off next week. But remind me later and I’ll make some time to go over the photo album I gave you for Christmas and tell you the story behind the pictures.”

Harry smiled. “I will, and thanks, Aunt Petunia.” As she vanished to hurry downstairs and tend to
Dudley, he started humming ‘Grizabella the Glamour Cat’ from *Cats*. Remembering the conversation comparing each member of the group to one or more of the characters from the show, he decided that he could see his aunt as Grizabella… someone who had made choices in the past that she regretted now, and who just wanted to be happy and accepted.

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At Buckingham Palace, Princess Diana and the young Princes joined the Queen, Prince Philip, and Prince Charles for dinner at Her Majesty’s request. Conversation during the meal was kept light, the two young boys chattering to their father and grandparents about going to see *Cats* with their friend Harry and his godfather Mr. Black, and then watching the film *Willow* afterwards before Mr. Black took Harry home again. After the meal, however, Prince Philip took the boys aside so that the Queen and Prince Charles could speak privately with Diana.

“I understand this is the third time Mr. Black has accompanied you on some excursion or another with the boys and young Mr. Potter,” the Queen said. “Is this a wise thing, Diana?”

Di managed to refrain from rolling her eyes. “It is the third time, yes, Your Majesty. Young Harry’s tutor Stephen Coyner was supposed to have come along on the visit to Great Ormond Street Hospital back in October, but had an exam he was unable to reschedule. It was at his suggestion that Mr. Black took his place, his main thought being that it would please Harry to have an extra opportunity to spend time with his godfather. Mr. Coyner did accompany us to see *The Nutcracker* back in December, and I’m the one who permitted Harry to invite another person along once Charles said that he would not be joining us since that meant we had an extra seat available in the box. As for our jaunt to see *Cats* yesterday, that was actually Mr. Black who invited me and the boys to come along when he decided to take Harry to the show. I accepted both because I wanted to see the show and hadn’t yet had a chance due to my obligations, and because I knew that Wills and little Harry would enjoy another chance to spend time with their friend. I’m told that both Mr. Coyner as well as some other friend of Mr. Black’s were invited but declined due to other obligations of their own.”

Charles frowned. “But our divorce isn’t yet final,” he said. “It looks bad when you’re seen out with a man, even if the boys are with you.”

Diana’s eyes flashed angrily. She kept her voice low so as not to alert her sons that there was an issue, but her words and tone made it clear that she was no longer the ‘Shy Di’ who’d been too unsure of herself to do anything but submit to the wishes of her husband and mother in law. “Considering how often you’ve been photographed with Camilla both before and after our separation was announced, I hardly see anything wrong with occasionally being seen with the godfather of my sons’ friend when in the presence of the children. Even the most tawdry of the tabloid paparazzi would have a difficult time accusing me of misbehavior with someone when I’ve only been in that person’s company three times in the last six months!”

“Still,” Charles persisted unwisely, “you are the mother of my heirs. Even though we are divorcing, you ought to be more circumspect…”

“Oh, do wake up and join the twentieth century,” Diana interrupted him in a furious hiss. “You cheated on me, you pompous arse, and now you’ve got the nerve to tell me I’m not to have a personal life because I’m the mother of your heirs? You’ll get to marry your whore and live happily ever after whilst I rot away in a cloister because God forbid that your heirs have some masculine influence in their lives other than yourself? Frankly, I think it would do them a world of good to have someone besides you as a role model. Preferably a man with a spine and a sense of honour, since you apparently have neither!” She stormed out of the room, calling to Wills and Harry to say
goodbye to their grandparents and father so they could return home.

Charles stood looking slightly gobsmacked at Diana’s tirade, only shaking himself out of it to hug his sons in farewell before sending them out to their mother. Once they were gone, he sighed and looked at his own mother. “That could have gone better,” he said dryly.

“She has got a point, you know, Charles,” Queen Elizabeth said with a sigh of her own. “While she could have expressed herself more diplomatically, it isn’t fair to expect her to shut herself away with the boys while you’re out and about with Camilla. You and Diana are officially separated and the divorce will be final come June.”

“So why can’t she wait until then to go gallivanting about?” Charles said rather petulantly.

Her Majesty frowned at her heir. “Why didn’t you wait and ask her for a divorce before taking back up with Camilla?” she asked. “Especially given that she and Andrew Parker-Bowles are still married and I’ve yet to hear anything with regards to the two of them seeking a divorce.”

Charles reddened. “They’ve both gone their own way for years now,” he said. “And I thought Diana knew, anyway.”

Now Prince Philip frowned. “What do you mean, you thought Diana knew? Are you saying that you were seeing Camilla the whole time you courted Diana? That you proposed to Diana even though you had no intention of being faithful?”

“You’re the one who told me to either propose or break it off,” Charles protested. “It wasn’t as if I could marry the woman I wanted at that point, and everyone was waiting for me to marry and produce an heir, so I went ahead and proposed to the one who had the family’s approval.”

“I’m sorry now that I did,” Philip said. “But then, I had no idea that you hadn’t broken things off with Camilla before starting to court Diana.” He turned and left the room abruptly.

Queen Elizabeth shook her head. “Well, Charles, all I can say now is that if Diana didn’t already have a personal interest in Mr. Black, your attitude might well push her into taking such an interest. I was merely trying to learn how she viewed the man when you opened your mouth and proceeded to thoroughly upset her. I’ll do my best to persuade her not to denigrate you to your sons, but I suggest you think long and hard before saying anything else to her about her social life. I don’t think you realise just how popular she is with the people, nor how far your own star has waned since word of your separation became official. There have been more than a few suggestions put about that perhaps you ought to have followed your Great-Uncle Edward’s example and abdicated your position if you truly felt you couldn’t do without the woman you love.” She squeezed her son’s hand and then followed her husband.

Charles just stood by the window, staring out at the courtyard with unseeing eyes as he lost himself in the thought that perhaps Diana was right about one thing. Perhaps he ought to have had the spine all those years ago to have stood up to those who said Camilla was unsuitable and either found a way to elope with her or at least refused to consider even dating anyone else until he’d worn them down into acceptance.
More Talks

A few weeks later, Harry was sitting at the kitchen table with his aunt, the photo album of Lily and a book of healthy recipes open in front of them. Petunia smiled as she indicated a photo of herself and her sister with a number of other girls roasting sausages over a bonfire. “That was the last year we were in Brownie Guides together,” she said. “I was ten and Lily was nine. But it seemed like every time our Pack did anything out in the woods, I’d get stung by a bee or I’d trip and tumble into a nettle patch or otherwise injure myself so I decided to quit rather than move on to become a regular Guide. We did have some fun, mind, but I got good and tired of being referred to as ‘Troublesome Tuney’ every time one of the girls had to call the leaders to bring the first aid kit.”

Harry managed not to laugh outright, although he couldn’t quite contain a grin. “Did you like anything to do outdoors? And what about my mum, what did she like?”

“I did like bicycling,” Petunia told him. “It kept me on the roads and out of the scrub. It wasn’t that I minded being outdoors so very much, I just prefer more civilized or at least cultivated outdoor spaces over ‘getting back to nature’ as they called it in my day. Lily enjoyed that part of it a bit more; she liked going berrying and didn’t mind getting scratched up by the brambles. And even before she met that Snape boy, she was always mashing up flowers and leaves and berries that weren’t edible, trying to make dyes from them. I remember her being thrilled when our gran showed her how to colour eggs with onion skins and red cabbage. Gran worked as a plotter for the WAAF back in World War Two, and got to know some of the Yankee WACs who held the same position in the American forces. Anyway, Gran told us that the Yanks celebrate Easter with dyed hard-boiled eggs, and so when Easter came round they managed to get hold of some eggs somehow and boiled one batch with onion skins which turned them rusty orange, and another batch with a couple of red cabbage leaves which turned them a sort of grayish blue. Anyway, Lily had all sorts of fun with that… I think the family had hard-boiled eggs for breakfast or egg salad sandwiches for lunch every day for a month after Gran showed her that, because she kept on making more.”

Harry did laugh this time. “Did she ever succeed in making dyes from anything else?”

“Well… sort of. But not in a good way,” Petunia said with a chuckle of her own at the memory. “She thought that beets would make a pretty colour as a dye, and somehow or other got hold of a few very tiny ones to experiment with, or at least, that was her intent. But she had put them in the pocket of her dress to carry home, and then forgot about them. The dress went through the wash with the beets still in the pocket, and came out with huge pink splotches all over it; as did several other items in that load of wash. The rest of that load of wash all came out with a pinkish tint to it. Mum was beside herself, as there had been a particularly nice, brand new blouse of hers which got ruined. She cut Lily’s pocket money by half until she’d paid back the cost of that blouse. I was actually pleased, though, because the pinkish colour that seeped into the entire load turned a light blue skirt of mine into a very pretty shade of lavender. Still, after that happened, Lily was much more careful when mucking about with plants for dyes.”

“I would think so,” Harry said with a chuckle. He glanced at the clock and asked, “Would you like help with dinner?”

“No, but thank you. Dudley’s lost half a stone as of this morning, so I thought we’d celebrate and order out for pizza,” his aunt replied. “Thin crust with ham and all the veg won’t completely ruin his diet, but it will seem like a reward to him, especially as I’ve found a variety of no-sugar-added individual sized fruit pies for tonight’s afters.”

Harry nodded. “All right. I’m going to get a head start on my reading, then, since Ms. Beckett said
we’re going to have to do a book report over the Easter hols. We get to choose from four books, but I’m not sure which one I want to do yet, so I might read them all and then decide.”

“Which books?” Petunia sounded interested. “Perhaps I can encourage Dudders to read one or more of them as well. His teacher thinks he might do better in school if he’d read a bit more.”

“We get to choose from *The Phantom Tollbooth*, *Tales of a Fourth-Grade Nothing*, *Charlotte’s Web*, and *The Borrowers,*” Harry said. “I got *Tales of a Fourth-Grade Nothing* from the library today.”

“I don’t believe I’ve heard of that one,” Petunia said. “What’s it about?”

Harry thought for a moment, trying to remember the blurb on the book jacket. “Um, it’s about an American boy growing up in New York City, and the fun and troubles he has with his family, especially with his little brother who can be quite annoying.”

“Well, let me know if you like it, and if you do, I’ll try to get Diddy interested.”

“All right, Aunt Petunia,” Harry said as he headed upstairs to do his reading.

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In Wiltshire, Malfoy Manor was humming with activity. Sirius had joined the family for an early dinner, and was now helping Lucius adjust his bow tie for his evening out with Narcissa. “There, you look perfect,” the animagus said with a smile. “You’ve got the tickets, right? And remember, there will be valet parking… you pull up and get out of the car, and an attendant will give you a claim ticket and move the car to the car park while you and Narcissa go into the theatre. When you leave again, give them back the claim ticket and they’ll bring the car ‘round for you.”

“I just hope Narcissa enjoys her evening,” Lucius said a little nervously. “Especially as Dr. Gardner suggested on our last visit that precautionary bed rest was likely on the horizon.”

“I’m sure she’ll love the ballet,” Sirius reassured the older man. “The Sleeping Beauty is one of the classics, according to my friend, and in fact, this year is its one hundredth anniversary. Plus it’s a story with a happy ending, rather than a tragedy.”

“Which is half the reason we selected it over Swan Lake,” Lucius admitted. “The other half of the reason being the probability of bed rest for Narcissa and the later performance dates for Swan Lake. Dr. Gardner did say that even if bed rest is prescribed as a precautionary measure, Narcissa could most likely get up for any special events, such as Draco’s birthday. But I’d rather not risk her health or that of the baby for something like the ballet, you know?”

Sirius gave a sympathetic smile. “I can imagine, anyway,” he said. “But never having been married, let alone a concerned father-to-be, I don’t actually know.” The two men headed down to the hall to await Narcissa.

Draco was already there, glancing up at the staircase. “You look very handsome, Father,” he said. “Cousin Sirius, may we play Monopoly tonight?”

Sirius chuckled. “No, Monopoly is never as fun when there’s just two people playing. I bought a new game today, something called Othello, and we can learn it together.”

“All right,” the young boy said with a smile. His expression turned to admiration as he caught sight of his mother walking carefully down the stairs. “Mother, you look beautiful!”
“I must agree with our son, Narcissa,” Lucius said, his tone warm as he offered his hand to assist her down the last few steps. “That gown is most becoming.”

“Thank you, darling, and you look quite nice yourself,” Narcissa said as she took in his tuxedo. “I see you got your tie and cummerbund to match my dress perfectly.”

“The one advantage of being magical,” he chuckled. “That shade of blue looks lovely with your hair.”

“And it doesn’t make me look too fat?”

“You’re expecting, not fat,” Lucius said firmly. “So no, it doesn’t make you look fat.” Her chiffon gown, in a shade of blue somewhere between royal blue and cobalt, had an empire waistline accented by silver and crystal beads and then flowed gently down over her expanded belly to swirl around her feet and offering only the barest glimpse of matching shoes. Sapphire and diamond earrings and a matching necklace completed the ensemble. “I do believe I shall be the envy of every man in attendance tonight,” he added as he offered her his arm. “Shall we be off?”

Narcissa tucked her hand into her husband’s arm but paused to give Draco a kiss on the cheek. “Don’t drive Sirius too crazy with questions, darling, and don’t stay up too terribly late. We’ll tell you all about the ballet in the morning.”

Draco smiled. “I can’t wait. Have a wonderful night, Mother, Father.”

“Good night, Draco,” Lucius said as he led Narcissa out. The couple climbed into the Rolls Royce for the trip into London.

Arriving in good time for the show, Lucius turned over the car key to the valet as he’d been instructed, and led his wife into the theatre. While they maintained their Malfoy Masks enough to keep from gaping at the opulence within, they both had to admit that they were impressed by the elegance of the lobby, and even more impressed by the auditorium when an usher escorted them to their box seats.

Narcissa found herself enraptured by the grace of the dancers and the beauty of the music, while Lucius had to admit that he was astounded at the ingenuity shown by the muggle special effects lighting as well as their ability to convey a story in music and dance. As they talked about the show on their way home, Narcissa smiled softly. “You know, Lucius, I think we ought to consider naming our daughter Aurora. Maybe it isn’t quite a star or constellation name, but if you consider the aurora borealis, it still counts. And I like it much better than either Columba or Aquila as we’d been thinking.”

“Aurora Verina Malfoy… I do like that,” Lucius said softly. “Yes, let’s name her Aurora, for the northern lights and for our first ballet.” He turned into the drive at the Manor and shut the car off, then reached over to lay his hand on the swell of Narcissa’s belly. “What do you think, little sweetheart, do you like the name Aurora?” he asked, and laughed when his hand was nudged quite emphatically from within.

Narcissa giggled as well. “I do believe she approves,” she said before yawning. “However, I also believe it’s a bit past her mother’s bedtime.”

“Past mine as well,” Lucius admitted, “given that there is a Wizengamot session in the morning. Fortunately, there isn’t anything too urgent on the agenda, unless something’s come up in the last day or two, and I haven’t heard of anything.” He exited the car and walked around to open Narcissa’s door and help her out.
She took his arm and levered herself out, letting him guide her into the house. “Nor have I, and I
did have lunch with Cordelia Greengrass yesterday. She would have said something if her husband
knew of anything in particular coming up.”

“Oh good, so they’ll read the minutes from last session, we’ll most likely hear a few proposals for
new laws… and if we’re lucky, one of them might have been thought out well enough to actually
make sense… and then we’ll be told if there are any court cases to be judged. Not likely, or I’d
probably have heard of it before now. So, nice and simple and boring tomorrow, I hope,” Lucius
said as they entered their bedroom. He kissed his wife softly before heading for his dressing room.
“Good night, Narcissa.”

She added a hug to that kiss before retiring to her own dressing room. “Good night, Lucius.”

After spending a pleasant evening playing Othello with Draco, Sirius headed back to 12
Grimmauld Place. “Hey, Moony, how was your evening?” he asked.

“Quiet, and yours?” the werewolf asked his friend.

“Othello is a pretty fun game,” Sirius said. “You’d probably like it. Want to learn to play?”

Remus shrugged. “Sure, but not tonight. It’s late enough I don’t want to get all into something that
will get me interested and thinking so that I won’t end up getting to sleep until 3 am or later.”

Sirius chuckled. “Yeah, I can understand that one. And I don’t want to stay up too terribly late
myself, since there’s a Wizengamot session tomorrow.”

“Anything important?” Remus wanted to know.

“Nah, just routine politics,” Sirius said. “I swear, half of what’s done in session is just so much
bollocks to make it look as though we’re actually doing something. Most law proposals that get put
up for debate as so poorly thought out that even the member proposing it can’t explain why it’s
such a good idea.”

Remus laughed. “Well, if you ever want to propose a law to make it easier for werewolves to hold
jobs, I’d be most appreciative. And you can defend it by pointing out that if we can work, we can
then afford the wolfsbane potion, not to mention, we can afford a place to transform safely.”

Sirius sighed. “I’m still working on enough support for something like that, Moony,” he said.
“Lucius is on my side now that he’s gotten to know you, and he’s working on his allies. But Fudge
still has a good sized block of supporters, and one of his main advisors is Dolores Umbridge. She’s
probably the most bigoted bitch it’s ever been my misfortune to have met. She hates everyone and
everything… veela, centaurs, werewolves, giants, merfolk, muggles, you name it. In fact, I’ve done
some research, and she’s been behind four of the last five laws restricting the rights of werewolves
and other nonhumans.”

“Ugh,” Remus said eloquently.

Sirius shrugged. “At least I know what to expect from her,” he said. “I won’t say it’s anything but a
right royal pain in the arse in dealing with her, but she’s terrible at being subtle.”

“And it’s always easier to counter the threat you can see,” Remus said, nodding in understanding.

“Exactly,” Sirius said. “Believe me, I do want to get some of the worst of her laws repealed, but
even with Lucius’ help, I just don’t have enough backing to pull it off yet. Hopefully by summer, though.”

Remus smiled. “I know you’re doing your best. So, aside from politics, what else do you have planned for the next few days?”

“I’m hoping to hear back from Princess Diana soon,” the animagus said. “She and her boys are scheduled to make some sort of tour in Canada when the princes are off school for the Easter hols, so they probably won’t get to spend time with Harry until the summer hols. But her last letter said something about possibly having us up to visit Balmoral for Harry’s birthday in July, if the Queen allows it. She said her original plan had been for a time at Highgrove, but as Prince Charles is mostly living there now that they’re officially separated, she feels that it wouldn’t be appropriate for her to invite people there anymore.”

“Understandable,” Remus said with another nod. “I can only imagine how awkward the entire situation must be for her. I mean, it’s hard enough to imagine one’s marriage breaking up like that anyway, but to have to live with the sort of public scrutiny she has to deal with besides… not to mention that given her sons’ ages and their status, she really has no choice but to maintain cordial relations with the Royal Family, doesn’t she? And I expect there aren’t too many people she can trust to even talk to when things get tough.”

Sirius nodded. “True enough. She’s vented to me a bit, simply because I wouldn’t know how to go about feeding information to the muggle press even if I wanted to. Which I don’t, of course. Why the muggle press wants to write about Diana so bloody constantly is beyond me, especially since half of what they write isn’t true. I honestly think it’s worse than those stupid Boy-Who-Lived story books; at least those are fiction and are marketed as fiction, whereas the news articles printed about Her Royal Highness purport to be the truth. But anyway, yes, she does have to see Her Majesty regularly because of the princes, although as I understand it, the two of them get along reasonably well.” He reddened slightly as he admitted, “Actually, though, I’m hoping to hear back soon because in my last letter to her, I offered to take her out dancing as soon as her divorce is final. She’s said a few times how much she always enjoyed going out dancing at a club, and how rarely she’s been able to go since Prince Charles started courting her because he hates it so.”

“Why Padfoot, you’re blushing,” Remus teased with a grin. “I do believe you might just be harbouring a bit of affection for the lady. Are you?”

“Maybe,” Sirius admitted, the colour on his cheeks deepening. “She seems quite nice, from the few times we’ve spoken in person, and I would like to get the chance to know her better.”

Remus looked surprised. “Are you truly thinking about courting her, then? I’m so used to thinking of you as the Lothario of the group… I mean, I don’t recall you ever maintaining an interest in a girl for more than a couple of weeks before. No, I take that back, you did date Moira McInnes for two full months back in seventh year even though she had the reputation of being the school broom.”

The animagus laughed. “Why do you think I dated her?” he teased his friend in return. “Let’s just say that Moira taught me a few things that stood me in good stead with most of the girls I dated after her. Seriously, though, back then I didn’t want to get involved with anyone because of the war and all. I could see how much his worry over Lily affected James, and I was determined to avoid the same thing happening to me. If things had gone as they ought to have following their deaths, I might well have found someone to settle down with, someone who would have helped me raise Harry with all the love he deserves. As for Princess Diana… well, she already has a soft spot of her own for Harry, and if it ever came to it, I’d be more than pleased to be allowed to help raise her
boys as well. Mind, I’ve no idea if anything even could come of it, between her and the boys being muggles not to mention the fact that Wills is second in line to inherit Britain’s crown. It might well be that the Queen and the Prince of Wales will force her into some kind of agreement to either not get involved with anyone until her sons are older or else give up custody of them so that they’re not being influenced by anyone who isn’t already a relation. So to answer your question, yes, I am truly thinking about courting Diana, but I don’t know if she’ll be able to accept such a courtship.”

Remus shook his head thoughtfully. “Well, I suppose all I can do is wish you the best of luck. I’d like to say that the Queen and Prince Charles wouldn’t be so petty as to deny Princess Diana a social life… and I honestly don’t think they would… but given that the little princes are involved, that does complicate matters to a degree. Hopefully I’m right and she’ll also want to get to know you a little better.”

“And what about you, Remus? You don’t plan on remaining single forever, do you?” Sirius asked.

The werewolf shook his head. “You know as well as I do that as things stand, I can’t marry,” he said. “How could I support a family when I can’t hold a job? I know, I’ll have an income from the textbooks, but there’s no guarantee that will last. Besides which, I wouldn’t want to put anyone at risk of infection. What if I did marry and have a baby that also turned out to be a werewolf?”

Sirius looked determined. “I’ll get those sodding laws changed if it’s the last thing I do,” he said. “As for the risk, the right woman will take it on gladly if it means she gets you. If you’re that worried about the baby issue, you can always just not have any. You’d have to ask Stephen for more details, but I understand there is a muggle surgery that will prevent a man from becoming a father, ever.”

“Really?” Remus looked intrigued in spite of himself.

“Really,” Sirius confirmed. “It’s something I’ve thought about myself, given the level of crazy in my family history. But if there’s the slightest chance things could work out with Diana, I probably won’t. When I first heard about the surgery, I hadn’t figured on ever getting married unless I had to for some sort of political alliance and if that was the case, the chances of the witch in question being a second or third cousin would be fairly high. I wouldn’t want a child with someone so closely related after hearing what Stephen said about genetics and health problems. But there’s no chance of Diana being closely related, and I do know that she’d like at least one more child in hopes of getting a daughter.”

Remus laughed. “Merlin, Padfoot, not even courting yet and already talking about possible children? You do have it bad, old friend!”

“Piss off, Moony!”

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Meanwhile in Kensington Palace, Princess Diana was blushing as she read her latest letter from Sirius Black. He wants to take me dancing, she thought, to celebrate my freedom when the divorce comes final. But does he mean the invitation as a friend? Or as an actual date? Does it matter right now? Would I like to date him, if it comes to that? I think I would… between the few times we’ve spoken and the letters we’ve written, I think Sirius and I have more in common than Charles and I ever did. All right, stop overthinking things… make a decision and answer!

Reaching for her personal stationery and a pen, she started writing.

Dear Sirius,
I’d love to go out dancing sometime. We can settle on a time and place as soon as I know for sure when the divorce will be final...
The Easter holidays came and went, with Harry spending the majority of the holiday and celebrating the Spring Equinox at 12 Grimmauld Place with Sirius and Remus. The only other excitement to occur before the end of May was Lucius sending word that he’d determined the location of another horcrux as well as the Dark Lord’s notes and passed the information to Madam Bones, whose team of aurors and Unspeakables retrieved them and transferred the horcrux from what turned out to be the Peverell family signet ring before destroying it as they had the ones on the cup and the locket. The bad news was, the notes were written in some language which no one in the Department of Mysteries could recognize, so for the moment, they’d proven to be of no help.

During the same time period, Sirius was on a personal mission to gain as many allies in the Wizengamot as possible. His friendly relations with Lucius had many of the traditionally Light families wary at first, while the majority of the traditionally Dark families distrusted him due to his former position as an auror and his known association with Dumbledore’s Order of the Phoenix during the war. However, his strict adherence to protocol in demanding the Potter proxy back from Chief Warlock earned him the grudging respect of the Dark families while his efforts at increasing the Hogwarts budget and his arguments in favor of repealing the most restrictive of the werewolf laws gained him a modicum of acceptance from the Light families.

It also made him into Dolores Umbridge’s new favourite target. He’d just finished his proposal to ease the restrictions on werewolves; in part, to forbid employers from firing a werewolf for being a werewolf and to require said employers to schedule any werewolf employees the day off following each full moon, and in part suggesting that certain areas be set aside as reserves for werewolves to spend their transformations well away from population centres. Madam Longbottom and Lord Greengrass in particular were looking thoughtful and seemed about to ask an intelligent question when, “Hem hem,” came Madam Umbridge's falsely girlish voice. “Lord Black, are you seriously proposing that we allow dark creatures freedom to live and work among us?”

Sirius closed his eyes for a moment in a silent plea for patience. “And just what is it about people suffering from lycanthropy that makes you classify them as dark creatures?” he asked in return.

“Well, everyone knows that werewolves are evil,” Madam Umbridge trilled. “They are vicious, filthy beings that would as soon savage a wizard as look at one. I realise that your time in Azkaban may have affected your memory, but surely you recall Fenrir Greyback leading his pack on raids for He Who Must Not Be Named during the war! What further proof do you need?”

“All right, I will grant your example of Fenrir Greyback,” Sirius said with a nod. “However, I don't believe you can point to him as a representative of all werewolves any more than you could point to Arthur Weasley as a representative of all wizards. I know I'm not nearly as obsessed with muggle artifacts as he is, nor am I as inclined to avoiding conflict at all costs. Are you even acquainted with any werewolves?”

“Certainly not!” Madam Umbridge huffed.

“Well, I know one, and he's about as different from Fenrir Greyback as Arthur Weasley is from Lucius Malfoy,” Sirius said, shooting his cousin's husband a quick glance of apology for bringing his name into the debate. Lucius nodded slightly in return. “While I won't give this man's name,” Sirius went on, “I will state that I'm not the only person here who has met him, and it's quite probable that most of those who have met him are unaware that he is a werewolf. He's certainly not a slavering beast. For all but a couple of nights each month, he's a perfectly normal wizard, albeit one with a better sense of hearing and smell than most of us. And since the development of the
wolfsbane potion, for those couple of nights he simply takes his potion and curls up on a rug to sleep.”

Madam Umbridge sputtered as Minister Fudge looked aghast. “Really, Lord Black, how can you say such a thing? How could members of the Wizengamot know a werewolf?”

