Broken Beyond Healing by Lady Russell Holmes

by BlackDragonGod

Summary

Disclaimer on my part: I told Lady Russell Holmes in her fan fiction.net account about me uploading her work here. If she responds to my message and tells me I can't upload her work, I will delete it at that moment. But for now relax and read her best work.

"Hi. I am Lady Russell Holmes, writer extraordinaire. This is my fic, and my ego sincerely hopes that you will like it enough to review. I have more than 200 pages already written for this fic on paper, of which this chapter is only the first 4 1/2, so I actually plan to finish this. A few words of explanation may be in order. This is in the summer after Harry’s fourth year, if it isn’t obvious, and I am insane. There. That’s all the explanation I have yet. More may come, just be patient."

Notes

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Chapter 1

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DISCLAIMER!!!!!!! Pay attention, because this is the only disclaimer that I am going to write, unless you give me trouble. I DO NOT OWN HARRY POTTER, OR ANY RELATED PARAPHERNALIA!!!!!! That is the inestimable privilege of Joanne K. Rowling, another writer extraordinaire. I’m just using him as a plaything, I am very rough on my toys, and I most definitely do not plan to return him in ‘like-new’ condition. So sue me, but all you’ll get is...(looks around room and checks pockets) 67 cents, 72 Francs and a very peculiar cat. Oh, wait, forget the cat: he owns me, not vice-versa.

Chapter 1

It was a quiet breakfast Friday morning at the Dursley’s, with Aunt Petunia and Dudley gone to London for the weekend, when Harry saw the owl at the window. Surprised, because owls usually came to his bedroom window, not the kitchen, he crossed the room and let it in. Vernon, at the table, looked apoplectic, but then Vernon had looked that way since Harry had come home for the summer, 4 weeks ago. He had lost his job at Grunnings, over an issue of embezzlement, and he was very irritable, even towards Dudley, but as always, especially towards Harry. Now his eyes drilled into Harry as he untied the letter from the owl’s leg. As he let the owl back out, Vernon slammed his glass of scotch onto the table, the first sound since the owl had tapped on the glass.

“Where do you get off letting a filthy bird into Petunia’s clean kitchen?” he demanded, his face gone red already.

“She didn’t touch anything,” replied Harry absently as he examined the envelope in his hands. It had his address on the front in a reddish ink. He flipped it over and his puzzlement grew. The wax seal on the back was imprinted with the crest of Gringott’s Bank. Why would Gringott’s send him a letter? Was he out of money? Harry opened the letter with trepidation, but Vernon snatched it from
his hands before he could begin to read it.

“Hey! That’s mine!”

“So? Rubbish! What is this Gringott’s?” Vernon said contemptuously, but his eyes continued to scan the parchment. Suddenly, they froze, and a slow smile spread across his face. Harry’s stomach dropped. He remembered telling Hagrid once that the Dursley’s fear of all things wizard would not include a pile of gold. It would seem he was right.

Calm now, Vernon looked up. He handed Harry back his letter, still grinning in a way that reminded Harry of Fred and George, but with more avarice than mischief. To avoid Vernon’s eyes, he looked down at the letter. It was written in black ink, in a jagged script.

Mr. Potter,

This is an accounting review. For you convenience, we have provided sums in both Wizarding and Muggle currencies.

Below the short paragraph was a long list of numbers which Harry recognized as amount of Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts, divided into withdrawals and interest, as well as a total which more than explained Vernon’s good mood.

“This can’t be right,” stuttered Harry. “There isn’t this much gold in my vault.” He realized what he had said when Vernon pounced on him, his smile gone.

“You’ve had this money the whole time, haven’t you,” he hissed. “You ungrateful bastard! We took you in, raised you, supported you your entire life.” Harry had heard these words before, but what frightened him this time was Vernon’s grip on his upper arm. He could feel his fingers pressing into his arm, deep enough that his bones felt crushed. “You’ve been hiding a fortune from us, boy!” the man ground out.

Harry looked at the parchment again. Vernon was right. It was a fortune. According to the letter, Harry Potter was in sole possession of 310,344,827 Galleons, 10 Sickles, and 11 Knuts. A very respectable sum in its own right, but when translated into British Pounds, it was incredible.

“9 billion Pounds,” breathed Harry, unable to believe what his eyes told him.

“That’s right, boy,” sneered Vernon, his smirk returning. And I think it’s high time that I collected what you owe me.”

Harry just looked at him. A coldness began to grow in his chest and he pulled his arm from his uncle’s bruising grasp. “Owe you?” he laughed. “You should owe me! Retribution for a childhood without love, without any rights as a human being.”

“But you’re not a human being boy,” said Vernon in a low voice. Harry realized that his uncle was drunk, or nearly so. “You’re a freak, an unnatural parasite, and we gave you shelter, food. Be grateful, boy!” He was roaring now, and had Harry’s arm again. Harry tried to pull away, but his time, his uncle’s grip was too strong. Vernon leaned into Harry’s face and spoke, softly, threateningly.

“What’s yours should be mine, freak. If you were dead, it would be mine.”

Harry couldn’t believe they were having this conversation. “It wouldn’t,” he said, just as softly. “I wrote my will last year. Dumbledore witnessed it. Everything I own is left to my friends and my Godfather.” He felt distant. This wasn’t really happening, was it?
Vernon purpled, and then his eyes left Harry’s. They now held a calculating look. He looked back. “Then you’ll just have to give the money to me.” He tightened his grip, but Harry ignored it.

“You’re cracked.” he said succinctly. He tried to pull away one last time, and Vernon snapped.

“You will not disobey me!” he roared. He pushed Harry face-first into the wall, twisting his right arm behind his back. Harry struggled, but stopped immediately as he felt his shoulder begin to burn from the unnatural angle at which it was held.

“Now,” hissed Vernon into his ear. “Consider carefully.” He sounded dead sober now. “Will you pay me what I am owed?”

Harry was biting his lip against the pain, but he knew instinctively that, if he gave in, this would happen again. “I don’t owe you anything.”

It happened so fast. Vernon yanked Harry’s arm up suddenly and Harry felt his elbow just... come apart. The small cracking sound filled the kitchen, before it was drowned out by Harry’s scream. Vernon slammed his head into the wall to shut him up.

“You get another chance to answer me correctly, freak.” In his mouth, the last word held the timbre of an Unforgivable curse.

As he sank to the floor, cradling his elbow, Harry retained at least some presence of mind. “No,” he said. “I won’t.”

Vernon laughed, a harsh bark. He grabbed Harry’s newly broken elbow and hauled him to his feet. “You’re too brave,” and the word was a sneer, “for your own good.” Harry blacked out from the pain in his arm as Vernon threw him roughly against the table, into a chair.

He came to with his cheek lying in a puddle of spilt milk. Only a moment must have passed, for Vernon was still there, but now he held... Harry’s eyes widened. His uncle now held a knife.

Chapter: 2

Hi. It’s me again. Thanks very much to my first two reviewers, Kim and ---------. Lookie how fast I got Chapter two up!!! I can’t promise I’ll always be this fast, but hey! I’ll try. I’m now up to page 10 out of 208 *on paper*, so I’ve got a lot of material, especially since I plan to continue feeding it to you in itty bitty chunks. Mwahahahahaha!

Chapter 2

Harry managed to sit up, but he groaned as his elbow shifted, bones grinding painfully together. Quick as a snake, Vernon grabbed his wrist, pinning the broken arm to the table. Harry refused point-blank to scream again as his uncle dug the point of the knife into the web of soft tissue between thumb and forefinger.

“I won’t give in,” said Harry through gritted teeth, more to himself than to his uncle. Vernon looked up. “You will,” was his only response. Suddenly, the knife swiveled to lie across the base of his
thumb. Harry saw it coming, but it only took one stroke.

A part of Harry watched with only concern as his flesh parted, as Uncle Vernon wriggled the blade to find the gap between the bones and drove it through to the wood of the table.

The rest of him was screaming.

His uncle freed the knife from the table and brought it to hover over the next finger. He looked up into Harry’s sweating face. “Well?” he growled, grinning.

Harry looked at his thumb, lying there, separate, on the table, and he began to shake. “I’ll do it,” he sobbed. “I’ll do anything you want. Just... don’t.” He wept as he slowly drew his maimed hand and arm against his chest, cradling them there as tears ran freely down his face.

Harry, wrapped in his pain, hadn’t heard his uncle leave the room, but now he returned, tossing a first aid kit in front of him.

“Clean yourself up,” he ordered, sounding bored. “And then we’re going to this ‘Gringott’s.’” Vernon watched impassively as Harry fumbled with the gauze and tape. When he finally had the stump covered, he threw a wad of cloth at the boy. Harry recognized it as one of his school robes, but without the house badge - Harry could see where Vernon had ripped it away - it looked just like any other wizarding garment.

“Put that on,” snapped Vernon. “It’ll hide your arm.”

Harry struggled into the robes, not even trying to thread his injured arm into the sleeve. Against his will, he looked back to his uncle for instruction.

Vernon smirked to see this. “Let’s go.”

They were at the car when Harry remembered. “I’ll need my wand.”

“Oh no, you don’t,” growled Vernon. “I’m not stupid.

He wasn’t, Harry realized, but he explained, “I can’t get into Diagon Alley, where Gringott’s Bank is, without it.” He hated how meek his voice sounded, cracked with pain and fear, but he could muster nothing stronger.

Only half-convinced, Vernon followed Harry upstairs and stood over him as he opened his cache under the floorboards, which was where he kept his wand. Before he could close it again, Vernon’s hand swept down to grab something out.

“What’s this?” he asked, sounding speculative. Before Harry could answer, he glared at him, daring him to lie. Harry found he couldn’t.

“That’s a Galleon,” he said tiredly.

“Is it real gold?”

“Wizard gold,” qualified Harry, standing up. Not saying anything further, he turned, and submissively followed Vernon to the car.

The ride from Little Whinging to London was long and nearly silent. Harry huddled against the passenger side door, as far away as he could get from his uncle. When Harry had directed Vernon where in London to go, and they had parked, Vernon turned to him. “Listen, freak. If you play me
false, this,” he said, grabbing Harry’s mangled elbow and shaking it. “Will feel like a papercut. You had better act whichever way passes for normal with these freaks of yours, you hear me?” His voice was an ominous mutter that chilled Harry to the bone. He nodded fervently, hating himself for doing so.

They got out and crossed the crowded sidewalk. Harry headed straight for the Leaky Cauldron, but when he reached the door, Vernon wasn’t behind him. He looked around and saw him looking into the storefront next door. For a brief second, Harry considered running into the Leaky Cauldron and calling for help, but then his uncle looked at him and the momentary courage drained away.

“It’s here, Uncle Vernon,” he called dispiritedly. “You can’t see it because you’re a muggle. Just follow me closely.” Vernon grasped Harry’s right shoulder in an over-firm mockery of camaraderie and Harry led him into the tiny pub. Vernon looked about at the dark, dusty room with disapproval, but Harry led him straight through and out back into the miniscule courtyard. “I need my wand now.” Vernon hadn’t let him have it in the car, but gave it to him now. Harry tapped the appropriate brick and stepped back to watch as the wall folded itself back from the entry to Diagon Alley. Vernon paled, but didn’t say anything as the noise from the crowd beyond surrounded them.

Harry threaded their way through the throng, his uncle’s hand still heavy on his shoulder, to the white edifice that was Gringott’s Wizard Bank. As they mounted the marble steps, a goblin in a hurry pushed past them. Vernon stared after it. “What was that?” he hissed into Harry’s ear. “A goblin,” replied Harry despondently. “They run Gringott’s.”

Approaching the desk at the head of the hall, Vernon gawked openly, but stayed silent. Harry drew near to the goblin at the desk. “I need to get into my vault, please?” he asked quietly, and produced the key, which he kept on a fine length of chain around his neck. The goblin took it and examined it before speaking.

“Very well,” he said. He returned the key to Harry, along with a canvas sack, and he called over another goblin to lead them into the labyrinth of vaults. According to the review, a full twenty of them were filled with Harry’s fortune.

Uncle Vernon sat rigidly for the entire trolley ride down to Harry’ vault, never releasing the boy’s shoulder. When the cart stopped, he slumped slightly, but regained his composure quickly. “Let’s go then, boy,” he said, but the tone of his voice said ‘freak.’

Vernon’s eyes grew hard with greed as the vault was unlocked, revealing the mounds of gold and silver therein. He left Harry standing at the door as he shoveled Galleons and Sickles into the empty sack, filling it as full as he could. When he was done, he had to enlist the goblin’s help in lifting it into the cart. After they had returned to the surface, he made Harry direct him to the exchange desk, and then sent him out to the car.

His uncle had left the car locked, so Harry stood beside it until Vernon emerged from the Leaky Cauldron. He looked insufferably pleased with himself as he rifled the bundle of bills in his hands. “A profitable morning,” he chuckled to Harry as he unlocked the car and they got in. Harry cringed away as his uncle leaned towards him. “Listen well now, freak. As long as you continue to do what I say, with no argument whatsoever, I won’t have to do that,” he tapped the bandage that concealed the stump of Harry’s thumb, “again. You hear me?” Harry nodded frantically. “Good,” said Vernon. “When we get home, the first thing that you are going to do is get rid of that bird. I don’t care how, just get rid of it.” Ignoring Harry’s half-stifled cry of protest, he continued. “And then, you are going to move all of your stuff back into the closet.”

When they were back at Privet Drive, Vernon stood over Harry as he sent a sleepy Hedwig to
Ron’s, explaining carefully to her that she couldn’t come back. When she was gone, Harry gathered his stuff awkwardly and dragged his trunk one-handedly down the stairs. Vernon had to manhandle it into he closet, and then he shoved Harry in on top of it. Harry clouted his broken arm against the doorjamb and screamed before Vernon slammed the door shut. He heard his uncle’s heavy footsteps fade over the pain that shrilled in his ears and his own sobbing breath.

Chapter: 3

Look how fast this fic is growing! You know, I can’t keep up this rate, forever. School starts next week. I will do my best then, but no more guarantee of daily postings.

Chapter 3

The next day, when Aunt Petunia and Dudley got home, Harry was still locked away in his cupboard. From the sound of things, Vernon met them at the door and, from Petunia’s exclamation, Harry guessed that Vernon had showed her the money. He wasn’t surprised therefore when, after a moment, footsteps approached his cupboard and the door slammed open against the wall. He squinted against the sudden light to see Aunt Petunia standing there.

“Is this true? Have you been hiding a fortune from us?” she questioned him angrily. Harry remained silent until Vernon, who was standing behind his wife, reached around her to drag Harry out by his broken arm. He shouted in pain as the bone ends slid roughly against one another. He could see one now, pressing up under against his skin. It nauseated him.

Petunia looked at Harry’s arm, and then she looked at her husband. A look of unease entered her face. Vernon saw it and grimaced.

“Petunia,” he whined. “This freak’s been holding out on us. If it weren’t for him, you would have inherited when your sister and her freak of a husband got themselves blown up. Just look at this!” He brandished the crumpled letter from Gringott’s, shoving it into her hand. “He’s had heaps of gold and silver squirreled away this whole time while he let us scrimp and save to raise him right. He owes us every cent.” Vernon threw Harry back into the cupboard and locked him in. Harry huddled in the dark as his aunt and uncle raged at one another outside. They had fought like this before, but as the screaming went on and on, a feeling of dread possessed him.

At length, it was justified when the front door slammed. Before Petunia’s car had skidded out of the driveway, Vernon reappeared at the cupboard door. He was a terrifying sight, with his hair wild and his face as red as the Hogwart’s Express, as he dragged Harry into the hall. “Petunia just left,” he growled. “Because of you! She took Dudley, and left me!” He fastened his hands around Harry’s neck. “And it’s all your fault!!”

Harry struggled ineffectually. A little part of his mind removed itself from the situation. -Ha!- it said. -I’m safe here from Voldemort, the most powerfully evil wizard ever, and my uncle is about to kill me!- -No!- the rest of him cried out. “I don’t want to die!”

“Will,” he croaked out, hoping Vernon’s greed would overcome his fury. It worked. Vernon relaxed his grip. “My will. If I die,” Harry reminded him hoarsely, “Ron and Hermione and Sirius get all of
the money, and it will be lost to you.” The ploy got through. Vernon dropped his hands, still glaring at Harry.

“You’re going to write a new will, freak.” His voice was chill and Harry’s insides froze. Vernon was going to kill him, just for money.

“I can’t,” Harry lied quickly. “Dumbledore has to witness any changes, or it’s not legal. Do you want him to see me like this?” Now he was relying on his uncle’s fear of wizards as he held up his bandaged hand. “I don’t think that he would be very happy.”

Vernon stood back at this for a moment before he slammed Harry back against the wall and stormed, growling, out of the room. Harry slid down to slump on the floor, but he barely had time to contemplate whether or not he could reach the door and run, well, stagger for help before Vernon was back.

“Let’s go,” he said tersely, and he pulled Harry up. Harry cried out and Vernon twisted the arm farther. He looked at the now-malformed arm and then up at Harry’s face and seemed to make a decision. Suddenly, he wrenched Harry’s arm violently. Harry screamed even louder as the sharp bone ends sliced out through the skin.

“We’re going to get the rest of that money. And then, freak, when I’ve got it in my hands, I’ll let you go to a hospital.” Harry nodded fervently as Vernon shook his arm, blood spattering them both.

“Anything,” he stammered out. “Just stop and I’ll do anything you want.” A part of him was dying as he gave in yet again. -I don’t belong in Gryffindor!- that part of him thought. -I don’t deserve it!-

Vernon made Harry sit in the back seat this time, which was fine with Harry, because that way his uncle couldn’t reach him. Neither spoke all the way to London. By the time they arrived, Harry was reeling from blood loss, but the wounds seemed to have finally scabbed over. This time, when they entered the bank, Vernon had Harry enlist the aid of enough goblins to empty all 20 vaults. It seemed to be an endless tour of treasure, and not just currency. Sculptures, jewels, and fantastic *objets d’art* filled the rooms, but Vernon was only interested in the gold, silver, and bronze coins. Afterwards, when he had had the exchanged money transferred to his regular bank, Harry worked up the courage to ask about the promised visit to a hospital.

“I’ve changed my mind,” was Vernon’s response. “I’ll take you to that doctor who fixed up Dudley after that monster attacked him, what was his name? Rubeus Hatgrid or something? Anyhow, he knows how to keep his mouth shut, and it’ll come out of ‘your’ money anyway.” Vernon sounded in an expansive mood. Harry didn’t say anything.

$ HEY! LOOK AT ME! IT’S WRITER’S BLOCK! Just kidding, but it was true for about a week. Imagine! This story almost died right here. Lucky for it (and you) that I know writer’s CPR. $

The doctor seemed competent to Harry as he set and dressed his arm, but strangely incurious. Harry had hoped he would see that the wounds were obviously not from accidents, and ask about them, but he didn’t, and with Vernon standing there glaring, Harry couldn’t bring himself to volunteer the information. Only as they were about to leave was he able to summon the courage.

“Don’t let me go with him!” he shouted, tearing free of Vernon’s grip. “He’ll kill me! He did this to me!” he yelled, brandishing his bandaged arm. He ran over to where the doctor stood by a sink, methodically washing his hands, and clutched at his sleeve. “He’s gone mad! He’ll kill me for money!”

The man turned and looked at Vernon, who shrugged slightly, and then at Harry. “If he were going
to kill you,” he said slowly, “why did he bring you here?” In the time it took him to say that, Vernon had come up behind Harry and once again grasped his shoulder.

“Let’s go, boy.” Harry stared in silent desperation as the doctor turned away and Vernon began to draw him to the door.

“Please,” Harry breathed, but when there was no response, he did not give up. Not this time. He turned, shoved past Vernon and ran out into the road. It was dark here, without even streetlights, for this was the countryside north of London. Harry could see the lights of a house not too far away, so he sprinted for it. Almost immediately, he could hear his uncle pounding and swearing behind him. When he heard Vernon stumble and grunt, he thought he would make it, but a moment later, a thrown stone came whizzing out of the darkness. For a man as patently unathletic as Uncle Vernon, he had a good aim. The rock struck Harry hard behind the knee, and he fell hard to the tarmac.

Vernon was on him in an instant. He kicked Harry in the ribs as he tried to stand, then hauled him to his feet. He pulled Harry to the car, where he opened the boot. “Get in, freak,” he said, gesturing to the open boot. Harry just stared. “You’re not getting another chance to run,” Vernon explained impatiently. “Now get in.” With that, he lifted Harry bodily and practically threw him into the boot. Harry barely had time to pull in his hand before the lid was slammed above him. He felt the car start, and knowing that it would be some hours before he could do anything to rescue himself, he put his head down on Vernon’s briefcase and slept for the first time since that owl had appeared at the window. He slept without dreams, and for that he was grateful.

Some time later, Harry woke with a start into sudden silence. It took him a moment to realize that it was the motor being stilled that had disturbed his sleep. He waited for Vernon to let him out, or for some indication of what was going on, but all he hear was the door of a house slamming.

To Harry, waiting crouched in the dark, it seemed like hours before the door opened and shut once again and the boot was thrown open. He saw at once that Vernon was very, very drunk. An insane murderous light shone in his eyes. Seeing it, Harry scrambled out quickly, before he could be shut in again. Thinking that an inebriated Vernon might be a good deal slower, he tried to run again, but Vernon was ready for him. Faster than Harry would have believed possible, his arm shot out and grabbed Harry by the throat. Harry couldn’t make a sound, couldn’t even breath around his uncle’s grasp. Vernon didn’t speak as he dragged Harry, struggling and choking, into the house.

Once inside, Vernon slammed Harry’s head into the wall once again and then let him slide to the floor. Harry, seeing stars, tried and failed to stand. Vernon laughed at this as he climbed the stairs. From the footsteps that shook the ceiling, Harry could tell that Vernon was in his room. The footsteps paused a couple of times, and the floor creaked, and then Vernon came back down.

“I found these in your little hidey-hole,” he barked. ‘These’ were two small vials of different colored liquids, one a milky grey, the other, an iridescent green. They were the results of Harry’s potion’s homework, done nearly a month ago in the bathroom on the Hogwart’s Express. Harry tried to tell this to Vernon, that they weren’t anything harmful, but the man was too drunk to listen.

“Don’t lie to me, freak. You were going to poison us all. Slip it in the tea, I daresay, and we all die. Make your life easier, I daresay.”

“No!” cried Harry as Vernon advanced upon him. “They’re harmless! I swear it!” He was groveling now as he backed against the kitchen cupboards.

“No!” cried Harry as Vernon advanced upon him. “They’re harmless! I swear it!” He was groveling now as he backed against the kitchen cupboards.

“They’d better be, freak, because you’re going to drink them.” With that, he reached past Harry, who couldn’t restrain him self from flinching, to grab a glass from the cupboard. He poured the contents of the vials into the glass and, ignoring the way it bubbled and stank, thrust it at Harry. “Drink,
freak,” was all he said, but Harry didn’t argue. Vernon was holding the knife again, the same one, still with dried blood on the blade. Harry trembled at the sight of it. The glass clattered against his teeth until he stilled it with his mouth and drank.

I could, and should, leave it here for tonight, but... my sister Comechatcha would kill me, and so would you, I think. Read on.

Apparently, and this is an understatement, those two potions should not be mixed. Harry realized that immediately, before agony drove all thought from his mind. His eyes were burning, two coals searing into his skull. He clawed at his face, flames licking at his hands, fully willing to scratch his own eyes out, just to stop the pain. After a momentary eternity, the torture let up enough to allow him the presence of bind to grope blindly for the sink. He snatched at the faucet, turning on the water and plunged his head under the flow. It was the most logical solution and it worked. The burning sensation ebbed away under the cold torrent and in a few moments, the fierce heat had gone, although a great deal of pain lingered. When Harry stood up however, something distracted him.

“I... I can’t see! I can’t see!” he shrieked, staring into darkness. He stumbled over something and fell heavily onto Vernon, who began to laugh drunkenly.

“That’s what you get for tying to poison my family, freak. Serves you right.”

Harry broke. He launched his fist in the direction of Vernon’s laughter. “You drunken sot!” he yelled hoarsely as he knocked his uncle down. His yells changed, however, when Vernon struck back. Harry had forgotten the knife.

Chapter: 4

Hi. It’s me, Lady Russell Holmes. Here is yet another installation in Harry’s newest epic. Enjoy, and try not to think too harshly of me.

Chapter 4

At Hogwarts

At Hogwarts castle, a goblin stood in front of the Headmaster’s desk. “Headmaster Dumbledore,” he said formally, “If you will remember, sir, several years ago, you asked us at Gringott’s to be alert as to anything unusual with regards to young Mr. Potter’s account. We thought that you would be interested to know that on Friday, Mr. Potter made a large withdrawal amounting to...” He had to consult a slip of paper in its hand. “941 Galleons, and 12 sickles, and that very early Monday morning, he emptied 18 of his 20 vaults. There are three additional causes for concern here. One,” he said, ticking off the point on an unusually long forefinger. “Is that early Friday morning, we issued Mr. Potter an review of the state of his account. Second,” and another finger folded. “Both on Friday and Monday, Mr. Potter was accompanied by an imposing muggle whom he addressed as ‘uncle’ and who he seemed to fear. Last, all of the money withdrawn was immediately exchanged to muggle British Pounds, and a great deal of it was transferred to the muggle’s account at the Bank of London.” The goblin assumed an expression at this point which, on a human, could only be called sheepish. “Please understand, sir. We do not often concern ourselves in the matters of humans, but
the Boy-Who-Lived is... well...” He looked at the floor, at a loss for words.

Dumbledore smiled. “Harry Potter in very special indeed. Thank you for this information, Griphook. I will look in on him. Do you want to know what I find?”

“Thank you, Headmaster.” Griphook bowed low and vanished.

In truth, Dumbledore was more agitated at what he had just heard than he let on. He had known since Harry’s second year that there were problems between the Dursley’s and their nephew. Then, Molly Weasley had owled him, telling him how her sons had found Harry a prisoner in his own room. Even then though, he knew that Harry was safer there than with the Weasleys, the Grangers, or even here at Hogwarts. His aunt Petunia was the key. She was a blood relative of Harry’s, the only one living, but more importantly, she was Lily’s sister. Her twin sister. When Lily Potter gave her life to save her son, her sister was affected as well. Quite unbeknownst to Petunia, her very existence and proximity shielded Harry from discovery by Voldemort and his minions. Despite her dislike for her nephew, she was his best defense. The protection was purely natural and couldn’t be detected or countered, even now, with Lord Voldemort revived and sharing that same protective blood. As long as Harry lived with her, that is.

Dumbledore made to rise, but before he could leave his desk, a hesitant tap sounded at the door. “Headmaster Professor Dumbledore Sir?” It was Dobby, edging cautiously into his office. “Sir? Dobby is worrying about Harry Potter, Sir. Dobby is trying to visit Harry Potter all day yesterday, but Dobby is not being able to find Harry Potter’s house.” The diminutive house-elf seemed very worked up. “I is going to where to where it is, Sire, but it is not being where it should be!” He was shrieking now, and stomping his sock-clad feet. Dumbledore sought to calm his hysteria, laying a comforting hand across his shoulders as the two moved down the spiral staircase.