“Because he was in my year at Hogwarts,” Sirius said flatly, glad that Remus had given him permission to use his story. “Headmaster Dumbledore made the arrangements himself to allow this young victim of Fenrir Greyback to get an education while keeping the other students safe. Remember, this was before the wolfsbane potion was available. The headmaster had the young man escorted from his dorm each full moon, and taken to a place away from the school where he could transform without endangering others. If this could be done in a school full of children, at a time when wolfsbane didn't exist, how can we as decent and compassionate people deny others the chance to be productive members of society?”

A low hum broke out across the chamber as quite a few members started speculating as to the identity of the werewolf Sirius mentioned; while a number of others started berating Dumbledore for his past actions which they felt put the students of the time at risk. Still others looked less than pleased, quite obviously not wanting to be seen as lacking compassion yet just as obviously not entirely willing to ease the restrictions on werewolves. Madam Longbottom called out over the buzz of conversations, “Lord Black, when you suggest setting places aside for werewolves to transform, are you saying the Ministry should purchase property for the purpose?”

Sirius shook his head. “No, Madam Longbottom, I am not. I myself own several properties that I would offer for the cause as I am not currently using them anyway. I would also suggest that perhaps the Shrieking Shack and its environs could be used as well. It might even be possible to make some arrangements with the owners of the professional quiddich teams to use the stadiums for a nominal fee, should it become necessary, although I highly doubt the werewolf population in Britain is anywhere near that large.”

The old dowager nodded. “Fair enough. But what do we gain from this proposal?” she asked.

“We gain workers who will be grateful for the opportunity to support themselves,” he answered promptly. We gain a werewolf population that is far less likely to listen to the likes of Fenrir Greyback telling them to take by force what wizards are unwilling to give them. If a werewolf has a steady job, he can afford a home and the wolfsbane potion to ease his transformations. He can have a fairly comfortable life aside from his affliction. He will not have anger and resentment building up within him because he's treated as an evil creature by wizards who may well have been his friends prior to the time he was attacked and turned.”

“And what of Fenrir Greyback and his followers?” Lord Greengrass spoke up.

Sirius shrugged a bit. “They are criminals,” he said, “not because of their lycanthropy, but because they have made the choice to attack people for the fun of it. They are no different from the petty thieves who mug the unwary in Knockturn Alley, except that they use teeth and claws rather than knives and saps. I wouldn't even object to a penalty against a werewolf who attacks and turns a human, provided that veritaserum is used to determine whether the attacker was out looking to hurt or turn someone, or if it was perhaps a newly-turned werewolf who didn't know what was happening to him or who was otherwise put in a position where he had no access to wolfsbane or a secure place to change. Yes, even the one who meant no harm should bear some punishment for causing it, but not nearly so much as the one who caused harm on purpose.”

“Like the difference between being sentenced to life in Azkaban for the use of the Avada Kedavra curse, while accidentally killing by means of an overpowered stunner might only be sentenced to a
year or so? Lord Greengrass asked.

“Exactly,” Sirius said with a nod. “Someone like Fenrir Greyback ought to get life in Azkaban, if not the Dementor's Kiss. But if someone like the man I know was in a situation where he was unable to take his wolfsbane... say he was in an accident on the day of the full moon, and ended up unconscious in St. Mungo's so that they didn't know he needed the potion or to be locked in a room alone... and then hurt someone when he transformed... he should get a much lighter sentence.”

“Are you sure you aren't just saying that because you know this person?” Madam Longbottom asked with a raised brow.

“Maybe a little,” Sirius admitted. “But honestly, the man I know is not a hazard to society, as long as a few reasonable precautions are taken. Given that lycanthropy is a medical condition of sorts, I might even suggest that werewolves wear some sort of identification in case they ever are in an accident and unable to speak for themselves. I know that muggles do something of the sort, they call them medical alert bracelets. People with certain illnesses or with allergies that can quickly become life-threatening wear bracelets that name their illness or allergies, so that if they become unconscious for any reason, the muggle healers know what to look for as the most likely cause, and what to do or avoid doing in giving them treatment. The only reason I hesitate to require such a thing, is that I fear certain people,” and he looked hard at Madam Umbridge as he said this, “would use the bracelets as a mere excuse to single out werewolves for poor treatment.”

Madam Umbridge sputtered, while Dumbledore looked torn between irritation at having his actions of the past questioned and interested in something new. “Lord Black, can you tell us more about these medical alert bracelet things? While such conditions are rare amongst wizards, there are a couple of children at Hogwarts who are allergic to certain potions ingredients, and at least one who is allergic to bee stings. Madam Pomfrey does, of course, keep a list of which child cannot have certain potions, as well as keeping a special potion just for the one who is allergic to bees. However, I can see where it could be most useful to have something on the students in question, particularly on Hogsmeade weekends or during quidditch games. Any time the children are out of the castle, really, and away from prompt medical care.”

Sirius shrugged a little. “I don't know much more than what I've told you,” he said. “I haven't seen one up close. But I'm told they are about the size of a standard name-bracelet, the sort with a flat or slightly curved plate where usually a name is engraved, with chains at both ends to latch on the other side of the wrist. Only instead of a name, the person's illness or allergy is engraved on it. I'd be happy to find a few examples and bring them to the next session, if you wish. But right now, I think we're straying more than a bit off topic.”

“Yes, I suppose we are, aren't we?” Dumbledore said. “All in favour of Lord Black's proposal to allow werewolves to work and grant them secure transformation sites, please light your wands blue.” He counted the lit wands and nodded. “All those against, light your wands red.” Sirius looked around as Dumbledore counted. It looked close, but he was fairly sure the proposal would pass. “By a margin of fifty-three to forty-one, the proposal passes,” Dumbledore announced.

Minister Fudge frowned while Madam Umbridge shot Sirius a glare. Sirius smiled back and blew her a kiss, causing her to sputter and redden, and causing the few who noticed the exchange to laugh quietly. “Cheer up, Minister;” the animagus called. “I’m sure you'll be able to spin this vote to make yourself look good just as easily as you did giving me my trial.”

“Indeed,” Lucius Malfoy put in smoothly. “If this proposal works out as well as Lord Black believes, then you, Cornelius, will be given the credit for ending the werewolf problem in Britain once and for all.”
“Really?” the portly little man asked anxiously. “You're sure about that, Lord Malfoy?” The Minister seemed to be ignoring his lackey for the moment, in favour of getting Lord Malfoy's advice. “I don't see how, when we're merely letting them hold jobs.”

“Letting them hold jobs is the first step,” Lucius said. “The real point is to slowly get the average wizard to stop fearing werewolves in general. If the average wizard gets to know a werewolf co-worker and becomes friends with him, he's likely to think of him as his friend who happens to be a werewolf, rather than as 'the werewolf' if you see the difference.”

Fudge shook his head. “No, I don't,” he said. “The werewolf is still a werewolf.”

Lucius tried again. “All right, well, your cousin Corinthus is known to habitually overindulge in Ogden's Finest; do you look at him and see 'a drunk' or your cousin who drinks?”

“Ohh,” Fudge said with a nod. “Now I get it. I think.”

Sirius smiled. “You see, Minister, when people fear something, they often react badly to it. By getting them to see werewolves as people with an illness of sorts, rather than as horrible monsters, they'll stop reacting so badly on their own... and once that happens, the door is open for things like medical research. Improvements to the wolfsbane potion, perhaps eventually even a cure. But none of that can happen while werewolves are hated and feared as a group due to the actions of a few rogues such as Fenrir Greyback. By letting werewolves hold jobs and giving them access to wolfsbane and safe places to transform, wizards in general will come to see that Greyback is the exception and not the rule.”

“Additionally, letting werewolves hold jobs makes them harder targets for the likes of Greyback to recruit,” Lucius said. “Someone who feels ill used by society is much more inclined to strike back in a violent manner than someone who feels accepted and worthwhile.”

“So you're certain this is the right thing to do, Lucius?” Fudge asked anxiously.

“Yes, I'm certain,” the blond aristocrat said with a nod. “Trust me, Cornelius, this is the right thing to do.”

Minister Fudge nodded. “If you say so, Lucius.”

“I'm sure of it. However, if you will excuse me, I want to get home to my wife as quickly as possible. I know that if there was a problem, she'd send a message, or one of the house elves would come for me in an emergency, but she is getting close enough to her confinement that I'd feel better for being there myself,” Lucius said. Giving a nod to the minister and another to Madam Umbridge, he strode rapidly towards the public floos and vanished into the green flames.

The toadlike woman frowned, unused to being treated so dismissively. “Well,” she huffed, “I don’t know what this world is coming to, Minister, when even your supporters treat you with such a lack of respect!”

Sirius rolled his eyes at the woman’s obvious ploy to ingratiating herself further with the minister. “Since when is a man’s concern for his family the same as a lack of respect, Madam Umbridge?” he asked her. “I realise you wouldn’t know, but my cousin Narcissa lost several babies over the years due to a medical condition that wizarding healers were unable to detect or correct. A muggle medical treatment has kept her from losing this one as well, but the treatment isn’t perfect and it’s more likely than not that the baby will come early... as in, it could come any time now. I know if it was my wife in that position, I’d be pretty anxious to get home as well.”
“And are you planning on taking a wife anytime soon, Lord Black?” Madam Umbridge asked in a pointed manner.

“There is a lady I hope to court in the near future,” Sirius said, “but at the moment, I have quite enough to do between my duties on the Wizengamot and the research I’ve been doing for Lucius and the Hogwarts’ Board of Governors.”

That caught Fudge’s attention once more. “What sort of research, if I may ask?”

“Oh, they’ve had me touring about, visiting wizarding schools in other countries. I’m sure you’re aware that there will be a Wizarding Culture course introduced at Hogwarts this fall, but they wanted to know how other countries run their schools to see if there are any other improvements that can be made without completely breaking the budget,” Sirius said.

“Improvements? What for? Everyone knows Hogwarts is the best school of magic!” Fudge said.

Sirius shook his head. “Best in Europe, perhaps, but far from the best in the world, at least according to test scores. That’s why they sent me on that tour. Unfortunately, I suspect it’s going to be more difficult to make additional changes, partly due to the budget reductions made over the last few decades and partly due to the way the Statute of Secrecy operates here.”

“What do you mean by that?” Fudge and Umbridge asked simultaneously.

“Well, in the United States and Canada, the wizarding world isn’t nearly as separated from the muggle world as it is here in Britain,” Sirius said. “The people I spoke with called it hiding in plain sight, with the idea being that if wizards could blend in well with muggles, they’re far less likely to appear odd or different as long as they weren’t blatantly firing off spells in public. Schools teach muggle subjects alongside wizarding subjects, for example, and wizards are as likely to have muggle careers as wizarding ones. John Hannah, for example, he’s the vice principal… deputy headmaster… of the Salem Institute of Witchcraft; before he started teaching, he played American football professionally for a number of years. Here in Britain, though, we’ve kept apart from muggles for so long that most wizards can’t manage for more than a few minutes in a muggle area without doing something that simply screams ‘different’ to anyone watching.”

“And what is such a problem about remaining apart?” Umbridge asked. “Surely the Obliviators can take care of any little issues. It’s what they’re there for, after all.”

Sirius shook his head. “They can’t obliviate cameras,” he stated flatly. “More and more muggle shops and other places are putting in cameras, both to deter crime and to aid in catching criminals. These cameras record movement, they don’t merely take pictures. What’s more, plenty of those cameras use a wireless signal of sorts to send whatever they’re recording somewhere else, so the camera itself won’t have any film inside of it to prevent thieves or vandals from simply stealing the film.”

Fudge frowned. “I’ve heard of muggle moving picture cameras, when I took Muggle Studies. But the class said the cameras were bulky and expensive and the films were of poor quality and not likely to be more than a passing fad.”

“Oh, hardly that,” Sirius said. “As I understand it, the motion picture industry is huge. Hundreds of films are produced each year for entertainment purposes alone, along with any number of educational films used in muggle schools. Small moving picture cameras have become popular, for people to record memorable events to watch again later, such as family weddings or trips abroad. Television, a sort of muggle wireless that shows moving pictures along with the sound, often sends camera crews to sporting events and to places where something newsworthy happens and then they
broadcast the event as it’s happening.”

“Impossible,” Umbridge sneered. “Muggles are backwards children. They can’t possibly do all of what you’re saying.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “If you don’t believe me, why don’t you come with me right now into muggle London… the both of you… and we’ll go have a bite at a pub with a telly in it, so you can see what I’m talking about.”

Umbridge sniffed. “I have no need to sully myself by pretending to be a stupid muggle for a few hours, as well as better things to do with my time. Good day, Lord Black!” She swept off in a huff that might have looked dignified if she had been taller and less stout.

Fudge, on the other hand, looked torn. “I do find what you say hard to believe,” he admitted, “but you wouldn’t likely be asking me to join you if you didn’t think you’d prove your point in that way. However, I was planning to use my lunch to go over the protocol for my meeting with the Italian Minister of Magic this afternoon.”

“I’d be happy to take you out any time you’re available, then,” Sirius said politely. Not that he actually wanted to spend more time with the politician, but if doing so might gain him another powerful ally on the Wizengamot, he’d do it without complaint. “Tomorrow, the day after, whenever.”

“I believe I’m free tomorrow,” Fudge said with a nod. “Let me just check with my secretary to confirm it, and if that’s the case, I’ll expect you at noon?”

Sirius nodded. “Sounds good to me,” he said. “And with your permission, I’ll take charge of transfiguring your clothing into something appropriate at that time.”

“I suppose you do know better than I do what’s appropriate,” said Fudge. “All right.” Turning into his office, he spoke briefly with his secretary while Sirius waited in the doorway. “Yes, I was right,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then, Lord Black.”

“Until tomorrow, Minister Fudge,” Sirius replied with a small bow. He headed out of the Ministry, fervently hoping that his plans for educating the Minister would work.
Sirius garnered several shocked and disapproving looks when he showed up at the Ministry in his jeans, motorcycle boots, and Led Zeppelin t-shirt. He blithely ignored them all as he made his way to the Minister's office, arriving just before noon. Fudge's secretary had apparently left for her own lunch break already, as he was greeted by the Minister himself.

“Ah, good morning, Lord Black,” the portly little man said. He looked a little less than enthused by the outfit the younger man was wearing. “Is that what muggles usually wear?” he asked, a hint of trepidation in his voice.

“Good morning to you as well, Minister Fudge, and some muggles do wear clothing like mine,” Sirius answered. “But not all muggles. This outfit is considered something more for casual wear, or for students, manual laborers, and rebellious sorts such as motorbike riders, and I did ride over here today from home. We can walk to the pub I have in mind, though. I can give you an outfit more appropriate for a man of your age and standing, if I may?” He drew his wand and looked at Fudge expectantly.

“Yes, yes, go ahead,” Fudge nodded, looking nervous.

With a wave of his wand, Sirius transformed Fudge's horrible lime green pinstriped robes to neatly pressed khaki trousers and a forest green Ralph Lauren polo shirt, accompanied by dark brown leather loafers and a matching narrow belt. “There you go, this is considered a causal outfit for someone like a muggle banker or other businessman. Ready for your adventure in muggle London?”

Fudge nodded. “As ready as I'll ever be, I suppose.” He followed Sirius out the visitors' entrance and almost immediately stopped and stared. “Merlin! I thought automobiles were uncommon, but there are so many of them!”

Sirius grinned. “Muggle Studies is more than a little out of date, as I said yesterday. Easily seventy or eighty years out of date, from what I recall of the course, and possibly as much as a hundred years out of date. Nearly everyone can afford a car these days, although plenty of people don't bother with one because the public transit system... the Underground and the bus... is often more convenient for those who live in the more populous areas of the city.” He led Fudge around the corner to a pub called The Foggy Flask and claimed a booth within easy sight and hearing of the telly over the bar. As was common for the middle of the day, a news programme was running. Sirius hid a snicker as Fudge stared at the telly, not even noticing that a server had appeared by the table. He ordered two daily specials of shepherd’s pie and two pints of dark before returning his own attention to the news.

“...latest word from Buckingham Palace is that the divorce of the Prince and Princess of Wales finalised as of 10 June. As of this time, custody of the two young princes will remain with Her Royal Highness in Kensington Palace, while Prince Charles has taken up permanent residence at Highgrove,” the news anchor said. “And now for the day's weather.” The picture changed to a satellite map of the United Kingdom, with a young woman standing in front of it and gesturing. “London and the southeast of England can expect sunshine this afternoon, with just a few high clouds moving in this evening. Coastal Wales can look for the morning showers coming to an end, while the rain moves across the Marches into Shropshire and Herefordshire, and our friends to the north may also expect scattered showers this afternoon.” As she spoke, she gestured at the satellite map, pointing out the areas of cloud cover and where the rain was falling.
Fudge stared in fascination. “How in Merlin’s name are they doing that?” he asked.

Sirius stifled a laugh. “Remember what I said about cameras that use a wireless signal to send their pictures elsewhere? That weather map is probably the ultimate example... the camera that takes the pictures of the cloud cover over the country is actually in a sort of space ship orbiting the earth.”

“A what?” Fudge looked as though he’d swallowed his hat.

“Muggles don’t just have aeroplanes, they have spacecraft,” Sirius said. “The Americans sent men to the moon back in 1969, and the Soviets have a space station where people can live for months at a time in space. Satellites are unmanned spacecraft that orbit the earth and do various things. Lots of them have cameras and are used to study weather patterns and things like that, while others are used to relay wireless signals around the world... well, look.” He gestured at the telly, which had moved on to world news.

The anchor was speaking again. “…fighting continues along Israel’s central coast, where Israeli forces have been battling Palestinian terrorists…” Behind him on the screen, dust billowed up between buildings as uniformed men sporadically fired rifles at other gunmen who were skulking in the shadowy areas and alleys. From there, it switched to coverage of the construction of the Channel Tunnel which would soon connect Britain with France via railway, ending with a report that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was in Washington D. C. meeting with United States president George H. W. Bush in a planned four day long summit; the possible banning of chemical weapons and the eventual destruction of both countries’ stocks of such armaments would be the highlight of the summit.

The server returned with their food and drinks as the news switched over to sports coverage, discussing the FIFA World Cup which would take place in Italy in just under a week before moving on to cricket scores which caused the occasional cheer or groan from other patrons in the pub. Fudge turned his attention to his meal and his dining companion. “So this telly thing, it uses moving picture cameras and wireless signals?” he asked.

“More or less,” Sirius confirmed as he discreetly cast muffliato to obscure their conversation from the rest of the pub. “I’m not exactly an expert on the technology, after all. But as I understand it, yes, they use moving picture cameras to record whatever it is they want to record, and a wireless signal to send the moving pictures wherever.” He paused to take a bite of his food, then added, “And from what I’ve heard, the cameras are getting smaller and smaller, and plenty of them are being used for security purposes these days. Sooner or later one of those cameras is going to record a wizard performing magic... whether said wizard is apparating into an otherwise empty alley to visit a friend living in a muggle area, entering St. Mungo’s through London proper, or is simply a thief who’s decided that unwarded muggle homes make easier targets than wizarding homes.” He gave a slight chuckle at that. “Actually, the thief is probably the first one going to be caught on camera. Muggles might not have wards exactly, but they do have things they call security systems, which use alarms to summon their police… aurors… in the event of an unlawful entry, and most often have cameras set in strategic areas to record the image of the unlawful entrant to aid the police in finding and capturing him.”

“Oh dear,” Fudge said. “Is there any way of preventing this from happening?”

“Well, making Muggle Studies a mandatory course, and updating it drastically would be good for a start,” Sirius said. “At the very least, if wizards had some idea of current muggle clothing styles, they won’t immediately stand out as something bizarre in a muggle area, and then if they behave a little oddly or appear lost, the local muggles will be more likely to assume they’re from somewhere else where things are done a bit differently. But as far as I know, an invisibility cloak is the only
thing that will fool a camera completely, and even then, if the person using the cloak opens a door or anything like that…”

“They’ll still attract the attention of whoever might be watching the pictures from the camera,” Fudge finished unhappily. “And you’re right about the clothing, too. I mean, at least I’m aware that muggle men wear trousers, but I would have just transfigured my robes without changing the colours as you did, and I can see that I’d have looked rather silly. I can only imagine what someone like Damocles Parkinson would come up with to wear.”

Sirius gave a chuckle. “Eh, it depends. But even if he was to consult with a muggle studies textbook, he’d still look out of place because those books haven’t been updated since, what, 1925 or so? Certainly not since the Grindelwald era, and I doubt even that recently. That’s the big problem; it’s been explained to me that while muggles do respect tradition, they also embrace change, especially when those changes make their lives easier in some way. Clothes such as we are wearing right now are easy to clean and comfortable to move in, much more so than the wool and linen suits that were fashionable back when the muggle studies books were last revised. These clothes are also fairly versatile, in that they can be worn for pretty much any leisure activity. What you’re wearing is even considered welcome in less conservative businesses, although the majority of those still require more formal attire during the workday. But in contrast to the last time the muggle studies texts were revised, back then, probably because doing the laundry was more difficult than it is nowadays, people had different clothing for various leisure activities. One outfit especially for riding horses, a different outfit for playing golf, yet another for strolling about the countryside, a special overcoat for driving a car… you do see some holdover from those days, particularly among those who ride horses competitively, they still wear a certain style of clothing for the competitions. But for the average person, something like what I’ve got on right now would fit in perfectly in any of those situations I named. Worse still, most wizards don’t seem to realise that wearing something like a riding or golfing outfit as pictured in the textbook will make them stand out rather than blend in.”

Fudge considered this for a while as he made inroads into his shepherd’s pie. “This is good,” he commented. “I would have expected the potato to be lumpy or the bottom to be burnt, since the muggles don’t have spells to prevent things like that from happening.”

“Oh, they’ve got plenty of technology to handle things like that, from what I’ve seen, not that I know how to operate most of it,” Sirius said with a grin. “My source of information is a young bachelor, so he doesn’t do much cooking for himself and what little he does cook tends to be simple things, boiled eggs, tinned soup and the like. But I’m given to understand that most modern cookers have mechanisms to regulate the temperature of the hobs and the oven, and timers to alert the cook when the food is most likely done.”

“So, that’s another sort of change the muggles have embraced to make their lives easier, I assume?” Fudge asked.

“Exactly,” Sirius agreed. “If you’ve time, we can visit a shop or two before returning to the Ministry. I’m sure you’d be interested in seeing what muggles write with and on, and also I scouted a place nearby that sells things like video cameras so you can see for yourself how popular they’re becoming and why it’s getting so important that wizards learn to blend in with muggles better than they do now.”

Fudge looked at his pocket watch and nodded. “I’d like that. You’ve given be quite a bit to think about already, and since I wasn’t sure how long this trip would take, I had my secretary reschedule a couple of meetings that weren’t especially urgent. Just some preliminary negotiations for next quarter’s budget allocations, with several department heads coming to tell me why their department
needs an increase in funding so much more than someone else’s department.”

Sirius laughed at that. “And some people wonder why I don’t get involved in the Ministry beyond my Wizengamot duties,” he said. “I have no patience for that sort of thing and I know it. I’d probably end up pranking the people doing the most complaining if I had to listen to them all day. Make ‘em sing nursery rhymes or something any time they try to talk about money for a day or two.”

“Ha! That’s not a bad idea,” Fudge said with a chuckle of his own. “Unfortunately, not something that fits in with the dignity of the Ministry.”

“Well, true enough, but it’s something pleasant to think about when you’re stuck in those meetings and listening to the whinging,” Sirius said. “Ready to go?”

Fudge drained the last little bit of his pint and nodded. He watched with some interest as Sirius gave a wave to the server, who immediately brought something resembling a very narrow book with no apparent pages in it. Sirius opened it and tucked some muggle money inside before handing it back and standing up. Fudge followed him out of the pub and up the street to a shop selling school and office supplies. He tried not to gawk too obviously, but it was difficult as he didn’t recognise over half of the items on display. “What is all this?” he asked his companion quietly.

“Exactly what the sign outside says,” Sirius answered. “Supplies that are most often used in offices and schools. I know you recognise paper since the Daily Prophet and other newspapers and magazines use that instead of parchment, and so do the interdepartmental memos within the Ministry. But look at these.” He held up a spiral-bound notebook for the minister to examine. “If I’ve done the conversion arithmetic correctly, two of these cost roughly one sickle, and one notebook will last the average student a full school year for taking notes for each class. The metal bit keeps the pages together and in order, and the lines on each page keeps their handwriting from going all over the place. That’s in contrast to a three-foot parchment scroll, which costs a sickle by itself and might do for a couple week’s worth of note-taking for one class if the student has fairly small and neat handwriting… and then it still might be misplaced or lost when it comes time for the end-of-term revisions. Sure, parchment scrolls are traditional, but these notebooks are a change that make the lives of muggle schoolchildren much easier, especially when used in conjunction with the item known as the biro, or ball-point pen.”

“This is much nicer paper than the Prophet is printed on,” Fudge said as he took the notebook from the animagus. “So what is this biro thingy?”

“It’s an inexpensive writing instrument,” Sirius explained. “It’s a bit like a self-inking quill, but far less messy, as the ink used in a biro dries almost instantly. No blotting necessary, not to mention, there’s no need to have an ink bottle that might get knocked over sitting on the desk while using it. Sure, the ink runs out eventually, but these biros cost even less than the notebooks… one can buy a packet of a dozen for the equivalent of perhaps fifteen knuts.”

Fudge blinked. “Are you serious?” he blurted out.

“I’m always Sirius,” the animagus replied, unable to resist the pun on his name as always. “But yes, I’m very serious about the cost of biros. Also, look over on this side of the store, they have the perfect solution for those people who have horrid handwriting but still need to communicate through the written word. May I present to you, the typewriter!” He led Fudge over to the typewriter display and inserted a piece of paper into a manual model, having learned how from Lily back in the late 1970s. Using two fingers but correctly operating the shift key, he slowly typed out the words, ‘I came, I saw, I conquered.’ He then hit the carriage return lever and turned the
“That’s amazing!” Fudge gasped. “How does it work?” He poked at a few random keys and watched little metal bars lift up with a clacking sound, leaving ‘mfqks’ on the page underneath the sentence Sirius wrote.

“Well, I know each key operates one of those little bars,” Sirius said, “and you hold down the shift key whilst pressing a letter key to get a capital letter. The bars strike against a ribbon that’s got ink of some sort soaked into it and that leaves the imprint of the letter marked onto the paper. Beyond that, I don’t really know. But from what a muggleborn friend told me back in my Hogwarts days, pretty much every business in the muggle world uses typewriters for correspondence just to prevent misunderstandings due to poor handwriting. They’re ubiquitous enough that muggle secondary schools have classes for the students to learn to use the typewriters without needing to look at the keys. Touch typing, I believe Lily called it.”

“And you say these typewriter thingies are used in most muggle businesses?” Fudge asked.

Sirius nodded. “Yes,” he confirmed. “Although something called a computer is likely to become more widespread over time, at least according to a muggleborn I’ve met since my release. Those require electricity, though, so I don’t know how well they would work out for wizarding use. Although I wonder if it might be possible to come up with something to shield technology from the effects of magic; the headlamp on my motorbike works fine despite the enchantments I’ve put on it… well. That’s a thought for another day. What do you think of what you’ve seen so far?”

Fudge poked at the typewriter again, this time typing, ‘sngdiLE’ before looking back up with a smile. “I think I’m astonished that no muggleborn students have turned up at Hogwarts with these notebooks before now, that’s what! I think I’m starting to see what you mean about muggles embracing change.” He looked at the typewriters again and added, “And I might just buy a few of these typewriters and set them up at the Ministry, just to see who’s willing to learn how to use them and who isn’t. Goodness knows old Perkins in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office really ought to have retired a couple years ago; he’s even older than Griselda Marchbanks. But his wife is an absolute harridan so he likes having a reason to be out of the house all day, every day. He didn’t mind being shunted off to that department so long as it meant he could keep working. But I had to get him out of the Department of Magical Transportation, because no one could read his reports anymore. His hands are still steady enough to use his wand, though, and Lucius suggested he might be willing to work under Arthur Weasley so long as he could still work. He might not have nearly the amount of written work as before, but I’m sure Weasley would appreciate being able to read what little Perkins does have to write without needing to ask what every third word is supposed to be.”

Sirius chuckled. “I know Lucius has a problem with Arthur, but really, the man isn’t all that bad. He’s eccentric to be sure, and he doesn’t know half as much about muggle things as he thinks he does, but he’s a good sort for all that. What you might not know is that there’s a few hundred year old feud between the Weasleys and the Malfoys; I don’t know the entire story myself but supposedly a Weasley son had been betrothed to a Malfoy daughter and then broke the betrothal but kept the dowry. The Weasley side claims she was pregnant with another man’s child and so he had a right to do what he did. The Malfoy side claims he beat and forced the girl before the wedding, getting her pregnant and then using the pregnancy as an excuse to reject her.” He shrugged. “Paternity spells hadn’t been developed back then, and the girl committed suicide because of the disgrace, so there’s no knowing the exact truth now. The one hint that the Weasley scion might have been the true culprit is that he was a known gambler, and the ancestor that is known to have lost the bulk of what small fortune the family used to have, which makes it plausible that he illegally kept the dowry money to pay off a gambling debt. On the other hand, the
Malfy girl was known to have wanted to marry some other young man only to find out he was betrothed elsewhere, which makes it plausible that she tried to break both betrothals by becoming pregnant with the other man’s child. Anyway, both sides have been raised since then to hate and distrust the other. This sort of feud seems like a waste of effort to me, but nothing like that ever happened in the Black family, so I don’t know how I’d feel if it did… if I might pass that anger on to my children and all that, you know?”

Fudge just shook his head. “Indeed. I, ah, don’t suppose you’ve enough muggle money on hand to purchase one of these typewriters? I really would like to try these out at the Ministry. I will, of course, recompense you for it.”

Sirius looked at the price tag and then looked in his wallet. “Sure, I can manage,” he said after a moment of figuring. “But let’s go to the other shop first, then stop back here on our way back, so that we don’t have to carry such a large package until we’re ready to go home.”

Fudge looked confused. “But we could just shrink…”

Sirius shook his head. “Security cameras, remember? You certainly don’t want to be the one caught breaking the Statute on camera.”

“Oh, right,” Fudge said sheepishly. He turned and headed for the shop door. “Where is it we’re going next?”

“It’s called Maplin, and it sells all sorts of electronic equipment. Just the sort of place Arthur Weasley would get lost in for hours,” Sirius joked.

Fudge laughed. The two men walked a couple blocks up the road and entered the Maplin store. Fudge gawked as Sirius led him to a display of CCTV and home security cameras. “You say these things are going up all over the place?” he asked as he watched himself on a small telly. He waved, trying to figure out where that particular camera was set up.

“Yes,” Sirius replied. “As I said, these sorts of cameras are quite sturdy, so that they can be set up nearly anywhere, with no concerns that they might be damaged by the weather. And by putting them in strategic locations on the streets, the muggle police then have a much better chance at identifying thieves and other criminals. Even if the crime itself isn’t caught on camera, it’s quite likely that a camera somewhere near the scene of the crime will record someone behaving suspiciously… running or acting furtive or whatever… and then that person can be found and taken in for questioning. My muggleborn friend says that in another ten years, probably every street in a major population centre will have multiple cameras on it. And probably half of the private homes will also have security systems which include cameras by then as well. It’s far less a matter of IF a wizard gets caught on camera, as a matter of WHEN a wizard gets caught on camera.” He looked upwards and gestured to a few dark half domes bulging down from the ceiling. “See those dark bumps? Those are hiding the in-store security cameras. The images will be going to a telly somewhere in the back or perhaps the basement of the store, with a security guard watching them at all times to catch anyone trying to steal the smaller items from the store.”

“That’s… a rather sobering thought,” Fudge admitted as he looked around. “What are some of the other things here? Are those also cameras? They look similar to these, but different too,” he asked, gesturing to another display a little further down the aisle.

“Home video cameras,” Sirius said. “These days muggles don’t just take photographs of events and places they visit, they make amateur moving picture films of them that can be played back either on special film projectors, or with a thing called a VCR which connects to a telly. I’ve heard the VCR cameras are getting more popular than the others, because the VCRs can be used for more
than just the amateur moving picture films… they’re now selling copies of cinema films that people can buy and watch through their VCR and telly at home. I’ve no idea how it works, although my friend showed me how to operate his VCR. We’ve watched more than a few films over the last few months.” He gestured towards another section of the store which featured a large display of the newly-released film Back to the Future II. “Anyway, these cameras most often run on batteries so that they can be taken anywhere, as opposed to the security cameras which need to be plugged into an electrical outlet.”

“Can anyone use these things?” Fudge asked.

Sirius nodded with a grin. “Sure. In fact, sometimes the news programmes on the telly purchase film bit from tourists who happened to be filming their visit to wherever and accidentally film something newsworthy, such as a driver losing control of his car and striking a building. I’ve heard that a new fad is for men to film the birth of their children, assuming their wives agree.” He snickered. “Puts me in half a mind to buy a camera for myself and suggest to my cousin Cissa that I film the birth of her baby, just to see the expression on her face when I suggest it! I probably won’t, though, because I don’t even want to know what she’d do to me to retaliate.”

Fudge chuckled. “You do have an odd sense of humour, you know.”

“And I take pride in it, too,” Sirius grinned. “Anything else you want to look at?”

“Not right now, no. I’ve got a lot to think about already, and I still want to get that typewriter thing before we head back,” Fudge said. “And whilst I did reschedule some of my meetings, I do have some work to do this afternoon, so I can’t stay out all day.”

“All right,” Sirius agreed.

They headed back to the office supply shop, where they purchased a manual typewriter and a ream of typing paper before making their way back to the Ministry. Sirius helped the Minister set up his new typewriter and install the ink ribbon correctly before taking his leave. Fudge spent the time before his next scheduled appointment looking over the instruction guide for the typewriter and thinking about the nearly overwhelming amount of information he’d learned on his short visit to muggle London.
Albus Dumbledore was not a happy wizard. While his plan to keep Sirius Black away from Harry Potter had worked well enough, Black had then proceeded to throw himself into politics with an enthusiasm he hadn’t anticipated from the hotheaded former Gryffindor. He’d expected, after young Harry’s rather emphatic rejection, that Sirius would either turn to him and beg that he intervene in some way to get the boy to accept him, or else leave Britain altogether to nurse his wounded feelings. Instead, Lord Black claimed his seat on the Wizengamot, and then proceeded to demand the Potter proxy vote as well. Worse still, the man had produced Gringotts-authenticated parchments showing a reciprocal agreement between himself and James Potter which stated that should anything happen to either of them, the other would be entrusted with their Wizengamot proxy until such time as their heirs were of age. Dumbledore had tried to convince the Wizengamot that Sirius was still unbalanced from his time in Azkaban and therefore not responsible enough to control two votes, but people apparently still felt guilty enough over the man’s unwarranted incarceration that they voted in his favor anyway.

Unfortunately, with the loss of the Black and Potter votes, Dumbledore no longer had as much influence on the Wizengamot as he used to. The Malfoy faction had used his quiet takeover of the two proxies to question whether he actually had the right to any of the proxies he controlled, and his claim that he’d taken them on for the Greater Good didn’t seem to be accepted the way it had been before Sirius was released. Furthermore, Lord Black’s entry into the political arena completely shifted the balance of power. The man had managed to forge ties with Malfoy and many of his ilk, while at the same time, gaining the trust of such influential members as Madam Longbottom and Madam Bones. He’d even gotten the Minister’s ear, for Merlin’s sake!

And that just added to Dumbledore’s headache, literally as well as figuratively. Following his lunch with Sirius, Cornelius had returned to the Ministry and set up some sort of muggle contraption called a typewriter in his office. He’d showed a few department heads how the typewriter eliminated the problems caused by poor handwriting, and within a week, every department had at least one typewriter, often more than one, and paid for out of the head’s pocket, no less! Now the Ministry was filled with the infernal clacking noise of the typewriters as people gleefully used them to write up reports and memos.

However, the racket from the typewriters had caught the attention of Arthur Weasley, who was just returning to the Ministry from a week’s holiday to welcome his children home from the school year. The sight of Arthur’s red head bending over the machine reminded Albus that he needed to have Molly start preparing her youngest boy to befriend Harry Potter when they started Hogwarts in another year. It wouldn’t do for the Potter boy to take up with the Longbottom scion, after all, or worse yet, the Malfoy boy. No, he needed Harry to be friends with the child of a family who understood that he, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, was the unquestioned leader of the Light and worked tirelessly for the Greater Good. He quickly made his way to the apparition point and left the Ministry for Ottery St. Catchpole.

Dumbledore arrived at the Burrow and almost immediately had to dodge a flying garden gnome.

“Sorry, Professor Dumbledore,” one of the twins called out, not sounding particularly sorry.
“Mum’s got us de-gnoming the place…”

“…just because we pranked Percy…” the other twin chimed in.

“…needs a sense of humour, he does…”
“…it’s not like the colours were permanent or anything…”

“…but Mum went spare last night when Charlie mentioned the job offer…”

“…always wanted to be a dragon handler, Charlie did. But the job’s at the Reserve in Romania…”

“…and Mum was already upset that Bill’s Gringotts job is taking him to Egypt…”

Dumbledore held up his hand. “Alas, my boys, I cannot override your mother’s decision in the matter. I can, however, give her something else to think about, if I might have safe passage through to the house?”

“Of course, Professor,” the twins chorused.

He quickly strode passed the pair to knock on the door of the eccentric house. Molly opened it, a startled look on her face.

“Professor Dumbledore, come in! I hope nothing’s wrong? The twins didn’t leave some foolish prank behind, did they?” she asked as she ushered him into the kitchen. “Would you care for some tea?”

“Tea would be lovely, Molly, thank you. And no, nothing is wrong and my errand today is not about the twins,” he said. “I’m actually here to speak to you about your youngest boy. Ronald, I do believe his name is?”

Molly nearly dropped the teapot. “Ronnie? But he’s not due to start Hogwarts until next year! Oh no, is tuition going up?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “Not at all, Molly, and I’m sorry to have given you the wrong impression. However, there is a rather delicate matter with which I’m hoping young Ronald will be of assistance to me. You are aware, of course, that Harry Potter will also be starting Hogwarts next year?”

“Well, of course, everyone knows that.”

“Yes, well. What I am about to impart is in the strictest confidence, Molly, you cannot even tell Arthur I’ve asked this favour of you.” Albus knew he was taking a slight risk, but he could always obliviate the woman if she didn’t respond appropriately. “You see, young Harry was placed with his only living relatives for his safety. However, those relatives are muggles. While this was for the best when it came to matters of safety, it has left him… lacking knowledge… of the wizarding world, and more importantly, of who is and isn’t the right sort for the Boy Who Lived to associate with.”

Molly’s jaw dropped. “Are you saying you want my Ronnie to befriend Harry Potter?”

“Indeed I am, Molly, as your family is exactly the sort young Harry will benefit from knowing. The Weasleys and the Prewitts have always favored the Light, and Harry needs to be kept from falling prey to the Dark. But as we all know, children can be mistrustful of strange adults, and often they’re more easily led in one direction or another by their peers. It’s my belief that by ensuring Ronald is young Harry’s first friend within the wizarding world, he’ll follow your son’s lead with regards to the Malfoys and their ilk. What’s more, I’m certain that your family would benefit from befriending him as well. In my years at Hogwarts, I’ve observed that quite a few young men grow up to take notice of their friend’s sister, and your Ginevra is only a year behind the boys,” Albus hinted broadly.
Molly beamed at the thought of her little Ginny growing up to become Lady Potter. “Whatever you want me to do, Professor, I’ll do my best to make it happen. I’m just not quite sure how to go about it all?”

Albus gave her his best grandfatherly smile, accompanied by the usual eye-twinkle. “For now, simply mention now and again that Ronald and Harry will be year-mates at Hogwarts, and wouldn’t it be nice if they got to know one another. Perhaps you and Arthur might speak of the fun times you had with your friends in Gryffindor when you were in school yourselves. Other than that, there isn’t much to be done before the boys’ actual first trip on the Hogwarts Express. At that time, I would suggest entering the platform from the muggle side, since that’s also where Harry will be coming from. Most people are not aware that the boy has been living in the muggle world for his own safety all this time, so they won’t be looking for him there, and that will let your Ronald meet him before anyone else gets the chance.”

“Absolutely, Professor, you can count on us to help,” Molly said firmly.

“Thank you, my dear, you’ve taken quite a load from my mind,” he replied. “And now I’m afraid I must take my leave. Even headmasters have summer homework of sorts, after all. Farewell for now, my dear.” He apparated out without waiting for a reply.

Molly returned to the sitting room of the Burrow after checking on the twins’ progress at de-gnoming the garden. As she sat back down to her interrupted knitting, she smiled, considering the potential benefits of Ronald making friends with Harry Potter, and the even larger potential benefits of Harry eventually becoming her son-in-law.

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Back at the Ministry, Sirius and Lucius were speaking about the Hogwarts budget with Lord Beltren when a house elf popped in. “Master Lucies!” the elf said. “Mistress Cissa bes telling Halla to say it is being time, and for yous to bes getting right home! And if yous is seeing Master Sirees, yous bes asking him to stay with the young master, too.”

Lucius paled and immediately stood. “Octavius, I’m going to have to postpone this meeting. My daughter is about to arrive.”

Lord Beltren shook his head. “No need for apologies. Family emergencies always trump budget meetings. Get out of here, both of you, and give Narcissa my best.”

“Thanks,” the men chorused as they left the office and made a beeline to the public floos.

At the Manor, Sirius gave Draco a smile while Lucius hurried off to collect Narcissa and her bag. “Looking forward to officially becoming a big brother?” he asked the boy.

“I am, but it feels strange,” Draco admitted. “I’m just glad the baby waited until after my birthday to start coming. Maybe it’s selfish, but I’m glad I won’t have to share my birthday too; it feels strange enough that I’m about to start sharing my parents with another child. Probably two children at that, I know Mother wants one more as long as everything goes well with the birth and her healer and muggle doctor say it’s safe for her to have another.”

Sirius nodded. “I don’t think it’s all that selfish,” he said. “You’re only just ten, after all, and you’re used to having your parents to yourself. I actually think you’re taking the idea of a new sibling much better than plenty of kids in your position would. You’re at least acknowledging that this is a huge change and you’re aware you won’t be the center of attention anymore, even though it’s what you’re used to. I know I would’ve been pretty upset if I’d had to share my birthday with
my brother, and he was only a year younger than me. Your birthday is the one day each year that you can say is supposed to be all about you. Well, unless you’re a twin, but that’s a whole different conversation.”

Draco smiled. “Well, I always did want a little sister or brother. I’d given up on having one, though, so that’s part of what’s so strange. And of course I want Mother and Aurora to be all right. I don’t like seeing Mother hurting.”

“We’ll both be fine, Draco,” Narcissa said, leaning on Lucius as the couple headed out to the car. “You behave for Cousin Sirius, and we’ll send word once Aurora is here. Sirius, you’ll bring Draco to see us as soon as Dr. Gardner says it’s all right?”

“Of course, ‘Cissa. I’m not only looking forward to meeting the baby, I want to know how Lucius does in the delivery room,” Sirius laughed. “I’ve heard all kinds of stories.”

“Just as long as no one is filming the birth,” Lucius huffed. “I still can’t believe you suggested it.” He shook his head as he and Narcissa made their way outside. He settled her carefully in the car, hurried around to the driver’s seat, and pulled out as Sirius and Draco waved from the doorway. The hasty application of a glamour made other motorists see the big Rolls Royce as an ambulance, causing traffic to give way and allowing them to make excellent time to Rosie Hospital.

Narcissa was laughing between contractions. “I can’t believe you did that, Lucius!”

He tried to look innocent. “What? We don’t want to risk the baby being born in the car, after all.”

“Just remember to end it before we arrive, or someone will wonder why there’s an ambulance in the car park and not by the Casualty entrance,” she said before panting through another contraction.

“Right.” Lucius pulled off the motorway at the proper exit and muttered a quick “Finite,” as he turned down the road to the hospital’s entrance. After parking, he hurried to open Narcissa’s door and escorted her inside. “My wife’s in labour,” he announced at the reception desk.

“All right, let’s get the admission done and we’ll get you up to Labour and Delivery,” the receptionist said calmly. She handed Lucius a clipboard with a couple of forms on it, and a biro tied to the clip with a length of twine. “Name of the patient?”

“Narcissa Malfoy,” Narcissa said.

The receptionist nodded and typed the name into the computer. “I see you’ve done the pre-admission papers already, so we just need the top form filled out and signed. Don’t bother with the one underneath.” She lifted the telephone and punched a couple of buttons. “Reception, we need an L&D escort please,” she said into the receiver. “Thanks.” Hanging up the phone and looking back up at the couple as Lucius pushed the clipboard back in her direction, she smiled. “Someone will be along in a moment to take you upstairs.”

Almost before the receptionist finished speaking, a teenaged girl in the uniform of a hospital volunteer approached with a wheelchair. “Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy?” she chirped. “I’m to bring you up to Labour and Delivery. Have a seat, Mrs. Malfoy.” She set the brake on the wheelchair and offered Narcissa assistance in getting seated. The volunteer then led the way to the lifts and up to the Labour and Delivery floor.

Dr. Gardner greeted them as they exited the lift. “Hello, Narcissa, Lucius. Looking forward to meeting your little girl?”
“Yes, although I’m still a little nervous,” Narcissa admitted.

“Don’t be,” Dr. Gardner said. “You’re just about thirty-four weeks along, two weeks longer than you managed with your son, and he was fine even without the support system we have here at Rosie Hospital should your daughter require it. I doubt she will.”

“I hope you’re right,” Lucius said as they brought Narcissa into a room and handed her a hospital gown to put on.

Once changed and in bed, a nurse came in, hooked up an external foetal monitor, and started an IV with plain saline; which Narcissa accepted stoically, and which made Lucius look somewhat green around the gills. “We’re aware of your preference for a natural birth if possible, and if you do decide you want something for the pain, the epidural is the safest option,” she explained. “However, we want the IV in place so we can administer anything that might be needed immediately on the chance that something should go wrong. It’s always easier to set an IV when all is calm, than try to do so when you’re in distress, after all.”

“That makes sense,” Narcissa said with a nod, reaching out with her free hand to Lucius.

He clasped her hand in both of his. “I just want you both to be safe,” he said softly, taking a seat on the stool provided for him by the head of her bed.

Dr. Gardner patted Lucius on the shoulder. “They’ll be fine. This part is usually harder on the father than on the mother, since she’s got something active to do. But don’t worry, I haven’t lost a father yet!”

Narcissa chuckled weakly at the joke before grunting softly with another contraction.

Hours passed, medical staff came and went, sometimes prodding at Narcissa and other times merely reading her chart and checking the readings on the monitor. Lucius, who had always been banished by the midwife and prevented from hearing anything by silencing wards, looked horrified as his ordinarily poised and elegant wife not only sweated as she pushed, but cursed creatively enough to make a Knockturn Alley whore blush. He blanched when she threatened to tie his member in a knot if he ever came near her again, while doing her best to crush his fingers.

There was a sudden flurry of activity at the end of the bed. “There’s the head. Once more for the shoulders… now! Pushpushpushpushpush… and relax.” Narcissa shrieked as she curled over the bulge of her belly, then fell back with a relieved sigh as a thin squall announced the newest Malfoy’s arrival. “You’ve got a lovely little girl there,” a nurse said with a smile. “Would you like to cut the cord, Mr. Malfoy?”

Lucius blinked, his eyes growing wide as he looked down the bed at the slimy-looking bundle still connected to his wife by something that resembled a length of pig intestine. He swayed on his stool and just barely caught the words, “Oh, shit, catch him!” before everything went dark.

When he came back to awareness, he was lying on a gurney with a small bandage on his cheek. “Well, Mr. Malfoy, I thought for a moment you were going to make a liar of me,” Dr. Gardner said in a jovial tone. “I told you I’ve never lost a father yet, so you had to try to be the first, didn’t you?” She helped him sit up slowly. “You scraped your face on your wife’s bed rails when you passed out. I should have realised with your medical history and background, you probably wouldn’t have participated in previous births, and taken that into account. Anyway, your daughter is in excellent health, particularly for her size… she’s just five pounds, two ounces… and with hair as pale as yours. I expect her eyes will eventually match yours as well. Your wife is also fine; there were no complications at any point and I only wish more of my patients had such an easy time of it.”
Lucius shook his head in confusion. “That was easy?”

Dr. Garner laughed. “Oh, you definitely were new to childbirth! Yes, that was easy. And whatever your wife might have said during labour, don’t believe it. We hear it all the time… ‘If you ever touch me again, I swear I’ll cut it off!’ and then once the baby is born, it’s, ‘When shall we start trying to give her a sibling?’ At least Narcissa didn’t throw anything at you; I’ve seen that happen a couple of times, too.”

“I think I’m grateful. And hopefully I shan’t disgrace myself again next time, assuming there is a next time,” Lucius said.

“Honestly, you’re not the first father to pass out, and you’ll not be the last. You may have damaged your pride a bit, but no one considers it a disgrace, either. Would you care to see your wife and daughter now that they’ve been cleaned up?”

“Oh, yes, please!”

She helped him to stand, making sure he was steady on his feet before bringing him to Narcissa’s room on the maternity and nursery floor. His wife looked up from the swaddled bundle in her arms, her eyes shining happily as the door opened. “Oh, Lucius, she’s so perfect!”

Lucius smiled softly, crossing the room to peer almost shyly down at his daughter. “She looks like you, ‘Cissa,” he murmured, kissing his wife on the top of her head.

Neither of them noticed Dr. Gardner closing the door behind herself as she left.

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In Little Whinging, end-of-term exams were coming to an end. Harry finished writing the final answer on his maths exam and set his pencil down with a sigh. Almost the hols, he thought. I wonder how soon Uncle Padfoot can set up doing that second-stage blood adoption thing. And if Draco and I will have lessons all through the summer. For that matter, I wonder if he’s a big brother yet? I know Stephen said never to say anything to a pregnant woman about how fat she looks, but Lady Malfoy looked HUGE when we were over there a couple of weeks ago. Like she’d pop if you stuck a pin in her. That thought made him want to laugh, so he picked up his exam paper and looked over the answers once more.

“Time’s up,” Ms. Beckett called out. “Everyone pass your papers forward.”

Harry, seated up front, turned back to collect the papers from the students behind him, added his own to the stack, and handed it to the teacher as she made her way across the front row.

Ms. Beckett set the papers on her desk and smiled at the class. “I’m quite going to miss you lot next year,” she said. “You’ve been an absolute pleasure to have as a class. Now tomorrow is supposed to be for any make-up exams to be given; as everyone knows, accidents and illnesses don’t generally respect such trifles as exams. However, since no one in this class has missed any exams, we’ll be able to spend the day on such educational pursuits as Scrabble and Monopoly, or any other board game you care to bring in with you. Then the day after, we’ll have our class farewell party, get our summer reading assignments, and say goodbye until next year. And I do hope a few of you will remember to drop in and say hello to me when school does start up again!”

At that point, the bell rang and the students eagerly hopped up, swarming towards the door. Harry waited for Lucy, Surya, and Paul to catch up before exiting the classroom with them. “What plans have you all got for the hols?” he asked.
Paul shrugged. “I might get to stay with my c-cousins when they go to Brighton. Mum said it d-d-depends on my final marks.”

Surya gave him a warm smile. “I’m sure you’ve done well enough. Honestly, your only less than brilliant marks all year have been in PE, and that’s hardly your fault because of your asthma. So make sure you write us all from Brighton! I’m going to Delhi again, and this time Father is also coming along. Something Mum said makes me suspect Father might be looking at a possible bride for my brother Anand!”

Lucy giggled. “There’s that arranged marriage thing again! If you want her, Paul, you’d better ask her father for her hand by the time you sit your GCSEs no matter what he’s promised her mum!” She laughed harder as both of her friends blushed.

“What will you be doing, Lucy?” Harry asked, trying to change the subject before the teasing got too far out of hand.

She shrugged. “Don’t know yet, do I? Not until the week after school’s out and I see my oncologist next. But as long as I stay in remission, Mum’s talked about spending a month up in Yorkshire with my grandparents, and maybe taking me to Alton Towers as well. If we do go there, I’m going to ask if you three can come too. What are your plans, Harry?”

“Well, first and foremost, avoiding Dudley as much as possible,” he replied to laughter from the others. “I know Her Royal Highness wants me to visit at Balmoral for a week or so, but Her Majesty has to give permission and say what dates would least inconvenience her.” He wrinkled his nose. “I really feel badly for Princess Diana. It must be terribly awkward to be getting divorced and yet still have to remain in such close contact with your former husband’s family like she has to do. Anyway, I’ll also be spending some time with my godfather, and most probably with Draco as well… Draco’s mum and my godfather are cousins, so we’ve met several times now. He might be joining us at school next year, too; he’s been homeschooled until now, but his mum’s about to have a baby and won’t have as much time so he wants to try a regular school. I’ll probably help him revise for the placement exams, to make sure he’s in our class. I figure he’ll feel odd enough without being in a room with no friendly faces in it.”

“And of course we’ll be friends with your friend, Harry,” Surya said. “I look forward to meeting him.”

“He’ll seem a little odd at times,” Harry warned. “You know how there are some religions and groups that don’t believe in modern technology for whatever reason? He’s been raised sort of like that. Like, he can write beautifully with a quill pen, but he’d never seen a biro until I showed him one, things like that. And he’s one of those who try to hide when they’re nervous by acting arrogant and snooty. But he’s really nice once he gets over the nerves and lets you see the real him.”

“If he’s your friend, Harry, he’s bound to be nice,” Lucy said. Changing the subject, she asked, “What did you get on that last word problem? I came up with twenty-seven, but I’m not sure about it…” The foursome continued on their way, discussing their exams and whatever else came to mind before they split up to head home for dinner.
On Saturday, Harry dashed eagerly into Grimmauld Place. “Is Draco a big brother yet? And if he is, are we going to go see him and the baby?”

“Yes to both questions,” Sirius laughed as Stephen followed the youngster inside. “But I thought we might want to shop for some gifts before we head over. Remember, Draco just had his birthday a few days before Aurora came.”

Harry nodded. “I got Draco some books at the school book sale. They’re ones I read and liked, so I thought he’d like them as well.”

“Oh? What books did you pick?” Sirius asked.