“There is a very simple explanation for that, Dobby. After last’s years events,” he explained, “I saw fit to place Mr. Potter’s household under the Fidelius Charm to protect him and his family. Also, I warded it so that no wizard or magical creature can approach it. I’m sorry if I frightened you, but it is for Harry’s own good.”

Dobby seemed calmer now, but he had one last question. “So Dobby cannot visit Harry Potter?”

“I’m afraid not, Dobby,” said Dumbledore kindly. “But you shall see him when he returns to Hogwarts in the fall.” He patted the elf’s shoulder a final time before they parted company, Dobby disappearing into the inconspicuous house-elf passages that riddled the castle and led, ultimately, to the kitchens. Dumbledore continued on his way to the Great Hall, lost deeply in his own thoughts.

Friday morning, Harry Potter had received his review from Gringott’s Wizard Bank. Friday morning, a vague, sourceless dread had accosted Dumbledore as he ate breakfast in his chambers. The feeling had intensified throughout the day until he was pacing the corridors, unable to settle or to concentrate on anything. He had not slept that night and the dread had escalated hour by hour. Today, he had awoken, soaked with sweat, from a restless, dream-ridden sleep to the news of Griphook’s arrival. He greeted this with a sort of relief, for he knew, deep within, that the goblin’s visit had something to do with his extreme unease. That Harry Potter was involved came as only a minor, if unpleasant surprise.

He emerged from his tense ruminations to find himself at the top of the Grand Stairwell. Looking down, he took a moment to notice something odd. From where he was standing, he could see the entire well, from its heights to its depths. Typically, one could always count on seeing at least one flight of stairs in the process of migrating from one landing to another. Today, however, nothing moved, not even the portraits coating the walls. All of the frames were empty, without exception. Dumbledore, puzzled, stepped out onto the uppermost stair.
He had meant to go downstairs, but not like this. As soon as his feet touched the step, it seemed to absorb them, trapping him neatly. Before he could even disengage his wand from its sheath in his robes, the flight disengaged itself from its landing, and dropped, straight down.

Only shock kept Dumbledore from screaming as he fell, pulled down by the vast weight of marble affixed to his feet. Shock and the dignity of more than three centuries of life. Before the shock and the dignity had time to give way to panic, everything stopped, without any evidence that he had ever moved. He was now standing, somewhat unsteadily at the foot of the stairwell. As the entrapping marble flowed away from his feet, the carved banister came up to shove him between the shoulder blades so that he stumbled into the Great Hall, propelled forward by its push.

A dozen or so members of Hogwart’s staff were eating late breakfasts in the hall. Startled by Dumbledore’s abrupt arrival, the stared at him as he cast wildly about. The school was trying to tell him something, he knew, and it was in this room. The sense of dread was so strong now that he fancied he could smell blood.

He could smell blood! It was strong, an acrid, coppery scent in his nostrils. Looking like an aged bloodhound, long nose almost touching the ground, he searched frantically for the source, but it was Professor Snape, with his nose long trained to the intricacies of potion-making, who found it first. He had smelt it almost before Dumbledore had entered the room.

“Here, Albus,” he called, beckoning. Dumbledore noted with distress that the Potion’s Master looked pale, extraordinarily so, as he ran to where Snape stood by the vacant Gryffindor table. He gestured slowly to a conspicuous spot below the bench. A dark red spot, slowly growing. Dumbledore’s legs gave out beneath him. He sank to the floor in a daze, not hearing Snape’s and McGonagall’s anxious inquiries. His eyes locked onto a word carved neatly into the edge of the table, an orderly wound, dripping blood.

“Harry” the word said and Dumbledore moaned softly. “Harry.”

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This is honestly the end of the whole fic.
Just kidding!!!!!!!! Sorry, sorry, I’m evil, I know. Actually it was my sister Comechatcha’s idea, so flame her, not me. On with the fic! Charge!!!!

By the time Dumbledore had regained his feet, he knew what he had to be done. Gesturing for McGonagall and Snape, to follow him, he headed back to his office. This time, the stairs behaved normally, although the portraits remained empty.

By the time the trio reached Dumbledore’s office, the two Heads of House were concernedly demanding an explanation. “What has the Potter boy done now?” growled Snape, but there was a genuine note of apprehension in his face despite his harsh tone and words. Professor McGonagall was all but stuttering in her concern.

“You-Know-Who can’t have taken Harry, can he? I thought you put him under extra precautions this summer. Oh, Albus, we should have kept him here, with you.” At this, Dumbledore sighed, leaning heavily against the mantle.

“I don’t know yet if Voldemort is involved, but you are right, Minerva. I should have kept Harry here, at my side.”

Moving like a man every day his age, Dumbledore grasped a handful of Floo Powder and stepped into the flames. “The Burrow!” Snape and McGonagall gaped briefly at each other before following.

Shocked silence greeted their arrival at the Weasley home. Forgoing greetings in his haste, Dumbledore addressed those present. “Ron. Where’s Ron? I need to speak to him now!” There was
no mistaking the urgency in his voice. Mrs. Weasley regained her composure instantly, and stood up, pointing at the stairs.

“He’s in his room, having a lie-... It’s at the very top!” she finished in a yell, for Dumbledore was already bounding up the stairs, taking them two at a time in his hurriedness. Before the Professors and the crowd of Weasleys could follow, he reappeared, Ron at his heels. He held up his hands to counter the clamor of voices. Silence fell in the kitchen.

“I am very sorry, but I do not have the time to explain just now. I shall very soon, but now,” he whirled upon a very uneasy Ron. “Ronald Weasley. Where is Harry Potter?” Dumbledore spoke slowly and formally. The adults present gasped as they recognized the age-old formula by which a Secret Keeper is asked to reveal his charge. Ron’s eyes widened, but his ritual response was delivered in a strong, steady voice.

“Who asks, and why?” Both he and Dumbledore brought their wands to bear on one another, and the light of a truth spell blossomed across Dumbledore’s face.

“Albus Dumbledore asks, for the protection of Harry Potter’s life.” Everyone gasped again as the truth spell faded, indicating complete honesty.

“Harry is in his uncle’s home, Number 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey,” said Ron, completing the formula. “What’s threatening Harry, Professor?”

“A moment please, Mr. Weasley, and I’ll explain.” Dumbledore rounded on Snape and McGonagall. “Severus, Minerva, go back to the castle. I need you to begin immediately to lift the wards I placed on Harry’s house, so we can approach it. It will take at least 24 hours, so please, begin immediately. I’ll join you once I have explained to Mr. Weasley and his family. Now, go!”

The two professor’s dissapparated immediately. Before Dumbledore could begin his explanations, however, Ron spoke up, to his parents.

“I told you something was up with Harry.” He turned to Dumbledore. “Friday night, Hedwig turned up at my window, and she won’t leave. I can’t get her to go back to Harry’s. I got a post from him a week ago, and he said everything was fine.” Ron wasn’t far from hysteria. Dumbledore put his arm around the boy.

“Ron. I know that you are worried about Harry. So am I, but right now, I need you to think. In any of Harry’s letters, did he mention his aunt or uncle? Especially his uncle.”

Ron thought for a moment, still breathing hard. Slowly, he spoke. “He said his uncle was fired from his job, about the same time school got out. I can’t think of anything else. He doesn’t like to talk about the Dursley’s much.”

Dumbledore looked as though an ugly suspicion had been proved. “Here is what I know. Friday morning, I believe that Mr. Dursley discovered just how wealthy Harry really is. For some reason, Gringott’s sent him an unsolicited accounting review. That same morning, I began to feel restless, a dread that I could not place.”

He continued to relate the events of that morning, from the concerns of Griphook and Dobby to the castle’s own concern and ‘Harry’ carved into the Gryffindor table. At this, Ron spoke again.

“Harry carved that our first year. Mine’s straight across the table. Everyone carves their name somewhere. I even found... Dad’s...” his voice petered out as he realized that he was babbling. “Harry’s really in trouble, isn’t he, Headmaster?”
Dumbledore sank into a chair. “He is, Ron, and it is my fault. There are a thousand things that I could have done, should have done to protect him. I could have let him stay on at Hogwart’s, or even just looked in on him this summer, but my own wards, meant to protect him, even now prevent me from helping him when I know that something is terribly wrong. I thought that only Voldemort would be a danger to him. I forgot the antipathy of his own guardians and that is what now threatens Harry.”

“Hang on,” said Fred, speaking up for the first time. “These wards only exclude magical beings, right? Not muggles?”

“Right?” answered Dumbledore, looking up from his hands in interest. “Go on.”

“So, Hermione Granger’s parents are muggles, aren’t they, Ron?” Ron nodded, also interested. “So they could go and get Harry, right?”

“That’s an idea,” chimed in George. “No.. wait? How would they get past the Dursleys? If they really have, you know, hurt Harry, they wouldn’t want anyone to find out, would they? They could go to prison.”

“They should go to prison!” cried out Ginny, in tears. “They should be in Azkaban!”

“My sentiments exactly, Miss Weasley, but I’m afraid I agree with George. We can’t use the Grangers. If they aren’t able to retrieve Harry on a first attempt, the Dursley’s could hurt him worse in retaliation.”

At this, Mrs. Weasley burst out. “Worse?” she cried. “We don’t even know how badly he’s hurt now! And all we can do is wait?” The last word was a sob, and she turned her face into Mr. Weasley’s shoulder as he held her close.

Dumbledore sighed despairingly. “I’m afraid so, Molly.” He pushed himself to his feet. “Do you want to come back to the school with me to... wait?” A sad, mirthless smile played across his lips. “You’re all welcome.”

A brief moment later, the Burrow was empty, the last green flames fading from the fireplace.

### Chapter: 5

Hi. It’s me, as if you couldn’t guess. I figured that this, Midnight December 31, was an auspicious time to post, so... here I am.

Chapter 5

Back at 4 Privet Drive

Despite Vernon’s inebriated state, Harry was no match for him. Certainly not blinded, and with one arm useless. Even less so with the knife thrown into the mix. Vernon’s reaction, almost instinctive, to Harry’s wild charge put the knife directly through the palm of Harry’s good, left hand. His recoil, accompanied by a panicked scream, tore the knife free, nearly severing his remaining thumb. His
rage ebbed as fast as it had flooded, leaving him cowering once more on the floor.

“Help me help me help me help me.” His voice, slurred by pain, was a wavering monotone as he rocked back and forth.

“Shut up, you,” said Vernon, returning to his abandoned bottle of scotch. “You’re irritating me.”

Harry didn’t hear him. “Help me help me help me...” he kept muttering until Vernon would take no more. He surged to his feet and Harry, hearing him, scrambled unsteadily to his, still calling despondently for aid.

“I told you to shut up!” roared Vernon, lunging for Harry. Motivated by terror, however, Harry evaded his uncle’s hands and stumbled towards the stairs, leaving an profuse trail of blood. Confused by his anguish, both mental and physical, he made for his room as a place of refuge, but Vernon caught him at the top of the stairs.

“Where did you think you were going, boy?” Vernon was laughing at him as he lifted him with the surprising strength of a drunken man. Despite his earlier burst of adrenaline, Harry could only struggle weakly as his uncle carried him back downstairs. His grip, although too strong to allow Harry to escape, slipped enough that Harry’s head bounced against the last four steps. When Vernon dropped Harry to fish his keys out of his pockets, the boy was too dazed to do anything more than lie there.

He didn’t fight at all when Vernon proceeded to drag him by a foot out to the car, only crying out softly when his head dropped off the curb onto the tarmac. He lay inert in Vernon’s arm as he was lifted and dropped carelessly once again into the boot. It wasn’t until the lid shut above him and he had heard Vernon return to the house that he began again to murmur for the help which seemed such a remote possibility.

At that moment, in fact, help, in the form of Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape and the Weasleys, was still 9 hours away, and the gash in his left hand would not stop bleeding. Even when he heard the Laughlins, from Number 6, walk by, he was too frightened and too weak to call out for aid. Before their voices had faded, Harry, exhausted by pain, blood loss, and fear, had once again fallen asleep.

Quite some time later, the boot opened. Harry couldn’t see it, but it was early morning. It had been night before. He could hear Vernon there, humming cheerfully and sounding generally unconcerned by Harry’s distress. “You stay quiet, freak,” he said menacingly. “You and I are going for a little ride.” The boot slammed again, and Harry felt the car tilt as Vernon got in and started the motor.

This ride was long, longer by far than the rides to London had been, and towards the end, the car jostled as though driving down an unpaved lane. When the car stopped, Harry curled himself as small as possible before Vernon opened the lid, but he was nonetheless dragged out to collapse onto what felt like gravel. He could hear rushing water nearby, but it didn’t quite register. Vernon hauled Harry to his feet, forced him to stumble towards the liquid sounds. The ground under foot changed to stone, cracked and uneven.

“I should have done this the day you showed up at my door, freak. I could have been rich then, and rid of you fourteen years ago. Well, after today, I’ll be both.”

Abruptly, Vernon released Harry, who staggered to catch his balance. A small metallic sound made him freeze. He knew that sound, had heard it before, but couldn’t place it now.

And there you go. Today’s installment must end there, I am afraid. Sorry it is so short. See you
tomorrow, and have a Very Happy New Year, from Lady Russell Holmes, Comeatcha, and The Masked Cliffhanger.

Chapter: 6

$ Hi. It’s me. My most profound apologies for the brevity of the last chapter. I just couldn’t resist leaving it there. (Ducks and hides under desk to avoid thrown wands and stray burning Bludgers. Squeaks.) This one’s going to be even shorter. Forgive me? At least, don’t kill me, or who’ll finish this story? Well, I suppose Relle could do it, but ... Hey!!! I’m not expendable!!! $

Chapter 6

A sharp, explosive report assaulted the air, and for Harry, time seemed to slow down to nothing. He could hear the whistle of something small rushing towards him through the air. His mind finally seemed to work as he recognized what it must be. A bullet. His uncle, the man who had raised him from infancy, had just fired a gun at him. He would die at his hand.

Harry had time to be amazed by the situation before he felt the bullet hit his chest, right below his heart. Even as he was knocked down, thrown backwards by the impact, his mind turned inward. He could feel the small lump of lead as it drastically rearranged his insides, and he screamed in a spray of blood as it blew out through his back.

Time returned to normal as he lay on the rocks, each breath bubbling out through the twin holes in his torso. Strangely lucid, Harry heard his uncle approach him. He nudged him in the shoulder with the toe of his shoe. From somewhere, Harry summoned the air and energy to speak.

“You’ll go to Azka-” he said, but had to stop to cough weakly, choking on his own blood. Before he could try again, Vernon put his foot across Harry’s mouth, silencing him.

“You’re still alive?” he asked, putting more pressure on Harry’s face. “Then listen, freak. I’ve got your money, which means I’ve got what I want, and I don’t want you. I never did. This isn’t even good-bye. This is good riddance.”

It was all Harry could do to cling to consciousness as Vernon stripped him roughly, even going so far as to rip the cast off his arm, causing him to scream again until blood filled his throat. When there was nothing left by which Harry could be traced back to Privet Drive, Vernon lifted Harry once again. Harry, still conscious, could only throw his head from side to side in protest. He couldn’t even feel his legs, let alone kick them. Instead, he tried to concentrate on what his uncle was doing to him.

Vernon was walking quickly towards the water sounds, which, Harry realized, were waves, far below him. Cliffs, then. The amused feeling from before returned. Who needed Voldemort? He had failed where Vernon Dursley, a muggle of the worst sort, would succeed.

He clutched at Vernon’s hands, but he was too weak. Vernon brushed his groping hand off like cobwebs, drew back, and flung Harry over the edge. Fortunately, Harry chose the next moment to finally black out from shock, for his inert form hit three rocky outcroppings in his vicious plunge into the waters of the English Channel.
Chapter: 7

Hi. (Tiny, meek voice comes from beneath desk. White flag waves.) I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Please don’t kill me. The clifflie ate my fic. (Emerges and speaks in a more normal voice.) This chapter is longer anyway. Have a ball.

Chapter 7

Back at Hogwarts. Again.

When the final ward fell, there was a palpable air of relief among those gathered. “What are we waiting for?” cried Dumbledore. “Arthur. You kept Harry’s house on the Floo network, didn’t you?”

“No,” said Mr. Weasley regretfully. “I really wish I had, but I promised. Oh, that doesn’t matter now. However we get there, it has to be fast.”

Hermione, who had arrived very early that morning, spoke up. “Dobby!” There was a collective ‘Huh?’ but she continued. “Dobby can apparate from here, and house-elves are really powerful. He could pop us all to Harry’s, couldn’t he, Professor?”

Dumbledore smiled hugely. “He could indeed! Dobby!”

By the time Dumbledore called his name, the elf in question stood before him. “Dobby can visit Harry Potter now, Sir?”

“Yes Dobby, you can, but you have to take us, all of us with you.”

“You can do that, right Dobby?” interjected Ron. Dobby nodded feverishly.

“Oh! Of course, Mr. Wheezy. Dobby can take all of you. It is easy.”

“Then I repeat: what are we waiting for?” Dumbledore grasped Dobby’s hand and the rest of the group followed suit. “Let’s go!”

“We go now!” Dobby snapped his fingers and the occupants of Dumbledore’s office dissipated into a fine mist, which raced out through a window and across the countryside. They zoomed past villages and hamlets, past the grey sprawl of Landon and into the endless suburbs of Little Whinging.
The mist alighted in front of 4 Privet Drive before coalescing into ten figures. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape, as well as Hermione and Ron, Fred, George, Ginny, Arthur, and Molly Weasley stood in front of the house in which Harry Potter had grown up. But Harry wasn’t there. At that moment, in fact, Harry was in the boot of his uncle’s car, which had just turned onto an unpaved lane which led to an isolated and unpopular viewpoint over the Dover Cliffs.

Not knowing this, the Professors and Weasleys crowded onto the narrow porch as Dumbledore rung the doorbell. No one was surprised when there was no answer. Hermione pushed to the fore.

“Allow me,” she said. “Alohomora!” The door sprung open under the force of her spell, and they piled inside. Dumbledore started to direct a search of the building, but his eyes fell upon the wall behind the door. He froze, his mouth hanging open. Everyone turned to look.

“Blood!” squeaked Dobby, covering his eyes with his ears. It was blood, feathered as if by hair in a streak clear down to the baseboard.

“In here!” cried Ron from the kitchen, sounding very shaken. He, Fred, and George had pushed in past the crowd and so had missed the first stain. Responding to the near-hysteria in his voice, the rest ran to him.

What Ron had found was more blood. A pool of it, and more, spattered over the cupboards and wall. In the midst of this gore lay a knife. Ginny turned away, sobbing, and buried her head in her mother’s arms. Snape laid a hand on Mrs. Weasley’s shoulder. Showing an uncharacteristic empathy, he said, “Maybe you should take Ginny outside, Mrs. Weasley. We’ll fetch you if we find anything, alright?”

Mrs. Weasley nodded mutely, glancing fearfully back into the kitchen before shepherding her distraught daughter out into the Dursley’s front garden. Fred and, more reluctantly, George, joined her there, but Ron and Hermione resolutely joined the grim search. It only took a few minutes. By the time Vernon was lifting Harry out of the boot near Dover, it was obvious that neither Harry nor his family was in Privet Drive. Ginny lifted her head, tears running freely, to a defeated Dumbledore.

“Is Harry dead, then?”

“No!” Ron and Dobby looked at each other, for they had both shouted. Dobby continued first. “No! Harry Potter can not be dead! The world needs Harry Potter!”

“I know that Harry isn’t dead! I’m his Secret Keeper. That means he and I are linked! I- I feel him! Like a thread between him and me. I’d know if it were cut. I’d know if he were dead, and he’s not!”

“Well,” said Professor McGonagall, sounding depressed, “If he is still alive, than where is he? How can we find him? He could be anywhere.”

Dobby’s ears pricked up. “Dobby can find him, Professors, Wheezys. Dobby is very good at finding lost things.” Before anyone could ask him what he meant, the house-elf had snapped his fingers and vanished with a loud clap.

As a mist, Dobby raced from one end of England to the other, searching as only a house-elf could. And he found Harry, saw him flung by Vernon over the cliff. Before Harry had hit the water, Dobby was back with the anxious wizards. He grabbed Dumbledore, who only had time clasp those nearest, Ron, Hermione, and Snape, to him before Dobby vanished again, taking them with him.

When Dumbledore rematerialized, the first thing he saw was Vernon Dursley turning back from the cliff, brushing his hands as if after a job well done. A broad grin faded from his lips as he saw the horrified and enraged wizards. Dumbledore pulled out his wand, intending to curse the muggle, but
Snape had beaten him to it.

“\textit{Petrificus Totalus}!” he cried. Vernon stiffened like a board and fell to the ground, but no one had any more attention to spare for him.

“Where is Harry, Dobby?” asked Hermione urgently. The house-elf gestured mutely to the cliff, and the four wizards ran to peer over the edge.

Hee hee hee. Told you this chapter would be longer, but guess what! It’s still the same cliffie! Is Harry alive or dead? Only I know, and you will have to wait to find out! Mwahahahahaha! That’s why \textit{I} am the evil genius!

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### Chapter 8

It was an incredibly long drop and at the bottom was Harry. He was drifting face down in the gentle waves, and they could see the horribly red stain that was spreading around him.

“Oh God!” cried Hermione.

“Merlin!” breathed Ron. “Hurry! He’s still alive!”

The two adult wizards apparated directly into the water, one on either side of Harry. Down here, the waves weren’t as mild as they had appeared, but they managed to cradle Harry gently between them as they apparated back to the top of the cliff. Hermione began to cry as she saw him, and, after a moment, Ron did too.

Harry lay absolutely motionless in Snape’s arms, staring at the sky from eyes gone as black and as flat as if they had been coated in soot. He was still breathing, but with each gasp, blood sprayed in a pink mist from the holes in his chest and back and bubbled in his throat. The tumbling fall down the cliff had done yet more damage. His already broken arm was twisted and all but torn off at the elbow, and now his other arm was broken as well, hanging stiffly from a malformed shoulder. One leg, miraculously, looked whole, but the other was folded completely back on itself from the knee, held there gruesomely by a shard of bone which protruded like a nail from Harry’s shin to enter his thigh.

Holding back his own tears, Dumbledore conjured up a floating stretcher. As Snape carefully laid Harry upon it, he turned to Dobby, who stood by weeping frantically, hands covering his eyes.

“Dobby! I need you to take us directly to Hogwarts, to the Hospital Wing, right now!” The elf opened his eyes and nodded. Again the party dissolved, reforming this time in the familiar environs of Hogwarts. Dumbledore hurried off to find Madame Pomfrey, but a stunned Snape stayed with Ron and Hermione by Harry’s side. Ron held Hermione in his arms, and she held him as he frantically called to Harry, whose eyes had closed.

“Harry! Harry! Wake up! Come on, just speak to me! It’s Ron! You’re safe now, you’re at
“Hogwarts! Just please, be OK!” he sobbed. Finding her voice, she added her exhortations to his.

“Harry, please, you just can’t die! We need you!”

When Dumbledore returned with a very flushed Madame Pomfrey, she immediately rushed over to Harry, clucking in disapproval until she actually saw the state he was in. “Tsk. What can Harry have done this ti... Oh my Lord!” She clasped her hands in shock. “What...? Who...?” She was all but speechless and Ron spoke up bitterly.

“His uncle did this to him.” He looked to her with hope in his eyes. “You can save him, right? You have to!”

His vehemence startled Madame Pomfrey into regaining her composure. “I will try my best, Mr. Weasley,” she said professionally, “but you and Miss Granger must wait outside. I’ll need no distractions.” Having said this, she herded the two students out into the corridor, not even bothering to shut the door before she hurried back to the bed where Harry lay.

Not even pausing for more explanation, the Hogwarts nurse set about to examine her patient. She murmured to herself as she did so, cataloguing aloud the boys injuries. Snape and Dumbledore leaned closer to hear. She started with Harry’s head, where a deep gash bleed ferociously from behind his ear.

“He’s cracked his skull here, that’s very bad. Oh! My word! What is wrong with his eyes? They’ll have to wait. What else? His neck is alright, good.” To proceed, she pulled off the cloak with which Snape had covered Harry’s naked body, crying out at the sight of the bullet wound. “Oh! How is he still alive? It must have missed his heart, but not his lungs. Look at how it’s bubbling.” A mist of blood still issued with every weak breath. Pomfrey tapped her wand lightly against the wound and an image sprang into existence above Harry, showing his insides, with the path the bullet traveled horribly obvious as a tunnel of pulped flesh, already blackened as dead tissue. “Oh no!” breathed Pomfrey and Dumbledore together. An indrawn hiss of breath was Snape’s only response. Pomfrey rolled Harry gently onto his chest so she could see for herself what the image showed.

The bullet from Vernon’s gun had blown a hole the approximate size of a grapefruit from Harry’s back. A hole which exactly bisected his spine. Through the cavity, the professors could see the edges of Harry’s ravaged lungs and the bones of his spine, from which about three inches was clearly missing. Madame Pomfrey gasped and covered her mouth, turning to Dumbledore.

“Oooh! Albus, I can’t fix this! I mean, I can repair the broken bones, heal his lungs, but the spine! There is no magic that can replace that!”

“Do what you can, Poppy,” said Dumbledore soothingly. “Do you want me to stay with you?” She nodded mutely, already absorbed in her healing.

“Then I shall join Weasley and Granger. Poppy, Albus.” Snape nodded himself out of the room before going to find Ron and Hermione. They were sitting quietly in the Gryffindor Common room. They looked up as he entered, hope warring with dread on both their tear-stained faces.

“Is Harry going to be alright, Professor?” asked Hermione hesitantly. Snape, once again sounding extraordinarily sympathetic, replied in hushed tones.

“We can’t know yet, Miss Granger. His injuries are worse than we had feared. His back...” He sank into a chair, unable to continue. The three sat in silence, each wrapped in fears for the boy who lay, deathly still, under the competent hands of Madame Pomfrey.
Suddenly, Dobby, who had disappeared before Ron and Hermione had left the infirmary, appeared from nowhere at Snape's elbow. “Professor Snape, Sir?” he asked, pulling at Snape’s sleeve. “Sir? What is Dobby to do with the muggle?” Dobby’s face and tone were murderous as he snapped his fingers. Vernon appeared, freed now from the body-bind curse, but instead held captive by twining chains and shackles of house-elf-conjured iron. Their weight held him to his knees. He looked up at the three wizards, his eyes fearful above the gag which kept him silent.

Snape and Ron, eyes blazing identically, stepped forward together, wands raised in ire. “Cruc-...” Snape started, but Hermione stopped him with a hand on his sleeve, forcing his wand down. A single glare stopped Ron.

“No, Professor. We can deal with him later. You know he’s not worth an Unforgivable curse. You too, Ron. Harry needs you here, not in Azkaban.”

Snape nodded regretfully and lowered his wand. “Put him in one of the old cells, Dobby. They’re in the lowest dungeon. You can leave him bound like that, if you like. Oh, and Dobby,” he added, seeing the brutal look on the elf’s usually amiable face. “Don’t hurt him. Much.” Vernon’s face paled as the homicidal house-elf advanced upon him. Snape allowed himself a small smile once they were gone.