“The Black Stallion, Tales of a Fourth-Grade Nothing, Superfudge, and Treasure Island,” Harry answered. “And I got The Outsiders, Call of the Wild, and Then Again, Maybe I Won’t for myself. If I like them, I’ll loan them to Draco if he wants. Where are we going shopping?”

“I thought we could pop into Diagon Alley before we head to the Manor for tea,” Sirius said. “We can do the second-stage blood adoption, and there’s a necklace I saw when the goblins returned a bunch of stuff they’d removed curses from that I think Narcissa will adore, so I want to grab that out of the vault for her. I already picked up a plush swan for Aurora.”

Stephen laughed. “A plush swan? What’s wrong with a teddy bear, or a plush kitten?”

Sirius drew himself up and looked down his nose in a parody of Lucius at his haughtiest. “Aurora is a Malfoy. Nothing so common as a teddy bear could possibly be suitable for a Malfoy child.”

Stephen grinned. “Well, I hope the plush kittens Harry and I got her prove acceptable.” He waved his wand at Harry, applying the usual glamour for their Diagon Alley visit, and then helped the boy daub concealer over his scar. “All right, we’re ready to leave when you are.”

The trio flooed to the Leaky Cauldron and made their way through to the Alley, heading directly for Gringotts. Sirius retrieved the Black Family Star Iron ritual knife from his vault, along with a delicate Art Nouveau necklace in gold with freshwater pearls and green, white, and violet enamel.
“It’s an artistic rendering of flitterbloom,” Sirius said to Stephen and Harry as they hopped back into the cart. “It had been cursed to strangle the person wearing it… but not on the first wearing. According to the inventory list, two generations of Black women used it to remove a girl they didn’t think suitable for their son to marry. The son, of course, was instructed to request the necklace back from the girl’s family ‘to always remember her by’ which is why it’s still a Black heirloom. And with pearls being the June birthstone, and both of Narcissa’s children being born in June, I thought it appropriate as well as something she’d like.”

“It is very pretty,” Harry agreed.

They paused briefly at the Potter main vault, to collect the Potter Family Star Iron chalice to use in the ritual as well, and proceeded to the meeting room they’d requested. “Just so you know, Harry, if doing this changes your looks at all drastically, it could be painful. I’ve brought a general pain-relieving potion in case it happens, but if you’re hurting too badly, we’ll skip going to Malfoy Manor, or leave early if you become uncomfortable while we’re visiting,” Sirius said.

Harry nodded. “I understand. But it’ll be worth it, to stop looking so very much like my father used to,” he said. “It isn’t so much that I don’t want to resemble my dad, as I want to look like me, you know? I don’t want people assuming I’m going to love pranks or be really good in Transfiguration like he was, just because I look like him. I mean, I don’t want to do badly in Transfiguration, of course, and I do want to learn to be an Animagus like you and him someday, but I don’t want people being surprised when I don’t do things and like things just because he did.”

Sirius hugged him. “Yeah, I know, pup. And I’m sorry I made those assumptions myself at first. I’m just glad Stephen was around to, um, explain the error of my ways before I did anything too stupid.”

Stephen and Harry both laughed, and they proceeded with the ritual. Stephen poured the prepared ritual potion into the Star Iron chalice as Sirius picked up the Star Iron dagger. The second stage blood adoption only required his blood, as it was designed to give the adopted child some resemblance to the adoptive parents. He nicked his left ring finger with the dagger, allowing thirteen drops of blood to fall into the potion. “With this blood, the adopted child becomes one with the family,” he said. “With this blood, let the kinship show.” He presented the chalice to Harry, who quickly downed the potion.

Harry winced a little as the potion started to work. It didn’t exactly hurt, but it felt strange and sort of crawly, as though bugs were wiggling around under his skin. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists to avoid scratching at the places where the crawly feeling felt the worst. After what felt like an eternity, but wasn’t more than five minutes or so by his watch, the weird sensations eased off and stopped. He smiled and opened his eyes again. “Did it work?”
“It sure did,” Stephen said, as Sirius conjured a mirror. “See for yourself.”

Harry looked, his smile growing wider. The changes weren’t terribly drastic, but as he’d hoped, he no longer looked like a miniature James-with-Lily’s-eyes. His face seemed a bit narrower than before, with his godfather’s higher cheekbones, straighter nose, and pointier chin. His hair had grown a bit, with just a touch of wave to it, and no longer stuck out every which way. His eyes remained the bright green he’d inherited from his mother, but were now the same shape as his adopted father’s. “I love it,” he declared, and then gasped as his hair suddenly went from black to a bright lemon yellow. “Huh?”

Sirius blinked. “Whoa, I didn’t expect that… but then again, your great-grandmother Dorea was a Black by birth. It looks as though the second stage of the blood adoption gave you more than just a bit of Black looks, but also one of the Black familial traits, metamorphmagery. My cousin Andromeda’s daughter is a metamorphmagus… she can change her looks at will. We’re going to have to figure out how to teach you to control it, so your emotions don’t spark a sudden change when you’re around muggles. I haven’t seen little Nymmie since I’ve gotten out, as she’s been off at Hogwarts… and I suppose she’s not all that little anymore either; she’ll be starting her final year come September.”

“Nymmie?” Harry asked.

“Yes, her full name is Nymphadora Spica Tonks, although I remember from when she was little that she hated her name,” Sirius said with a chuckle. “Her hair tends to go flame red whenever she gets upset over something. She usually kept it bright purple when she was a child.”

“Oh… do you have any idea how to make it go back to my usual colour again? Today’s supposed to be about Draco and Aurora, but you know people will fuss over me when they hear about this. Since it’s known as a Black family trait, they’ll all wonder how I ended up with it. That, and Aunt Petunia will toss a wobbler if I come home with hair like this.”

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Sirius admitted with a touch of chagrin. “I don’t have that particular talent myself. Maybe if you concentrate on it?” He frowned for a long moment. “I guess one of us can cast a glamour on you if you don’t get it back on your own, to keep your hair looking black no matter what colour it happens to be. It should hold up well enough at your aunt’s house and all that, until we’ve figured out how to teach you to control the changing on your own.”

“I guess,” Harry said. Peering back at the mirror, he stared at his yellow hair. Nothing changed at first, causing him to scowl in annoyance, and then his hair darkened abruptly, becoming the deep purplish-red of black cherries. His annoyance gave way to laughter, and his hair lightened again,
this time turning the green of a Granny Smith apple. “I give up,” he said, still laughing. “Do the glamour, please.”

Stephen, who’d watching the entire proceeding with a grin, obliged. “There you go, Harry.”

“Thanks,” he replied. “Is there anything else we have to do here?”

“No,” Sirius answered as Stephen shook his head. “But one of you remind me when we get back to my place, I should check the library for whatever’s in there about metamorphmagery. Since it is a family talent, but an uncommon one, there’s at least one book about training the talent. My ancestors wouldn’t have counted on having an older metamorphagus around and able to train a young one.” He grinned mischievously and added, “And I know there’s at least one, because I copied it for Andi when little Nymmie first showed the signs of being a metamorphagus. My mother was outraged, of course, since Andi’d been chucked out for marrying Ted, but I admired her for following her heart instead of keeping her mouth shut and marrying some pureblooded arse like a good little girl, you know?”

“I think so,” Harry nodded.

“We’d best get going,” Stephen said. “We’re not running late yet, but we’re starting to cut it close. Have we got everything?”

“Yes, just let me clean the ritual tools so they can be returned to the vaults,” Sirius said, suiting his actions to his words. Then he opened the door of the meeting room and led the group back to the cart station. Another quick trip into the depths to store the chalice and dagger safely, and the trio headed out of the bank and to the public floos for the trip to Malfoy Manor.

Draco greeted them enthusiastically as they stepped through. “Harry, Stephen, Sirius, you’re here! I can’t wait for you to meet Aurora! She’s so tiny; I never knew just how tiny babies are. But she already looks like Mother, except her eyes are dark.” He frowned for a moment, then asked, “But shouldn’t she have light blue or grey eyes, like the rest of us? If I remember those genetics things that you showed us, Stephen, she shouldn’t be able to have dark eyes, right?”

Stephen chuckled. “She will have light eyes eventually. All babies are born with dark eyes, and they change over the first few months to whatever their final colour will be. The dark eyes babies are born with has something to do with them being in the dark until they’re born and then suddenly being exposed to bright light at birth. I don’t understand exactly how it works, but then again, I’ve never studied anything in the way of healing, much less specialised healing for new babies.”
“Oh, all right, then,” Draco nodded. “As long as nothing’s wrong with her eyes. I was worried, but I didn’t want to ask Mother or Father, in case it made them worry, too.”

He led the group into the family sitting room. Narcissa lounged on a settee, cradling Aurora in her arms. Lucius had pulled a chair over to sit closer to his wife and daughter, and was cooing down at the baby.

“You’re just going to be Papa’s little princess, aren’t you, Aurora?” he murmured. “You’re going to grow up as beautiful as your Mama, and I’m going have to protect you from being inundated by suitors by the time you’re old enough to go to Hogwarts, aren’t I? Because none of those little boys could possibly be worthy of my little princess.”

Draco rolled his eyes while the two men and Narcissa tried to hide their laughter. Harry just looked puzzled. “What’s he on about?” he asked his friend.

Draco grinned. “Father’s been saying stuff like that since they came home from hospital,” he said. “Mother says he’ll get over it in a little while, though. She says there’s something about new babies that makes their fathers go a little bit daft at first, and that he acted just as silly when I was born, at least when they were in private.”

“Oh,” Harry said, still not really understanding, but accepting the explanation. “Anyway, Draco, I brought your birthday present as well as a little gift for the baby.” He pulled the larger of the two gaily-wrapped packages from his backpack and handed it to the other boy. Then he passed the smaller gift to Lucius since Narcissa’s arms were full.

Draco tore into his gift, beaming at the stack of books. “Brilliant! Have you read any of these? Are they good?”

“They’re all very good,” Harry said. “The Black Stallion is my favourite of those, but I liked them all. I think you will, too.”

The two boys moved off to the side, animatedly discussing the books now that Harry had seen and admired Aurora. The newest Malfoy was cute and all, but not yet able to hold the interest of boys nearly ten years older for very long.

Lucius, meanwhile, found himself with three gifts to open on Aurora’s behalf. Sirius had found a
graceful plush swan for the baby, while Stephen chose a very realistic-looking Siamese kitten plush. All three men chuckled at Harry’s gift, a smiling lilac-coloured cat wearing a little gold crown complete with embroidered jewels.

“Oh, that’s adorable!” Narcissa laughed. “Princess Kitty for Princess Aurora!”

“You haven’t been forgotten either, Cissa,” Sirius said. “I thought you might like this little find from the Black vaults.” He opened the velvet-covered box containing the delicate pendant.

Narcissa smiled. “It’s lovely! Do I want to know the history?”

Sirius laughed. “Probably not. Let’s just say there was a lot of cursed jewelry that I had cleaned up so I could share it with you and Andi and your daughters.”

“I hope you save some of it for a special lady of your own,” Narcissa said. “Just because you’ve blood-adopted Harry doesn’t mean you should avoid marrying and having children.”

“Well… there is someone I’d like to court,” Sirius admitted, “but there are complications. I’m taking things slowly for the moment.”

Narcissa perked up, looking inquisitive. “Oh? Who is she? Do we know her?”

A blushing Sirius shook his head as Lucius and Stephen also looked curious. “No, you don’t know her. She’s a muggle, although she’s aware of the wizarding world.”

Stephen raised a brow. “You’re not actually thinking of…”

“Of courting Princess Diana? Yes, I am, if she’s willing, and if her divorce settlement allows her to court and possibly marry again before the young princes are grown,” Sirius said. “She’s already agreed to go dancing with me this week, although I phrased the invitation casually enough that it may have sounded more as if I was inviting her out as friends rather than on a date. I’ll just have to see what happens.”

Lucius looked thoughtful. “Would you take to living in the muggle world, should things go as you
hope?” he asked. “She is very much a public figure, after all, and with her sons being in line for the throne, I don’t see how it would be possible for her to simply vanish into the wizarding world.”

“I would, if necessary,” Sirius said. “I’m familiar enough with the muggle world that I shouldn’t make too many mistakes. Since I’m not a public figure, I doubt the press would be too interested in me once they get past the novelty of Diana dating someone. I’d certainly endeavor to be as vague and boring as possible in my answers, should a muggle reporter decide to question me. More to the point, she knows Harry and cares for him, and he and her boys get along well. Anyone I choose to get involved with is going to have to get along well with my godson, and she already does. Harry is why we met, after all; since he and the young princes are friends, I was invited along on an outing with them to help chaperone since I’m his godfather. What’s more, we share several common interests, such as music and dancing.”

“She’s very pretty, too, from those pictures Harry showed us of his holiday with her and the princes,” Narcissa said. “Although that short hair gives her a rather tomboyish look.”

Sirius shrugged. “She is pretty, but so are plenty of other females, witches and muggles alike. Diana genuinely cares for people, that’s what’s so attractive about her. That first time we met, when I accompanied her, Harry, and Prince William to Great Ormond Street Hospital, you could see it in her eyes how she wanted to gather up all those ill children and coddle them personally until they felt better. Remember I mentioned one little girl attaching herself to me because I resembled her father who was abroad for his job in the RAF? Diana contacted some of the higher-ups in the RAF and arranged for the father to be transferred back to England, to somewhere close enough to London that he’d be able to visit his daughter frequently. Same thing when she hugged the AIDS patients and encouraged the boys to do the same, despite the doctor telling her she shouldn’t. She gave that doctor a bit of a rollicking over it, in fact, saying that she wasn’t going to deny those men a bit of human comfort when she knew perfectly well that AIDS can’t be transmitted through a casual touch. And she even took time to reassure me, when she saw I’d become distressed by the IV things most all of them had stuck in their arms.”

“Sirius! Are you really the same wizard who rejected a betrothal contract for Miranda Duffield because you didn’t like her looks, and then ran away a month later?” Narcissa asked.

“I’m not fifteen anymore,” Sirius said, a touch of irritation in his voice. “And me refusing the betrothal was less about what Miranda looked like and more about me not wanting to be forced into marriage with a girl my mother approved of. What was I supposed to tell Father, that I was afraid the girl would be as nasty as Mother since they got along well together? By saying I wanted someone prettier, I bought myself the time to prepare and execute my escape from the family. I saw how happy Andi was with Ted, and that’s what I wanted to find for myself. I thought maybe I had, back in late 1980, with Marlene McKinnon, although we were keeping things quiet due to the war. But then she and her whole family were killed in ‘81, and of course you know what happened to me in November of that year.”
Narcissa reached over to squeeze her cousin’s hand. “I’m sorry, Sirius, that was horribly thoughtless of me. Especially as I’d like to believe we’ve all grown up some since then.”

Sirius smiled. “You’re forgiven… if I can hold the baby!”

Everyone laughed as Narcissa passed Aurora to her cousin, and called for the house elves to bring tea.

Chapter End Notes

First Date and Revelations

Sirius pulled his Porsche through the northwest gates of Kensington Palace and parked, stepping out of the car and nervously straightening his burgundy button-down before grabbing the small bouquet resting on the seat beside him. A security guard directed him towards the entrance nearest Princess Diana’s apartment. He took a deep breath before pressing the call button on the intercom.

“Yes?” A voice he didn’t recognise replied over the static-y speaker.

“Sirius Black to see Her Royal Highness,” he answered. And then remembered he needed to press the ‘talk’ button first, and quickly did so and repeated himself.

Di’s warm voice crackled through the speaker in return. “Hello, Sirius, please, come in. I’m almost ready.”

A soft buzz and the snick of the door’s lock disengaging followed her invitation, so he pushed it open and made his way down the hall to the apartment door. A woman he vaguely recalled as some sort of secretary or personal assistant of Diana’s stood in the open doorway. “Lord Black? Come right in and have a seat, Her Royal Highness will be just a moment.”

“Thank you,” he said, following her into the sitting room and perching on one end of the big sofa. He grinned and relaxed at seeing a half-built lego castle surrounded by several toy horses, green plastic army figures, and a small Batmobile on a table across the room, and tried to figure out what the little princes might have been trying to accomplish from the arrangement. He gave up when he heard a step and stood up to bow. “Your Royal Highness, you look lovely,” he said, and presented her with the flowers.

Diana, wearing a flirty knee-length skirt and a lavender pullover top, blushed as she took the little arrangement of jasmine and bleeding heart. “Thank you, Sirius, these are beautiful,” she said. Her brow crinkled in thought as she studied the bouquet. “Hmm… I know from your godson that in your culture, flowers have meanings, and I’ve looked up some of them. If I’m remembering correctly, the jasmine is something about grace, but I don’t recall bleeding heart being mentioned in the book I found.”

Sirius wasn’t sure whether to thank Harry or jinx him whenever he next saw the child. “There are a few different meanings to jasmine; that particular variety means ‘you are cheerful and graceful’, which I expect most people in the UK would agree with. As for the bleeding heart, an older name for it is Venus’ Car, and it means ‘fly with me’.” He glanced around, making sure none of Diana’s staff were in earshot, and added, “Considering my culture, that’s a literal invitation. I drove here in my car, but I’ve got my motorcycle shrunk in the boot and it’s been enchanted to fly, if you’d care to try it sometime.”

She blinked and laughed. “Good heavens! I might just take you up on that, but not tonight as I’m wearing a skirt. I’d prefer to be in jeans, or at least leggings, and not just stockings if I’m to go flying.”

“I can understand that; I prefer to be in some sort of trousers rather than wizarding robes whenever I’m flying as well. Shall we be off, then?” Sirius offered his arm with a smile.

Di took it. “Lead on, good sir,” she said with a chuckle.

They proceeded out to the car, where Sirius politely handed her in before taking his place behind
the wheel. They headed to Annabelle’s, where they spent the next several hours dancing, dining, and chatting about everything from the latest films and music to her sons and his godson. They only reluctantly left the club when they realised it was after midnight, and Diana had to make a public appearance in the morning. They relaxed in comfortable silence on the drive back to Kensington Palace, listening to the soft melodies of Simon and Garfunkel’s Greatest Hits cassette. When they arrived, Sirius walked Diana to the door of her apartment.

“I had a lovely time tonight, Sirius,” Diana said. “Thank you so much for the invitation.”

“Thank you for accepting,” he replied with a smile. “I always enjoy your company. Perhaps we might do it again sometime?”

“I’d like that very much,” she said. “We’ll talk soon. Good night, Sirius.” She gave him a quick hug, impulsively adding a kiss on his cheek. “Sleep well,” she added, and vanished into her apartment.

“Good night, Diana,” Sirius managed to say before the door closed. Smiling broadly as he touched his cheek, he walked back to the car and drove home.

The next evening, Diana returned from her public appearance to find a new floral arrangement waiting for her. She guessed from the unusual mix that it likely contained a message, and the notecard tucked into the arrangement confirmed it.

Diana,

In case your book doesn’t have all the flowers listed, or if you don’t know what some of them are, I thought I would also say it in writing. The sweet alyssum means you have worth beyond beauty, while purple pansies mean you’re in my thoughts. The monks-hood stands for knight-errantry, lavender roses for enchantment, and the ferns indicate sincerity while the jonquils mean I desire a return of affection. In other words, you’re an amazing woman and I would very much like to court you if I may.

Hopefully yours, Sirius

PS – look for an owl somewhere about. I told it to wait for a reply, so it’s probably within sight of one of your windows, watching to see when you need it. Just tie whatever you’re sending to its leg or let it grab it in its beak, and it’ll return to me with the message… this is how wizards send their mail.

She blushed but couldn’t deny an attraction to the handsome man. She realised that a relationship could prove difficult between the duties she still had to the Royal Family as the mother of the young princes, and his life in the wizarding world, but she wanted to try. If nothing else, she knew Sirius wasn’t trying to get into her good graces to try to influence her sons in any way.

After a moment of thought, and re-reading the note once more, she grinned to herself and grabbed the book of floral meanings. “Right, so a red carnation for yes, and double asters mean I return your sentiments,” she muttered as she paged through the little volume. “Bugger, asters won’t bloom for another month or more. But I can do the carnation easily enough.” She dropped the book and grabbed her personal stationery, writing a quick note and dropping it into an envelope. Next, she headed for a vase holding an arrangement of carnations and pulled out a brilliant red one, blotting the wet portion of the stem dry. Then she moved to the window and opened it, looking around uncertainly. Despite what Sirius had written, she still started a bit when a large short-eared owl launched itself from a tree in the garden and landed gently on the windowsill. Feeling a bit silly,
she asked the bird, “Are you here to take my message to Sirius?”

To her surprise, the owl bobbed its head, gave a short, “Waouk!” and held out one leg which sported a bracelet and ties.

Diana carefully tied the note and the flower to the bird, and said, “Well, that goes to Sirius Black. I suppose you know where to find him? I can’t imagine you deliver to a postal box, after all.”

The bird burst out in a quick, “Too-too-too-too-too-toot!” that sounded almost like laughter and hopped back out the window.

Giggling, Diana closed the window and went to get ready for bed.

A short time later, a nervously pacing Sirius looked up as the wards indicated the passage of a post owl onto the property. He opened his own window and beamed to see the red carnation tied to the bird’s leg. He relieved the owl of its burden and offered it a treat. It accepted and fluttered back out as Sirius opened the note.

**Dear Sirius,**

*Just in case my book differs from the meanings your culture ascribes to various flowers, my answer is YES. I would very much like to be courted by you.*

**Affectionately, Diana**

***

Harry hummed happily to himself as he waited for Lucy’s parents to pick him up for the promised outing to Thorpe Park. Lucy had called following her oncologist visit, relaying the good news that she was not only still in remission, her bloodwork had shown marked improvement over her previous visit. Since Alton Towers was too far from Surrey to make it a day trip with her friends, her parents suggested they go to the nearby Thorpe Park instead. Dudley had sulked, of course, on hearing that his cousin had been invited, but Harry suggested that Aunt Petunia take him and one of his friends on a different day, “so that you’ll have fun without me being around,” and quietly slipped his aunt enough of his saved spending money to pay for their admissions. When she tried to object, he told her to consider the outing his birthday gift to his cousin.

When the car pulled up, Harry jumped into the back with his friend, grateful that Stephen had stopped by earlier in the day to renew his glamour on him for the occasion. Studying the book Sirius had found for him was helping him learn to control his new ability, but his hair still tended to change colour with his emotions, and he knew the excitement of his first amusement park visit would likely have it cycling through several colours throughout the day.

Lucy hugged him excitedly as he settled next to her. “Hi, Harry! We’re going to have so much fun today! I can’t wait! Oh, and since I’ve been in remission a full year now, Mum says I can get a kitten finally! Will you help me pick one out later this week? I know Paul shouldn’t go to the shelter because of his asthma, and Surya leaves for India on Tuesday so she can’t either. But you still have your tae kwon do classes, right? So you’ll be in the village and near the local RSPCA shelter anyway.”

Harry smiled. “Hello to you too, and sure, I’ll help you pick a kitten if you want. Congratulations on being in remission for a year.”

They pulled up to Surya’s house, where the Indian girl’s mother came out to meet Lucy’s parents
and ask when they expected to return home, and finally went and collected Paul from in front of his block of flats. They had to pause as his mum dashed outside to ask if he had his inhaler, which he did, and then they were on their way.

Lucy and Paul had been to Thorpe Park before but had been too short to ride the most exciting roller coasters. They hoped all four of them would be tall enough on this trip. The friends chattered excitedly about their holidays so far, and what they hoped to do at the park.

By lunchtime, the foursome had ridden all the roller coasters, and had gone on the log flume twice. They contented themselves with calmer rides for a couple of hours and played a few of the games. Harry won a small stuffed whale at one of the booths and gave it to Lucy, and Paul won a stuffed monkey which he gave to Surya. After one last go on the log flume, Lucy’s parents declared it was time to leave, so they would have time to stop for fish and chips before heading back to Little Whinging.

Two days later, Lucy turned up at the dojang as Harry was finishing up his tae kwon do lesson. “Can you come to the RSPCA shelter with me today?” she asked once he had changed back into his street clothes.

“Sure,” he replied, shrugging his backpack on. “Are we walking there or is your mum driving us?”

“Mum’s outside in the car. She still worries that I’ll overdo.” Lucy made a face. “I’m surprised she didn’t try to stop me from riding the roller coasters at Thorpe Park the other day. I suppose I understand why she worries so much, but it gets bothersome now that I’m doing so well.”

As Aunt Petunia had never concerned herself with his well-being, Harry wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that. “Maybe you could ask your doctor to speak with her, next time you have an appointment?” he suggested uncertainly. “I mean, surely the doctor would know what’s safe, right?”


At the shelter, Lucy’s mother busied herself with the paperwork involved with a pet adoption while the two children accompanied a volunteer into the back to see the available cats and kittens. Harry held back a bit while Lucy darted between the cages, finally narrowing her choices down to a slender cream-coloured kitten with orange ears and tail or a super-fluffy long-haired silver tabby. She and Harry followed the volunteer to the ‘meeting room’ where the two kittens were released to interact with them.

“Which one do you think I ought to get?” Lucy asked after a few minutes.

Harry considered the two for a moment. The tabby seemed particularly energetic, pouncing at shoelaces and fingers, and trying to climb up his jeans. The creamy kitten had merely sniffed all around them curiously and then snuggled up against Lucy’s legs, purring loudly. “I think that one,” he said, pointing to the cream-coloured fuzzball. “The tabby is pretty, but it seems like one that will get into the rubbish and chew things it shouldn’t. Plus I know from when I was younger and old Mrs. Figg babysat me regularly, cats with long hair cough up hairballs a lot… and usually in really inconvenient places like in your shoes or on top of the clean laundry you’re in the middle of folding.”

Lucy laughed. “Oh, Mum wouldn’t like that very much.” She picked up the little creampuff and inspected its back end. “Well, this one’s a girl, and Mum did want me to get a girl kitten. She said the boy kittens are more likely to go outside the litter box. And I do like that she’s snuggly.”
“There you go, then,” Harry said. He managed to catch the tabby long enough to check its gender.
“And this one’s a boy. So that’s another reason for you to pick her.” He let the kitten go again as it twisted around in his hands and attempted to gnaw his finger. “What are you going to call her?”

Lucy thought about that for a long moment. “Calla, because she’s coloured like the calla lilies in my Gran’s garden, all cream and peach.”

Harry smiled. “That’s pretty. Ready to go tell your mum you’ve chosen a kitten?”

“Sure, let’s go.” Lucy waited for the quiet volunteer to grab the tabby to return him to his cage, and then carried her chosen kitten up front. “Mum, meet Calla,” she said, holding up her new friend.

Her mother chuckled. “Calla, is it? Well, she’s cute enough, I suppose. As long as you like her, that’s what counts. Ready to take her home?”

“Yes, Mum,” Lucy replied. She coaxed the kitten into the carrier her mother supplied and kept talking to her new pet as they drove along, only pausing to say, “See you soon,” to Harry as he was dropped off on Privet Drive.

Harry said his own farewells and headed into the house to see his aunt, her budgie chortling and chirping on her shoulder, just hanging up the telephone in the kitchen.

“Oh, Harry, that was Mr. Coyner who called,” she said. “He asked me to tell you that your friend Daco? I think that was the name. Anyway, that your friend will be sitting placement examinations for your school tomorrow, and they’d like you to be there for moral support and to help answer any questions the boy might have about the school and such.” She hesitated, but asked, “Is this boy… one of your sort?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, he is. He’s been homeschooled before now, but his mum just had a baby and he’d like to give normal school a try. Stephen’s been helping tutor him in general science, history, and maths to catch him up and make sure he’ll be in my class.”

“I didn’t think your sort let their children go to normal school,” Petunia said. “The Snape boy’s father was normal, from what Lily told me, but his mother taught him at home rather than sending him to the school in Cokeworth. There’s too much risk of something fr… well, of something happening, you know, like when your teacher’s hair turned blue that time.”

“Well, that is part of the reason,” Harry said. “But also, for the ones who don’t have family ties in the normal world, they mostly just don’t realise schools as they are nowadays are a thing. Stephen says our lot seem mostly stuck somewhere between the Regency and Victorian times, as far as how things are done, you know? Like bowing and kissing ladies’ hands when greeting them and things like that mostly, but it goes for schools and schooling too. Rich people have tutors and governesses and the like for the children, and poor ones just get taught by their parents.”

Petunia looked surprised. “Really? Now that you mention it, I do remember the Snape boy bowed to us the first time we spoke. But of course, he mostly ignored me in favour of paying attention to Lily, since he’d spotted her using her… talent, in the play park that time.”

“That wasn’t very nice of him.”

“I always thought he wasn’t very nice in general. If he hadn’t seen Lily… do what she did… I expect he’d have ignored us the same as he did everyone else. But I suppose he didn’t want to make friends with other children only to grow distant from them once he went away to that school. What is this friend of yours like?”
Harry smiled. “Draco’s nice, although he can come across as stuck up when he’s nervous. His mum is my godfather’s cousin, and they found out by chance that Stephen is distantly related to his dad. His mum got it into her head that Draco ought to know at least enough about the normal world to be able to find a policeman if he ever got lost there, and so they asked Stephen to take them out to visit the normal world, and that’s when I first met him. We went to see the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace, and we shopped at Harrods and Waterstone’s, and went to the zoo as well. Draco really liked the penguins, and thought it was brilliant that people can build places where they can live even though the climate here isn’t suitable for them.”

“Perky’s a good birdie,” the budgie interjected with a whistle, causing both Harry and Petunia to laugh.

“Yes, you are a good birdie, Perky,” Petunia affirmed, making kissy noises at the bird and gently petting his chest. “And I agree with your friend, Harry, it is rather brilliant that we can build habitats for so very many different animals. Anyway. You’ll be all right getting yourself to the school tomorrow morning? I won’t be able to take you, as I’ve got an appointment at the uni. I’m looking into that computer course as you suggested, and perhaps one or two others as well. I decided I might as well go back to school at the same time as you and Dudley go.”

“Really? Do you know what you want to study for?” Harry asked.

“Well, that’s part of what I’ll be discussing during my appointment. It has been years since I did my A-levels, after all, and I took a two-month secretarial course after those. I never actually wanted a career, you see. I wanted to be a wife and mother, and a help to my husband by being a gracious hostess, that sort of thing. I suppose I could have gone on to a proper uni and tried to catch a husband there, but, well… I never had the sort of looks to draw in someone who might think me an asset, especially since my accent back then marked me as coming from a working-class background. Anyway, I decided back then that my best bet to find the sort of husband I wanted was to get work as a secretary for a company with lots of young businessmen, and then focus my attention on the ones who were both single and hard-working. I worked at Grunnings myself before I married Vernon,” Petunia explained. “Before he passed, I’d vaguely considered volunteering at a hospital or at church once Dudley was off to Smeltings, but now we’d be better off if I get an actual job again. But I’ve been a housewife for so long, I know I’ll need some catching up.”

“Catching up on what?” Dudley asked, coming into the kitchen in time to hear his mother’s last sentence. “And what’s for dinner tonight? I’m hungry.”

“I’m going to need catching up on what’s new in business, as I hope to go to work when you’re off to Smeltings next year, Diddyums,” Petunia said. “Harry’s been asked by his tutor to go to the school tomorrow; another student of Mr. Coyner’s is sitting placement tests and Mr. Coyner would like your cousin there to answer the boy’s questions about the school itself… this other boy has done homeschool until now but wants to try regular school. I was telling Harry he’ll have to walk to school, as I’m going to uni to see what courses I’ll need. You’ll be spending the day with Piers Polkiss at Thorpe Park. And for a treat, you don’t need to completely follow your diet tomorrow while you’re there… but no more than one ice cream and one sweet plus one helping of whatever afters get served with dinner, agreed?”

Dudley’s face lit up. “Thorpe Park and I don’t have to eat rabbit food all day? Thank you, Mummy!”

Petunia laughed. “You’re welcome, darling. As for tonight, we’re having baked chicken breast with brussels sprouts and something called tabbouleh that looked interesting. It’s a sort of grain
salad with cucumber and tomato mixed in. And pineapple bits in sugar-free lime jelly for afters. It’s almost ready, so go wash up.”

Dudley hurried to comply while Petunia returned Perky to his cage. Harry set the table and pulled the chicken and sprouts from the oven while Petunia got the tabbouleh and drinks from the refrigerator. Harry offered to help clean up afterward, to snickers from his cousin.

“You should stop hanging about with those girlfriends of yours, before they turn you into a girl yourself,” Dudley laughed. “Or is it that poofter is really your boyfriend, and you just keep the girls around to fool everyone else? Did your tutor warn his other student about what a freak you are?”

Petunia whirled around from the sink. “Dudley Vernon Dursley, apologise to your cousin right now! Or I’ll call Mrs. Polkiss and tell her to make sure you stick with your diet tomorrow instead of allowing you the treats I said you could have.”

“But, Mummy, you know what Daddy said about boys who hang about with girls, and anyway…”

“Stop it right there, Dudley. Your father was wrong. I was wrong. Harry is not a freak, and you will be civil to him. Apologise, now!”

Dudley pouted and kicked the table leg, but when his mother picked up the phone, he grudgingly muttered, “Sorry, Harry.”

“Apology accepted,” a wide-eyed Harry said in return.

Petunia hung up the phone again. “Was that truly so hard, Diddy?”

“Yes!” Dudley answered. “Daddy died, and suddenly Harry isn’t a freak anymore? Just because the Queen talked to him? I don’t get it!”

“Oh…” Petunia sagged back, the sudden realisation that she’d done as poor a job raising her own son as she’d done with her nephew hitting her like the proverbial ton of bricks. “Harry was never a freak, Diddy. I was jealous of my sister, because she was prettier than me and had a talent I didn’t have. She got a scholarship to a school for the gifted, and our parents were quite proud of her for it, and that just made me more jealous and resentful. Then when she and her husband died and Harry got left with us, I took my resentment out on him and that was wrong of me. As for your father, he didn’t like Harry’s father the one time they met, and he resented being asked to raise the son of a man he disliked. He took that resentment out on Harry and that was wrong of him. Only now I see that you learned from us to treat your cousin badly and that’s wrong, too.”

Harry slipped quietly out of the kitchen, hoping that maybe, just maybe, Dudley would listen and learn.
Exams and Experiences

Draco looked around nervously as Stephen’s Mini pulled up in front of the school. “Do you see Harry anywhere? He said he’d be here when I sat my exams.”

Stephen reached over and squeezed Draco’s shoulder lightly in a gesture of reassurance. “We’re early, Draco, give him a few minutes. When I spoke to his aunt last night, she said he’d be walking here as she has an appointment at the uni to see about some classes for herself come fall.”

“Oh… well, I still wish he was here. I know you were raised muggle and all, but you can’t tell me what the teachers and classes are like here. I just hope I pass high enough to go into his class.”

“You’ll do fine, I’m sure. And look, there’s Harry!”

Harry waved when he spotted Stephen’s car. He trotted over, his backpack bouncing against his shoulders, as Draco and Stephen got out. “Ready for your exams?” he asked Draco.

“As ready as I’m going to be,” the blond boy sighed. “Are the teachers here nice? Or is it better not to ask?”

“They’re nice enough,” Harry said. “At least, my teacher last year was. It was the first time I wasn’t in the same class as Dudley, so I’m sure that helped a lot. He’d not do his homework and then tell the teacher I ripped it up or something, and even if the teacher called Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon about it, they always took Dudley’s side and accused me of being a troublemaker. Also, I got punished for getting better marks than Dudley, so I skived off my work a lot before. But Ms. Beckett, my teacher last year, she seemed like she wanted to see for herself if I behaved or not, and with Uncle Vernon dead I was able to do my best without fear of punishment. I’m supposed to be in Ms. St. Claire’s class when school starts again, and Dudley won’t be, so I hope she’ll be all right as a teacher.”

Draco nodded as Stephen walked the two boys into the school. Harry then took the lead, guiding them to the office, where Stephen spoke with the administrative assistant, letting her know that he’d brought his young cousin for placement exams. She nodded and hit the button for the intercom, summoning Mr. Khatri, who would proctor the exams. Stephen headed out to take care of some errands of his own after telling the boys he’d be back in three hours when the testing would be over.

“Hello, Mr. Potter,” Mr. Khatri said as he entered the office. “Are you planning to be assigned to me again this year?”

“Not at all, sir,” Harry said, laughing. “This is Draco Malfoy, a friend of mine who hopes to test into my class. Draco, this is Mr. Khatri. He’s the school’s resource teacher.”

The teacher smiled. “What that means, Mr. Malfoy, is that I work with those students who might need a little extra one on one time with a teacher to be sure they’re understanding their lessons and keeping up with where they’re supposed to be. Mr. Potter came under my purview last September, as he got moved to a class that was a bit ahead of his original placement. However, it didn’t take him long to catch up and stop seeing me. I understand you’ve been homeschooled before now?”

“Yes, sir,” Draco replied.

“In that case, I look forward to having you as a student when school starts again, regardless of how well you do on your placement exams, simply because you’re used to one on one instruction. But
as you adjust to the classroom environment, time with me will be reduced or eliminated. I take it you’re hoping to join Mr. Potter’s class?”

“Yes, sir. My mother just had a baby, and so won’t have as much time to spend on my lessons. I could still do homeschooling if I really wanted to, but I thought that going to a regular school would be interesting. However, I admit to being nervous enough that I want to be in the same class as someone I know.” Draco ducked his head a little as he said that last bit, his cheeks going pink as he confessed to some discomfort.

Mr. Khatri nodded. “Well, that’s more than understandable, and as long as your knowledge is on par with that of your age-mates, we’ll place you in the same class as Mr. Potter. Shall we get started? Mr. Potter, you may remain in the room if you wish, as long as you stay quiet.”

Harry smiled. “Thank you, sir, and I brought books with me, so I’ll have something to do.” He held up a battered paperback copy of *The Leper of St. Giles* and a newer-looking hardcover titled *Murder at the War*.

Draco grinned. “You borrowed those from Cousin Stephen, didn’t you? I know that’s one of his Brother Cadfael books,” he said, indicating the paperback.

“Yes, I did. You know I like history,” Harry said. “And he suggested this one because it’s about modern people who pretend to live in historical times. One of his friends at uni does it as a hobby. The friend went to the U.S. last summer to go to something called the Pennsic War and bought the book there for a birthday gift for Stephen since he likes mystery books. The person who wrote it belongs to the hobby group, too.” He moved to the back of the room and settled in to read.

Draco nodded as Harry moved away and turned his attention to the exam papers Mr. Khatri handed him. Two and a half hours later, he gave a relieved sigh. “Finished!”

Mr. Khatri collected the papers with a smile. “It shouldn’t take more than half an hour for me to mark these,” he said. “If you’d like to see more of the school, I’m sure Mr. Potter will be an excellent tour guide. Or you may wait here if you prefer.”

“I’d like the tour, if you’re willing, Harry,” Draco said.

“Sure,” Harry agreed, tucking a scrap of paper into *Murder at the War* to mark his place. He tucked both books into his backpack before leading Draco out of the room.

The two boys roamed around the school, with Harry showing his friend Ms. Beckett’s classroom, Ms. St. Claire’s classroom where they both hoped to be at the start of term, and other important places such as the gym, the lunchroom, the toilets, and the library. They met Stephen just coming back as they returned to the office to see if Mr. Khatri had finished marking Draco’s exams.

He had. “Well, Mr. Malfoy, you are a little behind in the sciences, but not so much as to prevent you from joining your age-mates come September,” he said. “We’ll go ahead and put you in Ms. St. Claire’s class with Mr. Potter, and you’ll be seeing me probably twice a week for at least the first six weeks. As I said before, that’s mainly to help you with settling in since you’re used to private lessons. But I can also help you get caught up to where you should be in the sciences, so that you’ll not be at a disadvantage when you’re off to secondary school next year.”

Draco relaxed and smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Khatri. I look forward to it.”

Stephen smiled as well. “Thank you for giving my cousin his exams today, sir,” he said to the teacher before turning back to the boys. “Draco, would you and Harry like to stop for ice creams,
or would you rather go straight home and tell your mum the news?"

“Ice creams, please,” Draco replied promptly, causing Harry to grin.

“All right, then, out to the car with you,” Stephen laughed. “Mr. Khatri, have a good rest of the holidays,” he said as he followed the boys out.

They drove to the play park, where a confused Draco asked, “I thought we were going to Fortescue’s?”

Stephen shook his head. “No, since you’ll be going to a muggle school, I thought you’d like to celebrate with muggle ice cream.”

“But this is a play park,” Draco said, looking even more confused. “There isn’t anywhere to get ice cream here.”

As if on cue, the trio heard chimes tinkling out the tune ‘Greensleeves’. “There’s about to be,” Harry said. “That’s the Mr. Whippy van!” Sure enough, the distinctive van pulled up at the edge of the park. Harry and Draco joined every other child in the park, queueing up at the van. Harry ordered for them both when it was their turn. “Two cones with chocolate sauce, sprinkles, and a 99 flake, please.”

Draco’s jaw dropped as he watched the vendor simply pull a lever and soft-looking ice cream swirled into the cones. He took his cone with a smile and a soft, “Thank you,” and took a taste. The ice cream was much creamier than what he was used to from Fortescue’s, and while the flavour was rather simple, he had to admit it was delicious. After he and Harry finished their cones and went back to where Stephen waited, he had to ask, “How is it possible for muggles to get ice cream out of a machine like that? I mean, I’ve seen the freezer part of the refrigerator in Stephen’s flat, so I know muggles can make things stay cold, but I don’t get how a freezer can pour out ice cream like that… or how you could have a freezer in a car in the first place!”

Harry laughed. “I never asked how they worked. I was just glad to finally get to taste something once Stephen started coming around and I started getting pocket money. My relatives never let me have any, and Dudley would always brag to me about how good it was.

Draco nodded. “Well, I guess it doesn’t matter. It’s different from Fortescue’s, but I like it. Can we get it again sometime, do you think?”

“Of course,” Stephen answered, the boys having drawn close enough that he heard Draco’s last question. “But for now, we need to drop Harry off and get you home, Draco. You know your parents are waiting to hear the results of your exams.”

“And I can’t wait to tell them I’m going to school with Harry this year,” Draco agreed.

Harry hopped out of the car on Privet Drive and waved as Stephen and Draco pulled away again. Petunia’s car was still gone, so he retrieved the key from under the mat and let himself inside. He laughed as the budgie greeted him with an enthusiastic, “Hello! Pretty Perky! Pretty Perky!”

“Hello to you, too, Perky,” he said to the bird as he headed upstairs. Opening up his snake tank, he put his hand inside. ::It iss warm and sssunny out, Suliss,:: he hissed, slipping into parseltongue. ::Let’sss go outside and enjoy the weather::;

Suliss coiled happily around Harry’s wrist and he carried her and his backpack out to the back garden. The boy and the snake settled comfortably into a lounge chair, basking in the warmth. Harry once again pulled Murder at the War out of his backpack, enjoying the sun and the story.
Meanwhile, in London, Sirius hummed happily as he pointed his wand at his motorcycle. A quick “Scourgify!” left the bike spotless and a colour charm brightened up the red, yellow, and orange flame job gleaming against the black base paint. He took another hour or so in renewing the rest of the charms on the big bike: flight capability and invisibility as well as cushioning and other safety features.

Remus poked his head out the window with a laugh. “The bike looks fine, you old dog, but you’d best worry about getting yourself presentable or you’ll be late.”

“Thanks, Moony,” Sirius called up with a grin.

He headed into the house and took a quick shower, dressing in his nicest jeans and a t-shirt emblazoned with the flag of Wales. He found it amusing that the Welsh muggles had a red dragon on their flag, when the actual native dragon to the region was the Welsh Green. Topping the outfit with his leather motorcycle jacket, he picked up two carefully folded wizarding robes, one in black and the other in vivid blue. Styled similarly to quidditch robes, they were meant to be worn over trousers, unlike the more traditional robes. He headed back out to his bike, stowing the robes carefully in the saddlebags along with his spare helmet before mounting up and heading for Kensington Palace.

Princess Diana peered out her window with a smile when she heard the rumble of the Harley approaching. Rather than making Sirius come in to fetch her, she grabbed her purse and hurried out to meet him. “Oh, it’s good to see you again!” she called, giving him a hug in greeting. “Am I dressed warmly enough?”

Sirius took in her jeans, Duran Duran t-shirt, and feminine-styled leather jacket. “You look great,” he said, the look in his eyes reflecting his sincerity. “And you’ll be fine… I have warming charms on the bike as well. Ready for your first taste of the Wizarding world?”

Di nodded. “I’m looking forward to it. I’m just glad Her Majesty allowed me to go through the records of the people in security, so I could find a few wizards born to normal parents to switch into my detail.” She gave a little wave in the direction of the omni-present black-suited security man, who responded by lifting his sleeve slightly to give a glimpse of the holstered wand on his forearm.

Sirius recalled the security agents who’d unobtrusively followed them on the three dates they’d had so far, and nodded. Addressing the agent, he said, “I thought we’d go up to Hogsmeade, as the Three Broomsticks is much nicer than the Leaky Cauldron. The bike has flight capability as well as invisibility so we’ll not be spotted by muggles along the way. You’re welcome to put a tracking spell on it to keep track of our whereabouts, whether you follow along on a broom or meet us up there.”

“I’ll meet you there since I expect that motorcycle is faster than my old broom, but a tracker is a good idea, just in case you run into any sort of trouble along the way,” the agent said. He drew his wand and applied a tracking spell to the motorcycle, then looked at Di thoughtfully. “With your permission, Your Highness, I’d like to apply a tracker to you as well, just in case. Most wizarding folk wouldn’t recognise you as anyone of importance, but you have no way of defending yourself from a stunner or a portkey on the off chance of trouble.”

“Go ahead,” she answered with a nod. “And if you don’t mind my asking, what’s a portkey?”

“A form of magical transportation,” Sirius explained as the security agent applied a tracker to
Diana herself. “It’s any object enchanted to bring you from one place to another in just a few moments. They can take several people at once, the only real limit being the size of the object, as anyone traveling by one needs to be touching it in some way. Like, a pencil would work for one or two people to travel, but for a dozen people, you’d want to use something like a jump-rope.” He took out his spare helmet and set it on Diana’s head, using his own wand to shrink it to fit perfectly. “Shall we be off, my lady?”

“Let’s go,” Di said, smiling eagerly. “I can’t wait to see Hogsmeade!” She mounted the bike behind Sirius and wrapped her arms around him as he started the bike up. They circled the lot and headed for the drive out to the road. Halfway there, she felt a slight tingle and noticed their shadow had disappeared. A moment later she gasped as they became airborne.

“Fun, isn’t it?” Sirius said as he directed the flying motorcycle northward. “You can talk if you want, the helmets have communications charms so we can hear each other.”

“It’s amazing, Sirius! I can’t believe this is really happening!” Diana peeked down and squealed. “Oooh, look, Kensington Palace looks so small from up here. Where is Hogsmeade? Is it near London?”

“It’s in Scotland, near Hogwarts,” he replied, turning the flying bike north. “I think you’ll like it.”

Much sooner than Diana expected, Sirius brought the big motorcycle gently down on a dirt road near what appeared to be the ruins of some old keep on the shore of a lake. He brought the bike to a halt although he didn’t shut it down, and turned to smile at her over his shoulder. “I thought you might like a glimpse of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” he said. “Take my hand so you can see past the ward that makes it look like a ruin to muggles.”

She slipped her hand into his and gasped as the ruins seemed to shimmer and became a many-towered castle of weathered granite tinted golden by the late afternoon sunshine. “You attended school here? It’s so beautiful! The lake, the forest, all of it!”

“The school train brings the students from London up to Hogsmeade. First year students get ferried across the lake, so their first glimpse of the castle is truly impressive,” Sirius told her, his voice husky with remembrance. “The rest of the students go from the station to the school in carriages drawn by creatures called thestrals… I can best describe them as sort of reptilian winged horses that can only be seen by people who’ve witnessed death. Some say they’re bad luck because of that, but Hagrid, the gamekeeper at the school, says that’s just superstition. I personally believe Hagrid; he knows just as much about magical creatures as the professor of the Care of Magical Creatures class, even if he does have an undue fondness for the more dangerous beasties.”

“I’m not sure I’d want to see a thestral from your description,” Diana admitted. “What other sorts of magical creatures are there?”

“Well, there’s a centaur herd in the forest, although they’re not exactly beasts. Unicorns, of course, and smaller creatures like nifflers and bowtruckles. Nifflers look sort of like large black moles with snouts like duck beaks, and they’ll go after anything shiny. Bowtruckles are sort of stick creatures about the size of my hand that eat insects and live in trees that are good as wand wood. They can get fairly aggressive if you try to harvest wood from their tree, but they’re easily distracted by giving them wood lice or fairy eggs to eat,” Sirius said. “Honestly, there are loads of creatures, more than I can think of, I’m sure, especially since I didn’t actually take Care when I was in school. It wasn’t helpful towards becoming an auror – that’s a wizarding policeman – and anyway, taking Muggle Studies annoyed my mother more. But I could get you a book, if you’d like.”

“Would you? It’s so fascinating, learning about your world,” Di said. “Are dragons real, too?”
Sirius chuckled. “They certainly are. The Welsh Green and the Hebridean Black are both native to Britain, but there are plenty of others as well. We mostly keep them in reserves, well away from muggle areas, for safety’s sake.”

“I should hope so!”

“Ready to see Hogsmeade?”

“Definitely!”

Sirius put the bike into gear and they rolled gently down the road away from the castle. As the town of Hogsmeade came into sight in the distance, he stopped once more. “Hop off for a moment. I brought robes along so that we’ll fit in better amongst the villagers. I don’t want to risk any bigots spoiling your first visit to my world, and unfortunately, there are some who would consider you beneath them for being muggle.”

Diana dismounted, a slight frown crossing her face. “I suppose it was too much to hope there would be no bigotry amongst wizards.”

Sirius sighed as he dismounted and rummaged in the saddlebag. “It’s difficult. I mean, I don’t want to blame the muggleborn and sound like one of those stupid blood purists, but at the same time, they do have a bit of a point. Our culture is slow to evolve, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. Your culture is much more accepting of change. Part of the problem is that when the muggleborn first enter the wizarding world, an awful lot of them behave quite rudely by wizarding standards, but since their behaviour is considered tolerable or even polite in muggle culture, they refuse to believe they’re being rude.”

Diana accepted the blue robe from him and watch him don the black one before following his example. “Right, so what I’ve heard called ‘Ugly American’ behaviour. This is how they grew up; therefore, it must be right everywhere. It doesn’t occur to them that other cultures have different ideas of what’s polite.”

“Exactly,” Sirius said, re-mounting the bike and holding it steady for Diana to get on. “My cousin Cissy’s husband is trying to do something about that, by starting a class on wizarding culture at Hogwarts. He’s on the board of governors. Oh, Lucius is a snob of the highest degree, and he’ll even admit it if pressed, but Stephen said something to Cissy when they first spoke made him sit up and take notice. Stephen told her that if they disliked the way muggleborns behaved, maybe they ought to teach them proper behaviour instead of just sneering at them for not knowing it.”

Di settled herself back on the bike behind Sirius and wrapped her arms around his waist. “That does sound as if it would be productive.”

“We’ll see what happens,” Sirius said. “Anyway, while these robes are of a very modern style by wizarding standards, we won’t stand out nearly as much as if we went into any of the shops wearing muggle jeans and t-shirts, and so hopefully won’t draw any unwanted attention.” He started the bike once more, riding slowly along the rutted road until they came to the quaint little village. “Anyway, welcome to Hogsmeade.” He pulled up in front of the Three Broomsticks, letting Diana off before dropping the kickstand and dismounting.

Diana looked around with interest, grinning to herself when her security guard, who had been idly paging through a copy of the Daily Prophet while leaning against the wall of the owl post office, folded the paper and moved to follow them unobtrusively. Her eyes lit up when she saw the bookstore, Tomes and Scrolls. “Oh, can we stop in there before we eat? Or have we a reservation?”
“Whatever my lady desires,” Sirius told her with a smile. “I booked one of Rosmerta’s private rooms at the Three Broomsticks, so it doesn’t matter when we get there.”

“Thank you!” Diana further expressed her thanks with a hug and very enthusiastic kiss.

He took her hand as they strolled down the High Street and entered the bookstore. They browsed around for a bit before Sirius picked out a copy of *Fantastical Beasts and Where to Find Them* as well as *Hogwarts: A History*. He also grabbed a book about beginning Arithmancy, remembering that Harry had asked about the subject a time or two. After buying the books, they walked back to the Three Broomsticks where they enjoyed Rosmerta’s lamb stew, followed by apple pie and buttebeer.

The sun had just set as they left the pub, the darkening sky streaked with crimson and purple. They flew back to London while admiring the emerging stars. When they landed and came to a stop outside Kensington Palace, Diana looked up at Sirius. “I don’t want the evening to end. My boys are at Highgrove with their father this week, if you’d care to come in. I’ll warn you, though, you’ll most probably be photographed leaving if you choose to stay. Someone’s bound to notice if you don’t just drop me off.”

Sirius kissed her softly. “I’d very much like to stay. Especially since I can avoid the photographers,” he added with a grin. “Is there a spot that the security cameras can’t see?”

“Over between the garage and the hedgerow,” she said, gesturing toward the spot. “Why?”

“I’m going to call one of my house elves to collect the bike, then I can apparate directly from your apartment when it’s time to leave. The photographers won’t have anything to photograph.”

“A house elf?” She giggled. “And this apparate thing sounds useful. I wouldn’t mind being able to avoid the press now and again.” She watched with interest as he wheeled the bike over to the gap between the garage and the hedgerow. A soft pop heralded the arrival of a small creature wearing what appeared to be a pillowcase. Sirius spoke softly to the little being, who nodded vigorously and took hold of the bike, vanishing with another pop.

He walked back over and took her hands in his. “You’re sure about this, Diana?” he asked quietly. “I care enough that I don’t want to cause any problems for you.”

“It’s because you care that I’m sure,” she replied, tugging him inside and pulling him close.

When Sirius returned to Grimmauld Place, he couldn’t stop singing ‘Crazy Little Thing Called Love'.
As late June turned into mid-July, Stephen sought and rented a small house in Little Whinging, on the far side of the primary school from Privet Drive. The Malfoys offered to pay the difference in cost between his old flat and the house – as well as charming the paperwork to be sure he would be approved for the rental – in exchange for the use of the address for Draco’s schooling. Lucius helped him file the necessary parchment to get hooked up to the floo network, so that Draco could floo from the manor each morning and walk to school, reversing the trip in the afternoons. Stephen also bought an answerphone and taught both Lucius and Narcissa how to operate it as well as the telephone, in case the school needed to contact them.