After more moments of silence, Ron started. “Professor, what about the others? Mum, Dad, and Professor McGonagall? They must be terribly worried, and we forgot all about them!”

Snape looked at him in surprise. “You’re right, Mr. Weasley. Dobby!”

“Yes, Sir?” Dobby reappeared immediately.

“Dobby, go back to Harry Potter’s house and retrieve Professor McGonagall and the Weasleys. Bring them here.” He indicated the Common Room. “Go, now!”

Dobby bowed and vanished once again. Only a moment later, the other five Weasleys and Professor McGonagall appeared. Dobby disappeared again immediately as the newcomers clamored with questions.

“Did you find Harry?”

“Is he alright?”

“Where did you find him?”

“Where is he?”

“Where is Albus?”

Snape held up his hands, and the din slowly abated, everyone looking to him expectantly.

“Dobby found Harry just outside of Dover. His uncle had just...had shot him, and thrown him off a cliff. Harry is now in the Hospital Wing, with Professor Dumbledore and Madame Pomfrey.” He paused a moment and looked down at his hands before clasping them behind his back. “We can’t know yet if he... if he will live. He’s been hurt very badly.”

Everyone simply stared blankly at him for a moment, trying to absorb what they had just heard. Ginny spoke up first.

“Can we see him?” she asked, her voice cracked with worry.
Snape looked at her kindly. “Not just yet, Miss Weasley. Madame Pomfrey needs to give Harry her complete concentration right now.”

“Of course,” she murmured, subsiding.

“I’m going to see if I can help, Severus,” said Professor McGonagall, drawing him aside. “Will you stay here with them?”

“Of course, Minerva,” replied Snape. “Go.”

McGonagall actually ran down from the Gryffindor tower, all the way to the Hospital Wing. Reaching it, she stopped just outside the door in order to calm herself before quietly entering the infirmary. Silently, she approached the far end, where Dumbledore and Pomfrey worked quickly over a still form under a pool of light.

Harry looked better now than he had at the top of that cliff in Dover, but his appearance was still such that McGonagall cried out at her first sight of him. His limbs lay straight now, and most of the gashes and lacerations were sealed, but there had been no time or attention or time spared to clean away the blood that coated him. It was obvious to a nauseated McGonagall that the right arm, the one that had been broken first, was scarcely attached at the elbow, and that one foot was irreparably crushed. His skin was stretched so tightly over his skull that, through his eyelids, she could see the shadows of his burnt-black eyes. Even unconscious, he flinched at each touch, particularly on his hands. On his right hand, the stump that was all that was left of his thumb was hidden from view by a neat bandage. On his left, the huge gash had been replaced by a thick, ropy, red scar.

Dumbledore turned to smile wanly at Professor McGonagall. Looking to Pomfrey, he disengaged himself from Harry and put an arm around the Transfiguration teacher, who wasn’t far from tears. “Now, now, Minerva. He’s going to live. We’ve repaired his lungs, and the crack in his skull, and we’ve stopped all the internal bleeding. There shouldn’t even be any brain damage. We’re trying right now to save his arm and foot.”

“Albus,” interrupted Poppy. “I need your hands here.” He turned back to their task. McGonagall stood to watch just a moment more before turning to flee the heart-rending scene, returning to the Gryffindor Common Room and those waiting for news.

“He’s going to live!” she shouted as she clamored through the Portrait-Hole, dignity forgotten in the joy of relief. “He’s going to live!”

“What! Really?” The Weasleys and Hermione were exultant at the news. “Can we go and see him now, Professor?” Ron, wiping at the tears running down his face, started hopefully for the Portrait, but McGonagall caught his arm.

“No yet, Mr. Weasley. I’m sorry. Professor Dumbledore and Madame Pomfrey still have work to do. The Headmaster will tell us when they are done.”

“Now, Minerva,” came Dumbledore’s voice. She and the Weasley’s whirled to find him standing behind them, next to the open portrait. “We’ve finished, done all we can. You can come and see him if you like, although I must warn you that Poppy doesn’t expect him to wake up for a couple of days. What he’s been through should have killed him. We should all be grateful that he lives at all.”

Despite the palpable air of celebration, it was a somber gathering at Harry’s bedside. Cleaned up and with all of his wounds bandaged, it was easy to believe that he would live, even for those who had seen him at the cliff. To keep pressure off of his wounded back, Harry was floating an inch or so above the mattress, held there by a hovering charm.
Unable to hold his friend’s hand, Ron contented himself with resting his hand against Harry’s unbroken shoulder while Hermione brushed the hair back from his eyes. It was still stiff with dried blood and saltwater. Fred, George, and Ginny stood at the foot of the bed, while their parents conferred quietly with the professors some distance away. The room was dimly lit, and outside, it had begun to rain. The tableau held, virtually unchanged as night fell. House-elves lit the candles in the wall-sconces, oddly conspicuous as they snuck worried looks at Harry, who still lay unmoving and pale.

it was past midnight when Dobby showed up. His face held an oddly satisfied smile, but Snape didn’t call him on it. He stood on his toes by Harry’s side so he could see his face. After a moment, he turned to Ron. “Harry Potter will be alright?” he asked, his eyes large and questioning. Ron smiled, and clasped the elf’s hand.

“I think so, Dobby. Maybe you should go and ask Madame Pomfrey.” He gestured towards the adults, turning to face them for the first time that evening. His optimism dissipated as he saw them. His mother was crying silently into his father’s arms. She looked as though she had been for quite some time. She tried to hide it when she saw that he was looking, but it was too late.

“Mum?” He left Harry and crossed the room to her side. “What’s wrong?” She just looked mutely past him to where Harry lay. Ron persisted. “Mum, Harry’s my friend. I’m his Secret Keeper. I have the right to know what’s wrong. Please, just tell me!” He had tried to keep his voice low, but Fred had heard, and he, George, Ginny, and Hermione came up behind him. Dumbledore, standing next to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, sighed deeply and nodded.

“He does have a right to know, Molly. The bond between a Secret Keeper and his charge is as close as blood, maybe closer. I will tell them all, if you would rather not do it yourself.” At Mrs. Weasley’s pallid nod, he proceeded in a grave tone of voice. “Although Harry will most certainly live, he is not ‘alright.’ When his uncle shot him, he severed his spine. It is very unlikely that Harry will never walk again. He is paralyzed, and that’s not all. We had to amputate Harry’s left foot, and his right arm from just above the elbow. they were just mangled too badly for us to save them, although Merlin knows we tried. I’m sorry.”

Everyone had to take a moment to let this news set in. Dobby’s spindly knees gave way, leaving him sitting forlornly on the floor. As Ron was turning to return to his vigil at Harry’s side, Madame Pomfrey spoke up, her voice and eyes teary.

“That’s not all, Albus. I don’t know what that evil muggle did to him, but his eyes...” She turned away, but continued to speak. “His eyes are - burnt. From the inside out. i don’t know how it was done and there was absolutely nothing I could do.” She was crying now, and Dumbledore embraced her, trying to comfort her.

“There, there, Poppy. It’s not your fault. No one is blaming you.”

“But, but I couldn’t...” she sputtered, and he led her away, murmuring consolingly to the distraught witch. The others turned to Professor McGonagall for more answers.

“Does that mean that Harry’s blind, Professor?” asked George quietly. She nodded, looking down at her feet, and Ron blanched, returning to Harry without a word. Suddenly, Ginny burst out.

“Harry can’t be blind, can’t be paralyzed! And by a muggle? He’s the Boy-Who-Lived! He took a Killing Curse from You-Know-Who with only a scar, he’s beaten him three times since then, and a muggle could do this to him?” She looked as though she were about to hit Professor McGonagall, but abruptly, she collapsed to the floor, weeping bitterly with spent rage.
Ron, standing silently by Harry, wept with her for his best friend, the hot tears running down his face. He watched Harry minutely, trying to be only grateful that his friend would live, but unable to avoid glancing furtively at the blanket, where the lumps made by arm and foot should have been, but weren’t. He brought his gaze determinedly back to Harry’s face, trying not to see how the eyes were oddly shadowed through the papery lids.

“Harry,” he whispered fiercely, trying to convince himself with his own words. “It’s OK. Just wake up! That’s what’s important, that you live. You will live. We all know it, you need to know it too.” there was no reaction, but Ron hadn’t really expected one.

Chapter: 9

Sorry about the wait. School started and I got a bit discouraged by...stuff. So anyway, here’s what happens next.

**This chapter is dedicated to Moonlight, who thinks I’m revolting.**

Chapter 9

By the time the sun rose, only Ron, Hermione, and the twins kept vigil. Ginny had fallen asleep hours ago, immediately after her outburst, and her parents had taken her to the Gryffindor Tower, where they had fallen asleep as well. Madame Pomfrey had retreated to her office, while Dumbledore and McGonagall had each retreated to their own chambers. Snape, trapped in restless thoughts, was prowling the empty castle and scrupulously avoiding the lowest dungeons. Very early that morning, he had had one conversation with the muggle. He did not trust himself to return.

“Why?” he had asked Vernon. Harry’s uncle had cast vainly about in the darkness for the speaker.

“Who’s there?” He sounded frightened, and Snape smiled.

“My name, Mr. Dursley, is Professor Severus Snape, Potion’s Master here at Hogwarts. And I repeat my question. Why did you do what you did?”

Vernon, gathering a modicum of courage, didn’t answer. Snape conjured a light, and Vernon, who had been facing a blank wall, spun around and raised his fists. “Don’t come near me,” he said, posturing threateningly. Snape just laughed lowly.

“Do you want to fight me, muggle? I am a mature, fully trained wizard, in possession of my wand. You wouldn’t have half the chance you gave your nephew. But,” he said, sounding thoughtful, “I would appreciate the chance to show you what I can do to you, if you want.” His voice was light, but somehow managed to sound sinister all the same. Vernon backed down. “That’s better. Now, tell me why!”

Vernon, relenting, spoke sullenly. “That boy has been a thorn in my side since your kind dropped him into my life. He’s insolent, selfish, arrogant, and malicious. I have a son of my own, Dudley, a fine boy. Without Harry to support, I could have given Dudley the kind of life I wanted to give him. Every bite of food that boy ate, every breath of air, was a bite or a breath stolen from my son! Harry
was a parasite!” Vernon’s face was flushing with his passion for what he was saying. Snape felt sick. “We paid for his clothing, we scrimped and saved to raise two where there should have only been one. And all of this time, that freak has been hiding a fortune from us, even when he knew that he owed us that money. If he had died with his parents, when he should have died, that money would have come to Petunia. We deserved that money!”

Snape’s eyes flashed dangerously. “You would have killed Harry Potter for money? Merlin’s Beard, muggle, do you even know who that boy is? Before he was ‘dropped’ into your life, as you so eloquently put it, he had already saved the whole damned world! Have you ever heard the name ‘Voldemort?’ No? Voldemort is the most evil creature ever to darken the face of this earth. He was once a wizard, but he has become something so monstrous, that no one now will speak his name for fear of it. Although his father was a muggle, very much like you, in fact, pompous and a general ass, Voldemort grew to hate all non-magical people. He thought that they were ‘parasites,’ unworthy even to breathe the same air. About fifteen years ago, he decided to kill them. All of them. All of you. I believe the muggle news blamed the murders on terrorists or some such. He and his followers destroyed entire towns. He was one of the most powerful wizards ever, but he knew that there was someone who could overthrow him. Harry Potter was not even yet a year old, but Voldemort was afraid of him. He convinced one of James Potter’s best friends, a man named Peter Pettigrew to betray him, and he came for Harry. He killed James and Lily, who gave their lives protecting the boy. But when he tried to curse Harry, the curse rebounded. It destroyed Voldemort, and all Harry got from the encounter was a scar, the Parseltongue powers, and you as a guardian.” His voice was a sneer. “All this as an infant, not even old enough to grasp a wand. And that’s not all he’s done to your benefit, muggle. Voldemort wasn’t killed then, and he’s been regaining power as of late. In Harry’s first year, Voldemort came within a hair’s breadth of taking possession of the Philosopher’s Stone, which would have made him immortal and more powerful than ever before. Harry confronted him, alone, and drove him back. His second year, he defeated Voldemort in another form, as well as a basilisk, still alone.

“Now listen well to this, muggle. Last year, Voldemort returned in full, as powerful as ever, but smarter. Harry dueled him, wand to wand, and lived! No one has ever survived a dual with Lord Voldemort. That means that Harry may be the most powerful wizard ever. The entire wizarding world believes that he and only he can defeat Voldemort once and for all. Even if he can’t, he gives us all the hope to fight on. And you, a pompous, posturing, pathetic muggle almost destroyed that hope. If it were up to me, I’d kill you here, would have killed you on that cliff. Or maybe a slow death.” Snape smiled maliciously as he saw Vernon pale. “Slow and painful, drawing it out until Harry himself is strong enough to deal the final blow.

“Harry was never my favorite student, but I have never hated anyone so much as I hate you, you muggle piece of filth. I went to school with Lily. I loved her like a sister and you tried to kill her son. You crippled him and blinded him and for that you should die, but it is not my choice! By wizard law, you will go to Azkaban for the rest of your natural life, but it is Harry’s choice whether or not you spend that tenure in possession of your soul!” With that, Snape had swept out of the cell, leaving a very frightened Vernon to the dark and to Dobby.

Tired of prowling, Snape returned to the Hospital Wing. He stood by the door, not wanting to intrude on the solitude of the four friends gathered around Harry. Ron was talking quietly to the unconscious boy of inconsequential things.

“Fred and George say that they were going to vote for you as Quidditch Captain this year, Harry, and I’ve got a new broomstick, a Nimbus 2001, like what Malfoy’s got, so I might go out for the team. Bill reckons I’d make a good Keeper. Because I’m so tall, I’ve got a long reach.” He didn’t think that talking of playing Quidditch to one blinded and crippled was ridiculous or cruel. Quidditch was important to Harry, and besides. He was asleep and couldn’t hear him.
“Dan got promoted at work, with a huge bonus and a pay raise. That’s how I got my Nimbus. He got us all stuff to celebrate. Ginny got a kitten, Fred and George got a ‘drum-set’ and a ‘guitar,’ whatever they are. Muggle musical instruments, they say, but all they seen to do is make a big row with them.

“I think I told you that Percy moved out, didn’t I? He’s got a small flat in London so he could be closer to the Ministry offices in case there’s an emergency or something.” Ron just kept on talking to Harry as though the boy could hear him. Fred and George had drifted away during the one-sided conversation, and Hermione, unwilling to leave Harry’s side but wanting distraction, had summoned a book from the library. As she read, one hand lay lightly against Harry’s shoulder. Ron kept talking.

“Peter Pettigrew was caught, Harry. Remember Wormtail? That means Sirius Black will be cleared soon. Wormtail’s already fessed up about being your parent’s Secret Keeper, and to working for You-Know-Who. As soon as the paperwork goes through, Black’ll be free! You’ll be able to go and live with him.”

“Ron,” came a slow, breathy voice. “I want to live with you.” It was Harry, his speech hesitant and rough, but clear. Ron and Hermione cried out happily to hear it, and Madame Pomfrey came running from her office.

“You’re awake!” Ron was crying again, this time in exultation as he tried to refrain from hugging the stuffing out of his best friend.

Harry opened his eyes, and then closed them again. “I had hoped it was a dream, but I can’t see at all. Who’s here?”

Hermione answered him. “Ron and me, Hermione, and Fred and George, and Madame Pomfrey. You’re in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts,” she added before he could ask.

“Madame Pomfrey’s here? Can I please talk to her alone?” He didn’t want to hurt his friends’ feelings, but he wanted privacy as he discovered the extent of his injuries. He knew without being told that they were very serious. Ron and Hermione knew him well enough not to be offended, and they drew the twins out to the corridor, leaving Harry alone with the nurse.

“I can’t feel my legs at all, Madame Pomfrey. Are they... are they gone?”

“No, no,” Pomfrey hastened to assure him. “you still have your legs, Harry, but you are missing one foot. The reason you can’t feel you’re legs is that... Do you remember your uncle shooting you?” At Harry’s pale nod, she continued, trying to be as honest as possible, while easing what she could for the boy. “The bullet destroyed a good deal of you spinal cord, just below your heart. Can you tell me how much you can feel?”

Harry considered this for a moment. “Feeling ends just below my chest, I think. It’s kind of hard to tell.”

Pomfrey nodded before remembering that Harry couldn’t see her. “That’s what I expected. I afraid there was nothing I could do, Harry. I’m so sorry.”

Harry’s face had no expression. “Is it permanent?” was all he said.

“It is.”

Stoically, Harry refused to dwell on this. He moved on to his next concern. “What’s wrong with my arm? I mean, it’s great that I can’t feel it, because between my thumb, er, what was left of my arm and my thumb, it was awful. But I would like to know if I still have an elbow.” Pomfrey heard the
panic behind his levity, but let him deal with it in his own way.

“I’m afraid we had to amputate your forearm, Harry, about two inches above the elbow. The bone-edges had sliced the muscle beyond repair, so even if we had left, you wouldn’t have been able to use it. But we couldn’t leave it because infection had set in unbelievably fast. I’m so sorry, so very sorry.”

Harry turned his face towards her voice, his eyes opening sightlessly. “You keep saying that. None of this is your fault. No one, especially not me, will ever blame you. I know you must have done everything you possibly could to help me, and I owe you my life. Now, what else? What about my eyes? Will I ever see again?”

“Your eyes. Now, Harry, I don’t know what your uncle did to you, or even how a muggle did something like this at all. Your eyes were burnt. From the inside out.”

“I know that,” interrupted Harry impatiently. “Uncle Vernon made me drink my potions homework. It was, let me see, it was something to change eye color, and something to make clouds. He mixed them together.”

A startled noise revealed Snape, who was still standing by the door. “Was that the Optichroma Elixir and the Nuageur Potion, Mr. Potter?” he asked anxiously as he strode forward.

Harry and Pomfrey just jumped, startled by his sudden appearance. Harry recovered first. “Those are the ones, Professor. You assigned them.”

Snape sounded very grave as he continued. “Not to sound callous, Potter, but it’s no wonder you are blind. The hornwort and isrythil root in the Optichroma Elixir would have combined with the Salamander skin and breath from the Nuageur Potion to form the Eaufeu Catalyst. Eaufeu reacts with water to start a fire. It should never even come in contact with skin, let alone be taken internally. Fortunately, the Optichroma Elixir must have directed its effects into your eyes.”

“Fortunately?” Harry didn’t sound angry, it was just a question.

“Yes, fortunate, because otherwise the catalyst would have reacted with all the water in your body. You would have burnt to death in an instant.”

“Aren’t I the lucky one?” Harry sounded bitter for the first time since he has woken up. “Any thing else I should know about myself?”

“Well, you’ve heard the worst, Harry. The rest of your injuries aren’t permanent. Your left shoulder is broken, and it remains to be seen whether or not the tendons in that hand will heal properly, but I don’t foresee any problems. Your left leg was broken very badly, and may not heal properly because of the paralysis, but, well, that won’t bother you.”

Harry waited a moment for more, but none was forthcoming. “Is that all?” He had closed his eyes again, but opened them now.

“Yes, that’s all.” murmured Pomfrey.

“Good,” said Harry, his bitterness fading quickly. “Could you fetch Ron and Hermione back in here? I want to see... well, not see them... I just want them here.”

“Of course,” said Snape softly. He shepherded a tearful Madame Pomfrey back to her office, calling for Harry’s friends to come in. They hadn’t gone far, and now they ran in, accompanied by Ginny, who had woken up as well.
“Harry!” shouted Ginny. “You’re awake!” She ran to his side and embraced him impulsively. At her touch, Harry cried out roughly. Ginny jerked back. “Oh Harry! I’m so sorry. What did I do?”

Panting with pain, Harry spoke through clenched teeth. “It’s OK, Ginny, you just bumped my arm.” He held up the stump of his right arm. Seeing it, Ginny gasped and turned pale.

“Oh Harry! I’m so sorry! I didn’t... I’m sorry!” She turned, crying and ran from the room in tears.

“You are OK, Harry?” asked George. Harry turned towards him.

“I’ll be fine, Fred.” The twins looked at each other, embarrassed for their friend.

“Uh, I’m George, Harry. Fred’s on your other side.”

Harry didn’t respond for a long moment. “Guess I’m going to have to get used to being blind,” he said at last. There was a sense of forced calm to his voice. “Hermione, where are you?”

“Here, Harry,” she said quietly, touching his hand gently.

“Hermione, I need you to tell me the truth. How bad do I look?”

She looked helplessly at the others before answering him. “You don’t look nearly so bad as you did when we found you at the cliffs. You’re face is all bruised and scraped, and your neck, but you don’t look dead anymore.” She traced his cut with her fingers to show him where they were. “The worst thing is your eyes. They look... They’re black now, just flat black. No whites, no irises, no shine. Just matte black.” She stopped, waiting for a response.

Harry was silent for a time, apparently absorbing this new information. Then he began to laugh, horrible, manic laughter that built and built until the Hospital Wing echoed with it. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley ran in, and the professors, but they stopped short, unnerved by the awful mirth issuing from Harry. He began to jerk his head wildly from side to side.

“The worst thing about this,” he gasped out, “is that I won’t be able to see the faces of the first years that I’m going to scare.” His voice broke on the last word and the laughter turned abruptly to deep, wracking sobs. He brought his stump up in an attempt to cover his face as tears began to flow. Mrs. Weasley couldn’t stand it. Looking first to Madame Pomfrey for permission, she went to Harry and carefully gathered him into her arms. He turned his face into her shoulder as she cradled him like a small child, rubbing his head gently.

Harry could not remember ever having been held like this, as if by a mother. It was immensely comforting, and he soon fell asleep, tears still marking his cheeks. Emotion and the residue of pain had exhausted him.

“Arthur, I’m going to stay here. You should take the children down to the kitchens and get them something to eat. Ron, Fred, George, you should get some sleep. You too, Hermione. You were all up all night.”

In the end, Mr. Weasley stayed with his wife and Harry. He drew up a chair to sit beside the bed, and he and Mrs. Weasley talked in low voices, careful not to wake the boy.

“Arthur, he’s so thin! So small!”

Arthur nodded, agreeing. “You know, the first time I saw him, I would have taken him for nine or ten, not twelve. He barely looks twelve now, and certainly nothing like fifteen.”
He’s not, yet. His birthday is in two weeks. July 31st. We were planning to invite him over for a
surprise birthday party, and then keep him until September.”

“You can still throw him a party, Molly. He’ll probably love it.”

“I would,” said Harry sleepily, having woken up slightly. “I’ve never had one.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Weasley. “We didn’t mean to wake you up, Harry.”

“’s OK,” he said, his voice still thick with sleep. “Just... keep holding me, would you? I’ve never had
that either. It feels good.” He opened his eyes reflexively but closed them quickly when he felt Mrs.
Weasley stiffen. “Are they that bad, Mrs. Weasley?” he asked, sounding dejected. She hastened to
reassure him.

“No, Harry. They’re just.. a little unnerving, that’s all.” She made her voice as light as she could, but
Harry wasn’t fooled.

“I should cover them, I guess. Madame Pomfrey?” he called, raising his voice. She looked out from
her office as he continued. “Can I have something to hide my eyes? I don’t want to scare people.”
They all heard the caustic undertone in his voice. As Pomfrey ducked back into her office, Mrs.
Weasley spoke again to Harry, in an almost-pleading tone.

“You don’t have to hide them, Harry. They just take some getting used to.” Harry cut her off, not
rudely, but firmly.

“Mrs. Weasley,” he said sadly. “You flinched when I opened them. I don’t want the people who care
about me to draw away from me like that. I couldn’t bear it.”

“I’m sorry, Harry.”

“No,” he interrupted again, in a stern tone. “Will people please stop apologizing to me? None of this
is any of your fault. It’s just stuff I have to get used to, like when I found out I was a wizard, or
famous, or a Parseltongue.” This last word was whispered. Harry was almost asleep again. “I’m so
tired,” and his head fell back against Mrs. Weasley’s shoulder.

Sorry again that this took so long. As I’m sure everyone knows, school has just started again, and I
think I live there now. I have a twelve-hour school day, twenty credit-hours worth of work, plus a
forty pound book bag, so I feel in general as though Fred and George have been sitting on my
shoulders, one each, and beating me over the head with their Beater’s bats. Not a good day. Consider
yourselves all lucky that I want to see this story finished so bad. ‘Till next time, I can only go
sideways from here. (Mostly because I can’t stand up straight. Owwch!

Chapter: 10

Hi. It’s me. Thanks are very overdue to my lovely and diligent Beta, Comechatcha, who is also my
sister. {Comechatcha- HA! I get to read these months before any of you peoples do!!!!!!!!!!} Sorry
about her, but she’s right. (Except that it’s weeks, not months.)
Anywho, here is Chapter 10. I hope you like it, and I really, really hope that you review it! Come on, it’s not hard, just a click of the mouse and a moment of thought. I know you can all handle that, right?

Chapter 10

The next time Harry awoke, he couldn’t hear if anyone was near. “Hello?” he called, sounding slightly panicked. “Is anyone there?” When there was no answer, hysteria took him. “Please, don’t leave me alone! He’ll come back! He’ll kill me! Isn’t anyone here?” He wished desperately that he could move, could crawl under the bed and curl up into a tiny, invisible ball. “Please, anyone! I can’t be alone!”

He heard the door slam open and footsteps approach at a run, but his hysteria had a strong hold on his mind. “Help me! He’s here, and he’s going to kill me!” Strong hands gripped his good shoulder and he screamed, a long, high, shriek of terror, his mind seeing Uncle Vernon as the owner of those hands.

“Potter! Potter! Harry! Please, be still! You’re safe. Your uncle can’t touch you here! You’re safe at Hogwarts.”

The words finally got through and Harry stilled. He thought he recognized the voice. “Professor Snape?” he asked, and the hands left his shoulder.

“Yes, Mr. Potter,” was all that Snape said, but Harry didn’t hear any of the usual mocking tone. Something caught at his mind and he spoke it.

“You pulled me out of the water. With Dumbledore.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

Harry turned towards him. “Thank you, Professor,” he said genuinely, smiling wanly. Snape made no response, turning to leave. Harry, hearing him, cried out. “No! You can’t leave me alone!”

Snape sighed. “I told you, Mr. Potter, you are perfectly safe here, even if you are alone. No one will hurt you.” His ordinary tone of exasperation had crept back into his voice.

“I know that, Professor,” Harry said meekly, “but it’s awful, being alone in the dark.”

Snape made an impatient sound. “It’s not dark in here at all, Potter. Every torch is lit...” He stopped dead as Harry’s dead eyes began to water. “Oh God, Harry,” he breathed, sounding horrified at his own words. “That was cruel of me. I’ll stay with you.” He sat down beside Harry, wrapping his robes around himself. “I’m sorry.” From that, the two kept easy company, each wrapped in silent, brooding thoughts. Even after Harry fell back asleep, Snape didn’t move. He didn’t want Lily’s son to wake up alone again.