Dumbledore worried briefly that someone had discovered where he hid Harry Potter, when one of his Ministry contacts mentioned a new floo connection being made in Little Whinging. But further inquiry showed the owner of the floo to be a muggleborn Hufflepuff who was too young to have been a Death Eater even if he hadn’t been muggleborn. He decided it was merely coincidence that brought the young man to Little Whinging and concluded that he didn’t need to be concerned that the man had ulterior motives for moving there. It was presumably convenient to the man’s work or family or both, and with the new school year approaching quickly, Dumbledore just as quickly dismissed the matter as insignificant.

He had other things to worry about anyway; once again, the Defense instructor resigned over the summer citing a family emergency, so he needed to find a replacement from an ever-shrinking pool of applicants. He also needed to hire a new Muggle Studies professor, as Quirinus Quirrel, who had held the post for the last few years while working towards his Defense mastery, had requested a year’s sabbatical in order to complete his studies – he lacked experience against several types of dark creatures which were very rare in Britain. However, they were much more common in Europe, particularly near the Asian border, and so a Master of Defense was expected to be capable of handling them.

Well, Dumbledore considered, when Quirinus returns, he can step into the Defense position. He’s a decent teacher, he’s in good health, no family to speak of, and no scandals or even hints of impropriety since I hired him. I’ll request an auror to fill in the post one more time, and then Quirinus should solve the issue of no one remaining for more than a year. And while I’m at the Ministry, I’ll see if perhaps I can find a Muggle Studies instructor within the Department of Muggle Liaisons. At least I don’t need to find someone to teach the Wizarding Culture course, although I am quite disappointed that they went and hired that niece of young Edward Cavendish to teach it, out of their own pockets, no less. I’d hoped that my hints about overstrained budgets would have led to them dropping the idea. Really, who would have expected Lord Malfoy, of all people, to have dreamed up such a course, much less to start angling to be seen as a champion of muggleborn? Still, it’s just as well the course is starting this year instead of next. Gives me time to observe it, so I can see if I need to adjust it at all for next year. It wouldn’t do for young Harry Potter to learn too much about the wizarding world, after all. It might give him ideas that, for the greater good, can’t be allowed.

Rising to his feet, he exited his office and stopped in to see Minerva on his way out. “How are the new schedules coming, my dear?” he asked his deputy.

Minerva McGonagall looked up with a slight shrug. “Well enough,” she replied. “Fortunately, the current schedule left plenty of openings where the Wizarding Culture course could be slotted in, at least for the younger years. As per the Board’s suggestion, it will be a mandatory course for first and second years, and elective for older students. I am having a slight difficulty fitting it in for
NEWT-level students; however, I’ve owled Ludmilla Cavendish to see if she would be willing to
hold a class for the interested sixth and seventh years after dinner instead of during the day. It’s the
only way I see clear to manage, given how many of them have inquired about taking it. I’m hoping
to hear back from her by morning.”

Dumbledore nodded. “In that case, I shan’t bother you any longer. I just wanted to let you know
that I’m off to the Ministry to try to coax another auror into covering the DADA position this year.
Quirinus will be back, hopefully with his Mastery, and can take over the post next year. I’m also
going to see if I can’t get someone from the Department of Muggle Liaisons to give us a year or
two as well. While I am glad Quirinus had the opportunity for travel to complete his Mastery work,
I do wish he’d given a bit more notice before taking his sabbatical.”

“As do I,” McGonagall agreed. “Very well, Albus, I expect I’ll see you at dinner, then.” She
returned her attention to her desk as a tray marked Muggleborn Invitation Replies started to glow a
soft yellow. She reached in and plucked out a parchment envelope containing a letter written on
that odd lined paper with a trio of holes in the left-hand margin that had become so common in
recent years. As she read the request for a home visit for Annabel Entwhistle, who mentioned that
‘odd stuff’ happened around her younger brother Kevin and wanted to know if that meant he also
had magic, a small part of her mind wondered about the purpose of the holes in the paper and
when it started taking precedence over the formal stationery the muggles used to use.

Dumbledore left his deputy to her parchmentwork and strolled to the gates of Hogwarts before
apparating to the Ministry. He fortunately arrived at the DMLE in time to hear Garfield Arbuckle,
one of the oldest active aurors, saying to a colleague that he felt he was honestly getting too old for
the work, but that he didn’t want to just sit around home either.

“Forgive an old man for overhearing your conversation,” Dumbledore broke in as he approached
the pair. “But did I hear you say you were considering retirement, Auror Arbuckle? Might I be able
to persuade you into a year of teaching, perhaps as a way to ease into that retirement?”

Both aurors laughed. “The curse struck again, did it?” Arbuckle said. “Eh, why not? It’ll give me
some pay as well as a place to live while I’m adjusting to civilian life… and I’ve got enough time
to hand in my notice and go check with Prandep and Ketterly, see what sort of books and lesson
plans they used when they each took a year off to teach for you.”

“In that case, I’ll not keep you, my boy,” Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling cheerfully. “Please
owl your book requirements as soon as possible, so we can get the lists out to the children in time
for them to shop for their supplies. The castle elves will have your quarters ready for you whenever
you plan to arrive… perhaps the middle of August or thereabouts? So you’ll have time to arrange
the classroom as you like it, and get used to finding your way around those parts of the castle you
most likely wouldn’t have seen in your own student days.”

“Sounds good to me,” Arbuckle said. “I’ll be in touch.” He and the other auror moved off towards
the DMLE, the younger one joking that it was good that Arbuckle only agreed to a year’s contract,
lest he fall victim to the curse on the DADA position.

Dumbledore proceeded on to the Department of Muggle Liaisons, where he persuaded Harcourt
Fenton, a junior member of the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, that teaching would prove much
more fulfilling than twiddling one’s thumbs while waiting for the monitors to indicate accidental
magic occurring in muggle areas. Fenton agreed, as even when the squad did have something to do,
the Obliviators handled most of the work – and they were specially-trained Unspeakables. The
squad merely corrected whatever accidental magic had been done and left it to the Obliviators to
handle any muggle witnesses. Besides, he’d be able to save most if not all of his salary as a teacher,
since he’d get room and board as well, and no longer have to pay rent and buy food. That meant he and his betrothed could likely get married at least a year sooner than they’d expected, not that he informed Dumbledore of that particular reason for his acceptance of the position.

The headmaster returned to Hogwarts, pleased with the results of his trip. Now that this year’s errands were out of the way, he could start thinking how best to get young Harry Potter to make friends with the youngest Weasley son next year. Minerva handled most of the visits to prospective muggleborn students, but she would be a stickler for handling even Harry’s visit by the book. On the other hand, Harry wasn’t exactly muggleborn, either, even if he had been raised in the muggle world since his parents died. As he was in the records as being born to a wizarding couple, he would get the standard letter rather than the muggleborn informational packet.

When the lad responds with a request for more information – or if he doesn’t respond at all – I can send either Severus or Hagrid out to tell him a bit more and to escort him to Diagon Alley for his supplies. Either one would work well towards encouraging the boy to favor Gryffindor and dislike Slytherin; Hagrid because he’d been one himself before young Tom Riddle had gotten him expelled on the suspicion that his pet acromantula had killed Myrtle Warren, and Severus because he’ll be certain to treat the boy harshly due to his incredible resemblance to James, thereby causing the youngster to want to avoid being in the same house that Severus headed. Hagrid is forgetful enough that he’d likely just make sure Harry had his ticket to the Hogwarts Express without remembering to tell him where the portal to Platform 9-3/4 was, and Severus would probably find a modicum of pleasure in picturing his rival’s son lost and reduced to pleading for help from passersby. Either way, I’ll have Molly Weasley take her brood through the muggle side of King’s Cross when the time comes; her motherly demeanor would appeal to a lost child, and she could then see Harry onto the platform and introduce him to young Ronald at the same time. Albus popped a lemon drop into his mouth and gazed out the window of his office with a satisfied expression on his face.

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Elsewhere in the castle, Severus Snape grumbled under his breath as he poured the last of the newly-completed batch of stomach soother into vials destined for Madam Pomfrey’s supply cupboard. Not that he actually minded keeping the hospital wing stocked with the most commonly required potions, but the headmaster had barged into the lab the previous evening. The sudden draft from the door opening caused the flame beneath the cauldron to flare up at just the wrong moment, ruining a batch of Pepper-Up potion. He’d needed to make a trip to Diagon Alley for the supplies to make more, putting him behind his planned schedule. He really, really wanted to be done with the hospital wing’s potions in time to take a fortnight away from the castle, where he could experiment with his own research without Albus poking his beard into every cauldron due to his excessive need to know exactly what he was doing at any given moment.

Additionally, he still hadn’t the foggiest notion as to where to find the so-called Come and Go Room on the seventh floor that Lucius had inquired about back around the Yule holiday. Albus, of course, was the reason he hadn’t been able to investigate properly. He had no real excuse to wander around the upper floors of the castle with the children gone for the holidays, and every staff member knew he preferred to remain in the dungeons, either in the lab or his personal quarters, outside of meals, unless he was patrolling the corridors after curfew. If Albus found him on the seventh floor, he knew the old man would want to know why he was there.

One of the castle elves popped in like usual to take the finished potions to Madam Pomfrey, and it finally occurred to the potions master to question the little being. If anyone in the castle knew about this hidden room, the elves seemed the likeliest source of information. “Just a moment, elf,” Snape said, keeping his voice carefully neutral.
The elf paused, looking nervous. “Is Dakker doings a thing wrong?” he asked.

Snape shook his head. “No, Dakker, but I have some questions for you. Firstly, are you obliged to report any request I might make of you or the other elves to the headmaster?”

“Oh, no, Master Snake, sir! Not if yous asks us to keeps yous secrets, unless yous is hurtings the childrens,” Dakker said.

“Good. I have another question or two, and I do not want the headmaster to know that I’m asking. What can you tell me of something called the Come and Go Room?” Dakker beamed. “All the elveses know the Come and Go Room,” he said. “On seventh floor, across from tapestry of silly wizard and dancing trolls. Go past there three times, and bees thinking hard of what Master Snake sir wants of it, and the room opens as what yous bees thinking of.”

“How is it that the elves know about it, when the headmaster does not?”

“Dakker is not knowing why Headmaster Whiskers is not knowing it, Master Snake, sir. But elveses use room for keeping losted things until we’s is asked to find them again.”

“I see. Thank you, Dakker, go on and take the potions to Madam Pomfrey now,” Snape said. “And remember, know one is to know that I asked about the Come and Go Room.”

“Yes, sir, Master Snake sir,” Dakker replied before popping out with the box of potions.

Snape’s lips twitched as he turned his attention to replacing the ruined Pepper-Up potion. The elves used the room as a lost-and-found storage area? He could only imagine the amount of parchment piled up in the room; notes and essays misplaced by generations of dunderheaded students and the occasional absent-minded professors. At least he finally had an answer to give to Lucius, the next time he was at Malfoy Manor to see his godson and meet the new baby. Come to think of it, he ought to gift Narcissa with a pot of the skin cream he’d developed for his own use to prevent scarring on his hands from any accidental cuts or burns acquired as he worked. Experimental potions were known to fail spectacularly at times, after all, and scarred and calloused fingers could be detrimental to his potions-making ability by not allowing him to feel if certain ingredients were ground to the proper consistency and such. The cream would easily eliminate any stretch marks left from Narcissa’s recent pregnancy. He shook himself free of his maunderings, focusing back on the task at hand in hopes of getting his brewing back on schedule.

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A few days before his birthday and planned week at Balmoral with Princess Diana and the princes, Harry picked up the mail on his way in to breakfast and stared at his aunt’s favourite tabloid’s front page. ‘Diana Dating Mystery Man!’ blared the main headline, over a photo of a smiling Diana strapping on a helmet as she obviously prepared to mount a motorcycle behind a helmeted and leather-jacketed man holding the bike steady. The man’s face wasn’t visible, but Harry recognised both the bike and helmets as belonging to his godfather.

Petunia glanced at the photo and headline with a sniff. “I’m surprised the Queen allows her to be seen with such a hooligan,” she said. “She might not be married to Prince Charles anymore, but she’s still the mother of the heir to the throne. She ought to conduct herself appropriately.” She looked at her nephew and frowned. “I hope she doesn’t intend asking this mystery man on holiday with you.”

“Not that I’ve heard, Aunt Petunia,” Harry said. Sirius hadn’t mentioned being invited along when they’d seen each other last weekend, although he had said that he was now courting someone and
hoped to eventually persuade her into marrying him. “I wouldn’t think Princess Diana would even ask the Queen for permission to invite a date to Balmoral just yet anyway. She can’t have been seeing him for very long, after all, the divorce only just went through last month.”

“True enough,” Petunia agreed. “I still think she oughtn’t to be seen with a hooligan like that, but then again, she was quite young when she and Prince Charles married. I suppose it doesn’t matter if she wants to make a fool of herself over a so-called bad boy, so long as she doesn’t allow him any sort of influence with the little princes.”

Harry started to ask why she thought the man was a hooligan but thought the better of it. “She’s a good mum, so I’m sure she’ll do what’s right by Wills and little Harry,” he said. “Oh, speaking of Wills, you’ll be glad to know I’m going to take Suliss with me when I go to Balmoral. He’s heard so much about her that he wants a pet snake now too. He’s written that they’ve got a habitat set up, but they want me to bring her and teach him how to handle her properly and all that before they get him a snake of his own.”

Petunia shuddered at the thought of the little prince handling a snake, but also heaved a sigh of relief that she’d not have to feed Harry’s pet or clean the tank while he was on holiday. “I think Her Royal Highness is crazy, even considering getting her son a snake, but I am glad I won’t have to care for yours,” she said. “I have to admit, I would have forbidden a pet snake back when you got yours, if it had occurred to me that snakes were even an option. But because they scare me, you know? Not just to keep you from something you wanted.” Changing the subject abruptly, she asked, “What time will you be leaving for your holiday?”

“Stephen will be picking me up at seven in the morning, day after tomorrow,” Harry said.

“And Marge will be collecting Dudders at noon for his week at the seashore. I won’t know what to do with myself, a whole week with no one to cook or clean for!” She smiled. “Perhaps I’ll indulge myself a little, and have my hair done? If I’m going to uni and then back to work, I ought to try to look a little less – housewifely, don’t you think?”

Harry froze like a deer in headlights. “Er… maybe you should ask Stephen? I, uh, don’t know what’s proper in business or anything.”

Petunia laughed. “And you’re also a boy, just about to turn ten. That was foolish of me, to have asked your opinion. But you have a habit of really listening to people when they talk to you, I’ve discovered, and that’s a good thing, even if it does sometimes make people forget just how young you really are. I just wish your cousin listened better, but he takes after Marge, I’m afraid. She’s one that only hears the bits she wants to hear and disregards the rest. I only hope she doesn’t undo all the good his diet’s started to do for him, by trying to ‘feed him up proper’ according to her definition of proper. He’s down two stone so far.”

“Say you’ll get him whatever the newest game for his system is, if he doesn’t gain more than half a stone while he’s gone? Or something else he might want. Smeltings is the sort of school that wants the students to do some kind of sport or art as well as classroom lessons, right? I can’t see Dudley as a runner or swimmer, but perhaps he’d enjoy something like rugby, boxing, or wrestling?” Harry winced internally at the thought of his cousin learning to throw punches properly but continued anyway, “That way he’d go into Smeltings with the basics and have a better chance at being picked for one of the competitive teams, and sports players are nearly always more popular in school, too.”

“Now that’s something that never would have occurred to me, and proves once again that you pay attention,” Petunia said. “Thank you for the idea, Harry.”
“You’re welcome, Aunt Petunia.”
Meetings With Her Majesty

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Queen gave a concerned glance at the tabloid headlines featuring Diana and her so-called mystery man as she sipped her first cup of tea of the day. Nothing too uncomplimentary thus far, but Her Majesty knew perfectly well that the longer his identity remained a mystery, the theories as to who he was and why he and Diana wouldn’t date openly would only grow crazier. However, they couldn’t exactly tell the truth, either. Some of the more conspiracy-minded tabloids might willingly publish a tale of Princess Diana and a wizard, but they would most likely spin the tale to make Sirius a villain using his magic to gain control of the Royal Family somehow.

While her few magical agents hadn’t been able to learn much about Sirius Black to date, between what they had come up with, what had been in young Stephen Coyner’s reports, and what Diana and her grandsons said of their earliest meetings with the man, the Queen cautiously approved of him as someone who might possibly end up in a position of some influence with the young princes. However, they had to come up with some sort of reasonable background for him, to keep the tabloids from making up whatever nonsense they thought would sell papers. Or more to the point, to give the responsible press a reasonable story so that the general populace would believe the reasonable story and merely laugh at whatever nonsense the tabloids made up to sell papers.

To that end, and also because she knew Diana wanted to invite Mr. Black up to Scotland for a day to celebrate Harry Potter’s birthday as well as officially tell her boys she was dating him, Her Majesty asked Di to bring Sirius to a private meeting in Buckingham Palace this morning. It was time she met the man in person.

Sirius tugged his suit coat straighter as he got out of his Porsche in the private parking area of Kensington Palace and grabbed two books from the back seat. When Diana contacted him about the queen’s desire for a meeting, she’d hinted that it might have something to do with giving him a background acceptable to the press, so that they wouldn’t get too bizarre with their stories. As long as the Queen understood what he intended to show her in the books, they shouldn’t have to invent much of anything for him. He smiled as Diana emerged just as an official car pulled up.

“Sirius, right on time, I see,” she called, walking over to greet him with a hug and light kiss before tugging him to the official car. “You remember everything I told you?”

He helped her into the car and climbed in behind her. The partition between the driver and passenger compartments was already up, giving them their privacy. “Yes, I believe so,” he answered. “Bow, I may or may not be offered her hand. Shake, don’t kiss it if she does offer it. ‘Your Majesty’ on first addressing her, ‘Ma’am’ is fine after that. Don’t sit until invited, stand again when she does, and if I’m dismissed whilst she’s still in the room, I’m to back away several steps before turning to exit. Did I miss anything?”

“Not at all, you must have been studying.”

“Well, if I’m to keep you in my life, I had best prove acceptable to Her Majesty, hadn’t I? And I do want you in my life, Diana, for as long as you’ll have me in yours.”

Diana blushed. “I feel the same way,” she murmured. “I honestly think I fell for you the first time we met, when you comforted that little girl in hospital who said you resembled her father, despite how unsettled you were by all the medical equipment. A man willing to ignore his own discomfort
in order to help a child is a man well worth knowing.” Wanting to get away from more personal topics before they reached Buckingham Palace, she asked, “Anyway, what are those books you brought? Will they help establish a background for you in some way?”

Sirius nodded with a smile. “I hope so. You’re familiar with Burke’s Peerage, right?”

Diana nodded as well. “I am, although serious genealogy students say it contains far too many mistakes in research and even outright untruths to be considered reliable.”

“It’s probably more reliable than most of your culture realises,” Sirius said. “You see, the John Burke who wrote the original, he was from a squib branch of the wizarding Burke family. While many of the blood-bigot families outright rejected any children born without magic, disowning them and abandoning them in muggle orphanages and such, some of the more moderate families preferred to maintain ties with them. They’d set them up with land and money or businesses, and keep in touch on a regular basis so as to position themselves to generate income from the muggle world, as importers of food and other raw materials that we simply can’t produce in enough quantity for ourselves.”

“Clever,” Diana said. “And I take it the Burke family is one that remained in contact with their non-magical relations?”

“Yes, and both branches have always had an interest in genealogy, it seems.” Sirius showed her the two books: Burke’s Peerage, and Nature’s Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy, originally written by a Niall Burke. “Some of the ‘mistakes’ in the muggle book are due to the first John Burke’s inclusion of noble wizarding families as well as the muggle peerage.”

Diana raised a brow at that, as the driver paused to speak with the guards at the checkpoint to allow them to access the secure areas of Buckingham Palace. “What about your Statute of Secrecy?” she asked. “That came into being well before Burke’s Peerage was written.”

“It’s what makes your serious scholars think there are mistakes in the book,” Sirius replied. “As the book is published by the Burke family to this day, there’s a charm in the printing process that prevents those not already in the know from remembering any information about the wizarding families listed. They can read the book all they want, but they’ll not recall certain parts of it even five minutes after reading them. Or else they’ll recall those bits as mistakes or even false claims, if they involve connections between wizarding and muggle families.”

“I see… and the Black family is listed, I presume, in one of those charmed bits? Is there something you can do to remove the charm from your family’s entry?”

“No exactly. What I can do is copy the entry, and then put a second charm on the copy, one that will make anyone looking at it vaguely recall having seen it before. They’ll vaguely remember the Blacks as a family that spends most of their time abroad, and one that educates their children privately. I’ve also charmed my Hogwarts leaving certificate to appear as a diploma from the University of Michigan, in the States, giving myself a degree in business administration; you know, to better manage the family’s assets.”

“So anyone looking at your ‘credentials’ will more or less respond by thinking, ‘Oh right, them,’ and promptly dismissing the new knowledge as something they’d already known but that wasn’t important enough to remember, yes?” Diana asked as they got out of the car.

“Exactly,” Sirius said, offering his arm as the Queen’s secretary greeted them and led them to the small yet comfortable office Her Majesty chose for this meeting.
The secretary announced the couple, and Diana made the formal introductions. Her Majesty found herself pleasantly surprised by the easy blend of courteous respect and sincere friendliness Sirius showed her. In her experience, far too many people meeting her for the first time either babbled nervously or else stuttered out one-word replies to any questions she asked.

“I assume you’ve probably encountered the paparazzi at this point in your relationship with Diana,” the Queen said, once the proper greetings had been exchanged and the three had taken seats. “It occurred to me that you’ll need some sort of appropriate background that can be released to the press, or they’ll start making up anything they think will sell more papers.” She smiled wryly. “I wouldn’t put it past the more imaginative among them to claim you’re a space alien or the humanoid form of the Loch Ness Monster.”

Sirius burst into laughter at that. “No, Your Majesty, I guarantee I’m neither Luke Skywalker nor the humanoid form of the Loch Ness Monster! Actually, I have a background already, given that mine and most other wizarding nobility are listed in Burke’s Peerage. If you didn’t know, that was originally written by a squib member of the wizarding Burke family.”

“No, I didn’t,” the Queen said, looking interested.

Sirius opened the book to the Black family entry and launched into the same explanation he’d given to Diana on the ride over. He also showed them the corresponding entry in Nature’s Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy. Diana flipped through the latter as the Queen questioned Sirius further. Her Majesty decided that she definitely approved of the pair’s deepening relationship; her skill at reading people telling her that Sirius genuinely cared for Diana and wasn’t motivated by the hope of gaining influence with Prince William. His solution to the question of his background was simple and mostly truthful, although she did have one concern with it.

“Well, I can only see one potential issue with the background story you’ve assembled for the press,” the Queen said. “What if some reporter decides to dig into your educational background? You won’t have an actual file at the University of Michigan for them to find, and that could lead to some awkward questions.”

“I can take a quick trip over there and create a file,” Sirius said. “I chose Michigan because it’s quite a large school, and as I supposedly left it back in 1981, it won’t seem odd if none of the professors remember me in particular. I’ll just find someone else who left that same year with a degree in business administration and copy their file, then alter the copy with my personal information and put it in the appropriate place for that enterprising reporter to find.”

The Queen nodded. “Very well, please do so within the week, so that you’ll be back before your godson’s birthday. You’re welcome to join Diana and the boys at Balmoral for the day, so you can celebrate with Harry, and so that Diana might tell Wills and young Harry that the two of you are dating.” She glanced at her wristwatch, ignoring the look of surprise on the wizard’s face. “Oh good, I still have some time. Would you mind showing me some of your magic?” Her Majesty’s eyes sparkled eagerly as she gave Sirius a pleading glance.

Diana smothered a giggle, as she understood the Queen’s desire. Knowing magic existed was one thing, actually seeing it happen was something else.

Sirius grinned. “As you wish, Your Majesty,” he said. Drawing his wand, he looked around the room to find a few things to charm or transfigure. Spotting a paperweight shaped like a sitting corgi, he animated it, causing the little brass dog to trot smartly across the desk and silently bark up at the people watching it before sitting down again and resuming its former state.

“Oh my, that’s amazing!” the Queen exclaimed, clapping her hands with delight.
Seeing an arrangement of red and white carnations, Sirius summoned one. “Accio carnation,” he said, easily catching the single flower as it lifted from the vase and sailed towards him. “What is your favourite colour, Ma’am?”

“Goodness, I like most bright colours,” she replied. “Perhaps a dark purple? I’ve seen dyed carnations before, but they’re usually fairly light in colour.”

With another quick spell, the red carnation turned the same shade of purple as a violet flower. Sirius then picked up a few paper clips from the desk and transfigured them into different items: a thimble, a birthday candle, and a shoelace. A magazine became a blue willow pattern plate. After changing everything back and replacing the flower into the arrangement, he smiled. “And for the grand finale, I’d like the both of you to meet my alter-ego, Padfoot!” He shifted to his animagus form and wagged his tail, looking up at the two women with a happy doggy grin.

Diana laughed and applauded. “That’s wonderful! What else can you become?”

Sirius shifted back. “Only Padfoot, I’m afraid. That’s known as the animagus transformation, and it’s not something that every wizard or witch can do. Although I suspect that’s as much due to the amount of work and practise it takes to find one’s form and then become it. One’s form is considered a reflection of the inner self, and I know of at least one person who found her form but chose not to work on the transformation afterward because she decided it wasn’t practical… her form was a Shetland pony, or so she said. I can see her point. Padfoot might be quite a large dog, but he’s still a dog, and so he’ll more or less blend in anywhere. Plus I can track someone by scent in that form. Not as well as I’m sure a real dog could, but I can do it. Whereas a Sheltland pony would stand out horribly in most places these days, and really isn’t good for much more than pulling a cart or being ridden by very small children.”

“It’s a shame I can’t turn into a polo pony,” Diana said with a chuckle. “I’d feel much better about Wills and Harry learning to play if I were carrying them. They still seem awfully young to me, to be learning to play such a rough sport. Still, I have to credit Charles with enough sense that he’s training them on his oldest ponies, the ones that he’s retired from play.”

The Queen reached over and patted Diana’s hand. “My grandsons will be fine. Those ponies know how to avoid accidents and they’ll take as good care of the boys as Charles and the trainers will.”

Diana smiled. “I know. I’ve just never been especially interested in polo or hunting or any of those rougher activities. Trotting along bridle paths is one thing but going neck-or-nothing over ditches and five-barred gates is something else again. It’s why I’m deferring to Charles for that part of their education.”

The Queen smiled and looked at her watch once more. “Well, I must be off to make ready for my next appointment, and I’m sure the two of you have plenty to discuss as well. If you don’t mind, Diana, I’d like to drop by Craigowen Lodge the day before Harry Potter’s birthday, to give him my own good wishes as well as to see for myself how he’s doing. I don’t want to disrupt your plans for his birthday celebration itself but given that I did make him the first Royal Ward in centuries, I feel a personal interest beyond just reading young Mr. Coyner’s reports.”

“Of course, just let me know when you plan to arrive, so I can make sure the boys aren’t out fishing or something,” Diana nodded.

Her Majesty stood up, Diana and Sirius also politely rising to their feet. “Lord Black, it’s been a pleasure. Let Diana know when you’ve slipped yourself into the files at the University of Michigan, and we’ll arrange for some sort of press release after you two have spoken with my grandsons.” She extended her hand to the wizard with a smile.
Sirius clasped the offered hand, bowing over it although refraining from kissing it. “It’s my honour to meet you as well, Ma’am, and thank you.” He released her hand and stepped back as she turned to leave. Once she was out of the room, he blew out a relieved breath. “I think I did fairly well, what do you think?” he asked Diana.

She slid her arm around his waist and kissed his cheek. “You were brilliant,” she said. “Her Majesty likes you; I can tell. Come on, we can discuss your visit to Scotland for your godson’s birthday and then you’d best see about that little trip you need to the States.” She led him back out to the car and they headed back to Kensington Palace, talking about how they wanted the celebration to go, as well as how to tell the Princes that they were now a couple.

After arriving at Craigowen Lodge, Harry barely had time to settle Suliss into the habitat waiting in his room before Wills and little Harry came bursting in.

“Did you bring your snake? Shall we go riding in the morning? What movies do you want to see while we’re here? Mummy says Grandmum is going to come visit while you’re here, did you know that?” The two young princes spoke over each other in their enthusiasm.

Harry laughed. “Yes, I brought my snake. Her name is Suliss, and there she is.” He gestured towards the habitat, where Suliss had settled herself onto a heated rock. “Riding sounds like fun, as long as we don’t ride for too long. I’m not used to it as you two are, and I’d like to be able to walk after the ride.” He paused as the other two giggled, then continued, “As for movies, I’d like to see Honey, I Shrunk the Kids if possible, but I don’t know what films you have here. And no, I didn’t know that your grandmother was going to come visit. But I do now!”

The three boys spent the next few days riding, playing with the dogs, fishing, and talking about everything they’d done since they’d last seen each other at the performance of Cats a few months earlier. Harry told the princes about helping his friend Lucy pick out a kitten, that he’d be testing for his blue belt in his tae kwon do class soon, and about seeing his friend Draco’s newborn baby sister. Little Harry talked excitedly about starting polo lessons with his father, and that his mother said he could come along the next visit she made to Great Ormond St. Hospital. Wills confessed that while he enjoyed the polo lessons, they also made him uncomfortable at times because his father’s girlfriend often showed up to watch. It wasn’t that he minded meeting her so much, but that even though she seemed nice, she was still married to someone else and didn’t seem to care who knew it. He also said he wished the papers would stop speculating that his mum was dating every famous actor and musician under the sun. Harry smiled at that, having seen his aunt’s tabloids. They’d suggested the mystery man under the motorcycle helmet was anyone from Brian May of Queen to the American actor Don Johnson.

That afternoon, Diana called the boys in a little earlier than usual. “I want you all to clean up and dress nicely, as Her Majesty is coming to tea, to visit with the three of you,” she said.

Wills smiled at Harry as they hurried off to their rooms. “Don’t be nervous,” he reassured his friend. “Grandmum’s quite nice, and we’ve told her all about you. I know she’ll like you.”

“Thanks,” Harry grinned. “I did meet her once, you know, a bit over a year ago, when she’d summoned my family so she could thank me personally for standing up for you and little Harry when that bully attacked you in my schoolyard. I hope this meeting won’t be quite as eventful as that one was.”

Wills laughed and the boys parted to their respective rooms to shower and change.

The boys arrived back to the sitting room to find the Queen chatting with Diana, a brightly wrapped package sitting on the table next to her. Not entirely sure of the proper protocol to follow
for a family gathering rather than a formal audience, Harry let Wills and little Harry dart forward to
greet their grandmother first. They did, dashing over to hug her happily.

Once they were done, he stepped forward and gave a bow. “Good afternoon, Your Majesty,” he
said with a shy smile.

“Hello, Harry,” she replied with a warm smile of her own. “It’s good to see you again. Come have a
seat. You look much better than when I first saw you last year. Are you enjoying school? What
sort of activities do you do outside of class?”

Harry sat down. “I like school, now that Dudley’s stopped beating up the other kids for talking to
me. I’m not popular like my classmate Toby who’s a brilliant football player, but I’ve made a few
good friends this past year and nobody avoids me anymore. Studying is much easier, too, now I’ve
got the proper glasses and more time to do my homework, and I’ve made it into the top ten in my
year. I do yoga on Saturday mornings, and I take tae kwon do classes twice a week. Master Soong
allows students to practice at the dojang outside of lessons as long as we’re respectful of whatever
class is taking place while we’re there, so I usually go for extra practice at least once a week, more
often twice. I’ll be taking the test for my blue belt come September.”

“Is that good? Does the belt colour signify anything? I understand that experts in martial arts wear
black belts, but I hadn’t heard of other colours.”

“I don’t know for sure about other martial arts, and I do know that not every form uses the exact
same system of ranking,” Harry said. “But Master Soong says that learning tae kwon do is like
growing a tree, in that it takes time, patience, and care. The white belt that everyone starts with
represents the seed being planted. The yellow belt is the roots growing, as the student learns the
basics, although some also think of it as the sunshine that warms the seed and lets it sprout. Green,
where I am now, is the tree growing and leafing out, as the student gains confidence and learns
more. The blue belt represents the sky that the tree grows towards, as the student becomes
advanced and learns more techniques. The red belt represents the sun which nourishes the tree, but
also blood and danger as the student now knows enough to really hurt someone and so must also
learn caution and control of his actions. And the black belt is the darkness beyond the sun and the
seeking of new knowledge, while showing that the student is now capable of passing along what
he’s learned to a new generation of students. There are nine ranks of black belt but gaining rank in
those works a little differently than testing up as a student.”

“What a lovely way to think of learning,” Diana said.

“And an apt comparison as well,” the Queen agreed. “Well, before we get to our tea, I understand
that your birthday is tomorrow. Diana tells me you’re interested in history and enjoy stories of
knights and such, so I thought you might find this interesting.” She handed him the package from
the table.

Harry took the package with a startled expression and a heartfelt, “Thank you, Ma’am!” He opened
it to find *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* inside. “Oh, this is wonderful!” He held the book up to
show Wills and little Harry, who crowded over to look.

“Good, I chose well. I thought that you might like to learn the symbolism behind the knights’
shields, and to see how that all has evolved into the heraldry still used today,” the Queen said.
“And now for the most important issue of all… will you play mother today, Diana, or shall I? And
is there clotted cream to go with the scones?”

“I will,” Diana said as little Harry giggled at his grandmother’s eager expression when she
mentioned clotted cream. “That way you can devote your attention to the boys. And yes, clotted
cream and blackberry jam today.” She moved over to the end of the table where the teapot steamed gently and started to pour. “Cucumber sandwiches, chicken paste, or smoked salmon?”

The five set about the serious business of enjoying their tea and conversation, and it was a happy trio of boys that waved goodbye to the Queen when she departed for Balmoral Castle later that evening.

Chapter End Notes

In the morning after breakfast, Harry showed Wills and little Harry how to clean the snake tank. Both princes enjoyed handling Suliss and Harry was hard put not to chuckle at some of her comments about them, especially when little Harry tried to get her to explore a Lego cottage that he’d built. She’d complained that while the “human-made cave” looked nice, she didn’t understand why the bumps on the floor didn’t move with her passing the way pebbles, twigs, and other debris she often encountered when out of her tank did.

When the tank was cleaned and Suliss returned to it, Harry let Wills feed her. The young prince wrinkled his nose a bit at having to handle the thawed pinkie mouse, but both princes watched eagerly as she opened her jaws widely enough to swallow it. Then they giggled at the lump it made just behind her head.

“Right, now she’s been fed, we’ve got to leave her be for a couple of days,” Harry told them.

“How come?” Wills wanted to know.

“If you pick her up and move her about when she’s just eaten, you can make her sick, even kill her by accident,” he explained. “Your Aunt Sarah has a new baby, so you probably know that if you bounce a baby after feeding, it nearly always sicks up, right?”

Little Harry nodded. “Yes! And I thought nappies were stinky!”

Harry laughed. “Well, the same sort of thing can happen to a snake if it’s bounced about after being fed. But snakes physically can’t sick up as easily as babies do, to where they can actually die from it. And since snakes only eat about once a week, it’s best to give them a couple of days for the meal to settle.”

Wills nodded. “That’s good to know. Sort of like how you can’t let a horse eat too many apples or too much sweet feed, because they can’t sick up at all. If they eat a lot of something that makes them bloat up, they can die from that. Once we got big enough to ride our own ponies, everyone from the stablehands right up to Grandmum made sure we knew that, so we wouldn’t feed them so many treats as to make them ill.”

“Learn something new every day,” Harry quipped. “I didn’t know that about horses. So, what are the plans for today, aside that I’m sure your mum has a bit of a celebration planned since it’s my birthday?”

“Mummy said we should ask what you wanted to do,” little Harry said earnestly, “because it’s your birthday. You know, if you wanted to ride or fish or even stay in and play games. And we’ll have a big tea with birthday cake and presents, like when you visited at Highgrove last year.”

“Mum also said something about a surprise guest or two for tea, if everything worked out as planned,” Wills put in. “But we can do as we like until teatime.”

Harry smiled. “Well, I’m fine with riding out to go fishing, as we’ve been doing. It’s fun, catching the fish that we’ll actually eat for dinner, you know? Sort of like how Aunt Petunia likes to grow a tomato plant or two in the back garden each year. She says the tomatoes one gets at the market never taste as good as the tomatoes one picks straight from the vine.”

“Race you to the stables,” Wills said, and promptly took off running. Harry and little Harry dashed after him, laughing.
The boys returned to Craigowen Lodge and presented their catch of nearly a dozen large trout to
the kitchen staff before retiring to their rooms to shower and dress for tea. They headed for the
family dining room but found it empty. Then they heard Diana calling.

“Come out to the terrace, boys, I thought we might have our tea outside as the weather is so nice,”
she said.

“Coming, Mummy,” little Harry called back and they headed out to see that Diana wasn’t alone.

“Uncle Sirius! Uncle Remus!” Harry cried, running to greet his godfather and honorary uncle with
hugs. “Are you the mysterious surprise guests we heard rumors would be here?”

Sirius swept Harry up and swung him around before letting him down again and lightly shoving
him towards Remus. “We are, Pup, we weren’t going to miss your birthday if we could help it. Her
Majesty gave permission for us to come up for the afternoon.”

Wills looked impressed as Remus hugged Harry. “Wow, that’s an awfully long trip for just one
afternoon!”

Remus chuckled. “It is, but it’s worth spending time with our Harry and his friends,” he said.
“Besides, we both already had today off of work as we’d planned to give him a party for his
birthday before we knew he’d be up here this week. Joining you today means we don’t need to try
to bake his birthday cake ourselves!”

That got everyone laughing and Harry properly introduced Remus to the princes, correctly guessing
that Sirius would have already presented him to Diana. The servants brought out tea and Diana
poured while Sirius made up plates of sandwiches and scones for everyone and passed them about.

Remus entertained the company with a slightly edited story of one of James Potter’s early attempts
to impress young Lily Evans, by learning her birthday and surprising her with a gift, a fancy
makeup kit. (It had actually been a selection of beauty products from Madam Primpernelle’s, but of
course, he couldn’t say that out loud.) “… so Lily was gobsmacked, of course, because she’d
considered him an arrogant prat from the moment they’d met, and further disliked him because he
and a friend she’d known from primary school hated one another on sight and were constantly
pranking one another. But she cautiously accepted the gift and it looked as though she might give
him a chance. James was so pleased by her reaction; so certain she would become friendly to him
since he’d gone out of his way to get her the gift. Only it backfired on him. It turned out she was
allergic to something in the makeup and it gave her hives… and because James was known for his
pranks, nothing anyone said would convince her that he really had sought to please her. She was
positive he had pranked her for sticking up for her old friend.”

Harry shook his head. “Dad must have matured a lot in their last couple of years at school, for
Mum to have gone from disliking him so much to agreeing to marry him.”

“He did,” Sirius said. “Although it also helped that Lily’s friend, um, got in with a rather rough
crowd who jeered at him for being friends with her. Admittedly part of that was due to the prank
wars… most of the rough crowd were her friend’s dorm-mates and so he made sure to get along
with them because he didn’t want to have to worry about pranks within the dorm as well as outside
of it. But because of them, he and Lily started to grow apart after a couple of years, and they had a
final falling-out just before the end of term in our fifth year. And that summer was when James
started learning to manage the estate from his father, and I think that gave him a bit more sense of
responsibility. He wasn’t so quick to prank people in sixth and seventh years, anyway, and the
pranks he did pull tended to be more general rather than targeting individuals.”
“What kind of pranks?” Wills wanted to know.

Sirius looked to Diana before answering, but she gave a bit of a nod so he chuckled. “Well, the one I remember best, he’d rigged it that if anyone stepped in a certain spot outside one of the classrooms, it would sound as if they were loudly breaking wind. Mostly I remember because Professor McGonagall set it off one time, and she’s one of those severe-looking sort of women that you’d swear never made a bodily noise in their lives. You should have seen everyone when she stepped in that spot and PPPBTTTHTHHT! I’m not sure what was funnier, her appalled expression, or the reactions of all the students who witnessed it.”

Everyone cracked up laughing at that, even Diana.

As they all settled down once more, two servants came in bearing a cake decorated with a knight holding a sword and shield. A banner over the knight’s head contained ten lit candles interspersed between the letters spelling out “Happy Birthday, Harry!” As they set the cake down in front of the birthday boy, another entered carrying a pile of wrapped gifts. Diana led off the singing and Harry blew out the candles to cheers from the princes. A servant took the cake aside to cut and distribute while Harry opened his presents.

He opened Diana’s gift first, a selection of new games for his Gameboy. Harry grinned as he said, “Thank you!” knowing she’d gotten them from her American friend, as one of the games was titled NFL Football but the picture on the game case didn’t even remotely resemble football as he knew it. Under the games, she included a beautifully rendered drawing of what he assumed was his family’s coat-of-arms. He admired it for a moment but set it aside to study in more depth later.

Little Harry didn’t wait for him to pull the next gift from the pile but thrust a messily wrapped package into his hands. “This one’s from me!” he announced proudly. “I picked it out myself!”

Harry laughed and opened it to find Labyrinth, a board game. “Oh, this looks brilliant, thank you,” he said. Little Harry looked proud of himself.

“Mine next, please,” Wills requested, passing over a heavy box.

Harry opened it, revealing a microscope and slide kit. “Thank you, Wills, this is going to be quite helpful in science class this year,” he told the younger boy.

Remus handed over the last two presents. “These are from me and Sirius, if you hadn’t guessed,” he chuckled.

“I guessed,” Harry laughed back as he opened the first one. The two packages were of similar size and weight, and he guessed they were most likely books. His guess proved correct when he found Treasure Island in the first, and Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book in the second. “Thank you both,” he said, “I’ve been wanting to read these.” He set his presents aside as the servants came around with plates of cake for everyone.

When they’d finished, Diana cleared her throat a little nervously. “Harry, I hope you’ll forgive me for usurping a bit of your special day, but this seemed like the best chance to make this particular announcement to everyone here.”

Recalling his aunt’s tabloid and suspecting what the announcement might be, Harry smiled. “I don’t mind at all, especially if it’s what I think it is.”

“All right, then,” Diana said. “Wills, Harry, I know you’re aware that your father has a girlfriend now, right? That he goes on dates with her and such?”
“Yes,” Wills said as little Harry nodded.

“Well, ever since the divorce was finalised, I’ve been on a few dates myself,” she said. “At first, the dates were mostly friendly, but he and I decided we really like one another, and we’d like to be boyfriend and girlfriend. Are you okay with that?”

Little Harry shrugged. “I guess. Is he nice?”

Wills looked from his mother to Sirius, his brow furrowing as he put two and two together. “Is Mr. Black your boyfriend, Mum? I remember Harry saying that his godfather rides a motorbike, and that picture that keeps getting in the papers is of you with a man on a motorbike.”

“Yes, Wills, it is Mr. Black,” Diana said.

The prince thought about it for a moment. “Well, you and Daddy weren’t happy together or he wouldn’t have gotten his girlfriend and you wouldn’t have been divorced. I’ve only met Mr. Black a couple of times before, and he’s always been nice. But, and here Wills turned to Sirius, “you better treat Mum right! It’s bad enough that Daddy hurt her and made her cry. If you make her cry, I’ll… I’ll… I’ll get Grandmum to put you in jail!”

“I care for your mum very much,” Sirius said. Part of him wanted to laugh at the eight-year-old’s defense of his mother, but he knew that if he wanted a good relationship with the boys, he had to treat them with respect. “I would never hurt her intentionally; I promise you that. Right now, your mum and I would like to spend more time together and not just on dinner-and-dancing type dates. Those are fun, but we also want to know each other better, and that includes me getting to know you lads as well since you’re obviously the most important people in your mum’s life. You’ll give me a chance, then?”

“I will,” Wills said.

“Me too,” little Harry chimed in. “You didn’t laugh at me when I got scared during Willow.”

Harry grinned. “Congratulations, the both of you. When you said you had an announcement, I wondered if it might be this. I recognised Uncle Sirius’s bike in that tabloid photo. I guess Her Majesty approves, then? Aunt Petunia doesn’t, but then again, she disapproves of motorbikes in general, thinks anyone that rides one is a hooligan.”

Diana smiled and hugged her sons in turn. “Her Majesty does approve of Sirius, in fact. Part of why we wanted to tell you boys today is that there will be an official press release next week confirming that he and I are dating. Her Majesty wants the basic facts out there before some idiot of a tabloid reporter decides that my so-called mystery man is a space alien or worse.”

Remus shook his head, bemused. “Would they really print something like that?”

“They’ll print anything they think they can get away with,” Diana sighed. “Mind you, the serious press tries to keep to the facts although that doesn’t stop them from making speculations or invading my privacy whilst trying to put a name to anyone I might be seen associating with. Harry might recall when he and I returned from Balmoral last summer, I introduced him to the reporter as a friend of my lads, but she still wanted to know his name and how they’d met and all. The tabloids, though, they’ll print the craziest things as truth, and unfortunately, there are people out there who’ll believe every word of it. In the last few months, I’ve supposedly been saved by the Yeoman Warders from jumping from the White Tower, I’ve supposedly tried to kidnap my sons to the United States to ‘save them’ from being part of the Royal Family, I’ve supposedly traveled incognito to Hollywood to take a film test with the plan of becoming an actress, and I’ve
supposedly been in hospital twice – once for cancer and once for a heroin overdose. And mind, that’s just what’s been written since the divorce became final.”

“That’s… crazy,” Remus muttered. “And people actually believe this… this donkey dung?”

“Some do,” Harry confirmed. “Not everyone, of course, or even most people. But there are a few who believe that if it’s in the papers, it’s true, no matter how crazy the story is. Aunt Petunia’s right on the line, actually. She didn’t believe the kidnapping story or the film test one, but she did believe the ones about the suicide attempt, the illness, and the drug overdose. At least, she believed them at first and only changed her mind when the big papers didn’t pick up the stories and confirm them.”

Sirius grinned. “I remember your mum saying that her sister always believed in star signs and some rot about crossing off letters of her name together with the names of boys to try to pick out the best possible future husband. If she believes in that, no wonder she believes the more plausible tabloid stories! Of course, from some of what you’ve said about her late husband, I’m surprised she’s not stopped believing in those things, because I can’t see him as having been anyone’s best possible mate.”

Harry shrugged. “I think by the time she met him, she’d changed her standards a bit. She told me a little while back that she’d only ever wanted to be a wife and mother but coming from a working-class background and not being the prettiest girl around, she didn’t think she’d pull a would-be doctor or solicitor by going to uni. So she took a secretarial course and went to work at a business largely staffed with men and focused her attention on the ones she thought would get themselves a few steps up the ladder. Uncle Vernon had plenty of faults, but he did have a head for business, worked in a nice office instead of the factory floor, and earned enough that she didn’t have to work.”

“Well, none of that matters right now,” Diana said. “I’m just pleased that none of you lads are against me and Sirius dating. And before you ask, yes, Wills and Harry, I’ll allow you to ride his motorbike with him sometimes.”

Wills and little Harry cheered and hugged her in thanks.

Later that night, after Sirius and Remus had left, Wills knocked at Harry’s door. “Can I come in?” he asked.

“Sure,” Harry replied. “Is something wrong?”

Wills shook his head. “Not wrong, but… you’re not upset that I threatened your godfather, are you? When I told him to be good to Mum or else.”

Harry laughed. “No, I’m not upset. It’s a boy thing, Uncle Sirius says, to be protective of your mum, your sisters, and your daughters. His cousin just had a baby girl and you should have heard the things her husband was saying to the baby. That she was just his beautiful little princess and that no boy would ever be good enough for her but that he’d be right there with a b… cricket bat to keep all those nasty boys away so she’d be safe.”

Wills giggled at that. “D’you think I’ll ever say anything that silly if I grow up and get married and have a daughter?”

“Probably,” Harry said. “According to Uncle Sirius, daughters are punishment for having been rowdy teenagers… that every man lives in dread that his precious little girl will meet a boy just as rowdy and obnoxious as he himself used to be. Anyway, he understands that you’ve seen your
mum hurt by things your dad did or didn’t do, and that naturally you’d be concerned that another man might do or not do the same things and hurt her again. He just wants you to give him a chance, because he does like your mum a lot. He hasn’t said it in so many words, but I suspect he might even want to marry her someday, if she likes him back the same way.”

Wills tilted his head. “Huh. Maybe I’ll ask Teddy what that’s like, when school starts up again. He’s in my class, and his parents are divorced and they’re both married to other people now.”

“That’s a good idea,” Harry said. “Especially if his parents had a… an ami… ami… oh, I can’t think of the word. If their divorce was relatively friendly rather than hateful, and they still get along like reasonable people.”

“Thanks for talking to me, Harry. I should go back to my room now.”

“Want a go on one of my new Gameboy games before you do?”

“Really?”

“Really. Besides, I’d bet your mum’s going to give you and your brother the same games as she gave me as soon as you’re home to Kensington. She’s fair like that, but she also wouldn’t give you two presents on my birthday.” Harry handed the Gameboy over to the prince.

Wills climbed onto the bed with Harry and started up the NFL Football game. They woke up in the morning to slightly stiff necks from the awkward positions they’d dozed off in, and to dead batteries in the Gameboy.
On the first day of school, Harry got up early and started breakfast preparations; heating water for tea and starting toast before pouring orange juice. Petunia, looking quite smart with her new haircut and wearing a trim cream blouse with a chestnut brown pencil skirt entered the kitchen with a smile.

“Oh, thank you, Harry, I thought I’d be up first. All excited for the new school year?”

“I am. I know I’ve seen Lucy a couple of times over the hols, but Surya’s been to India and Paul’s had to help out his family all summer, so I haven’t seen either of them since Lucy’s birthday excursion to Thorpe Park. And I can’t wait to introduce Draco to all of them, too. What about you? You’re starting your uni courses today, too.”

“I’m scared half to death,” Petunia admitted with a laugh. “I hope there’s at least one more mum going back to school in my classes, so I’ll not be the oldest person there.” She started scrambling up eggs with diced ham, onions, peppers, and tomatoes.

The toast popped up and Harry buttered it before putting a second batch in. “You’ll be fine. Are you going to be home when our school lets out, do you know?”

“I’ll be home today, but on Friday I won’t be. The computer course has its hands-on lessons then, so I won’t be home until nearly five on Fridays, at least for this first term.” Petunia looked a little concerned. “I hope Dudley won’t go on a rummage through the cupboards when I’m not here. He’s done so well in his diet so far.”

Harry shrugged a bit as he buttered the second batch of toast. “Well, you’ve got him signed up for boxing lessons, right? Hopefully he’ll take to that well enough that he’ll want to watch his weight on his own, so he’ll be better able to move in the ring. And maybe he’ll end up with his practices running long on Fridays as well? Or at least can have extra time at the gym, the way I do extra time at my tae kwon do lessons. Then he won’t be home looking for snacks so much.”

“We can hope.” Petunia started dishing up the eggs. “Will you call him down, please? He ought to have been here already.”

“Okay.” He moved to the bottom of the stairs and yelled up, “Dudley, your mum has breakfast ready!”
“Coming,” his cousin called back. A series of thumps and bangs sounded from above before the still-heavyset boy pounded down the stairs and galloped into the kitchen. “Oooh, good brekkie today!” he exclaimed as he plopped into a chair. “Does that mean rabbit food for lunch?”

Petunia shook her head with a sigh. “Healthy food, not rabbit food, Duddikins. You’ve got roast beef and swiss on multigrain bread with lettuce, tomato, and dill pickles, plus sliced apple with peanut butter dip. And because it’s the first day of school, I also included a packet of sugar-free oatmeal raisin biscuits.”

Dudley sighed dramatically. “I suppose it could be worse.” He turned his attention to his breakfast.

Harry finished his own meal quietly and put his dishes in the dishwasher. “I’m going to leave now; I want to get there early and look for my friends. I know Draco will be nervous since he’s not gone to regular school before.”

“Are you sure, Harry? I was going to give you boys a ride since it’s the first day and I have to drive past there to get to uni anyway.”

Harry smiled. “I’m sure, Aunt Petunia, but thanks for the offer. Oh, I might go home with one of my friends after school, so I might be late today myself. I’ll be in time for dinner, though.” He pulled his bagged lunch from the refrigerator and tucked it into his backpack before heading out with a wave.

As he approached the school, he spotted Draco coming slowly from the opposite direction, staring wide-eyed all around as he walked. “Draco! Over here!” he called, waving.

Draco brightened and waved back, picking up his pace. “Harry, good to see you!” he said, not quite able to keep a touch of relief out of his tone. “Seriously, I’m glad you’re here. I don’t want to start off by putting my foot in it, you know?”

Harry smiled. “I know. But you’ll be fine, as long as you don’t put on your future-Lord-Malfoy mask. Oh, and most kids use first names, unless they don’t like you for some reason. So don’t be surprised when my friends start right out calling you Draco when I introduce you to each other.”

“All right,” Draco said as they entered the schoolyard.
Just then, Lucy’s mum pulled up to drop off her daughter. “Harry!” Lucy screeched as she flew out of the car and hugged him. Draco snickered as Harry stumbled back a couple of steps from the force of his friend’s greeting.

“Nice to see you again, Lu, and I take it you’re still doing well?” Harry asked, returning her hug. He thought she looked much better this year; her hair had grown out almost to her shoulders and she’d definitely put on some much-needed weight. “And how’s Calla?”

Lucy giggled. “Calla’s getting bigger, but still loves to snuggle. My oncologist says my blood count is spot on but I still need to be tested each month just in case. Have you seen Paul or Surya yet? And who’s this?” She indicated Draco.

“This is Draco Malfoy. His mum is cousins with my godfather, and he wanted to do regular school instead of homeschool this year because his mum just had a baby,” Harry said. “Draco, this is Lucy Bemis, one of my friends I promised you’d meet.”