Nearly a week went by in this fashion, with various combinations of Weasleys and professor’s keeping company with Harry, who slept most of the days and lay awake every night. Ron, Hermione, and Dumbledore spent hours on end talking with him, just unimportant things such as reading to him from the Daily Prophet or what progress the twins had made with Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. No one mentioned quidditch, now that he was awake, or You-Know-Who, or anything that might distress Harry. They were on eggshells around him, and he let them be so. Still, tears frequently wet the black blindfold he now wore to hide his eyes.

Today, six days after his arrival at Hogwarts, Madame Pomfrey bustled to his side. “How does your arm feel today, Harry?” she asked cheerfully.
“Missing,” he replied, raising his stump in a flippant salute. The bandages had come off two days before.

“Very funny, Harry,” she said dryly. “But I meant your other arm. Can you move you fingers?” she asked, unwinding the bandages from that hand. When he had demonstrated that he could, although the thumb was stiff and unwieldy, she moved to his elbow. He could move that too and Pomfrey sighed in satisfaction. “I think we can take the cast off you shoulder today, Harry. It seems to have healed just perfectly.” With a wave of her wand, the cast fell apart to expose Harry’s should, pale and bone-thin, but whole. “Flex it for me, would you, Harry?” He did, a smile spreading across his face.

“It feels great! A little weak, maybe,” he said, rotating his shoulder.

“That’s to be expected, but with proper exercise, it will be as good as new in no time,” said Madame Pomfrey, beaming. Dumbledore, from his place at the foot of Harry’s bed, spoke up in a bluff, hearty voice.

“To celebrate, Harry, how would you like to go for a nice constitutional around the castle? Professor McGonagall and I have prepared a wheelchair of sorts for you. Are you willing to try it out?” Dumbledore clasped Harry’s hand, guiding it to the sleek arm of the wheelchair.

Harry explored the chair with his fingers for a long while, feeling the smooth wood and brass and the sleek cushions. “Does this mean I get to sit up?” he asked at last, his voice humourous. The tension of the last few moments dissipated immediately as the twin’s and Ron lifted Harry gently into the chair. When they released him, however, he listed slowly to one side. The remnant of his spine, it would appear, couldn’t hold him upright, but even this, he felt was preferable to having to lie one more minute flat on his back. He said so, but added, “Um, this might get uncomfortable after a while, and I’m sure it looks very odd.”

Pomfrey laughed politely. She then tapped the wheelchair with her wand, and it adjusted so that the cushion behind Harry held him upright. He was a little embarrassed that he couldn’t even sit upright, but in the last week, Harry had begun to be resigned to a lot of things that he could no longer do. It was enough for now that he would get out of the Hospital Wing.

Hermione and the Weasley children took turns pushing Harry around the school. The charmed chair did not actually need to be pushed, could in fact merely be told where to go, but they had volunteered. In fact, Fred, George, and Ron had fought for the privilege, a brief scuffle that left them all laughing, Ron in possession of one of the brass handles, Fred the other, and George pushing them both.

Hermione kept up a constant litany of where they were in the castle for Harry. When they were in a corridor on the first floor, Harry interrupted her. “Are we near Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom, Hermione? I want to pay her a visit.”

“Who’s Moaning Myrtle?” asked George, who, never having had the need to go into a girls’ toilet, hadn’t met the mournful ghost. Ron answered him.

“She’s a ghost Harry, Herms and I met in Second Year. She haunts that girls’ lavatory that’s always flooding, and she’s absolutely the most depressing creature you’ll ever meet. What in the world do you want to see.. er, visit her for, Harry?”

“I promised her I would, last year when she helped me figure out the clue in the egg so that I could find you in the lake. I promised her that you would come too,” he added slyly.
“What are you doing, making promises for me?” asked Ron, mock-angry. Harry smiled.

“I didn’t think you’d mind, Ron. After all, you got on so well with her in Second Year.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, it wasn’t me who she invited to share her toilet, was it?” blustered Ron good-naturedly. George and Fred guffawed loudly to hear this.

“Ah ha ha! Potter’s got a ghost for a girl friend!”

Harry blushed affably. “Not quite.”

They turned into the door of the bathroom to be greeted by an unexpected spectacle. Myrtle was lying on the ceiling while reading a transparent comic book. She was laughing uproariously. When she saw the group below her, she stopped quickly and tried to pretend that nothing had happened. But it was too late. They had seen, or in Harry’s case, heard.

“It’s all an act, isn’t it, Myrtle?” asked Harry laconically, smirking like Malfoy. “All that moaning and groaning and junk.”

Myrtle looked offended at first, then puzzled. “Who are you?” she asked, and then she saw past the blindfold. “Harry?!” she shrieked, zooming down to peer at him. “Harry? What happened to you?” She sounded shocked, which was to be expected.

“That’s a long story,” said Harry evasively, “and I’d rather not go into it right now. I just dropped in to say ‘Hi.’”

Myrtle just stood there numbly, her mouth hanging open. When no response was forthcoming, Harry asked “Are you still there, Myrtle?”

“You, you just came to see me?” The last word was a disbelieving squeak from the ghost. She sounded a bit like Dobby, Harry thought.

“Well, not to ‘see’ you, exactly,” said Harry wryly. “I don’t see much of anyone these days.” He tapped the cloth covering his eyes. “Listen, though. I have a favor to ask of you. Do you see haunting a toilet?”

Myrtle looked suddenly crafty. “Not really. Did you have something better in mind?”

Harry smiled. “I have something of a little grudge against my Aunt and cousin, Petunia and Dudley Dursley.”

“Wait! Did they hurt you too, Harry?” demanded Ron, his hands balling into fists.

“Calm it, Ron. They didn’t touch me. In fact, Aunt Petunia left Vernon when she found out what he had done to me,” He shuddered slightly at what that had provoked his insane uncle to do to him. “But that’s all she did. She could have called the police or child protection and I would have gotten out of this with only a broken arm and a missing thumb. But she didn’t do anything.” His hand was clenched so tightly onto the arm of his chair that his knuckles were white, but his voice was light as he continued. “I read somewhere that ghosts can change their appearance if they want to. Is that true, Myrtle?”

“Yes,” she said eagerly, sounding intrigued.

“Can you look like me? Like I was before, but bloodied up a bunch?”
“Yes,” she said again, sounding excited. She demonstrated, and Hermione described the result to Harry.

“She looks just like you did after the Chamber of Secret’s but even bloodier. And older.” She sounded sly, having deduced Harry’s plans. “It will be perfect!”

“Great. Myrtle, what I’d like you to do is to haunt Petunia and Dudley, looking like that. Not for too long, I don’t want you to get in trouble. Just scare them witless for a week or so. Will you do it?”

“Of course,” cooed Myrtle, enchanted with the idea. “Ooh, this’ll be so much fun!” With that and a shriek of laughter, she rocketed out of the bathroom and down the corridor.

“Well,” said Ron, halfway between approving and shocked. “You certainly made her day.”

I did, didn’t I?” said Harry, sounding suddenly exhausted.

“Should we go back to the Hospital Wing, Harry,” said Ginny, noticing. “It’s almost dinnertime.”

“I suppose we’d better,” he said quietly. “Yummy. Dinner-in-a-Needle.” It wasn’t quite a joke. Due to the injuries and the extent of his paralysis, Harry’s body couldn’t process solid food. Magic had never come up with self-digesting pizza, much to Harry’s displeasure. “Tastes a bit sharp,” he had quipped that morning as Madame Pomfrey slipped the needle into a vein in his arm.

“I think we’ll eat up with you today, Harry” volunteered Fred after a moment’s silent walking.

“No, don’t,” said Harry politely. “I appreciate it, but I don’t think I could stand smelling the food.”

“We’ll have salad, then,” said George brightly. “Can’t smell salad, can you?”

“Indeed you can’t.” Fred agreed. Harry smiled.

“Thanks, guys.”

Back in the Hospital Wing, Harry asked for Dumbledore, who arrived shortly. “Professor,” he asked, “How much longer do I have to stay here, now that I’m ‘up and about?’ I mean, this is as good as I’m going to get, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid it is, for the most part. Harry, although the sensation in your hand may yet improve. Madame Pomfrey wants to keep you here at Hogwarts for a couple more days, for observation. You may, however, move to the Gryffindor Tower, if you would like to sleep in your own bed tonight.”

Harry grinned hugely. “Really? That’d be great. Nothing against you, Madame Pomfrey, but I have spent far too much time in here since my first year.”

She nodded, chuckling. “And I’ve seen too much of you, as well. It’s fine with me, but you will need to come back here for meals, just until I can get you set up to do your own IV’s.”

“How can I do that? I can’t see to get the needle into a vein.”

“Don’t worry about that. Professor Flitwick is working on a charmed needle for you, one that will insert itself accurately. All you’ll need to do is connect it to the bottle of nutria-potion. But it will take another day or so.”

“All right, then,” Harry said, “Let’s go.” Dumbledore moved to take the handles of the wheelchair, but Harry stopped him. “I can do it, Professor. Chair, take me to the Gryffindor Common Room.” The wheelchair trundled off, slowly enough that Ron and the others had no trouble keeping up. At
the stairs, the wheels unfolded into eight spindly legs which carried him smoothly up, holding him perfectly level the entire time.

In the common room, house-elves had already laid a fire. Even in July, the rooms of the castle carried a chill. Harry raised his head as though sniffing the air. “Feels like home.” Everyone laughed, agreeing with him. Exhausted by the days events, he yawned and directed the chair up to the newly-labeled Fifth Year dormitory. Ron helped him into his own poster bed. Harry spoke up tiredly. “I hate this, Ron.”

“I know, Harry,” said Ron, turning to go back to the common room. From behind him came only a light snore. Harry was asleep.

Down in the common room, Dumbledore was engaged in earnest conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Harry was the topic.

“Albus, we want to adopt him. He’s already virtually Ron’s brother, and we all want the best for him.” Mr. Weasley leaned forwards, hands clasped with his elbows on his knees. “According to Ron, the first thing he said when he woke up was that he wants to stay with us.”

“What about Sirius, though?” countered Dumbledore. “He’ll be cleared very soon, and he is Harry’s Godfather. Lily and James chose him to take care of Harry.” Dumbledore looked Mr. Weasley squarely in the eye. “My chief concern, Arthur, is Harry’s safety. I’ve failed him twice, I don’t dare do so again. Sirius was an auror, one of the best. If Voldemort or his Death Eaters come for Harry, he has at least a chance of holding them off until help can come. Harry is defenseless right now, he hasn’t even got a wand. We can’t even keep it a secret much longer, because Harry is too much in the public eye. I just feel that he would be safer with Sirius.”

“Albus,” cut in Mrs. Weasley, “What if Sirius were to live with us as well? Three adult wizards would be better than one ex-auror, wouldn’t it?” She sounded hopeful.

“That is an idea, Molly,” mused Dumbledore. “Yes. If Sirius and Harry agree, we can do it your way.”

“Where is he anyway,” asked Ron, walking up to the adults and referring to Black. “Why isn’t he here? Last year, he came running just because Harry’s scar hurt.”

“Mr. Black,” said Dumbledore, “is on an errand for me. And before you ask, no. I can’t tell you the nature of the errand. I can tell you that I expect him back at some point in the next few days. Until then, I can’t get in touch with him at all. He doesn’t know.”

The next morning was bright and warm. Harry was sitting by himself in the Great Hall, his face
turned upwards to catch the placid light which streamed through the windows. Dumbledore, coming
to find him, stood for a moment in silence to watch the boy. Harry looked, not content, but close.

“Good Morning,” he said at last, breaking the silence. Harry started violently.

“Please, Professor. Don’t sneak up on me like that,” he said shakily, pressing a hand to his heart. “I
thought I was alone. What are you doing up so early?”

“Oh, I often stroll the school when it’s quiet like this. I quite enjoy it, actually. But today, I was
looking for you. You weren’t in your room.”

“No,” said Harry simply. “I wasn’t.” He seemed tranquil, merely absorbing the peace of the
morning. “did you want me for something?”

“I was merely wondering if you knew that Hagrid has returned from his envoy to the giants.”

Harry turned to face Dumbledore. “Really?”

“Would I lie to you?”

Harry chose not to answer that. “Does he... does he know? About this, I mean?” His self-conscious
gesture took in the chair, his blindfold, and the stump of his arm.

“No, I am afraid he doesn’t. I thought that you would want to break it to him yourself.”

“You’re right, Professor, but would you please come with me? For backup?”

Dumbledore smiled indulgently. “Of course, Harry.”

Except for Harry’s commands to his chair, neither spoke as they crossed to grounds to Hagrid’s hut. When they reached the steps, however, Harry asked Dumbledore to let him go first. Maneuvering his
chair close to the massive door, he knocked firmly. After a moment’s commotion within, the door
opened.

“Hello, Hagrid,” said Harry solemnly, removing the blindfold and facing towards where he estimated
the half-giant’s face to be. Long moments passed before Hagrid’s reaction came, but it was every bit
as explosive as Harry has predicted.

“Bloody ‘ell, Harry! What happened?” Hagrid’s voice was rough with shock and dismay. “Who did
this? Professor Dumbledore” the Headmaster had come up quietly behind Harry, putting his hand on
his shoulder. Harry was grateful for the support.

“Hagrid,” started Harry, then he turned to Dumbledore. “I don’t think I can do this.” His voice
shook.

“Do you want me to explain, Harry?” asked Dumbledore in a kind undertone. Harry nodded.

Sitting down at Hagrid’s enormous table and drinking tea, Dumbledore explained the whole matter.
Quite understandably, Hagrid was enraged that anyone, let alone Harry’s own uncle, would do such
damage. At one point, he gripped his mug of tea so hard that it shattered. During the interruption as it
was cleaned up, Dumbledore decided that it would not be prudent at this time to reveal that Vernon
Dursley was in the castle.

When Dumbledore had finished, Harry spoke up. “Hagrid? Are you OK?”

Hagrid’s rage cooled instantly and his voice filled with tenderness. “Am I OK? Merlin’s Beard,
“I’m OK, Hagrid, or at least I will be. Could we talk about something else now?” So they did, and they were still talking by the time Ron came to fetch Harry for Madame Pomfrey. Dumbledore stayed back a moment, he and Hagrid watching as Ron pushed Harry across the grounds towards the school.

“’E’s a verra brave boy,” said Hagrid softly, wiping his eyes on an enormous handkerchief.

“He has to be,” agreed Dumbledore, just as softly. “We all depend on his courage.”

Back in the castle, breakfast was laid out in the Great Hall. Harry was sitting in his normal spot at the Gryffindor Table, the bench cut away there to allow for his chair. Around him, Hermione and the Weasleys ate, talking cheerily when Harry heard an owl land on the table.

“What’s that?” he asked, hearing the rustle of someone opening a post.

“It’s my subscription to the Daily Prophet,” said Hermione from his right. “Harry! You’re on the front page! Oh, it’s Rita Skeeter again. Here, let me read it to you.

“Does the Boy-Who-Lived yet live?” she said, reading the headline.

“As the wizarding world knows, ever since the tragic deaths of his parents at the hands of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, has lived with his muggle family, his Aunt, Uncle, and one cousin. Until very recently, however, the location of said family was a closely guarded secret of the Ministry of Magic, kept in order to protect Harry from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Early Tuesday afternoon, however, one week ago today, that secret was blown. Harry Potter has been raised by Vernon and Petunia Dursley, along with his muggle first cousin, Dudley Dursley. They have lived in Little Whinging, Surrey, in what muggles call a suburb, at Number 4, Privet Drive.

“The reason that this secret no longer need to be kept is that Harry Potter is no longer at Number 4 Privet Drive. This reporter can exclusively reveal that muggle authorities discovered Mr. Dursley’s automobile abandoned near Dover last Tuesday, with no sign to be found of the Dursleys or of the Boy-Who-Lived. A thorough search of their house and properties revealed no clues as to their whereabouts, although there were indications of violent struggles, both at the house and in Dover. When Ministry officials investigated, they discovered that, while none of the Dursley’s possessions were so much as disturbed, nothing belonging to Harry was to be found, save his wand, which was discovered, broken into several pieces in Mr. Dursley’s automobile. Faced with this grim evidence, this reporter can only hypothesis that Dark Forces have managed to capture Harry Potter. Until there is more evidence one way or the other, we at the Daily Prophet urge our readers not to panic. Anyone with any relevant information should please contact the Ministry as soon as possible, and we will keep you updated as to any changes in the situation.”

Harry was shocked. Since his first year, he had become used to being constantly under public scrutiny, and even more so since the Triwizard Tournament. The idea that no one knew where he was was actually appealing. Dumbledore spoke before Harry could, once again seeming to read his mind.

“I’m sorry, Harry, but we will have to tell them that you are here and not in the clutches of the dark. The panic your disappearance must have caused, I neglected to take that into account. Yes, what we must do is prove that you are in safe hands, immediately. Are you up for a visit to London?” Harry nodded, somewhere between amused and apprehensive. He did have a question, though.
“Won’t my... injuries cause people to worry, too, Professor?”

“We shall have to explain as frankly as possible. This, perhaps, would be the ideal time to turn your uncle over to the proper authorities.”

“My uncle...is... He’s here?” Harry’s voice, calm if nonplussed a moment ago, now held an edge of barely-controlled hysteria. “He’s been here the whole time?”

“He is in the lowest dungeon, nearly a mile below our feet,” said Dumbledore soothingly, “and Dobby guards his cell quite diligently, along with all of the suits of the armor in the castle. You are in no danger whatsoever. You will never even have to hear his voice again, unless you so desire, save at the trial.”

“A trail?” Harry perked up. “Will he go to Azkaban?"

“He will,” said Dumbledore sagely. “When he has had a proper trial. Under normal circumstances, wizard law is very much like muggle law, but we have stricter sentences for crimes of this sort.”

Harry smiled, sad, but smug. “I’ll be glad to tell a jury what he did and what he tried to do. Is attempted murder enough to send him to Azkaban for life?”

“Extravagant theft, extreme child abuse, torture, and attempted murder are enough to send him there for several lifetimes.”

“All that, eh?” mused Harry. “Well, what are we waiting for?”

“I just need to make one arrangement first, Harry. Be patient. Severus,” called Dumbledore to the professor who had just entered the Hall. “Severus, could you please collect Vernon Dursley and take him down to the Hogsmead Station? Put him in a secure car, if you can get one, and have the train wait for us. We’ll be along shortly.” To his amazement, Harry thought he heard a low chuckle as Snape swept out of the Hall, on his way to do the Headmaster’s bidding.

“Did Snape just...laugh?” he murmured to an equally thunderstruck Ron, sitting beside him.

“Yeah!” whispered Ron back. “And he had a real weird look on his face, like he was looking forward to something... tasty.”

“Harry,” said Dumbledore, “What are we waiting for?”

Hermione and the Weasleys, of course, insisted on accompanying them, and they picked up Hagrid as they crossed the grounds, so it was a full ten people who met Snape on Platform 61/5 in Hogsmead. Ron described the scene for Harry, for the train present was not the familiar Hogsmead Express. This train, according to Ron, looked like a bullet train, sleek and black, with only a few cars. One of the cars, the last, had heavy shutters closing its windows. Harry and company boarded the first.

Only once the train had been underway for more than an hour did apprehension overtake Harry. He really did not relish the idea of the entire wizarding world knowing how badly he had let his uncle, a mere muggle, beat him. Draco would be insufferable. As he sat there, his rage against the muggle in question grew until all that his mind’s eye could see was his uncle’s smirking, triumphant face when Harry had given in that first time, a week and a half and a lifetime ago. He did not know that his hand was clenching tighter and tighter into a fist, could not know that his best friends sat across form him, watching him grit his teeth and cry silent tears into his blindfold. He was startled when Ron spoke.
“Harry. Just remember, we’re here with you. You count on our support, no matter what.” With the murmurs of agreement from the rest in his ears, Harry relaxed, the fury turning into a determined sort of courage.

“Professor Dumbledore?” he asked, his voice controlled and older than his years would account for. “I would like to talk to Vernon now, before we reach London.” He didn’t offer an explanation, and nobody asked for one. Dumbledore merely led Harry in his chair back, out of their car, through the second, where several wizards and witches stared curiously, and to the final car, where a guard stood attentively in front of a solidly barred door. At Dumbledore’s nod, he unlocked the door and stood aside. Harry went n alone.

Chapter: 12

At first, Harry couldn’t hear anything save his own tense breathing. “Uncle Vernon?” he ventured softly. A chain rattled as someone shifted.


“Of course. Don’t you recognize your own handiwork?” He spread his arms, first taking off the blindfold. He stared towards his uncle’s voice, satisfied to hear an indrawn breath. “What? Aren’t you proud of what you’ve done?”

“Of course not!” Vernon now sounded whiney, his voice shaky and pleading. Harry was reminded forcibly of Wormtail. “I was drunk, and you provoked me. You know that I would never have done those things if I were sober. You know it’s not my fault.” Harry was disgusted by his sniveling.

“You have no excuse!” he snapped. “People get drunk all the time without cutting someone’s finger off, or shooting them and throwing them off a cliff. Especially a member of their own family. You did all of this on purpose, out of sheer greed and bloody mindedness. You meant to kill me so I couldn’t turn you in for stealing so much money. So I wouldn’t be a ‘nuisance’ to you anymore. Well, after the trial, you’ll be rid of me and I’ll be rid of you. For the rest of my life. Just so you know, after the trial, I plan never to think of you again. You on the other hand, I am sure, will think of me everyday for the rest of your life.

Vernon whimpered. “What... what is Azkaban?”

“Oh, you’ve heard about that, have you?” Harry grinned maliciously. “Do you by any chance remember that criminal who escaped right before I blew up Marge? It was on all the news. Anyway, that was Sirius Black. My Godfather. The prison that he escaped from was Azkaban, the worst of wizard prisons. The guards there are not humans, but Dementors instead.” Harry couldn’t repress a small shudder, but Vernon didn’t see it. “Dementors are evil, soul-sucking creatures that drain all the happiness from you, making you relive the worst moments of your life over and over again until you go mad. Just so you know, I see my parents dying to save me. Oh!” Harry’s face suddenly lit up. “One more thing about the Dementors. Muggles like you can’t even see them.” By now, Harry could
hear Vernon hyperventilating. “I'll leave you with that pleasant train of thought. See you at the trial.” He waved ironically, backing his chair out of the cell. Dumbledore was waiting for him.

“A little harsh?” he said but his tone was laughing. Harry didn’t answer, merely smiled in satisfaction. “I guess not.”

When the crowd disembarked at Platform 93/4, a ministry car was waiting for them. Harry, unable to see where they were going, was a little carsick by the time they stopped. Hermione described their destination as an imposing stone building, squat against a cloudy sky. Despite its awkward proportions, she was all but speechless over the spectacular carvings that decorated the facade. She illustrated to him with words how they portrayed the flight, deaths, and rebirths of an entire flock of phoenixes. Harry, thinking fondly of Fawkes, wished desperately that he could see it himself.

Inside, the first thing that the group encountered was a wizard running at full tilt down the stairs in front of them.

“Arthur! Arthur Weasley! Where have you been? Ever since the Potter boy disappeared, Fudge has been looking for you like mad. We all know it’s not your department, but seeing as he’s a friend of you son,...” The man shrugged. “The Minister thought you might know something.”

Mr. Weasley finally got a word in. “I’ve been at Hogwarts the whole time. Why didn’t you just send me an owl?”

“We tried! They just came straight back, with their letters still attached.”

“Dad!” a voice interrupted. It was Percy. He ran over to his parents, embracing them both. “Merlin, Dad!” he said chastisingly. “Where’ve you been? Fudge wants you ‘cause of Ron being Harry’s friend and all that. He’ll want to see you immediate, so come on. You too,” he said presumptively upon seeing Dumbledore. Harry realized that no one had noticed him, sitting as he was in the back of the group, in front of Hagrid.

“Excuse me,” he said quietly, but the babble that flowed around him did not so much as falter. He drew a deep breath and bellowed. “Hey!”

Silence fell. Harry could almost sense all eyes on him as he wheeled his chair forwards, towards Percy. “I believe, Percy, that Fudge will want to see me.”

Murmurs and whispers raced around the room.

“Can it be?”

“Potter?”

“What could have...”

“He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?”

“What could have happened to him?”

“Y-yes,” stuttered Percy, trying to regain his composure. “Yes. Well, then. Come on. He’s in his office, upstairs.”

Harry allowed Hagrid to push his chair up the stairs as they followed Percy to the office of the Minister of Magic. Harry hadn’t told anyone, but his chest still hurt and that shout had cost him. He was just now catching his breath when they stopped. He could hear voices, indistinct beyond a
closed door. Harry smiled ruefully to recognize both Rita Skeeter and ‘Corny’ Fudge. Percy cautiously opened that door, clearly expecting the greeting that he received.

“Weasley?” Fudge sounded cross but relieved, as though any interruption was welcomed. Rather than make Percy explain, Harry intervened by rolling forward directly into Fudge’s view. The Minister, seeing him, swept down on him immediately.

“Harry Potter?” he asked tentatively. Harry nodded. The next second, he yelped in surprise as Fudge embraced him soundly. “Thank Merlin you’re safe!” he said fervently. “Your house, empty, blood everywhere, your wand broken... We were so afraid that You-Know-Who had taken you.” As he released Harry, he felt the older man shudder once, hard. “We need to inform the world that you’ve been found that, you’re safe. Ms. Skeeter? I need the Daily Prophet to deliver an Extra edition immediately!”

“Of course, Minister.” Harry swiveled to face her voice, surprised by her deferential tone. “I’ll just need a few more details. Headmaster Dumbledore, Mr. Potter, will you please explain to me for our readers the details of just what happened?”

And so Harry had to tell everyone of that awful weekend, and he did, in all its gory detail. He had forgotten none of it and he never would. Neither would those who were gathered in Fudge’s office. Harry’s audience grew as he spoke, staff members of the Ministry drifting in as the news spread. He warmed to his telling, feeling encouraged by the supporting murmurs of those around him. At one point, when he was describing the dispassionate doctor who had refused to help him, he felt Mr. Weasley’s hand on his shoulder, buttressing his courage. Strengthened, he continued.

When his story neared its end, telling of Vernon shooting him, of his words as he threw Harry over the cliff, he could hear rumbles of outrage all around him. Comforted by this, he finished his tale with his rescue by Dumbledore and Snape. Done, he found himself exhausted and sweating. He let Dumbledore answer the inevitable questions, rousing only when he had to.

Rita Skeeter, of course, had the most questions. “What is the extant of Harry’s injuries?” was her first, and Dumbledore listed them, eliciting more expressions of anger and sympathy. He was very patient, waiting until every single query was satisfied before turning to Fudge.

“Cornelius, what else I have to say requires a modicum of privacy.”

“Of course, of course,” agreed Fudge. He herded the crowd out, leaving the delegation from Hogwarts, plus Percy, alone with him. Dumbledore spoke without preamble.

“Presently, Professor Snape will be arriving here with Vernon Dursley. We expect him to be put to a rapid trial.”

“You have him?” Fudge sounded delighted. “Wonderful! Of course we’ll put him to trial. The public will want to see retribution, won’t they? Tomorrow! The trial will be tomorrow! Do you think, Harry, that your aunt would testify against her husband? We’ll have to find her first, of course. You do know where she went, right?” He didn’t even hear Harry’s “no,” continuing anyway in a relieved babble. “You should stay here in London. All of you.” He looked up to include the rest of Harry’s group. “We’ll just get you rooms in the Leaky Cauldron, and you can come straight back here tomorrow morning. Yes. The best thing is to get this whole mess behind us as fast as humanly or magically possible. Between you and me, this has been one disaster after another with public relations.” He stopped suddenly, realizing that he had gone one step too far. Harry wasn’t very offended. Rather, he laughed softly, shaking his head. He had realized early on that his eyes, unsettling as they were, were effective as a tool to shock people into paying attention to what he had to say. Now, he untied his blindfold, which was white today, awkward with his one hand. The trick
worked now as he stared in Fudge’s direction.

“You should consider yourself lucky, Fudge, that that is your only disaster.” He was irritated, as always, by the Minster’s attitude. Fudge stood silently, his mouth opening and closing uselessly. He seemed to realize how he had just wronged Harry

“I’m sorry, Harry,” he said, but Harry didn’t feel like listening to the officious little man a moment longer.

“I’m sorry, Minister,” he said, the very image of cordiality. “But I am very tired. My stamina, well, I have none. Did you mention rooms at the Leaky Cauldron?”

Faced with that, all that Fudge could do was escort Harry’s party to Diagon Alley.

Chapter: 13

Intermission

Robin Hood and Little John

Walkin' through the forest

Laughin' back and forth

At what the other'ne has to say

Reminiscin’, This-'n'-thattin’

Havin' such a good time

Oo-de-lally, Oo-de-lally

Golly, what a day

Never ever thinkin' there was danger in the water

They were drinkin', they just guzzled it down

Never dreamin' that a schemin' sherrif and his posse

Was a-watchin' them an' gatherin' around

Robin Hood and Little John

Runnin' through the forest

Jumpin' fences, dodgin' trees

An' tryin' to get away
Contemplatin' nothin'

But escape an' fin'lly makin' it

Oo-de-lally, Oo-de-lally

Golly, what a day

Oo-de-lally, Oo-de-lally

Golly, what a day

I just had to give you all a little break while I find Vernon. It’s kind of a long story. You see, Harry ran away with Waccu (From the Tenchi series) last night, and before anyone could stop him, that nasty muggle Vernon ran out after them. Harry and his new wife returned after a few hours, but we’ve seen neither hide nor hair of Vernon. We have to get him back before we can put him on trial. Also, we have arrangements to make for a party. So, see you as soon as I can.

Chapter 14

Just so you know, we found Vernon. He was hiding under a rock.

Just so you know, the Intermission was Chapter 13, just so I can keep it all straight.

Chapter 14

Fudge was true to his word. Before noon the next day, yet another ministry car collected Harry and company, taking them back to the Ministry building. Following a ministry aide through labyrinthine corridors, Harry had time to reflect. He relished the idea of Vernon getting his due with a visceral, almost bloodthirsty pleasure. It actually unnerved him, how much he was looking forward to this, but before he could dwell on it, his chair stopped.

Around him, Harry could hear a rumble of voices, echoing slightly as if off the walls of a very large room. The crowd sounded excited, almost as if they were there to see a quidditch match, but there was a clear underlying current of anger.

“Hermione?” Harry whispered, groping for her hand. Finding it, he continued. “Where are we? Describe it to me.”

Harry’s hunch was satisfied. The room that Hermione described was the self-same room that he had seen last year, when he had fallen into Dumbledore’s pensieve. The fact that he had ‘seen’ this place with his own eyes was somewhat comforting.

“Harry Potter!” The cry raced around the room as the crowd spotted him. Silence fell next as Dumbledore guided Harry to his place at the front of the room, Hermione still at his side to act as his eyes.
“All rise for the Honourable Judge Nicholas Longbottom,” a voice rang out. Dumbledore, seeing Harry's confusion, whispered to him under the noise of the standing crowd.

“Neville Longbottom’s uncle, his father’s older brother. And yes, he does know of your friendship with his son.”

Harry smiled, almost pitying his uncle. Even the judge would be prejudiced against him!

Then Vernon was led in. The crowd, which had just sat down, surged back to their collective feet in a massive, howling wave. They booed him violently, showering him with garbage and derisive fury. Harry, heartened still more by this, laughed at his uncle’s incoherent attempts to defend himself.

Then there was a metal sound. Harry stiffened, remembering vividly that small noise, back at the cliff, but here it was only the clink of the chains holding Vernon to the chair in the center of the room. Harry relaxed again.

The jury entered next. 18 anonymous witches, wizards, and even muggles who would decide the fate of the accused. The trial began.

Harry’s solicitor, who he had met earlier that morning, was a witch by the name of Joanne D’Arche. He had liked her immediately. She was vibrant, her voice animated as she laid out concise plans to show Harry's uncle in the worst possible light, which, as she said, would not be very hard. As the prosecution, she gave her statement first. Once again, Harry had to listen to a retelling of those ghastly days. Ms. D’Arche didn’t exaggerate at all. She didn’t have to; the jury was obviously on Harry’s side. They murmured sympathetically at each pause and, although Harry couldn’t see it, shot frequent glares at the hapless Vernon.

D’Arche wrapped up her account, smiling triumphantly towards Vernon and his solicitor, an average-looking wizard who had been appointed by the Ministry to his defense. It was clear that, while he would do his job, he strongly disliked his charge. he was on Harry’s side too. His statement was short and convinced nobody at all of Vernon’s innocence. He claimed that Harry had run away, stealing his car, and that he didn’t know how the boy had been injured. His story was debunked immediately, however, with Dobby was called to the stand as the first witness. He had seen Harry’s uncle throw Harry from the cliff. Dumbledore followed, and even Snape gave testimony, and then it was Harry’s turn.

He had been told that morning what to expect. Instead of an oath to tell the truth, he was given a drop of Veritaserum, and then D’Arche began to question him.

“Harry, can you see me?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“My uncle Vernon Dursley made me drink my potions’ homework.”

“How did he force you to drink that?”

“He had a knife.”

“And the potions, what were they?”

“The Optichroma Elixir and the Nuageur Potion.” Snape had already testified to this, telling the audience of that infelicitous combination, so Harry received moans and sighs of sympathy from the audience and the jury. Ron and Hermione gasped, remembering Professor Snape’s strict injunctions
on the properties of the catalyst.

D’Arche continued in a similar vein for Harry’s arm, going so far as to bring in the knife and the severed thumb as evidence. They had been recovered by wizarding law enforcement officers before Harry had been ‘found.’ All in all, the audience was calling for Vernon’s blood by the time Harry returned to his place by Dumbledore and Hermione, and D’Arche still had two more witnesses. The first of these was Aunt Petunia.

When she first saw Harry sitting there in the courtroom, she let out a shrill scream. “You... I saw you dead! I saw your ghost!” she stammered pointing at him with a shaking hand. Harry laughed.

“No, I assure you, I am quite alive,” he said, “no thanks to you.” He refused to say anything more to the shaken woman. Trembling and speaking straight to Harry, she told the court of what she had seen. Harry, cowering in fear of his drunken uncle, his broken arm and absent thumb, and the money. Bloody money, she called it. The whole time she avoided looking at Harry, but her voice pleaded a forgiveness which Harry refused to supply. D’Arche picked up on this.

“Why didn’t you tell anybody, Mrs. Dursley? Even if you had just made an anonymous telephone call to the muggle police, Harry would have been rescued before losing anything more than a thumb.” Petunia tried to mutter something about being afraid of Vernon and retribution, but the Veritaserum wouldn’t let her and neither would D’Arche. “It wasn’t Vernon, fear of the defendant that held your tongue, Mrs. Dursley. After all, you and your son were safe, away from your husband. Only Harry stood to be hurt.” Petunia’s thoughts had been obvious, and D’Arche’s voice dripped with scorn. “You just didn’t bother. You let your own nephew, your dead sister’s only son, blood of your blood, be crippled and blinded in the hands of a monster! You would have let him die!” She gestured fervently towards Harry. “The only remnant of your only sister. Did you love her so little, and hate him so much?” This was the last straw for Petunia, who burst into tears and was dismissed from the stand. Still sobbing, she ran out of the courtroom.

Last for the prosecution was the indifferent doctor. Harry bristled to hear his expressionless voice and D’Arche tore into him even worse than she had Petunia. He would be charged himself, at a later date, along with Petunia and Dudley for criminal negligence. From him, however, D’Arche could not provoke a reaction. He delivered his testimony accurately but without emotion, even when speaking of Harry’s pleas or of his desperate run for help. She dismissed him as quickly as she could, invisibly unnerved by his coldness.

Now it was the defense’s turn. Vernon himself was his only witness, and his attempt was pathetic. Under the influence of Veritaserum on the stand, he contradicted his earlier claim, actually confessing to the truth. D’Arche never even bothered to question him herself. The trial was over. The jury did not have to deliberate at all to declare Vernon Dursley guilty of all charges, criminal child abuse, assault with intent to cripple and maim, and attempted murder, as well as grand larceny for the money stolen.

With that, it was over. Judge Longbottom wasted no time at all sentencing Vernon to a life in Azkaban. He called Harry forward to the bench.

“Mr. Potter,” he said gravely. “As the injured party here, under wizard law you have a choice to make. Your uncle will spend the rest of his life in the confines of Azkaban. You must decide whether or not he receives the Kiss.”

Actually, it’s up to you, the reader to decide whether or not Dursley gets Kissed. I will count the votes for and against at 3:00 tomorrow (Monday, January 20, PST) afternoon and post the appropriate chapter soon after. So, you must tell me what you think.
*Here’s the next chapter. Sorry it’s so short, but it’s really just the end of the last chapter, Harry’s
decision and some other stuff. Remember, you, the reader, chose this. (If you voted yes, you can read
that version at .net. The link is .?id=1914)*

Chapter 15

“No.” Harry had decided this already. He was tempted, but he had a personal horror of the
Dementors and could not even wish them on his worst enemy. Well, maybe Voldemort, but not
Vernon. “I want him to enjoy the atmosphere at Azkaban,” he explained over Vernon’s frantic
expressions of relief. He turned away, grinning vindictively. “I think he should have Sirius Black’s
old cell, don’t you, Dumbledore?” Those close to him were too stunned to react, but Neville’s uncle
appreciated the humour.

I’m glad you mentioned Black, Mr. Potter,” he said. “The Minister has something of an
announcement to make about him.”

Hearing this, Fudge stood up. “I have an announcement to make,” he said loudly, drawing the
room’s attention and stilling the many peripheral conversations that had sprung up about the
sentencing and Harry’s choice. “Two weeks ago, auror’s found Peter Pettigrew near Godric’s
Hollow.” He had to raise his voice to be heard over the murmurs and shouts of incredulity. “He has
agreed, under threat of Azkaban and the Kiss, to help the side of the light against the return of He-
Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.” Hearing no expressions of surprise at this, Harry realized that
Voldemort’s return was now accepted as valid fact. “He has also testified, under full Veritaserum, to
the innocence of Mr. Sirius Black in the deaths of Lily and James Potter.”

Harry, the Weasleys, Hermione, and Dumbledore all cheered raucously as Fudge laid the documents
in Harry’s hand. Harry was happy beyond belief.

All in all, it was a heady day for Harry. And it got better, for as they left the Ministry building, a
voice cried out.

“Harry!” It was Sirius, running up to them from a muggle taxi. “Harry!”

“Sirius!” Harry was overjoyed to hear his godfather’s voice. He waved the pardon papers at him.
“You’re free, Sirius! You’re clear! Fudge pardoned you!”

“And I missed it.” Sirius sounded disappointed, but still ecstatic at his freedom. “I’m more upset that
I missed your uncle’s trial. What’s important is; how are you?”

Harry was relieved that he would not have to explain his state to his temperamental Godfather. “I’m
fine, Padfoot, as good as I’m going to get. Vernon’s gone. They apparated him straight to Azkaban. I
know you’d like to kill him, but this is better. They’re giving him your old room, I hear.” He smirked
and Black laughed, patting his shoulder firmly.

“You’re right, Harry. Azkaban and a life without a life is right for him. Death would be too good.”
“I just want to forget that Vernon ever existed, alright? I told him I would, and that’s all I need right now.”

“You’re right again, m’boy,” said Sirius with a determined heartiness. “I’ll not speak of it again. So, you’re staying at the Leaky Cauldron?”

Harry nodded. “We all are,” he said, gesturing to the small crowd around him.

“Have dinner with us,” invited Mrs. Weasley. “it can be celebration, both for Harry and for you.”

“Better than that,” cut in George.

“We’ll throw a party!” finished Fred.

Chapter: 16

*On with the fic!*  

Chapter 16

“Better than that,” cut in George.

“We’ll throw a party!” finished Fred.

And so they did. Tom, the innkeeper at the Leaky Cauldron, was only too glad to host a celebration for the Boy-Who-Lived, and Sirius, as his godfather, was given the royal treatment. Fred and George orchestrated the entertainment, which consisted of them doing satires of muggle magic tricks. they had found Lee Gordon with his family in Diagon Alley and pulled him into the act too. Between the three of them, they had everyone in the pub clutching their sides and howling with laughter. Even Professor Dumbledore, who had volunteered to take a turn narrating for Harry so that Hermione could go and dance with Ron, could hardly speak for laughing. Harry, who couldn’t have danced if he wanted to, certainly did not begrudge his best friends the chance.

Percy, in a move totally out of character for him, had pulled a few strings and gotten a band. Although Harry had never heard of the London 4, they were, apparently, a very big deal in popular wizarding music. Ginny spent the entire evening standing at the back of the room, staring forlornly at the drummer, a teen named simply Trick.

All in all, the party was a grand success. Witches and wizards had poured in from the street as the news spread until the party had to expand into Diagon Alley. Magical fireworks lit the sky and the twins were doing a roaring trade in pranks. After the first hour, no one even paid attention when a nearby individual burst out in feather, merely continuing their revelry as if nothing had happened.

The sun was nearly up when the last reveler went home. A yawning Mrs. Weasley offered to help clean up, but an equally exhausted Tom refused, pushing her towards the stairs and saying that he had help who would do the work later that morning. “Just sleep it off, dear,” he said. “This is my job.” She didn’t protest as he shooed her to her room.
Harry wasn’t tired at all. He sat, wide-eyed and content, listening to the silence that fell as Tom left for his own chambers. Well, not quite silence. Hagrid and Dobby had fallen asleep in a booth, Dobby lying across the half-giant’s chest and using his beard as a blanket. They both snored.

At some point during the festivities, Harry had come to an agreement with himself. This body, broken though it may be, was his. He would not be ashamed of it, would not blame himself for what his uncle had done. Gryffindors were strong and brave and he, Harry Potter, was a Gryffindor.

Morning came and went and, just before noon, Ron descended, rubbing his eyes. “You still here, Harry?” he asked with some surprise. “Didn’t you sleep at all?”

“Nope,” said Harry brightly. “Too happy to sleep. I never have to live with the Dursleys again! No more cupboard, no more awful summers.”

“We need to talk about that, Harry.” Dumbledore’s voice came from the direction of the stairwell, but Harry heard more than one pair of feet.

“Who’s with you?” he asked.

“Mr. Black, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley,” responded the aged wizard, understanding Harry’s need to know who was around him. “We’re going to settle that very issue this morning. You see, both Mr. Black and the Weasleys have offered to adopt you. Sirius, as your godfather, was James’ and Lily’s choice, but they didn’t know Molly and Arthur.”

Sirius spoke up. “Harry, I’ll understand if you choose them. I’m a confirmed bachelor, and very much unused to having to share my life. I honestly don’t know what type of father I would be.” his voice was very earnest. Harry knew that, although his godfather loved him, he wanted him to choose the Weasleys for his own good. He had already made his decision, but he let Ron’s parents speak first.

“I know that Sirius is your godfather, Harry, but we,” Here Mr. Weasly gestured to himself and his wife. “We think that you might be happier at the Burrow. I mean, you and Ron are all but brothers already.”

“Also, Harry,” interjected Mrs. Weasley. “With us, there are more people to help you if you need it.”

“But I don’t need help,” Harry started to say, but she overrode him.

“I know you don’t want to depend on anyone, Harry, but the truth is you have to now. I’m going to be very frank with you. You can’t even get yourself out of bed, or dressed. Please, let us help you.”

Harry wished vainly that he could see their faces, see what they were feeling beyond what bled into their voices. They sat silently for a moment before he spoke. He faced Sirius.

“Padfoot,” he said, using Sirius’s nickname from Hogwarts. “I’m sorry. I want to stay with Ron’s family.” He turned to his friend. “If you really want me.”

The next second his breath was knocked from his lungs as Ron hugged him fiercely. “Of course we want you!” The impact knocked him loose from the grip of his chair and he slumped sideways. He fell to the floor when Ron, acting instinctively, released him. “Oops, sorry Harry. Did I hurt you?” He sounded appalled at the idea, and Harry couldn’t do anything but lift his arms.

“Up?” he said mockingly in the voice of a very young child. Everyone laughed, once again diffusing a tense situation. Mr. Weasley lifted Harry back into his chair.
“Of course we want you, Harry. There is nothing we want more. Our home is your home.”

“I know,” said Harry, sobering. “but I need to go to Privet Drive first. All of my stuff’s still there, and I’ll need it.” He wasn’t looking forward to such a visit, and so was very glad when Dumbledore told him that he couldn’t go. Percy, who had just come downstairs, volunteered immediately and dissapparated just as fast. A moment later, Fred and George came down together, yawning and stretching in unison.

“’Lo,” they said, shuffling off to the kitchen in search of caffeine. By the time they got back, Percy had reappeared. From the sudden silence, Harry could tell that something was amiss.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. He heard footsteps approach him and then something was put in his hand. Closing his fingers around it, Harry could feel an odd, feathery grit, with larger chunks interspersed with it. The lumps were varied; one splinterly, one like a rock, and several that crumbled dryly. Try as he might, at last he had to ask “What is it?”


Harry’s throat felt tight. He was determined not to cry, but the pressure behind his useless eyes tested that resolve. “All of them?” His voice broke. “My Firebolt?” He dropped his handful of ash.

Percy knelt at his side and placed another object in his palm. Harry’s fingers recognized the smooth brass band that had once encircled the brush of his treasured broomstick, dusty now with soot and pitted with heat. He could still feel where he had engraved his name into it.

“Did he leave anything?” he asked desperately, tucking the ring into his robes. “Anything at all?”

“Yes,” said Percy, brightening. “I found your photo album wrapped up in your invisibility cloak and tucked under your mattress. Good job hiding them.”

Harry nodded sadly. “They’re my only remnants of my parents. I’m glad I didn’t lose them, too. Can I have them?” He held out his hand.

“Here.” Harry felt the familiar watery silk and leather cover. Opening the album, he ran his fingers lightly over the glossy pictures, remembering the images that he could not see. Seized by a sudden impulse, he threw the cloak over his head.

His face hidden from the world, he had meant to cry, but instead he laughed, manic hilarity like before. Dumbledore exchanged a worried glance with Black and the Weasleys before looking back to Harry. The cloak had only covered the boy’s head, so an apparently decapitated body shook with gales of bitter, self-derisive mirth. This time, Sirius reacted. He pulled the cloak off Harry’s face and gripped his chin firmly. “Harry,” Sirius said gently. “Harry. We’re all here for you, even if none of us can know what you’re going through.”

“I think I’m going crazy,” said Harry, so quietly that only Sirius and Dumbledore picked it up. He turned his face away from Black’s hand. “Yesterday was wonderful, one of the best days I’ve ever had. Today, I’ve got a new family, my best friend is going to be my brother, but I don’t know how I can do anything now.” He gestured impotently to his eyes. “Dumbledore, can I even do magic, be a wizard at all, like this?”

Dumbledore replied warmly. “Of course you can, Harry. It will be harder to learn the wand movement, and you will have to relearn a great deal to do it left-handed, but it is by no means impossible. You will not be the first blind wizard. With some extra work this summer, you’ll be able
to join your classmates in September.”

“That,” said Harry, straightening. “Is a huge relief. I was terrified that being blind...” He shook his head ruefully. “I’ve got to get used to that word. That being blind would mean I couldn’t go to Hogwarts anymore.”

“Lay that worry to rest. There is absolutely no reason for you not to come back.” Everybody crowded close, uttering reassurances until Harry smiled again. They all relaxed, now that he had.

Chapter: 17

Hi. More fic.

Chapter 17

By the end of the day, it was official. Harry was the legal child of Arthur and Molly Weasley. Percy and the twins had disappeared almost immediately after the morning’s conversation, saying that they were going to prepare for Harry’s grand arrival at the Burrow. At Fudge’s insistence, however, Harry spent one more night in London, being officially checked over by the staff of St. Mungo’s and seeing his aunt and cousin’s trials. They were each sentenced to two years in Dartmoor Prison, a lesser wizarding prison for lesser offences. Harry was satisfied, though his friends were all for stronger sentences.

The next morning dawned early and hot, typical for late July. Harry realized that only three days remained before his fifteenth birthday. He was really looking forward to it. Even though he didn’t know what Ron’s family did to celebrate birthdays, it had to be better than celebrating with the Dursleys.

“Making no noise and pretending I’m not there,” mused Harry, voicing his thoughts and startling Ron, who was drowsing in the seat behind him. Harry had not wanted to take a portkey, as they held unpleasant memories, so he and his new family were in yet another ministry car, bound for the Burrow. Hermione had had to go home, as her parents had made plans that could no longer be postponed, and the Professors and Sirius had left for Hogwarts. Truth told, Harry was a little relieved. Having an entourage that followed him everywhere had begun to be a little irritating. He sat in the front seat, Ron and Ginny sharing the back with their parents. No one was talking, but it was an amiable silence.

Harry was fingering his new wand. Mr. Ollivander had custom-made it, just for him. Dumbledore had provided another of Fawkes’ feathers for the core, but the rest of it was different. It was longer than his old one, thirteen and one-half inches. The same length as Voldemort’s, in fact, but cedar not yew. Already, Harry could tell that his other senses were improving. With his fingertips, he could discern the straight grain of the wood in his wand, could even smell it, a faint scent that reminded him, of all things, of his trunk.

“We’re here, Harry,” said Mrs. Weasley. Harry had been so wrapped in contemplation that he hadn’t noticed the car’s stopping. Mr. Weasley lifted him out of his seat as Ron brought his chair around from the trunk, and set him into it. Harry let Ron push him across the yard and up to the porch. Fred
came out to greet them.

“You’re late,” he said, reminding Harry so forcefully of a movie he had seen in Hogsmead the fall before that he couldn’t help responding.

“A wizard is never late, Fredo Baggins, nor is he early. He arrives precisely when he means to,” he said affection the voice of an aged man and adopting a very serious face. Silence reigned for a moment before Ron, Finny, and Fred cracked up. They had all seen the same movie with him. Everyone at Hogwarts had. Their parents just looked at each other in puzzlement. When Harry could speak again, gasping for breath, he tried to explain.

“Haven’t you read The Lord of the Rings?” he asked.

“No,” said Mrs. Weasley tentatively. “I haven’t.”

“You really should. They’re amazing books. They’ve got everything; wizards, elves, er, proper elves, not house-elves, dragons dwarves... They’ve got to be my favorite books. Anyway, the muggles made a really great movie, you know what a movie is? Good. A great movie out of the first of them, and the second one will come out just before Christmas, right after that other big movie. I can’t remember its name, though, but it was very familiar, like I’d heard it before.” His babble trailed off.

“C’mon, Harry.” It was George’s voice, calling from somewhere high above. “Come check out your new room!”

“I get my own room?” Harry had expected to share Ron’s room like he had before. From the sounds Ron was making, so had he. “Where is it?”

“C’mon. We’ll show you.” Fred grabbed the handles of his wheelchair to propel him through the door. “You’re all the way at the top.”

“Wait. My room’s at the top,” protested Ron.

“Higher.”

“Wait,” said Mr. Weasley. “You put Harry in the attic?” He sounded incredulous.

“No, of course not, Dad,” said George, joining them in the kitchen. “We were just kidding. We redid Percy’s room, is all.”

“And we moved it,” added Fred. “up right next to Ron’s room so he can be near help if he needs it. That chair handles stairs alright, right Harry?”

“Yeah,” agreed Harry distractedly. His own room. A real room, with only his own stuff in it. The idea was novel.

Harry leaned back and shouted to his chair. “My room!” The chair leapt away from Fred’s fingers, racing up the lights in its spidery legs only to stop suddenly. Harry put out his hand, found a door knob and stop, unsure of what he was waiting for. The he swung the door open wide and rolled in.

Around him he could feel a very friendly space, one that felt very much like home. Ron arrived after a moment, gasping from trying to keep up and followed by the rest of his family.

“What” gasp “do you” wheeze “think, Harry?” he asked, looking around for himself.

“I like it,” Harry announced. “Now, who can tell me what it looks like?”
Fred and George were eager to describe the minute attention they had paid to detail. From the plaque on the door declaring this to be “Harry’s Secret Lair. (Beware giant monster)” to the view outside the bay windows, to the perch for Hedwig, the vied to be the first to describe it to him. “And we saved the best for last, Harry,” crowed George. “Just tap the wall with your wand.”

Harry did, and instantly, the room was filled with soft hummings. “What is that?” he asked, puzzled.

“Allow me to demonstrate.” George cleared his throat importantly. “Bed.” Immediately, one of the murmurings grew infinitesimally louder, separating from the rest. Harry heard a voice that sounded all but asleep.

“Come to bed come to bed come to...” It faded back into the rest. Listening hard, Harry found that he could still pick it out. He followed its sound, hand out, and soon encountered a fluffy quilt spread over a soft, overstuffed mattress. Tilting his head, he oriented on another of the voices, following this one to a roll top desk. Guided by the sounds, he explored his new room, finding a massive wardrobe, a side table, and a nearly-empty bookcase. The window, when he put his hand against it, told him in a pleasantly female voice that there was a gnome riding a chicken below in the garden. He laughed and turned back to his new family.

“This is... incredible,” he said, searching for words. “Thank you all so much. I don’t know what I can ever do to repay you.”

“you don’t have to repay us, Harry. This is what families do, and we’re so glad to have you in ours.” Mrs. Weasley hugged Harry gently, and he could feel her shaking as she tried not to cry. Awkwardly, with an arm and a half, he hugged her back.

“So, do I call you Mum, now, or what?” asked Harry lightly.

“If you want to,” she answered tearfully, “or if you aren’t going to be comfortable with that, you can call me Molly.”

“And call me Arthur,” joined Mr. Weasley.

“And me, Fred,” followed George. Fred cuffed him and they laughed.

“Come on now, you,” said Mrs. Weasley. “It’s too late for breakfast, so we’ll have an early lunch. It’s so hot, what say we eat in the garden.”

“Sounds great to me,” said a new voice. Everyone spun to face the newcomer. Newcomers.

“Bill! Charlie!” Their dad sounded delighted. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, that’s nice,” said Charlie cheerfully. “We used to live her too, you know. Anyway, Perc’ said that we had a new member of the family. And here I thought you were to old for that, Mum.”

Mrs. Weasley blushed and batted her eldest’s shoulder. “I am too old, you. What he meant was, we adopted Harry.” The Weasley’s drew back so that Charlie and Bill could see Harry.