Lucy offered her hand. “Nice to meet you, Draco. And then she blushed and giggled when instead of shaking her hand, he bowed and kissed the back of it lightly.

“A pleasure to meet you as well, Lucy,” Draco said with his most engaging smile.

Harry rolled his eyes but chuckled. “You keep turning on the charm like that, Draco, you’ll have every girl in class fancying you, and all the boys wanting to pound you because all the girls fancy you.”

Draco pulled himself straighter and looked down his nose at Harry, using his haughtiest voice to say, “And that is as it should be; Malfoys are eminently fanciable, after all.” His grin belied his tone, however, and he couldn’t hold his pose for long as he dissolved into laughter as well.

Lucy spotted Paul and Surya walking in together just then and flew off to tacklehug the pair and drag them back over to Harry and Draco.

“I saw Pig-boy getting dropped off,” Surya said once everyone had been properly introduced. “He doesn’t look quite so piggy anymore, though.”
Harry nodded. “The doctor put him on a diet when he broke his leg back in early spring. Scared him into staying with it by telling him he’d get diabetes and would never be able to eat sweets again. And now Aunt Petunia’s sending him for boxing lessons, to get him to exercise more as well.”

Paul groaned. “J-j-just what we n-need. Pig-boy learning to h-h-hit properly.”

“I’m hoping it won’t be so bad,” Harry said. “He pretty much left off pounding me since breaking his leg. I think Aunt Petunia’s threatened to take away what few sweets are allowed on his diet, if he keeps up his bullying. She’s finally admitted to herself that he’s been more of a troublemaker than I ever was.”

The bell rang and they all trooped up to their new classroom, taking seats together near the front of the room. Ms. St. Claire introduced herself and called the roll, checking everyone’s names against the attendance book. Once that was done, she smiled. “All right, class. It’s the first day back after the hols, and I know half of you haven’t seen one another since school let out last term. So, we’re going to have a couple of review quizzes, as I need to know how much you all remember, and then you may all talk quietly amongst yourselves for the rest of the morning. The quizzes won’t count towards your marks, they’re just for me to see where everyone is at, and if anyone not already scheduled to do so might benefit from spending some time with Mr. Khatri.”

Pleased by the unexpected treat, the class settled down quickly and got through the quizzes. Harry and his friends pulled their chairs into a circle, to more easily hear one another talk.

Paul spoke of looking after his younger siblings twice a week all summer so that his mum could do a refresher course at the local hospital, where she had worked as a nurse until having his youngest brother the previous year. “N-now she’s back working again, her w-wages will pay for a regular sitter for the two little ones with some over,” he said. “And she’s p-p-promised me a c-computer for Christmas, to make up that she c-couldn’t pay me over the summer.”

Draco looked impressed. “I couldn’t imagine trying to look after my baby sister all by myself, let alone others as well. How many siblings have you got?”

“I’m the oldest of f-four,” Paul said. “Jenny, my s-sister, she’s eight. Timmy’s almost three, and J-J-Jack just turned one. H-how old is your sister?”

“Not quite three months,” Draco said. “She came early, too. Aurora was so small when she was born, I think I’ve seen roasted chickens that were bigger.” That got a laugh from the whole group.
“How was India, Surya?” Lucy wanted to know.

“Well, my cousin Raj is still a moron,” Surya said to more laughter. “Remember last year when I told you how he stupidly teased their bird while it was eating and got bit for his trouble? Well, this time the idiot managed to get bit by a krait, because he didn’t shake out his football shoes before putting them on. The family had to rush him to hospital for antivenin to save his life. Auntie Laysa was furious once she was done being scared for him. She said she might send Raj to university in England, not because she thinks he’ll do well, but because if he’s stupid enough to leave his shoes out overnight and forget to shake them, he’d be safer where most wild animals can’t kill him.”

“It’s good that he’s all right, though,” Harry said. “Was your father serious about trying to arrange a match for your brother like you thought?”

“He was! Her name is Naini, and her mum is cousins with Auntie Laysa on the other side of her family, so we’re not directly related. She and Anand liked one another, so Father and her father are working out the details and they’ll get married next summer.” She shivered a bit. “I don’t see how she can do it, but she’s happy and so is Anand. Still, I really, really hope I won’t have to go through all that. I expect Mum will be sure Father keeps his promise not to make a match for me before I’m done with uni.”

A fiercely blushing Paul said, “K-k-k-keep me in m-m-mind, if he does t-t-try to find you someone? I’m not p-p-perfect, but I l-like you and think you’re p-p-pretty and I’d t-t-treat you right.”

Surya blushed and ducked her head. “I will,” she mumbled.

Harry decided they’d appreciate a change of subject. “While we’re on the topic of matches, you’ve all seen the papers talking about Princess Diana and the ‘mystery man’ she’s been dating? It’s my godfather.”

“Really? How did that come about?” Lucy asked.

“Well, they met a time or two because of me,” Harry explained. “You know, him bringing me to meet up with her and the Princes and such. Uncle Sirius enjoys clubs and music and dancing, so he invited her to come out to a club with him as friends as soon as her divorce went through, to celebrate her freedom, he said. I know she told me once she likes going to clubs but mostly couldn’t because Prince Charles doesn’t like them and if she went alone whilst they were still married, she’d be accused of all sorts of bad behaviour. But she and Uncle Sirius must have
decided they liked one another, because they’ve been dating ever since. They told me and the 
Princes about it back on my birthday, because there was supposed to be a small press release about 
it a couple of weeks ago. But I guess the story got buried, between Iraq invading Kuwait and the 
German reunification. Or maybe they didn’t release it yet for some reason.”

Draco smiled. “I knew Cousin Sirius was dating someone, but I didn’t know who. Did you suspect, 
Harry?”

Harry laughed. “I did, actually. One of the tabloids got a photo of them as she was putting on her 
helmet to go for a ride on his motorbike. You can’t see Sirius’s face due to his helmet, but I 
recognised the helmet and bike as his. And then I had to listen to Aunt Petunia saying that Princess 
Di shouldn’t be allowed to date a ‘hooligan’ like that, meaning a man with a motorbike. She has all 
these ideas about what is and isn’t proper, and one of them is that anyone who rides a motorbike 
can’t possibly be anyone decent.”

“Oh, I know how that goes,” Lucy said with a nod. “My Gran thinks that way too. If he rides a 
motorbike, he must also be in a gang, carry a knife, and riot at football matches. Most probably 
mugs tourists and robs petrol stations as well.”

“That’s silly,” Draco said. “I’ve seen policemen riding motorbikes. Surely they couldn’t be 
considered hooligans.”

“Well, that’s why p-prejudice is silly,” Paul said. “P-people don’t fit into little b-boxes, even if 
some folks like to think so. I c-c-can’t run about much because of asthma, so s-some boys c-c-call 
me a poofter because I p-p-play piano instead of footie or rugby.”

Harry snorted. “I know exactly which boys, since my cousin Dudley is one of them. He’s called me 
a poofer as well, because I’m friends with Surya and Lucy, and also because I help Aunt Petunia 
in the kitchen sometimes. Personally, I like knowing how to cook, so I’ll not be dependent on 
takeaway when I go out on my own. Dudley and his lot, they’re all going to be very surprised when 
they can’t find girlfriends who are willing to baby them the way their mothers do. Uncle Sirius 
says that if a girl wants to be a wife and mum that’s fine, but if she wants a career as well, she’ll 
want a man who’s both willing and able to do a share of the household work.”

Draco grinned at Harry. “Does that mean I can ask for more cooking lessons from you?” Everyone 
laughed and the bell rang for lunch.

The afternoon passed quickly, as Ms. St. Claire went over the quizzes and gave them outlines of 
her planned lessons for the term. She also gave them their first homework assignment; a book
report on any book of their choice, due in one week, and they were to bring in the book as well as the report on the off chance they picked something she wasn’t familiar with.

After school, Harry walked with Draco to the house Stephen rented. Narcissa was in the front garden with Aurora in a pram, obviously waiting for her son. “What do you think of school, Draco?” she asked. “And did you have a good day, the both of you?”

Draco smiled. “I met Harry’s friends Surya, Lucy, and Paul, and I think they liked me. We had some quizzes this morning, Ms. St. Claire said to see where we all were rather than for marks, but I thought they weren’t too hard. We got to spend most of the morning talking, although I know that was special and won’t happen most of the time. After lunch, we discussed the quizzes and Ms. St. Claire set us a book report for homework. I think I’m going to like school, though. I never realised how much there is to see and learn outside of the wizarding world!”

“Why don’t we head inside and get a snack, while you boys tell me more?” Narcissa suggested as Aurora started to fuss. “One of you bring the pram, please?” She picked up the baby, bouncing her lightly and making soothing noises as she made for the door. Harry grabbed the pram and wheeled it inside behind Narcissa, while Draco closed the door once they were all inside.

When Stephen first rented the little house, he set aside a small cupboard as well as one shelf in the refrigerator specifically for Draco’s after-school snacks and drinks, so he’d be able to come in and munch without worrying about eating something Stephen might want later. Narcissa got settled in at the table and started feeding the baby, as Draco rummaged in the cupboard. “Crackers and cheese?” he asked, “Or pretzel sticks?”

“Pretzels, please,” Harry replied opening the fridge and checking Draco’s shelf. “What do you want to drink, fruit punch or grape juice?”

“Fruit punch, I had grape juice in my lunch today.”

Harry retrieved the drinks and sat down, Draco following suit with two packs of pretzels. The two boys regaled Narcissa with tales of everything that happened that day as they ate. Draco, who’d been particularly impressed that Paul had taken care of three younger siblings all summer, announced that he wanted lessons in caring for Aurora, including changing her nappies, although he quickly added, “The wet ones, anyway – I want to know what I’m doing before I take on one of the bad ones!” Harry and Narcissa both laughed at that.

They all departed for their own respective homes after that, the Malfoys vanishing through the floo while Harry walked back to Privet Drive. He offered to help his aunt with dinner, although she
declined, saying that as a first day of school treat, she’d ordered pizza. As Dudley never really paid attention to the foods he should and shouldn’t be eating, pizza in general seemed like a treat to him and never mind that by getting thin crust, lean meat, light cheese, and veggies for toppings, it was actually quite healthy. Thuds and raucous laughter from the back garden indicated that Dudley and several of his friends were out there, so Harry headed up to his room to choose a book for his assigned book report.

At dinner, he asked his aunt about her first day of classes, which she said went well before asking both boys about their own first days. Dudley grumbled about having homework already, a book report due the following week. Harry grinned, causing Dudley to frown.

“What are you laughing about?” he grumbled.

“Looks like all the top year classes are doing book reports,” Harry replied. “I’ve got to do one as well. Do you have a book assigned or can you choose one?”

Dudley shrugged. “We’re supposed to choose. But I don’t like reading,” he whined. “I don’t know what to choose.”

Harry tried to think what Stephen would say in this situation. “Umm… well, what sort of things do you like?” he asked. “Maybe you can find a book about something you do like, so it’ll be interesting even if you don’t really like to read.”

Dudley squinted at his cousin, as if seeking some sort of trap in the question. “I like video games,” he said, “and stuff with aliens in it. I think maybe I’m gonna like boxing, too, but I don’t know for sure yet.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “So maybe for your book report, you could find a book about video games – how they’re designed and such – or I’ve seen Dr. Who books in the library, and Star Trek and Star Wars. Those likely have aliens in them, I bet there’s at least one Dr. Who book with daleks in it. Or you could look up the history of boxing or find a book about a famous boxer.”

“Dr. Who!” Dudley brightened. “Daleks are brilliant!” He held his arm out stiffly, like a laser gun. “Ex-ter-mi-nate! EX-TER-MI-NATE!”

“I’ll thank you to not exterminate anything at the dinner table, Diddyums,” Petunia said, although Harry noticed the corners of her mouth twitching as though she was trying not to smile.
“Sorry, Mummy,” Dudley said, turning his attention back to his dinner. After taking a few more bites, he looked back at Harry. “I want you to find me a book with daleks in it.”

Harry tilted his head. “Tell you what, I’ll do it, but I want something from you, too. I want you and your friends to leave me and my friends alone this year.”

“And if we don’t?”

“Remember, Surya’s dad owns Panahar. You don’t want to be the one to get your lot kicked out of one of the best curry restaurants around, do you? Especially since curry fits in well with your diet,” Harry said calmly. “Honestly, I don’t even care if you want to call us names amongst yourselves, I just don’t want to hear you yelling those names across the schoolyard or see any of you pull the girls’ hair or whatever. I know Piers Polkiss did that to Surya a couple of times last year, but him and the others listen to you.”

Dudley wrinkled his nose. He didn’t like the thought of doing what his cousin wanted, but he didn’t want to risk getting not just himself, but all of his friends banned from Panahar. Plus it rather soothed his ego that even his freak cousin could see he was the leader of his friends. “Okay,” he finally said, a little grudgingly. “We’ll leave you lot alone this year. But you have to help me find a book any time I have to choose my own reading this year.”

“Done,” Harry said, holding out his hand.

Dudley hesitated, then reached out and gave it a shake. After a moment, he glanced at his mother. “Take us to the library tonight, Mummy, so I can get my book?”

“Of course, dear,” she said.
The school term sped by swiftly for Harry. He had his regular school work during the week, his tae kwon do lessons, and his weekends with Stephen, Sirius, and Remus (and quite often the Malfoys, too) where he crammed in as much knowledge as possible about the wizarding world; it was almost as tiring as the endless lists of chores Vernon had liked assigning him. At least he wanted to do all this studying and learning, and the mental exercise might leave him feeling tired, but not worn out and sore the way the chores always did.

With the approach of Christmas and Yule, he prepared for the holiday gatherings he knew would happen. He’d already found a gift for Aurora; a Baby’s First Christmas ornament he’d bought from the kiosk that popped up inside Marks and Spencer every year selling personalised pens, ornaments, clocks, and other engraveable items. He got a nice desk set for Stephen from there as well, and a locket plus a music box that played something called Nadia’s Theme for Aunt Petunia.

He also had his list written up for when Stephen took him holiday shopping this coming weekend. He planned to get Dudley more Legos and a book about the American boxer Mohammad Ali. He thought Draco would like his own Othello game and one other board game, maybe even two others, but he’d decide on those in the store. For his school friends, Mad Libs again, along with small boxed stationery sets so they could keep in touch when they would all be off to separate schools the following year. Remus would get subscriptions to some puzzle magazines – crosswords, word searches, logic problems, etc. – as well as another Chocolate of the Month subscription.

Wills and Harry would be easy enough, he’d get them board games as well. The Malfoys, and Princess Diana and Sirius, they would be the difficult ones this year. After thinking about it for a while, he decided to get music boxes for Lady Malfoy and Princess Di, and cassettes for Lord Malfoy, as his car had a cassette player. He thought Draco’s father might appreciate The Nutcracker Suite or some other ballet score, and maybe Stephen could suggest other appropriate music. For Sirius, he finally decided on more rock cassettes plus a scrapbook of the two of them since they’d first met. Stephen had taken some photos, as had Remus and sometimes Harry himself, so finding enough pictures to fill it wouldn’t be too difficult.

As the holidays drew closer, Harry explained the concept of Father Christmas to Draco, to make sure he didn’t accidentally say something to destroy any of the younger students’ belief Draco found the whole idea of Father Christmas to be an odd combination of silly and charming, but he did like the flying reindeer part. Stephen bought videos of the American classics Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Santa Claus Is Coming to Town, The Year Without a Santa Claus, Frosty the Snowman, and How the Grinch Stole Christmas and planned a viewing marathon in mid-December. Sirius surprised everyone when he announced his plan to bring Diana, Wills, and Harry to the viewing marathon and reminded everyone that the little princes didn’t know about the wizarding world yet. Stephen just laughed that it was a good thing his current house was quite a bit bigger than his old flat, but they’d be welcome, and it wouldn’t be a bad thing for the group to get acquainted before attending The Nutcracker the following week.

The holiday video marathon turned out to be a huge success with all the kids; Wills and little Harry had seen Rudolph and Santa Claus Is Coming to Town before, but not The Year Without a Santa Claus. Sirius decided that the Grinch reminded him of his old school nemesis and started singing the Grinch song, changing Mister Grinch to Mister Snape, which had Remus laughing, although Diana rolled her eyes at his antics. In between the videos, Harry led Draco and the princes in baking sugar biscuits in various holiday shapes and then decorating them with frosting after they
cooled off. Lucius and Narcissa didn’t join the others for the event, but Draco packed some of the biscuits to take to them when he returned home. Wills and little Harry also packed a share of the biscuits to give to their grandmother, excited because it was the first time they’d baked, Diana not being especially handy in the kitchen.

*** *** ***

The following weekend, Lucius and Sirius drove everyone – except Aurora, who remained home with a nanny-elf – to Kensington Palace, where they joined Diana and the princes for a quick snack before leaving for the matinee show at the theatre. As the show started, Harry blinked. One of the children in the Christmas party scene looked familiar. He checked the programme and grinned; sure enough, he had recognised her. Listed under ‘Party Guests – Children’ was the name Sophie Carruthers, whom he’d met at Highgrove along with Zara Phillips over the Christmas hols last year. He glanced over at Diana, who caught him looking and nodded slightly. She’d arranged for Sophie to audition for the part.

After the show, the Malfoys needed to leave Kensington Palace right away, to get home to Aurora. Sirius, seeing that Draco was having fun with Harry and the princes, offered to have him sleep over at Grimmauld Place along with Harry so that the kids could visit longer. Lucius and Narcissa accepted and headed out after admonishing Draco to behave for his cousin. Draco nodded, so absorbed in the game of Life the boys had started playing that he hardly noticed them leaving. Sirius and Diana talked quietly as the boys played, and Sirius invited her to a Yule celebration at Grimmauld Place, although since there would be magic being performed openly, he couldn’t yet include the princes.

Later that night, when Sirius came to tuck Harry in, he asked his godfather why the princes couldn’t yet come to a Yule celebration.

“Well, because of the Statute of Secrecy, mainly,” Sirius said. “Wills is probably old enough to be able to keep it a secret, but little Harry probably isn’t. In fact, he’s about at the age most likely to blab, and while most muggles would assume he was making up stories or whatever, it’s still better to just avoid letting him in on the secret just yet. Mind, if Diana agrees to marry me we’ll have to figure out a way to explain magic to her boys, but until that happens…” He shrugged. “Honestly, if she agrees to marry me, I might just go muggle until the boys are a few years older, just to be on the safe side. I wouldn’t mind moving into her apartments in Kensington Palace, and Moony could stay on here and keep the place up for me. Maybe Stephen could move in as well, since he’ll be done with uni at the same time you and Draco finish primary and leave for Hogwarts, so he won’t need that house in Little Whinging anymore. Then in a few years, when little Harry is old enough to know when to keep quiet, we can start splitting our time between there and here if we wanted.”

Harry bit his lip nervously. “Would you still want me living with you?” he asked in a small voice. “I mean, if you and Princess Diana marry, since she’s already got her boys and all.”

Sirius scooped his godson up in a fierce hug. “You are my oldest son and don’t you forget it!” he said. “We did the second-stage blood adoption, remember? Just because you can’t live with me quite yet, doesn’t mean I don’t want you. Here or Kensington, your place is with me once we get the Dumbledore Difficulties sorted.”

“Dumbledore Difficulties?” Harry giggled. “That’s pretty funny, Uncle Sirius.” Feeling better with the reassurance, he asked, “So when will you ask her to marry you?”

Sirius laughed. “When I think she’ll say yes, you cheeky bugger. Get some sleep, pup.” He laid Harry back in the bed and tucked him in.

“G’night, Uncle Sirius.”
The Yule celebration went much as the previous year’s, the main difference being that Harry wasn’t the youngest attendee, and so Aurora, now six months old and just able to sit on her own as well as hold onto things, got to light the Yule Log this year – with a little help from her mother.

In the course of the evening, Lucius spoke of going to Hogwarts, ostensibly to look in on the Wizarding Culture course and see how it was doing, since he was the governor who’d first brought up the idea. He said he was quite impressed with the course itself, for which he thanked Remus once again for his excellent work on the textbooks, and that he’d heard rumors of groups of students, pureblood, halfblood, and muggleborn alike, performing simple rites to celebrate Samhain and Yule even though Dumbledore refused to offer any such celebrations for the school as a whole. He also said that with the help of Severus Snape and Kreacher, they located the Come and Go Room and found the diadem. The Unspeakables had already cleansed it and handed it over to Gringotts to try to find its rightful owner. As the diadem had been lost for centuries, though, the goblins weren’t sure an owner would be found, in which case it would be turned over to Hogwarts.

Harry shivered a bit at that, knowing that his scar was the last one.

Sirius gave him a reassuring hug. “Once you’ve gotten your letter, pup,” he said. “That’s when we’ll toss a few kneazles amongst the snidgets. I’ll petition for custody and we’ll get you in to see the Unspeakables. They’ve been trying to figure out You Know Who’s notes all this time, but no one can figure out what language he’s written them in.”

That made Harry sit up. “Didn’t you say You Know Who could talk to snakes like I can?” he asked. “Do you think maybe snake language has a written version? I know it sounds weird to think, but if he could write Parseltongue as well as speak it, what better way could he possibly come up with for keeping his notes secure? No one else could read them, or so he’d have thought.”

All the adults stared at Harry with varying degrees of gobsmacked showing in their expressions.

“That’s… just crazy enough that it could be brilliant,” Remus finally said. “Although I don’t know if it’s a good idea to just waltz into the Department of Mysteries and ask the Unspeakables to let Harry try reading those notes. Outing him as a Parseltongue aside, these are You Know Who’s notes we’re talking about. Merlin only knows what potentially nightmare inducing things he might have written down, especially concerning those artifacts. I’m not sure I’d want to read them, and I’m thirty. Harry’s not yet eleven.”

“If we propose the idea to the Unspeakables, just that the notes might be written in Parseltongue, that might either give them the clue they need to translate them, or else push them into looking outside of Britain for assistance,” Stephen said. “A couple of my year-mates were Hindu, and I remember them laughing, even during the height of the war, at the idea that Parselmouths were evil because they were Parselmouths. They kept saying that Parselmouths were revered in India, and most often served in temples there.”

“That’s a good idea, Stephen, and I’m glad you thought of it,” Sirius said. “Do you want to make the suggestion yourself? If you’re going to try to get in with the Department of International Cooperation, it wouldn’t hurt your chances any to start being seen around the Ministry speaking with Wizengamot members and Unspeakables.”

“Sure, why not?” Stephen said. “If nothing else, it’ll get me used to talking with the high and mighty in there, which I’ll need to do anyway. I’m always happy to help out with something for Harry besides. When should I go?”
“The Wizengamot opens the winter session on 4 January, Lucius said. “Sirius and I will both be there for it, if you want to make a show of talking to us.”

Stephen nodded. “Probably a good idea,” he said. “What time does the session start? I’d much rather turn up early than late.”

“It starts at ten, although I recommend you get there by eight,” Lucius said. “The couple hours before the session officially opens is when quite a few alliances are made and new ideas put forth. The earlier someone is there, the more weight is given to whatever it is they’re advocating. Showing dedication and all that, you know.”

“Which will get the attention of some of those fossils on the Wizengamot,” Sirius added with a laugh.

Over on the other side of the room, Harry and Draco had become engrossed in figuring out Harry’s newest board game while Narcissa and Princess Diana chatted. While the wizarding world didn’t have nearly the sort of issues with paparazzi as the muggle world, the Malfoys were targeted just often enough that Narcissa could easily sympathise with Diana when it came to obnoxious and pushy reporters and photographers. From there, the two women turned the conversation to raising their children, and Diana got the opportunity to cuddle with Aurora for a bit. By the time Narcissa declared that Aurora and Draco needed to be home and in bed, the two women had become quite friendly.

After getting Harry into bed, Remus and Stephen settled in by the fire for a chess match while Sirius drove Diana back to Kensington Palace. Manneheim Steamroller’s A Fresh Aire Christmas played softly on the Porsche’s stereo as Sirius took a scenic route, letting them admire the lights and decorations of London’s streets and parks.

As they neared Kensington Palace, Diana finally spoke. “I thought the ritual tonight was lovely,” she said. “I’m looking forward to my boys – well, my Harry, anyway – getting a little older and less inclined to share every thought that pops into his head, so that we can tell them about magic and let them participate as well.” She blushed and added, “Assuming we’re still together by then, I mean.”

Sirius pulled into Kensington’s private car park for residents and vetted guests of residents but stopped at the far end instead of pulling up to Di’s assigned spaces. He turned to face Diana and reached out to take her hand. “I have every intention of that happening,” he said softly. “I wasn’t going to do this yet, I thought it might be too soon following your divorce, but – I love you, Diana. Would you do me the great honour of becoming my wife?” There was an almost imperceptible pop, and he suddenly had a ring box in his free hand. Reminding himself to come up with some sort of reward for the house elf that delivered it, he flipped the box open to reveal the ring he’d had made just last week. Similar in style to the ‘dearest’ or ‘regard’ rings of the early Victorian era, it held five stones in a row: a fiery orange jacinth, a deep green emerald, a pale blue aquamarine, a dark red ruby, and a light yellow topaz.

Diana gasped, looking from her boyfriend to the ring and back again. “I – you’re serious, aren’t you?”

For probably the first time in his life, he let the opportunity for the pun pass. “Very serious. I know there will be a million problems to work out due to your position and all, but I really do want to share my life with you.”

“I… yes! Although Her Majesty will have to give her approval before it can be made public,” Di said, and held out her left hand.
“That’s why I had this ring made,” Sirius said as he slid it on. “Most folks these days wouldn’t recognise some of the older traditional rings as being engagement rings, because they’re too used to diamond solitaires since that company started advertising the heck out of them back in the late 1930s. The names of the stones in this ring spell out the word heart with their initials, in token that you’ve held my heart for longer than I think even I realised at first.”

Diana smiled softly and looked at the ring more closely. “All right, I see E-A-R-T with the emerald, aquamarine, ruby, and topaz, but what’s the orange one?”

Sirius chuckled. “A slight bit of cheating to get the spelling. It’s a jacinth, but in times past, that particular colour of jacinth was known as hyacinth, so there’s the H.”

“Hyacinth works for me,” Diana agreed before wrapping her arms around her fiancé and kissing him thoroughly.

The light from a passing security patrol car caused them to separate a little sheepishly, and Sirius pulled the car up to Di’s assigned parking spot. “I do need to get back home,” Sirius said. “Do you have any idea when you might be able to speak with the Queen?”

Di wrinkled her nose. “Possibly later in the day, Christmas Day. The morning will be all pomp and circumstance as usual, but she does like to spend the afternoon and evening with the family.” She brightened a bit. “Of course, I could always bring up the topic while Charles is in earshot. He might not want me himself, but he’s already expressed interest in keeping me single because he prefers to be the sole father figure in the boys’ lives. I’ve already informed him that it might be better if he wasn’t, because the boys certainly aren’t going to learn honour and respect for their loved ones from him.”

“Meow! The claws come out!” Sirius teased. “Not that I blame you for feeling that way. He did treat you quite poorly. Still, I can’t help but be glad he did, or I might never have had the chance to get to know you.”

“Oh, Sirius, I do love you,” Di murmured before giving him one last kiss. “Blessed Yule, darling, good night.”

“Good night, beloved, and blessed Yule.”

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