“Hello,” he said simply, waving towards them.

“Harry’s here?” asked Charlie, shocked. “I thought he was missing.”

“you should have read yesterday’s paper, then,” countered Bill. He looked at Harry. “Seems you had some trouble with that muggle family of yours. Your uncle’s in Azkaban?”
Harry’s face went carefully blank. “I have no uncle,” he said.

“Yeah, you do, Harry,” said Ron, drawing all eyes to him. “And aunts too. Mums got four sisters and a brother, and Dad’s the eighth of ten boys. You’ve just joined a huge family, with grandparents and great-grandparents and everything. Most of ‘em live in the states, though.” He lowered his voice to a stage whisper. “You’d never guess it, but Dad’s a yank!”

“I am not!” said Mr. Weasley, swelling with mock-indignation. “I was born right here on British soil, and I dare you to say otherwise.” He stamped his foot light-heartedly.

“Maybe, but Granny and Grampa Weasley were Yanks, so that makes you one too.”

“If you say so,” said Mr. Weasley, suddenly mild. A crafty gleam came into his eyes. “But hat makes you half Yank, doesn’t it?”

“If it does,” said Fred and George in unison, “He’s the Yank half!” They each pointed at the other.

Harry, listening to the exchange, was ecstatic. This was exactly how he felt a family should be, close and laughing. He laughed too as the whole family went downstairs, joining them in the garden even though he wouldn’t be able to eat at the impromptu picnic. The whole group was joyously raucous, even when an errant gnome stole an apple pie. They just laughed harder.

That night, as Ron helped him prepare for bed, Harry was still chuckling from a joke Percy had told at dinner. Ron, however, had fallen silent.

“What’s wrong?” asked Harry.

“Where did you get this scar?” asked Ron frankly.

“If you say so,” replied Harry frankly.

“Which one?”

“This one, around your left ankle. It looks older than the rest.”

Harry smiled. “Oh. That one. When we were four or five, Dudley got a puppy for Christmas from his Aunt Marge, that woman I blew up before Third Year. It was an evil little dog, and Dudley named him Shredder, after a villain from a muggle TV show. Anyway, one day, I was walking the little beast one day and it just clamped onto my ankle, and wouldn’t let go for three blocks. I had to get eight stitches, but it wasn’t the Dursley’s fault, if that’s what you’re thinking. They never hurt me before this summer. Dogs just don’t like me, and I don’t like them. Except for Snuffles, of course.”

Ron snorted. “That name is going to haunt him, isn’t it?” He pulled the night-shirt over Harry’s head, one of the things that Harry couldn’t do one-handed, and lifted him onto the bed. “Ugh. Good thing you’re so light, or I wouldn’t do this. You could just sleep in your chair,” he joked. “How much do you weigh?”

“Let’s see. Madame Pomfrey weighed me at Hogwarts. It was... er... six stone even.”

“Wow,” said Ron in an indrawn breath. “I weigh nine stone four, and I’m not that much bigger than you, am I?”

“I’ll probably gain weight on this IV.” Harry was pulling his needle out of its smooth, little case. Released, it quivered in midair for a moment before plunging itself deep into a vein in Harry’s half-arm. He flinched, because it was very tender. “I didn’t get to eat much at the Dursley’s.” He pulled the large glass vial of nutria-potion from its compartment in the wheelchair standing next to the bed, and screwed it onto the stalk of the needle. “That feels good,” he said, relaxing.
“What does it feel like?” asked Ron curiously as he pulled the quilt up under Harry’s arms.

“Like my invisibility cloak, you know, cool and silvery, but under my skin.”

“At least, if you have to do it, it’s not half-bad.”

“Yeah.” The vial was now empty, so Harry returned it and the gleaming needle to their proper places. “Good night, Ron.”

“Good night, Harry.” By the time Ron shut the door behind him, Harry Potter Weasley was asleep.

Chapter: 18

$ Hi. It’s me again. Just for those who don’t know what a stone is, it’s a unit of weight equivalent to 14 pounds, so six stone even is 84 pounds, while nine stone four is actually 130 pounds. So as you can see, Harry is ridiculously light for a fifteen year-old boy.$

Chapter 18

By the time Ron shut the door behind him, Harry had fallen asleep, once again exhausted by a hectic day. Ron went quietly down the stairs. “Mum?” he called softly upon gaining the parlor. “Mum, he’s asleep.”

“Oh good,” said Mrs. Weasley, putting down her knitting. From where she sat by the hearth, she threw a pinch of blue glitter into the fire. “Matilda Weasley!” she cried as quietly as she could. The flames turned a brilliant shade of indigo with a whoosh, and a head appeared amidst the coals. The older Mrs. Weasley most certainly did not look old enough to have grown grandchildren. Despite her son and grandchildrens’ red hair, she was a blond. An extraordinarily brilliant blond that, despite all odds, was in fact natural.

“Why, hello, Molly. What brings me to your neck of the world?”

“You’ve been reading the papers the last few days, haven’t you?”

“You mean the stuff about the Boy-Who-Lived and his uncle?” said the very perceptive Matilda. Molly nodded.

“Exactly. We told you he was a friend of Ron’s at Hogwarts, didn’t we? Anyway... We adopted him,” she finished in a rush, hoping for the approval of her mother-in-law. She got it in spades.

“Really?” gushed Matilda. “Oh Molly, that’s wonderful. That poor boy really needs a family to love him. How could anyone have done such things to a child?”

“Harry’s uncle was insane, and Harry never wants to hear his name again,” said Molly warningly.

“Gotcha in one, Molly. I can’t blame him at all,” replied Matilda.

“What I called you for was... The day after tomorrow is Harry’s fifteenth birthday. He’s never had
any family worth speaking to, so I want to give him one as a present. Can we come out to your place for a party with the whole Weasley Clan? I know it’s something of an imposition, as well as extraordinarily last minute, but he’s never had a birthday party.”

“Not a problem, Molly. Not a problem at all. As a matter of fact, William and Jerome and their respective broods are already here, for the Tall Ships Festival, and Eric is coming tomorrow. It’d be great to have all of you, too. We have plenty of room, and you’ve never visited us.”

“Wonderful. If it’s all right with you and Uther, we’ll stay the whole week, from Monday ‘til Saturday.”

“That’s fine, dear. Would you like me to round up the rest of the gang?”

“Would you?” Molly Weasley beamed in relief. “That would be a heap of help. I still have to talk my clan into this. But I should have asked you first; Can you hold my side, too?”

“No worries, Molly. Well, if I’m going to get this set up in time, I had better go. Ooh, this’ll be so much fun!” Matilda Weasley squealed as her head faded from the fire.

“Claire Fraser!” Molly called out next, throwing another pinch into the fire. A new head materialized in the coals, with hair as red as the flames themselves.

“Mol’?” asked the new face inquiringly. “Is somat’ wrong?”

“No, no, Mum. Listen. You read today’s paper, right?”

“No ....,” said Mrs. Weasley’s mom, drawing the word out into a question.

“Have you heard the news about Harry Potter?” asked Molly impatiently.

“Who hasn’t?”

“Alright then. Here’s the thing. Arthur and I adopted Harry. He’s been a friend of Ron’s since First Year, saved Ginny’s life in Second, and now he needs a real family, so we gave him one.”

“What a wonderful thing to do,” crooned Mrs. Fraser.

“That’s what we thought, Mum. The other thing is that the day after tomorrow is Harry’s birthday. He’ll be fifteen, and we’re all going to the States to introduce him to Arthur’s family. I want mine to be there too.”

“Of course we’ll come, Mol’. Malachy’s Harry’s and Ron’s age, i’n’t he?”

“He is. They’ll probably like each other right off.”

“T’is a great idea, Mol’. I don’ believe we’ve ever had both your families together. It’ll be a right proper hoard, it will.”

“It will, won’t it?” said Mrs. Weasley, eyes shining excitedly. “74 of us in all, plus Harry, and Ron’ll probably want to bring his friend Hermione. I think he fancies her,” she whispered just loud enough for Ron to hear. He rolled his eyes and she laughed. “So a total of 76. Wow. Do you think you can get everyone, Mum?”

“Of course, mo chride, but maybe you could ask Rebecca yourself? Her Dougal doesn’t like me much.”
“That’s no surprise,” said Mrs. Weasley wryly. “You don’t like him much.”

“Hmm. I don’t, do I? Ah, it canna be helped. Well, I’ve got to go, but I’ll get everyone to your place late tomorrow eve, come high water or Hell.

“Oh no,” cautioned Mrs. Weasley. “Make it the morning after. This is going to be a surprise party!”

“Are you sure, Mol’? If he’s in as bad a way as they say, can he take a shock like 74 people yelling ‘Surprise!’?”

“He’ll be fine,” replied Mrs. Weasley. “There’s nothing wrong with his heart or his nerves. He’s still the bravest person I know.” She sounded proud.

By the way, Mol’, what did that muggle do to him? All I get here are rumours and tell-tales.” There was a concerned note to Mrs. Fraser’s voice, and Molly deflated a bit.

“He tried his damndest to kill the boy, Mum. Harry’s blind now, and his spine was broken so he can’t even sit up and he lost his arm and a foot and he has to eat through a needle...” A note of hysteria entered her voice, but she forced it down. “Sorry, Mum. It’s just, I had such great parents that I can’t even imagine anybody treating a child like that. It’s not just this latest, either. We had him here three summers ago, when Ron and the twins found him being held prisoner in his own room, barred window and all! And he’s so small! Ron’s four months younger, but he’s got at least six inches on Harry and probably a stone and a half.”

“More than three, actually,” piped up Ron from the couch. “He weighs six even, and I’m nine stone four. He says he’s gaining, though.”

“Six stone?” said Mrs. Fraser, shocked. “You’d better feed him up, Mol’.”

“That’s just it, Mum,” wailed Mrs. Weasley. “I can’t! He can’t eat food, just nutria-potion through a needle into his arm. I can’t even make the potion, he has to get it from Hogwarts."

“He looks really skinny, Mum,” said Ron. “I can count his ribs and his hips jut out, but he says he’s OK.”

“Then we’ll let it be, unless he gets worse,” his mom decided firmly, wiping her eyes. “So, Mum. Maybe you should get started?”

“Righto, dearest,” said Mrs. Fraser, and her head winked out.

“It’s almost midnight, Mum,” said Ron as he stood and stretched.

“You go to bed then,” she said, waving him absently towards the stairs and reaching for another pinch of blue dust. Her conversation with Rebecca Mackenzie was much the same as the first two, securing an eager promise to come. Dougal, her brother-in-law, came in about halfway through the conversation, happy to see her. His dual was with his mother-in-law, not her daughters. He too was excited about the idea of throwing a party for the Boy-Who-Lived.

$ Well? So now Harry has a family. Hope he likes them. $
done to him, I figured he needed a BIG break.

Gara-

Oh, believe me, I can write a more depressing fic if I wanted to, and I do! As soon as I’m done with this one, I’ll write a total tear-jerker. Just you wait and see.

scholcomp1-

Of course I’ll keep going, of course this isn’t the end of it, and you need to learn how to write a useful review.

Lei Dumbledore-

Ah, yes. My favorite reviewer, and my most faithful. (And not a bad author yourself, I might add) Thank you for the eleven, count ‘em eleven supportive reviews. And I’ll repeat, just for you, that a stone equals 14 pounds.

Poetheiress-

I like it when good authors read/review my stuff. Makes me feel good. Incidentally, we’re nowhere near the end. This is the fic that never ends... Well, it will, but that’s quite a ways down the road. I’ve still got over a hundred pages on paper that I have to type and post.

Laterose-

My other most faithful critic, with five reviews for me to your name. I do hope your heart started again, you optimist you. And yes, I am evil. School starts in September. It’s still July, remember? And he’s laughing because he’s afraid to cry. I should know how that feels. Yuck.

Angryry-

And so he shall!

Ashers, Clymm, Blood Wi’tch, Cherrity, Kimmy, and Admiral Ael Danks-

Sorry, I didn’t Kiss Vernon, but I did on . Go there and see Harry’s vengeance wreaked!

BuzzBuzz16-

You’re right. Vernon is scum.

Deerose91-

It would spoil the story if I told you whether Harry would get better or not, but remember if you will my disclaimer. (In Chapter 1)

Bill Weasley-

Harry doesn’t make speeches.

Relle - Of course he’ll, but Harry will forget him, and so will we. Incidentally, you’re one of my favorite authors. Hey everybody! Go read Relle’s stuff! It’s really a bullet in the chest!
Kyohaku Celestiale Vespertina-

Thanks for your compliments of my court scene. I stole it from Perry Mason, except for the Veritaserum stuff, obviously. Didn’t you like my intermission? I typed the Oo-de-lally song from memory. I know I need a life.

Snapdragon-

Oh my God, thank you for your enthusiastic review. Of course the Kiss would be too nice for Vernon, most things would.

Lady Foxfire-

Thank you for recommending me to Relle, I owe you. Of course P and D get tried too, and found guilty, and yes, this is going to get even nastier. And Myrtle very nearly does give P a cardiac arrest.

HPLover234-

There’s always hope, isn’t there?

Lynlyn

- Thank you for the in-depth review, i don’t see to many of those. Of course Harry is going to get his money back, but it won’t be a big deal in the story. Incidentally, the blindfold thing actually came from the *Fourth Quarter* books by Tanya Huff.

Amy

- Actually, I *can* be as cold-hearted as that. It’s an art.

Jordon-

Because he does.

Figgy the Witch-

Thank you.

liena-

Of course Harry won’t die, and the Dursleys will get their due. Pull yourself together, girl.

Temporary Insanity-

I may be an evil bastard, but I’m not a cliched evil bastard.

Mystic Queen-

Of course.

Jordan-

 Nobodies died, and Vernon *has* gotten it. Happy now?

Kim-

I know I’m evil, but stop throwing things at me and hitting me with things!
Anzie-
Thanks
______-
Hey nameless! Thanks for the review, but I already know that I am evil and insane. Isn’t everybody?
Anne-Julie-
I said sorry already!
Bill Weasley (ruddy again)-
Sorry! As for what you have all done wrong is that I don’t have enough reviews! I eat reviews, and I can’t post when I’m hungry.
PissedOffEskimo-
I know it’s good. I wrote it.
Moonlight-
I have nothing to say to you, since I already have dedicated a whole chapter to you and you’ve only given me one review.
Well, that’s everybody, so just keep on posting reviewing and I’ll keep right on posting.

Chapter: 19

Well, was that just an overwhelming acknowledgment list or what? And I’ll eventually have to do another one, ugh! Ah well, on with the fic! Also, did ANYONE get the ‘Fredo Baggins’ joke? I thought I was being incredibly clever, and I had my family in stitches! Why did no one notice? Boo Hoo!

Chapter 19

On the morning of his birthday, Harry woke up in silence. He could hear Ron shifting about in his room across the landing, but from downstairs there was nothing. “What time is it?” he called aloud. The clock answered.
“It’s seven in the morning. Oops, seven o’ one.”

Apparently, Ron had heard him, for Harry heard a tapping at the door. “Come in,” he called, and Ron stuck his head in the door.

“Happy Birthday, Harry! Are you ready to get up?”

“I guess so,” Harry replied noncommittally. “Where is everybody?”
Ron sounded cheerful as he started to get Harry dressed. “They’re here, downstairs. Birthdays are a big deal with us. When I turned fourteen, Fred and George threw a fireworks show. That was an incredible day, and today’ll be even better, I bet.”

“My very first birthday party,” mused Harry. “Hey, watch the ears! I need those,” he joked as Ron pulled a shirt over his head.

“Sorry.”

When Harry was dressed and safely ensconced in his wheelchair, they went downstairs. Ron’s steps behind him sounded particularly loud to Harry.

“Harry, Ron, is that you?” called Ron’s mom from the kitchen. “Happy Birthday, Harry.”

“Thanks, Mrs.... er, Molly.”

“Come on, Harry, we’re all in here.”

Entering the kitchen, Harry heard odd noises surrounding him, half-whispers and sounds of cloth rubbing against cloth. Who’s there?” His hand found his wand in its pocket, unnerved by the impression of being at the center of a silent multitude.

“It’s alright,” said Ron, sounding as though he were trying very hard not to laugh. “Just hold this.”

He put something small and smooth into Harry’s hand.

Before Harry could question this, he felt a horribly familiar jerk. It was the sensation that had haunted the moments between sleep and not-sleep ever since the third task. A Portkey. Terror overtook him, sending him screaming into the maelstrom. To him, the transit lasted an eternity. By the time it ended, he was gasping for breath, no longer even able to shout.

“Harry! Harry!” Mr. Weasley’s voice took a moment to cut through Harry’s fear. On his knees in front of the trembling boy, he shook him gently. “Harry! You’re safe! We’re here, with you!” His voice was low and fervent and it worked. Harry visibly calmed, questing around the unfamiliar surroundings.

“Where are we?” His voice was still a little shaky, and he was uncomfortably aware that he had just made a fool of himself.

“We’re... well, I can’t tell you just yet, but I promise you, you are absolutely safe.”

His panic gone, Harry realized that this must have something to do with his birthday. Yesterday, the Weasleys had been conspicuously silent on the subject. It would have reminded him of the Dursleys, save for the whispered conversations that halted every time he entered a room. He grinned. “Alright. So, what now?”

“Just a sec,” said Mr. Weasley. He ducked out of the room for a moment, returning almost immediately. “All set. Here, Harry. Let me take you out there.” He then pushed Harry out the door.

“Surprise!” A great shout enveloped him, and he would have jumped if he could. “Happy Birthday!”

“Wow,” was all Harry could say. “Ron, he whispered out of the corner of his mouth, trusting that his friend was there. “Who are all these people?”

Ron sounded smug. “Your new family, all seventy four of us. Oh, and Hermione.” Hermione punched him affectionate.
“74.” Harry was at a loss for words. “Wow. That’s a lot.”

“Too right. And you have to meet them all. Each and every one.”

And so he did. Mr. Weasley, that is, Arthur Weasley, had nine brothers. Harry met William. Arthur’s oldest brother first, greeting also his wife, Marie, and their two grown children, Jonathon and Ewan, as well as Ewan’s wife, Marilyn, with their young daughter, Lieh.

“We live in Hawaii,” said Ewan, by way of introduction. “About as far away from England as you can get.”

Next was the next eldest son, Jared. He too was married, to a woman from Canada named Tracy and their two children, polite teenagers, were Isabelle (Just call me Bell) and Cedric. Harry winced at the boy’s name, but no one noticed.

The third son, Charles, was not married, but the fourth, Jerome, was wed to Angela and the proud father of two sets of twins; Robert and Dvorak (Just ‘D,’ please.) and Amie and Theresa.

Number five was Ian, who had Sheila and Blake, an eight year-old boy, and six was Sean, who had married Sarah and shown a slightly twisted sense of humour in naming his quadruplets; Simon, Stanton, Stephen, and a girl, Sequoia.

Luke was unmarried, the last one older than Arthur. The second youngest son, Eric, was there, with his wife Christine and their month-old son, a squalling little tyke named Raoul. Jason, the youngest who was only newly-wed, shyly introduced his wife of seven weeks and two days, Marissa.

“That’s thirty-two,” said Harry, who was patently enjoying this parade of introductions and pleasantries. Everyone here seemed to like him! “Who’s next?”

“My parent’s,” responded Mr. Weasley, approaching with said parents in tow. “Harry, this is Uther and Matilda Weasley. Mum, Dad, this is Harry.”

Apparently,” rumbled a deep voice to Harry’s left. A rough hand shook his. “Very good to meet you, Harry. I guess you get to call me Granpa now. Not Gramps, mind you.”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry flippantly. Granpa Weasley chuckled.

“I think I like this kid.”

Than I guess I’m Granny, aren’t I?” Matilda Weasley ruffled Harry’s hair. “Makes me feel old.”

“You don’t sound old,” said Harry genuinely. His new grandmother giggled.

“Oh, what a gentleman!”

“Hey, you haven’t introduced me yet!” a new voice called.

“We’d never forget you, Grandpa,” said Arthur. “Harry, this is one of my grandfathers. Grandpa Percival. We named Percy after him. Where’s Grandma Anna, Grandpa?”

“She’s over there,” the old man said, pointing even though Harry couldn’t see. “Gossiping with Renna, Clair and Virginia.”

Introductions took another half an hour. In the end, Harry had a total of eight great-grandparents, four grandparents, fourteen uncles, ten aunts, twenty-nine first cousins, and two second cousins, or were they first cousin’s once removed? It didn’t matter, they were all family. His family.
Automatically he liked them all, especially his uncle Malachy, Molly’s kid brother, who was in fact, two years younger than Harry himself.

“Hey, everyone!” yelled Matilda once Harry had met everyone. “I’ve got us all tickets to Tall Ships for tomorrow. Today, though, is for Harry. A big hand for the Birthday Boy!”

“Thanks, I need one,” shouted Harry over the din of applause, sending the hoard into delighted laughter. They were definitely a merrier bunch than the Dursleys.

“So what do you want to do about all these presents, Harry,” asked Malachy, still laughing.

“Presents?” Harry sounded surprised.

“Of course,” said Claire Fraser, sounding surprised at his surprise. “It’s your birthday.”

It was a huge mound of gifts, far more presents than Dudley had ever gotten. Even after four years, opening presents was still novel to Harry. One-handed, it went slowly, but everyone was enjoying themselves too much to complain. The first gift he opened, from Claire and Colum Fraser, Molly’s parents, was a shiny new cauldron.

“Mol’ told us all how you lost all of your school things,” Colum explained tactfully. “So we thought this’d be a good idea. And it’s silver, so it’ll last longer than pewter.”

“Thank you,” said Harry sincerely before moving on to the next brightly-wrapped box. This one held a new wool cloak, with a Gryffindor Lion worked in bronze as the fastener. Hermione had resumed her sel-assigned post as Harry’s narrator, so she described it and all the other gifts to him. From his new parents came a ne trunk, complete with his name inscribed on a little plate in the front. Harry opened it immediately, moving his opened presents into it from his lap.

“Thanks, Molly, Arthur, but you didn’t need to give me anything. A family is the best present I’ve ever gotten.” A fierce hug was their response, knocking the breath from Harry’s lungs. “Well,” he gasped. “If you insist.”

Ginny’s present to him was a bundle of left-handed quills, mostly eagle, but with a big ostrich plume thrown in. That, Harry kept in his lap, running his fingers through its down as he opened more of his presents. Hermione, of course, got him a book. *Hogwarts, a History*, and charmed to read itself aloud.

“Thanks, ‘Mione,” said Harry wryly, “but now what will we need you for?”

Fred and George gave him a whole sack of pranks. Harry put those aside quickly without explaining, hoping he would have a chance to pull a few of them in the very near future. Ron’s gift was a real Golden Snitch. “It’s autographed by Victor Krum,” he explained.

Through Percy came a gift from the Ministry itself. “This,” he explained importantly. “Is a medal of commendation for extraordinary courage in the face of great danger.” He pinned an ornament to Harry’s left shoulder. “And this,” he said, pinning another, “is a citation for a honourable wound, received in the defense of the citizens of Great Briton and the World.”

Harry was floored. “These?” he asked confusedly, raising his stump and gesturing to his eyes.

“No,” said Percy soberly. “This,” he tapped the scar on Harry’s forehead, “and this.” He would have tapped the inside of Harry’s right elbow, but he had to falter. Harry had no right elbow. “The place where Peter Pettigrew cut you to take your blood to bring back He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The Ministry sends its profoundest apologies for not believing you at the time.” Percy shook Harry’s
hand warmly before stepping back.

That had dampened the mood, but now it returned to full swing as Harry continued to open presents. By the time he had opened them all, the crowd was as jocularly raucous as ever. He was euphoric with joy.

At this point, lunch was ready. Harry, although he couldn’t join in the meal, was put at the head of the table. His mouth watered at the smell of all the foods that he couldn’t have, until Molly’s mother spoke.

“Who wants Haggis?” Harry’s appetite died immediately.

After lunch, the adults stayed in the kitchen to talk, but all of the children swarmed out into the large back garden to play. Harry was it first in a spirited game of Blind Man’s Bluff. Yesterday, he had discovered that by planting his base of his wand against the arm of his chair he could use it as a kind of joystick. With that improvement in his mobility, this was a game that he was ideally suited for, requiring only one alteration to the rule. Whoever was ‘it’ had to constantly make some sort of sound so that Harry could track their movements as well as the sighted kids.

They were having so much fun that only when it began to get dark did the game end. Harry protested. “I can play just fine in the dark, why can’t you?” His tone was light, if regretful.

“Come on, Harry,” said Malachy. “It’s just about time for dinner, anyway. We’re all going out.”

“Really, Uncle Malachy? Where?”

“Don’t call me that,” he said without asperity. “It’s a restaurant called the Space Needle. Odd name, isn’t it? But Grandpa Weasley says the food is really good.”

“The Space Needle? As in Seattle, U.S. of A?” Harry was once again floored.

“Yeah. Didn’t you know where you’ve been all day? This is Granny Weasley’s place in the States. She lives on an island called Lopez in Washington State. It’s like Hogsmead back home, almost everyone here is magical.

“I’ve never heard of it, but then I’ve never been to the States before,”

“I haven’t been here since I was very little, when I came with Mol’, but it’s just like I remembered it. Did Hermione describe the house to you?”

“Yeah, she did, earlier. During the introductions. It sounds incredible.”

“It is,” said Ron as he came up to them. He sounded sentimental.

“Are you boyos coming or not?” called Aunt Bonnie, Molly’s youngest sister, from the back door.

“Coming, Aunt Bonnie,” called back Ron. “Come on, Harry. We’re going to Floo to Uncle Luke’s flat in Seattle. He says we can walk to the Space Needle from there.”

It took a long time for 77 people to disappear through the capacious fireplace. Harry couldn’t help but remember his first experience with Floo, and cringed and chuckled to himself simultaneously. He didn’t repeat the incident, for which he was grateful. Uncle Luke’s small apartment was absolutely packed when he arrived, but they all headed out immediately, a great hoard moving leisurely along the sidewalks of Metropolitan Seattle. Suddenly, Hermione gripped Harry’s arm.
“Oh, Harry, it’s beautiful!” she cried softly.

“What?” he asked.

“The Space Needle. It’s, oh, how can I describe it? Have you seen the Eiffel Tower, in Paris?”

“No,” said Harry patiently.

“Oh, well, this is like a saucer on top of a big, conical pedestal... Oh, here!” Seizing his hand, she traced the swooping lines of the landmark into his palm. You see?” she asked anxiously.

“I see,” said Harry. “What else can you tell me?”

“Well, it’s all lit up, with blue and white neon. It looks like some... Oh, there’s nothing I can compare it to. It’s... unique,” was all she could come up with.

“Sounds beautiful,” said Harry softly.

“It is,” she agreed.

Apparently, the clan had somehow reserved the entire structure, so there was no delay for the legendary elevator or to be seated in the revolving restaurant at the top. The food was incredible, and Harry even got to taste some, although no one would let him swallow any no matter how much he pleaded. Harry, Hermione, Malachy, Ron, and the other kids amused themselves by sticking notes to the windows. Only the floor of the restaurant revolved, along with the tables, while the windows and the central kitchen area remained stationary. Anything put on the windows therefore, passed by all the diners before returning to its originator, a circuit which took about forty five minutes. When Harry got his little slip of parchment back, nearly everyone had added a little comment or sketch to it. Once Ron had read it to him, laughing so hard he could hardly speak, Harry put it carefully away into his chair.

As dessert was wrapping up, an unfamiliar voice spoke up. “Harry Potter? My name is Klaus Dettriche, and I’m the President of the Space Needle Owners’ Association. May I just say that it is an honour to have you here, in our establishment.” Apparently, Mr. Dettriche was a wizard. “If there is anything that we, I can do or provide, you have but to ask.”

Harry replied slowly. “No, there’s nothing that I can think of right now. Wait.” He’d had an appealing thought. “Can we go up top?” During dinner, Hermione had told Harry of something she had seen on television about the Space Needle, and Harry had immediately wanted to get as high as he could on it.

“Anything for the Boy-Who-Lived,” said Mr. Dettriche obsequiously. “If you’ll just give me a moment.”

“Anything for the Boy-Who-Lived,” said Harry over Ron’s jibes. “Being the Boy-Who-Lived is beginning to grow on me. I could even get to like being famous.”

Arrangements were made with the speed of light, and Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Malachy were escorted up a service staircase by Dettriche and an engineer named Martin. Above their heads, Harry heard a door open. Directing his chair upwards, he surmounted the Space Needle. He leaned into the stiff wind as best he could, trying to believe that he was on a broomstick, flying high above a Quidditch pitch, for that was why he had wanted to be so high. He missed flying more than anything else he had lost. Being up here wasn’t a substitute, but by the time Dettriche called to him, the craving for altitude had eased.
“I’m sorry, Mr. Potter, but the wind is picking up. You and your friends have to come down now.”

Harry, reluctant to leave the roof of the world, lagged behind the other three in returning to the stairs and was the only one still out when a vicious gust swept across the saucer, knocking his chair on its side and sending it sliding. “Help!” Harry screamed, clawing uselessly at the slick surface. His fingers caught and tore at the rivets in the metal, but he couldn’t stop his slide.

“Harry!” shouted Hermione, but it was too late. Harry was three feet from the edge, one foot, and gone.

Chapter: 20

$ Was I evil with my last chapter? I’m sorry. (Mock sweet tone.) No, really, you’ve got to believe me. I don’t want to give you cliffhangers, but all the people who live in my head... They’re not so nice. (See my bio for a partial list of everyone who lives in my head.) $

$ PS: Sorry that this chapter took so long. I had to write a huge chunk in the middle from scratch or Harry wasn’t going to get to go to the Tall Ships thing, and I really wanted him to go. For those of you who aren’t boat people, a Tall Ship is an old-fashioned one. Think pirates, Columbus, and Captain Cook. The Tall Ships festival is where a whole bunch of tall ships and other noteworthy boats got together and toured the West Coast. I think they do the same thing on the East Coast, too. (Of America) They usually have two or more masts, square sails, that kind of thing. $
“I’m fine,” Harry repeated. He turned his head towards the voice, smiling to reassure the man, but he heard instead a gasp of surprise.

“Who did this to you?” the man asked, and Harry felt his hands on the knot of the blindfold. He opened his eyes as the cloth fell away.

“The man who did this is in a prison in Britain,” he said truthfully. “Can you please turn me over? This is very uncomfortable, and I’m lying on my stump.”

His anonymous would-be-savior relented, carefully rolling Harry onto his back.

“My name is Harry Potter, by the way,” said Harry, feeling awkward in the odd situation.

“My name is Samuel Clayton,” said the voice. “Dr. Samuel Clayton.”

“A doctor. Hmm. I picked a good place to fall, didn’t I?”

“I suppose so.” He sounded unsure of himself as he continued delicately. “Out of a professional curiosity, Harry, what happened to your eyes? I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“Fun, aren’t they? A real talking point.” He had to prevaricate quickly, for a muggle such as this Doctor Clayton would not understand things such as an Eaufeu Catalyst. “A man... poured petrol into them and lit it.”

“Oh. God.”

“It’s OK, sir. Hey, could you or someone here go up to the restaurant, and get a Mr. Arthur Weasley? He’s my guardian and will need to know where I...” He didn’t get to finish his sentence.

“Harry!” It was Mrs. Weasley, running from the foot of the Needle. She sounded panicked as she pushed through the crowd that had grown around the boy. “Harry! Oh, Harry, are you OK?” She fell to her knees beside him and he reached for her hand.

“I’m OK, Molly,” he assured her, smiling. “As I was telling this man. Dr. Clayton, this is Molly Weasley, my step-mother.”

“Mrs. Weasley, your stepson just fell over five hundred feet without a scratch,” said the doctor, his voice making it a question.

“Just lucky, I guess,” said Harry. At this point, he just wanted to escape this too-curious muggle so he could tell Molly about what had just happened.

“Even so, Harry, I would like to get you to a hospital to check you over. There could be internal damage or fractures that I can’t see here.”

“I’m sorry, Doctor,” said Molly. “Obliviate!” Dr. Clayton’s hand fell limply from Harry’s shoulder as his memory was erased. “That should hold him for a few moments. Come on, Harry. You’re sure you’re OK?” She lifted him carefully like a small child and headed back into the shops at the foot of the Needle, where Arthur, Ron, and a large selection of the hoard were piling out of the elevator.

“Harry!” cried out Ron, seeing him. “Mum? Is he OK?”

“I’m fine,” said Harry with some asperity. “I’m not hurt at all.”

“I’m very glad you’re all right, Harry, but I don’t understand that you’re not hurt. We all saw you fall past the windows, way up there.” Mrs. Weasley sounded confused.
“I don’t understand either,” agreed Harry. “I was falling and then, I wasn’t. I didn’t hit the ground, I just wasn’t falling anymore, and I was on the ground.” Suddenly he remembered something else. “I heard an odd sound, like glass breaking.”

Mr. Weasley spoke up. “You must have apparated, Harry. Where did you learn that?”

“I apparated? How? I mean, I’ve never learned it, so how could I do it?” Harry remembered Mr. Weasley telling him once that apparation was very hard. “I didn’t splinch myself, did I? I’m missing enough pieces already.”

“No, you look all there to me, but how? Underage apparating is all but impossible.”

“I know. I mean, you’ve told me, but I don’t know how I did it. I didn’t even think of apparating, and I didn’t have my wand.”

“Who cares how he did it?” burst out Ron. “He’s OK!”

“Yeah, I am,” agreed Harry. Suddenly, a wave of exhaustion hit him. He yawned. “But I’m really beat.” Someone had retrieved his chair by now, and, as Mrs. Weasley settled him into it he yawned again.

“I suppose we should go back to your place, then,” said Mrs. Weasley, a trifle regretfully. “Matilda, thank you for today. This means so much to him.” She gestured to Harry, who had already fallen asleep. “It means a lot to all of us.”

“Think nothing of it, Molly. It’s always a pleasure to host a bash like this.”

Harry didn’t even wake up as they took a portkey back to his uncle Luke’s apartment, where he and his immediate family were to spend the night as the rest of the two clans went back to Matilda’s house on Lopez. When they reconvened the next morning, it was already a blindingly hot day. The fair at the waterfront was already in full swing, full of people out to enjoy the spectacle of a score or so of ships sailed straight out of the past, tall ships such as the Lady Washington, which Fred recognized with delight. George did not.

“That’s because you don’t watch Star Trek,” taunted Fred. “That’s the ship from the beginning of Star Trek; Generations, but they called her Enterprise for that, of course.”

So they toured all the boats, swelling the already-long lines with seventy-odd more people. Harry actually got to sail on one of the tall-ships, the Hawaiian Chieftain in one of the mock-battled that it held with its traveling companion, the Lady Washington. He cheered until his throat was raw with the smoke from their cannons and laughed heartily when he heard a story from the ships’ last stop, a small town up north, right by Canada, called Anacortes. They had held mock-battles there, too, and a great mass of local boats ad come out to cheer them on. One of these, a schooner named Rejoice, had actually joined in. Lacking a cannon of their own, the young crew made one of their own by the simple expedient of lining up along the rail and shouting “BOOM!!” at the top of their lungs whenever they were broadside to either of the tall ships or to the shore batteries set up on the piers of the town. The Rejoice, Harry learned, had followed the tall ships here to Seattle, and was moored on display only a few docks down.

Immediately after the battle, Harry made a beeline straight for the Rejoice. He wanted to meet the inventive crew. As this boat wasn’t actually a tall ship, there was no line. They were welcomed aboard by a teen who introduced herself as Beth Huffington, a Sea Scout. The entire boat was crewed, owned, and maintained by Sea Scouts, and had an interesting history of his own, which Beth was more than willing to relate.
"The Rejoice was built in 1923 during the Depression, as a wedding present from a man to his bride. Her name was Joyce, and it was actually the man’s second marriage to the same woman. Hence the name, Rejoice.” The pun drew a few guffaws. “The boat went through several owners before she was donated to the Sea Scouts. The owner before us was actually afraid of her, so she hadn’t been sailed for about a decade before we got our hands on her. She’s been sailed plenty since, but she was built for blue water, er, open ocean sailing and we can’t give her that. We’re based in La Connor, and we’ve never taken her farther than southern British Columbia.” Suddenly her voice petered. Harry could hear her fidgeting, and then she spoke again, quietly, as though afraid that those around her might hear. “Are you Harry Potter?”

“You’re a witch?” Harry asked, surprised. Sailing sounded like a lot of fun, but it did seem like more of a muggle pastime.

“Yeah,” she said with confidence. “I’m a student at the Northwest Islands Academy of Magic, up north on Folly Island. It’s just a small school, but it’s great. I’m a sixth year, South Tower.” She took Harry’s hand and shook it excitedly. “It’s an honour to meet you.” In rapid order, she introduced the rest of her shipmates, all of whom attended the Academy. “And this is Rob Shriglet, our Skipper,” she concluded, and Harry’s hand was shaken a final time.

"Would you like to come below, and tour the boat, Mr. Potter?"

“Sure,” said Harry. Since everyone on the boat was magical, he could use his chair’s more useful attributes, such as legs. It barely fit down the narrow companionway, but he made it below. Hermione was kept bust describing everything, and Harry had a lot of questions for Beth. The boat, it turned out, could power along up to eleven knots under the “iron genny,” a pink-painted diesel engine that lurked beneath the galley counter. They had a stove and a sink, but no oven or running water, and the head was a topic to be avoided. (A head on a boat refers to the w.c.) He got to try out a bunk, the smallest, which the crew affectionately and descriptively called “the Coffin.” It was a tighter fit than Harry’s cupboard had been. “Cozy,” he remarked, and people laughed. He learned that, although there were only a total of eight bunks, four in the main cabin, two in Captain’s quarter, and a further two very far forward in the foc’sl, or forecastle, sixteen people would be sleeping on board tonight. Mr. Weasley asked Captain Shriglet why they hadn’t used magic to expand and improve the quality of the living spaces.

“Because the magic-free ship,” replied the captain proudly. “She was built by hand and that’s how we keep her. Sure, it’s a challenge.” He described their annual haul-outs where they sanded and repainted the entire, fifty-six foot long hull, top to bottom, “But it’s a great thing for kids, for anyone to do.” The man was obviously passionate about his favorite pastime. Harry could sympathize, he was the same way about quidditch. He sternly repressed the little voice in his head that mocked him for even thinking about quidditch, and complimented and thanked Rejoices’ crew one last time.

The next day, at Harry’s insistence, they came back. What he wanted this time, though, was not to tour the boats again, but rather to try his hand at the activities on shore set up by the Sea Scouts. Beth had told him about them, and she, in fact, was crewing them today, rather than the boat. They had set up a rope-and-pulley hoist that they called a Bo’sun’s chair, and they were lifting small and not-so-small children aloft with it. Harry, hearing the happy shrieks of children some twenty feet above him, decided he had to try it. The Sea Scouts were extraordinarily conscientious in tying the knots on which he would depend, adding a few to compensate for his disabilities, and then he was up. Here was the feel of flying again, marred only by the abrasive rope that fed through his hand. Too soon, he had to go back down.

The rest of the week was spent on Lopez and the surrounding islands. Lopez had a small village called, appropriately enough, Lopez Village. It held the island’s only petrol-station and grocer, as
well as a renowned bakery called Holly-Bee’s and a number of hole-in-the-wall bookstores. Friday Harbour, on nearby San Juan Island, was a bustling metropolis by comparison. Why, it even had a cinema! This being August, there were tourists clogging every venue. Harry preferred Lopez.

On their last day, it was decided that they would take a muggle airplane home, rather than another portkey, for Harry’s sake. At some point in the week, Thursday, Harry thought, a ministry official from England had tracked him down and asked him what he wanted to do with his recovered money. Harry had sent most of it back to Gringott’s, but had kept about five thousand Pounds out as ‘spending money.’ He had treated everyone to ‘frappacinoes,’ an American delicacy, but still had enough to buy tickets for himself, Hermione, and his family, and he insisted. They took the ferries to Anacortes, which islanders called ‘the mainland’ even though it was an island itself, because there was a bridge that connected it to the continent. From the ferry dock, they took the airport shuttle past Seattle and all the way to the Seattle-Tacoma Airport, SeaTac. Mr. Weasley and Ginny, who looked to follow in her father’s eccentric footsteps, were speechless in wonder at the profusion of muggle ingenuities such as subways, conveyor side-walks, and ‘escabators.’ Hermione, who had flown often in her life, explained everything. Harry, who had never even seen an airport, listened as avidly as his step-father.

His handful of notes proved to be more than enough to seat them all in First Class on Flight 48 to London Heathrow Airport. At one point in the nine-hour flight, a stewardess approached Harry.

“Excuse me, sir. Is your name Harry Potter? The captain would like to meet you.” He followed her in his chair up the aisle to the door to the cockpit, puzzled. The stewardess knocked and he was admitted immediately, Ron and Hermione right behind him. Someone seized his hand, shaking it excitedly.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Potter. I am honoured.” The excited voice of a young man rang out in the small room. “My name is Frank Abagnale. Captain Abagnale.”

“Pleased to meet you, Captain,” said Harry politely. “This is my friend, Hermione Granger, and my brother, Ron Weasley.” Harry was finally getting used to being recognized wherever he went, even starting to like it. “Thank you for inviting us up here.”

“My privilege, sir, my pleasure. If you’ll just come over here, my co-pilot will show you the controls.” He didn’t seem to realize how ludicrous this was to think of showing a blind person anything, but Harry didn’t mind. The co-pilot, a witch by the name of Dorothy Gallant, was eager to explain the control board to Harry, letting him “see” it with his fingers, so long as he was careful. Ron and Hermione took turns sitting in the captain’s chair, laughing at each other. “Er, can I get a picture of you and me?” asked Captain Abagnale when Harry and his friends were ready to go back to their seats. He produced a camera, and Ron, laughing at the echoes of Colin Creevey, took the picture of him and his co-pilot with Harry sitting between them and the darkening sky as a backdrop.

“Can I have a copy of that?” Harry asked laughingly as the Captain himself escorted them back to their seats.

“Of course.”

When they go back, Mr. Weasley was watching the in-flight movie in awed silence. Harry chuckled. From the sound of it, it was The Lord of the Rings; the Fellowship of the Ring, and it had just begun. Those who had seen it already waited with baited breath for the line and, when it came, laughed riotously at Mr. Weasley.

“Aye, that is funny!” he gasped, getting the joke at last, and wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. “Fredo Baggins indeed.”
At London Heathrow Airport, after getting Mr. Weasley past the oh-so-fascinating baggage claim, they hailed a trio of muggle taxies to take them to the Burrow. Harry tried to foot the bill again, but his step-mother would hear nothing of it.

“That’s your money, Harry. We can handle things like this from time to time,” was her argument, and he gave in, although he did insist on paying the tips.

Having been up all night on the flight, the entire family was exhausted. On arrival at the Burrow, no one resisted going straight to bed, Ron helping Harry, and Hermione rooming with Ginny, even though it was nearly noon.

“Harry! Ron! Everyone up! Ron, could you hurry and get Harry up? He’s going back to Hogwarts today.” It was the next morning, and Mrs. Weasley was yelling from the landing Harry shared with Ron.

“I’m awake,” muttered Ron from his room. “I’m awake.” Harry could hear him stumbling around, tripping once before he came across to Harry’s room.

“Morning, Ron,” chirped Harry cheerfully, deliberately provoking the half-conscious Ron.

“Good morning, Harry,” said Ron sarcastically, through gritted teeth, but he was as considerate as ever in helping Harry get ready for the day. Sometime while they had slept, Mrs. Weasley had brought Harry’s gifts up to his room, careful not to wake it’s exhausted inhabitant.

“Could I wear my new cloak today, Ron?”

“Sure.” Ron was slowly waking up. Today, Harry was going back to Hogwarts where the professors would help him learn to perform magic blind and left-handedly. He was actually looking forward to it. At least, he was until he got there.

“As Professor Snape is the only left handed member of the faculty, you will be working with him for the next month,” announced Dumbledore calmly, ignoring the obvious consternation of both Harry and Snape.

“Him?!” they cried in unison, each pointing to the other dramatically. At least, Harry had meant to point at his hated potion’s teacher, but he ended up indicating the wall behind him. Ron laughed and corrected his aim.

“Albus, I don’t think that I am best suited for this task. One-on-one teaching has never been my forte. Maybe you or Minerva would be a better choice.” Snape sounded almost panicked, which made Harry feel better about his own misgivings.

“No, Severus,” said Dumbledore, sounding amused. “This is up to you.”

“If i must,” deferred Snape in a growl, sounding definitively nonplussed. Harry wasn’t happy about it either, but he wasn’t about to complain in front of Snape.

“Good,” said Dumbledore, observing their grudging compliance. “You should work out between the two of you when you are going to meet, and then get started.” He clapped Snape’s shoulder jovially, ignoring the man’s bared teeth. “Well, I leave you to it.”

Upon Dumbledore’s departure, Harry sat nervously, feeling Snape’s glare. He shrugged. “This isn’t my choice, either, Professor. So, when are we going to do this?”

“Immediately, Mr. Potter. Best get this ordeal over as rapidly as possible. Follow me.”
Harry tagged along behind the sweep of Snape’s robes, descending into the dungeons to Snape’s office.

$ More soon, I promise. Same brat time, same brat channel. Not really same time, but you get the idea, right? $
“Oh, yes, Potter?”

“Have I got it right?” He performed the wand movement one time more, paying attention to nuance.

“Er, yes. That’s correct.” Snape sounded very distracted, and Harry commented on it. “It’s nothing, Potter, not your business.” Snape pulled himself together and stood. “Very good, Potter. I believe there is nothing more I can teach you in this matter. As I have business to attend to, the next time we shall meet will be at the Welcoming Feast.”

“’Till then, then,” said Harry cheerfully, waving. Snape patted his shoulder firmly before leaving in a rush of robes. Harry alone made his way up to the Gryffindor Tower. Halfway there, he ran into Peeves. It was the first time he had encountered him this summer.

“Aww. Is ickle Potty Potter rolling along?” crooned the poltergeist, spinning his chair in a circle. “Where is wee Potter going?”

“I’ll go to the Bloody Baron if you don’t leave off,” threatened Harry. The threat worked, and Peeves zoomed off, bouncing from wall to wall and laughing insanely. Harry laughed to and continued towards the Tower. In front of the portrait, however, stood Dumbledore.

“Harry,” he began warmly. “Term starts shortly, and Severus tells me that you have some spare time. Would you like to go to Diagon Alley with me to collect your school things? I have a free day, and it would be my pleasure to accompany you.”

“Sounds great, Headmaster,” said Harry, beaming. He had been wondering what he would do to fill the hours without schoolwork.

“Than we shall go.”

They took the train once again to King’s Cross, and then the muggle Underground. Unsurprisingly, Dumbledore took all of the muggle technology in stride. Upon arrival at the Leaky Cauldron, Harry was, as always, accorded a hero’s welcome. He blushed at the applause, but didn’t wince as he once would have. He waved to Innkeeper Tom’s cheery “Nice to see ya again, Mr. Potter, Dumbledore,” as they passed straight through and out back to Diagon Alley.

Diagon Alley was as crowded as ever, full of students shopping for their Hogwarts supplies, just like Harry. His first stop was Madam Malkin’s, for new robes. As well as his school robes, he got some varied ones for everyday wear, and a pair of novelty socks for Dobby, one’s which sized themselves to any foot and glowed at night.

Next was Flourish and Blot’s, where the storekeeper gladly hunted down self-reading copies of Harry’s required texts, as well as a few books for pleasure. Added to the books he had received for his birthday, he was amassing quite a library.

When he had finished the rest of his list, he was quite content to simply follow Dumbledore through his shopping, interested in what such a wizard would but. Dumbledore kept a running commentary for Harry’s sake, but it was mostly mundane stuff, potion’s ingredients and old books. Last, almost to the evening, Dumbledore stopped Harry’s chair in front of a shop. “Which shop is this?” Harry asked tiredly. It had been a long day.

“This is Quality Quidditch Supplies,” replied the Headmaster, pushing Harry through the door. “You need a new broom.”

“What for?” Harry was puzzled now, and more than a little irritated. “I can’t ride one now, like this.”
“You can,” answered Dumbledore patiently, “If you try.” He turned to address the solicitous shopkeeper. “I owled you about four weeks ago, concerning the order of a custom broom. I understand it is finished?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” simpered the man, and he ducked into a back room. “I’ll be just a moment,” he called back.

“What’s this about, Professor?” Harry was still confused.

“I should explain, shouldn’t I?” Well, on your birthday, Harry, I ordered a broomstick on your behalf. It is a Starstone, absolute top of the line, and I’ve had it added to. Now, it will clasp you to itself, in much the same manner as your chair, and you steer it with a harness that will attach to your shoulders, leaving you a hand free to catch the Snitch.”

“How can I catch the Snitch if I can’t see?” Harry was beginning to get exasperated now, but the older man didn’t seem to notice.

“That will be taken care of, Harry. Ah, here it is. Would you like to try it out immediately?”

All hesitation was instantly forgotten. “Yeah!” Harry was excited now, as Dumbledore put the Starstone in his lap, describing it while Harry explored its shape.

The Starstone was longer than his Firebolt had been, and slimmer, with a more delicate transition between the handle and the brush. It felt good in his hand, almost humming with energy. According to Dumbledore, the handle was made of frosted glass, translucently blue, with a tail of fine, pale twigs. Harry could feel his name etched at its head, along with what Dumbledore said was stylized lightning bolt. He smiled at that. The modifications were evident as well, three pairs of slender arms extended from the staff, each delicately filigreed with tiny veins of silver. It felt good. It felt right.

“So, you gonna try it?” asked the shopkeeper with an odd tone to his voice. Something like awed hope.

“Oh, of course,” said Harry eagerly. “A hand, Professor?”

With Dumbledore’s help, Harry was soon mounted on his new broom, floating a few feet above the floor. His useless foot and stumpy leg were firmly secured in dragon-hide stirrups so that they wouldn’t dangle, and the six arms were twined about him from his hips to his shoulders, holding him upright and canted slightly forward. The silver filigree had expanded to cover his shoulders, his neck, and the back of his head. His hand was free, just like Dumbledore had promised. After the shopkeeper had delivered a rapid-fire series of instructions, Harry was ready.

The skills that had earned him a place on the Gryffindor Quidditch team in his first year hadn’t deserted him. In a matter of minutes, Harry had mastered the strange new broom. He raced around the shop, avoiding people, walls, and racks of merchandise as though he could see them. Quickly, he had accrued a fair-sized crowd as an audience, all of whom applauded to see their young hero so obviously unfazed by his trials. This, is fact, had been one of Dumbledore’s main aims in getting Harry back on a broomstick. It had worked.

“Harry,” he called at last. “It’s time to go.”

“Aw,” pleaded Harry. “Do I have to?”

Dumbledore chuckled warmly. “I’m afraid so, Harry. I have to get back to the castle. Come on.” He disengaged Harry from the broom and settled him back into his chair. “Remember, the broom is yours now. You’ll need to practice hard to be ready when the next Quidditch season starts, right?”
After Harry bought the rest of his Quidditch supplies, he and Dumbledore went back to the castle. There, the headmaster let Harry fly through the halls until well after midnight. When he did at last go to bed, it was with his Starstone in arm’s reach.

The last few days of the summer literally flew by for Harry, who spent every waking moment on his broom, eschewing his wheelchair entirely. Dumbledore had enchanted a Snitch for him so that it whistled highly, only for his ears. It was not loud, so the chances of his hearing it were the exact same as those of a sighted Seeker seeing it. Dumbledore had checked with Ludo Bagman, and all of the modifications, both to the broom and to the Snitch, were perfectly legal in any Quidditch match. They would even be allowed in the World Cup, should Harry go that far in a Quidditch career.

The fell of flying again, wind reddening his cheeks as he sped far out over the lake, this was what he had been missing, and he had barely even known it. His emotions when he first caught the Snitch were indescribable, and he wept from a place beyond joy.

The day school would start, Dumbledore woke him very early. The house elves hadn’t even lit the fires yet. “Harry,” he said, sounding slightly abashed. “Today, the staff traditionally have a quidditch match. An informal one, just for old time’s sake, but it is vaguely Gryffindor versus Slytherin, and they trounced us last year. We need a good Seeker.”

“Are you asking me to play?” Harry was excited and amused. Even the teacher’s thought he was good! “Sure! Who’s the Slytherin Seeker?”

Dumbledore answered with a chuckle. “Professor Snape.”

Immediately after breakfast, Dumbledore helped Harry into his Quidditch robes and onto his broomstick, and pointed out the rest of the team. He, Professor Vector, and Madame Hooch were the Chasers, Professor McGonagall was the Keeper, and the Beaters were Hagrid and... Remus Lupin.

“Professor Lupin!” cried out Harry in delight. “Are you teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts this year?”

“No, I’m not,” said Lupin. “Dumbledore told me that Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers are still scarce on the ground, but this year Professor Snape gets the job. I’m taking over potions from him. I know I’m not quite as adept there as he is, but I think I’ll do.”

“You’ll do great,” was all Harry had time to say, and then the game began.

Professor Trelawney was announcing the match and Harry, for once, found himself listening intently to her. The game was fast, faster than any he had ever played, and he loved it. He could track his teammates and opponents by listening to them whistling through the air, fast as bullets. Gryffindor scored, then Slytherin, and then Gryffindor again, all in an instant. But when the game was 260-270, Slytherin up, he heard the Snitch, zipping past above him. He raced after its sound, following the tiny whistle straight up. Snape had seen it in the same instant, but Harry could hear him falling behind, cursing and unable to keep up. Suddenly, the Snitch reversed, began to fall straight down. Harry didn’t turn to follow it. Instead, smiling, he stalled his broom, beginning a freefall. He fell past a startled Snape, through a layer of Catchers and Beaters, all trying to save him. He didn’t need saving, not this time. Still harnessed to his broomstick, Harry spread his arms wide, an exultant grin across his face. Without even trying, the Snitch was suddenly trapped in his hand. He halted his fall immediately and hovered, still on his back with the grass of the Quidditch Pitch only a foot below him. The other players landed around him an instant later.

“You fool Potter! You pull a stunt like that again and...” Snape was speechless with rage, and Harry suspected that his face would be approaching the shade of a violet pudding.
“Aww. Severus. I didn’t know you cared,” Harry drawled. “And what? You’ll expel me?” He was still on an adrenaline high, and didn’t care.

“Calm down,” said Dumbledore, dismounting. “Harry knew what he was doing, didn’t you, Harry?” Harry shrugged. “I was just having fun.” He heard Dumbledore laugh sharply. “What?”

“That’s what James said when he pulled this same stunt. I think you did it with more flair, though. Your father hit Severus here on his way down. It spoiled his form somewhat.”

“And broke my bloody arm!” cried Snape, but Dumbledore waved him away. McGonagall spoke up next, having just landed.

“You are OK, Harry?” she asked anxiously.

“Oh My Goodness, look at the time!” she exclaimed suddenly. “The students will be arriving in less than an hour!”

“Erk,” said Hagrid, surprised. “I’d better hurry down to th’ station, then.”

“We’ve all got things to do,” said Dumbledore calmly. “Just get to them. I’ll walk Harry back up to the castle.” Having summoned Harry’s chair, he levitated him into it and the two started across the grounds as the others ran off in various directions.

“Did my dad really do that falling thing?” Harry asked as they left the pitch.

“He did. He called it the Potter Faint Feint. It wasn’t his signature move, but it was his favorite. He had been signed by the London Lowflights by the time he graduated.” They had reached the castle. “Do you want to wait for the students to arrive in the Great Hall, or with Professor McGonagall?”

“With Professor McGonagall, please. I’d like to get the staring and the whispers over as soon as possible. Plus, it’ll be fun to scare the first years.” He pulled off his blindfold and stared towards Dumbledore “How do I look?”

“Unnerving as ever,” said Dumbledore with a mock shudder before he left Harry in the entry-way. Harry directed his chair down to the room where McGonagall was waiting for the annual crop of new students.

It wasn’t long before the first First Years arrived. Seeing Harry at the top of the stairs, a tiny girl screamed. McGonagall whirled to find Harry, slumped limply to one side, his black eyes open and staring in a scarred, vacant face. “Mr. Potter!” she snapped. “Please endeavor to look less dead. You’re scaring the First Years.”

“That,” said Harry as he closed his eyes and adjusted his chair to hold him upright, “was entirely the point, Professor McGonagall. I’m sorry, but I couldn’t resist,” he apologized to the younger students. The girl who had screamed approached him cautiously.

“You’re Harry Potter?” she asked in a whisper. He nodded, and was greatly surprised when she embraced him fiercely. Releasing him after a very long moment, she spoke again. “My name is Breena, Breena Diggory.”

“Oh,” was all Harry could say, absolutely stunned. “You’re...?”
“Cedric was my brother.”

“Oh,” Harry said again, feeling very stupid and awkward. What could he say to this girl? I’m sorry I got your brother killed? What he ended up saying was “I’m sorry about Cedric.”

“Oh. Thank you, but it’s not your fault, even my dad admits to that. We’re actually very grateful to you for bringing his body back to us.”

“He asked me to,” Harry said sadly, and then McGonagall led the new students into the Great Hall. Harry came in behind him, and then made a beeline for his spot at the Gryffindor table, joining Ron and Hermione.

“’Lo, Harry,” said Ron.

“Hi,” added Hermione.

“Good to see you, Ron, ‘Mione,” said Harry, before he was interrupted by a familiar drawl behind him.

“Have a good summer with those muggles of yours, did you, Potter” said Draco Malfoy. Harry swiveled his chair to face him, and was deeply satisfied to hear his rival stumble backwards with a half-formed curse. He had not yet replaced the blindfold.

“Actually, Malfoy, I did not. They’re just like you, to tell the truth. You hate muggles, just on principle, and they hate wizards. You’d get along famously.”

Draco was incoherent with rage at having been compared to a muggle. “I... uh... you...”

“Snake got your tongue, Malfoy?” said another voice. “How fortunate for you. If I had had to listen to insult Potter again, I would have been forced to take points from my own house.” The voice, smooth and icy, belonged to Snape. Harry grinned to hear him tell Malfoy off.

“Hello, Professor Snape,” he said cheerily, wishing desperately that he could see Malfoy’s face. Hermione, on his left, was making little muffled sounds of hysterical laughter.

“Hey, Malfoy,” interjected Ron. “You should be happy. With Harry off the Gryffindor Quidditch team, you might actually have a chance at getting near the Snitch.”

“Hey!” said Harry indignantly. “Since when am I off the team?”

“Well,” said Ron, sounding abashed. “I just thought, well...”

“Here,” said Harry, producing something from a magically enlarged cavity in his chair. “One of my less considerate fans sent me this as a get-well Soon gift. I think they made it. Apparently, it’s a hybrid between a wizard camera and a muggle camcorder. I filmed this with it this morning.” With that, he thumbed the ‘on’ switch, wishing yet again that he could see.

What everybody but Harry saw was the Quidditch Pitch, as it had been after breakfast that morning. To all appearances, they had all apparated their, for they could no longer see the seats on which they sat. Around and above them were the players in that morning’s game. Trelawney’s voice, easily recognized by those who had her class, announced the score.

“Gryffindor 260 to Slytherin 270!” The Slytherin students cheered to see their alumni in the lead, but everyone else’s eyes were riveted on the drama above. They watched as Harry ascended after the Snitch. Harry heard Hermione mutter “Icarus Complex,” and laughed. He knew what came next.
The next second, the entire audience gasped as one when Harry’s odd broomstick apparently failed, and he plummeted backward towards them and the hard ground. Not a few people screamed as the image of Harry fell directly into, no, *through* the real Professor Snape to stop abruptly at the level of his knees. Growling, Snape stepped out of Harry’s image only to have his own land directly on top of him, and then run to Harry’s side.

“You fool Potter!” the whole student body heard before the real Snape reached the camcorder-thing, shutting it off ill-temperedly.

“If you are finished disrupting this sorting, Potter, may we please proceed?” asked Snape sarcastically through clenched teeth.

“You may,” said Harry airily, waving his hand in benediction. His fellow Gryffindors laughed disbelievingly and Snape returned stiffly to his place at the high table. Order restored, Professor McGonagall proceeded with the Sorting. The Hat, when placed on its customary stool, sang out as always with a new song.

Oh, when you look at me,

You may see just what you see.

But you’d be wrong if you thought that

Was all there was to me.

Ten lives of yours and more ago,

The Founders needed one to know

Who they would teach when they were gone,

So in me that knowledge they did throw.

Gryffindor’s the house to choose

If courage is a trait you’d use,

Or P’rhaps in Ravenclaw you’ll find

Friends like you with clever minds.

If you work hard, and play as well,

Than Hufflepuff is where you’d dwell.

But should you find yourself in Slytherin,

Slyness is yours, and ambition.

Seven years from now, when you must leave,

You’ll miss me, and I know you’ll grieve.

“That crazy old hat,” you may well say,

“Placed me well, my Sorting Day.”
$ Well, did you like it? I want to rewrite the scenes between Harry and Snape, but I need some suggestions. Before anyone tries it, this story is not, nor ever will be slash of any form. I read it, I don’t write it. $
have thought possible. It was her easygoing manner, and she obviously held no grudge against him. She vaulted over the table to sit across from him, wedging a place for herself between Fred and George. Everyone turned their attention back to the Head Table, where Dumbledore had just come to his feet.

“Well, here we are once again, at the beginning of yet another year. This year will be different than those we are used to. As you all know, two of our students are here this year under unusual circumstances. They both need your respect, not your pity. I speak, of course, of Breana Diggory and Harry Potter. I know that those of you in non-magical families may not have access to Wizarding news, and may not be familiar with these names. Before you hear any rumours, I will explain Harry’s situation.” Harry shrank into his chair, not wanting to hear once again the details of his injuries, but all Dumbledore said was “Early this summer, Harry’s uncle tortured him in an attempt to steal the Potter family fortune. As a result of the injuries he received, Harry is now blind, and unable to walk. Be considerate of him, but do not pity him.

“Oh,” he said in a much lighter tone. “I do have some very bad news for Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Harry is still the Seeker for the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and, as you all have seen, his skills have most certainly not suffered.” These last comments broke the aura of tension in the room, and people here and there laughed. Harry was relieved. While many people would still want to know more, they at least knew enough that he would not have to incessantly explain. “To proceed with the rest of my announcements,” continued Dumbledore, his voice instantly quelling the rising conversations in the Hall. “As always, the Forbidden Forest is strictly forbidden to all students. Also, I am pleased to introduce your two new Professors. Remus Lupin, whom you older students should remember, has returned. This time, he will be teaching potions, as Professor Snape has finally gotten the Defense Against the Dark Arts position that he has always wanted.” Everyone laughed at that, even the first years who had no clue what the Headmaster was talking about. “And this is Sirius Black, here to teach Auror Method’s and Magic to Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Year students. His classes are mandatory, and have been added to all of your schedules.” groans greeted this last, but apparently Sirius’s innocence was now well known, as there were no screams of terror. Harry, Hermione, and the Weasleys cheered for his godfather.

The feast was as good as ever, even if Harry couldn’t eat it. He was reacquainting himself happily with his fellow Gryffindors when Malfoy returned, his cold voice cutting into a spirited, six-way quidditch-based conversation.

“Is what I hear true, Potter? You’re a Weasley now?”

“I am,” said Harry proudly. “What of it?”

“I thought the Headmaster said you had a fortune. He must have been mistaken, if that miserable excuse for a pureblood family adopted you. They seem to be allergic to gold.”

“Actually, Malfoy,” said a widely grinning Harry. He was going to enjoy putting the Slytherin down a peg. “I think I’m richer than you.” Beckoning his rival closer, he whispered figure into Malfoy’s ear, relishing the indrawn breath of shock. “I never knew how much fun being inconceivably wealthy could be,” he confided in a laughing Ron as an amazingly subdued Draco retreated to his own table.

As dinner was finished, Dumbledore stood once again. “If I am not mistaken, three out of our four Quidditch teams are in need of new captains this year. Will the members of Gryffindor, Slytherin, and Hufflepuff teams please rise.”

While Fred, George, and Angelina Johnson, the only remaining members of the Gryffindor team still in Hogwarts stood, Harry poked his chair with his wand. Its eight legs unfolded to raise him above
the level of the seated students around him.

“Good, good. Now, we will begin with Gryffindor. Will the team members please use their wands to vote for their choice?”

Harry had thought long on this, and voted now for George, but when the results were in, he was shocked to learn that all three of the others had elected him. He, Harry Potter, was Quidditch Captain for Gryffindor. The whole table stood as one to cheer. “Speech! Speech!” hooted the twins until Harry waved them off.

“Thank you,” he said, speaking around the lump of emotion in his throat. “I’m very flattered, and I will try my best, always. Gryffindor’s name will be on this year’s Cup!” The cheers grew, drowning out the boos and hisses emanating from Slytherin as Harry lowered himself back to the table. They finally died down in time to hear Chadwick Compton voted Captain Hufflepuff.

“I pity him,” whispered Ron to Harry. “He has to fill Cedric’s shoes. He’ll never do it.”

For Slytherin, Draco and his erstwhile teammates elected Travis Mallow, a Fifth Year that Harry remembered as being about six foot five and almost as wide as Dudley, muscle-bound and thick necked.

“I’m not worried. We’ll have no problem beating him,” confided Harry confidently to his team. “I can’t wait to see what we get in the trials. That’s in two weeks. I’m really looking forward to it. We’ve had no new blood in this team since me.”

“Careful, Harry,” jibed George. “You’re beginning to sound like Wood.”

“That’s a bad thing?” deadpanned Harry, and then he smiled.

Dumbledore was still not quite finished, not quite. “Due to certain events this summer and last year, prefects have not yet been appointed. Instead, we have four Head Boys and Girls, one per house. By Halloween, I will have elected all eight prefects, but I cannot explain the reasons behind the display just yet.

“Now, I believe that this feast has run well overlong, so have just to sing the school anthem and you can all toddle off to bed.” Harry was delighted. He hadn’t gotten to sing the anthem since his first year, and he loved it. Everyone sang lustily, choosing their own tune and completely ignoring Dumbledore’s conducting.

“Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,
Teach us something please!
Whether we be old and bald
Or young with scabby knees,
Our heads could do with filling
With some interesting stuff,
For now they’re bare and full of air,
Dead flies and bits of fluff.
So teach us things worth knowing,
Bring back what we’ve forgot,

Just do your best. we’ll do the rest,

And learn until our brains all rot.”

This time, Harry, Ron, and Hermione joined the twins in their funerary rendition of the ancient, irreverent lyrics, falling down laughing over each other at the end, and then they left the table as a group, repeating snatches of the song as they climbed to the tower. They parted in the common room to go to their respective dorms, still laughing. As Ron tucked Harry into bed, Harry plugged himself into his nutria-potion. A moment later, Seamus, Dean, and Neville piled into the room.

“Oy, Harry, what’s that?” cried Neville.

“What’s what?” asked Harry patiently. “Neville, I can’t see what you’re pointing at.”

“That... thing... er... poking into you arm, er... How did you know I was pointing if you can't see me?”

“It’s kind of obvious,” said Harry, blowing his hair out of his useless eyes. “Even to a blind boy. This is an IV line, Neville. IV stands for intravenous, or ‘in the veins.’ It’s delivering this nutria-potion here,” He tapped the bottle at his side. “Straight into my blood. See, below here,” now he tapped his sternum, “nothing works. I can’t feel it, I can’t move it, and it doesn’t work. Here, pick up my foot. Pinch it, poke it, whatever. I don’t care.” He flipped the covers off his whole leg. “Are you doing anything?” he asked a moment later. “I can’t tell.”

“All right,” said Seamus from somewhere near his feet. “But how are you going to Quidditch Captain if you can’t even walk?”

“I don’t need to walk, if I have my chair or my broom. Accio Starstone!” His new broom swept up from its place under his bed to nudge gently against his hand. He gripped it.

“It’s a Starstone, with a few modifications. Dumbledore ordered it for me.”

“A Starstone? Really? A real Starstone?”

“Uh huh.”

“By Merlin, Harry, do you know what types of broomsticks Starstone makes? They make one of a kind brooms, and really wealthy people collect them. No one actually flies a Starstone, they’re just too valuable! Dad’s seen one once, when he was invited to Princess Diana’s wedding as a representative of his department.”

Huh. Well, not to brag or anything, but I can buy about a hundred of these, so I plan to fly this one. Wait. Princess Di was a witch?”

“Nah, muggle through and through, but she got one as a gift from Mr. Hermes himself.”

“Who?”

“Oy, Harry. You’ve been in the wizarding world for five years now, and you still don’t know anything. Mr. Arturio Hermes, the guy who makes the Starstone brooms. He’s an artist, an incredible one. He’d probably have an apoplexy if he knew you were actually using yours.” Ron sounded annoyed, but admiring, and Harry rose to the bait.

“Would this Mr. Hermes ever allow someone else to modify one of his amazing brooms?” He indicated the arms there to hold him.
“No, but,”

“Well, then he modified mine so that I could fly it. Apparently, this broom was made to win Quidditch games. Ron, it’s incredible! I can’t fell it below me, but I don’t think that I would even if I could. With the steering harness, it feels like I have my own wings. That game this morning was the best I’ve ever flown!” Harry said fervently.

“Wings,” muttered Ron, obviously caught by the word. “Oh! I almost forgot! One of the firsties is a boy named Tristan McGinnis. He’s half-fae, he wants desperately to play Quidditch, and he got sorted into Gryffindor. I’m sure he’ll be at the trials, even if he is a firstie.”

“Hmm. I’d have to get Professor McGonagall’s permission to get him a broom, if he’s any good.” mused Harry, but Ron interrupted him.

“He’s going to be good! He’s damn fast, and he’s got wings!”

“Wings? He’s in. I will have to get him a broom, but the rules only say that he has to ride it for the first minute of play.”

“You do sound like Wood,” laughed Ron. “You’re gonna be a great captain!”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” said Harry. Suddenly, he yawned. “Good night, guys.”

$ Is it just me, or do I end a lot of chapters with Harry falling asleep? It’s just an easy method of transition, I guess. Aye well, read and review and I love you.

PS: If you like Cowboy Bebop, check my profile and read my new little Cowboy Bebop piece. $
“No, he hasn’t.” Lupin sounded a little confused, and Harry was provoked by Draco’s snickers from the Slytherin side of the dungeon, so he decided to explain.

“Here are the results, then. Malfoy’s already seen them.” Yet again, he pulled off his blindfold to expose the lifeless eyes beneath it. “The Optichroma Elixir changes the imbiber’s eye color, and the Nuageur Potion creates clouds in clear sky. Do not mix them. If you do, the hornwort and the isrythil root from the Optichroma Elixir will combine with the salamander skin and breath in the Nuageur Potion to form a variant of the Eaufeu Catalyst. When this mixture is taken internally, the other ingredients from the Elixir will direct the catalyst to the eyes, which are then burnt from the inside out. The Nuageur Potion confines its effects to the eyes so that it doesn’t spread.” His voice was perfectly impassionate, as though what he was describing had not happened to himself. “The immediate effect is burning, actual flames shooting from the eye sockets. Long-term effects include irreparable blindness and,” he paused to smile. “No eyelashes, and frightened First Years.”

Silence met his recitation. Even the Slytherins had nothing to say. It was a very long pause before Lupin gathered his wits again, changing the subject effortlessly to continue with his first class. After a few moments, however, Malfoy interrupted him stridently. “Why would anyone be thick enough to drink something like that?” As the class was now discussing famous potioners, everyone knew what he was talking about. Harry replied, sounding irritated.

“Accio knife!” he hissed. He had barely spoken when a boning knife from the kitchens appeared in his hand. In his chair, he vaulted over the intervening tables to land directly in front of Malfoy. He pressed the blade under his jaw. Everyone drew back, unwilling to interfere for fear of causing Harry’s hand to flinch. “Call me ‘Sir,’ Malfoy,” he growled, drawing the blade back an inch.

“Yes, S- Sir,” stuttered Malfoy, trembling and paler than usual. Harry drew back the rest of the way and banished the knife back to the kitchens.

“See how quickly you caved, and that was my first threat. I didn’t give in until that bastard had broken my elbow and cut off my thumb. Now, leave off!”

No one said anything as he wheeled back to his place, but after class, Lupin drew him aside. “What was behind that, Harry?” he asked, resting a hand on Harry’s shoulder. Harry shrugged it off.

“Malfoy had it coming, Professor,” he said stiffly. “He’s had it coming since first year.”

“I won’t disagree with you, and that’s why I didn’t take any points off of Gryffindor, but you can’t just threaten people with knives, even to prove a point. I’m giving you an hour of detention, here, tomorrow after dinner.”

Harry’s black mood lifted as suddenly as it had fallen. “See you then, Moony,” he said, smiling over his shoulder as he left the dungeon. “I’ve got to go or I’ll be late for Divination, and we both know what a shame that would be. They both laughed as Harry climbed the stairs.

Harry had been wondering just how he would get into the attic where Sybil Trelawney taught, but when he came to the foot of the rope ladder, his chair didn’t stop, just mounted rungs like a spider on a web. The similarity, in fact, was so strong that Ron, standing below him, shuddered.

“You look like a spider,” he said, beginning to climb himself.

“Cool,” replied Harry, grinning down at his friend. “Just call me Aragog.”

Ron shuddered again as he reached the top of the ladder. “I thought we agreed never to mention that again.” Harry just laughed.
Professor Trelawney made her usual dramatic entrance a moment later, looming from her shadowed, curtained office and peering through her bug-glasses. The effect was entirely lost on Harry. Abruptly, before she could speak, Harry went rigid. A low sepulchral voice issued from his open mouth.

“Sybil Ann Trelawney,” he intoned. “I see you. You were born thirty-nine years, eight months, and seventeen days, and four hours ago, in Mercy Hospital, Dublin, Ireland. Room 12C. You will die...”

“No!” cried Trelawney, composure completely abandoned. “No! I don’t want to know!”

Interrupted, Harry stopped. Slowly he relaxed, closing both his mouth and his eyes and shaking his head as if to clear it. When he spoke again, it was in a normal voice. “You mean you don’t know yourself, Professor?” he asked innocently. She gasped.

“You had a true seeing, and you remembered it?”

“I did, didn’t I? Isn’t it normal to remember?”

“Not as a child. Not always as an adult, but never as a child. Have you had any visions before? Here, wait a moment.” She had utterly abandoned her mystic air, letting it give way to frank curiosity. “Class dismissed! We will get back together tomorrow. Harry, dear, could you please step into my office? I’d really like to talk to you.”

“See you later, Ron,” said Harry regretfully as the class filed out around him.

“What was that?” whispered Ron as he passed. Harry could only shrug in puzzlement. He then turned to follow Professor Trelawney into her office, feeling a mild sense of unease. With the door closed behind them, Trelawney rounded on him excitedly.

“Have you ever seen before?”

“No, not that I can remember.”

“No unexplained blackouts, fainting, anything like that?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Her voice turned a trifle suspicious. “You’re not just pulling a prank, are you?”

“No,” Harry hastened to say. He was actually eager to describe what had happened. “I was as surprised as you. It was really weird. I mean, all of a sudden, I could see! For a moment, I thought that somehow, my sight had come back, and I tried to look around, but I couldn’t. All I could do was watch a little room where a woman, a witch was giving birth, and I knew where I was, and when I was, and exactly what I was seeing, like someone very close to me was standing right behind me, telling me, and then I saw you again, but you didn’t want to see that part, so it went away. I can’t remember what I was about to see there. Is that what seeing is like for you?” Harry was as excited as Professor Trelawney. He had seen something! Even if it wasn’t with his own eyes.

“My seeings aren’t that clear, Harry, and I don’t often remember them. You told me about one of mine at the end of the year before last, did you not? The night Sirius Black escaped the Dementors?”

“Yeah, but you didn’t believe me. Dumbledore did, when I told him later. He said that brought your total of true seeings up to two.”

“Future seeings, yes.” Trelawney seemed embarrassed. “I can predict fairly well, tea leaves, crystal
balls and the sort, but seeings are much, much more rare. And I can see the past and the present without too much effort, but they are easier.” Harry could hear tea pouring, but Trelawney was considerate enough not to offer him a cup.

“But I saw the past, and I was about to see the future. Does that mean I’m a seer?” Harry didn’t know whether to be eager or depressed. He had always denigrated Divination, not believing in predicting the future.

“It does,” said Professor Trelawney, sounding delighted. “But don’t worry. If you don’t want the visions, I have a charm that I can teach you to ward them off. When I was a young witch, mine were overwhelming. Everyone I met, I would see their past, to the point where I couldn’t tell if I was talking to an old man, a youth, or a young boy. I didn’t get it under control until I came here. Dumbledore helped me.

Harry thought about his options before he spoke again. “I’ll try this for a while, to see if I can handle it. I like being able to see something.”

“Alright then. I’m sure you want to join your friends, so you can go. Just, if you’ll come by later this evening, I’ll have some books on this for you to read. They’ll help you to understand this, I hope. See you then?”

“OK,” agreed Harry. “See you then.” With that, he directed his chair back to the Gryffindor Common Room, knowing that he would find Ron and Hermione there. He was right. They were there, along with the rest of his year. They all crowded around him.

“What was that all about, Harry?” asked Ron immediately. Harry told them all about his conversation with the Divination teacher, even what he had seen.

“Ron, I could see! Really see!” he finished fervently.

“Harry, that’s great,” replied Ron, sounding just a little uncertain about his friend’s new ability. “It sure shocked old Bug-eyes, though, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, it sure did,” laughed Harry. “Almost as much as Malfoy in Potions.”

Ron laughed hard at this. “Oh, I wish you could have seen his face Harry. He was dead white, and fit to piss himself. Snape would have killed you, but Lupin just let it slide.”

“Er, not quite,” amended Harry. “I’ve got a detention with him tomorrow night. He did agree with me, though. Malfoy only got what he deserved.” A note of suppressed anger showed under his voice, but there was no sign of it in his face.

“He did, didn’t he?” agreed Ron. “Are you coming to lunch?”

“No,” said Harry. “You go. I’m going to ask Dumbledore about something.”

“Nah, I’ll come. Not hungry anyway.”

“Alright, then, come on.” Harry led the way to the gargoyle that led to Dumbledore’s office. “Skittles,” he announced, and the statue leapt aside to allow the two students to ascend. Dumbledore was waiting patiently at the top, obviously expecting them.

$ OK. I wasn’t intending to end this chapter here, but I feel that none of you want to wait two weeks for an update from me. I’m using a different computer than normal, so nobody blame me if this chapter ends up looking odd. It’s not my fault. $
Chapter 24

$ Hi. Sorry, most sincerely sorry about the long wait. There have been... problems. And Midterms, and illness. And I was turned into a newt. I got better. So now I’m back, and I expect hundreds of grateful reviews. Or at least three, and a flame. That’s a more realistic expectation, right? Ah... so then, here. $

Chapter 24

“May I help you, Harry, Ron?” he asked, smiling benignly.

“Professor,” Harry replied, jumping directly to his point. “May I have my own room? I think I’m making my dorm-mates uncomfortable, and I’d rather not have that between them and me.”

“That’s not what I expected you to be here about, but I understand, but there are a few concerns. It is true that you need help, whether you like that fact or not. Madame Pomfrey has insisted that you have someone within earshot at night, just in case.”

Inspiration struck Harry. “Ron could share the room with me. He has to help me already anyway, and he’s my brother. It’s fun scaring First Years and Slytherins, but I don’t want to scare my friends. Plus, it’s embarrassing for me.”

Ron agreed happily to Harry’s idea. “I agree with Harry, Professor,” he said, nodding. “The other guys aren’t really dealing with this in the dorm. even though, during the day, they’re OK with it. Harry can’t even dress himself, he needs as much privacy as he can get.”

“I believe that will work admirably, Mr. Weasley. There is, in fact, a room adjoining your current dorm that will be perfectly suited to this situation. You can enter it via a house-elf passage. Dobby will show you, if you can find him. He should be in the kitchens, this time of day. But I wanted to talk to you about the news I got from Trelawney. She told me you had a vision.”

“Yeah, I did,” said Harry. “She said what I saw was true, and that it was very extraordinary for a youth to see the future and then to remember it.”

“It certainly is,” said Dumbledore musingly, “but we have always expected the extraordinary from you.”

“What?” Harry was surprised. “Why from me? I’m not that special.”

“He’s right, he’s not,” interrupted Ron jokingly. Harry meant to elbow him in the ribs, but he was too low and only hit his thigh.

“I mean it. Why does everybody expect me to save the world?”

Dumbledore suddenly grew cryptic. His voice was light, but somber. “You’ll know before too much longer, but we can’t tell you now.” With that, he ushered them abruptly out of his office.

“We?” said Ron in a puzzled voice to the closed door.
Realizing that their interview with the Headmaster was decidedly over, Harry and Ron raced each other down to the portrait that guarded the kitchens and tickled the pear. As they climbed through the hole, a small, Dobby-shaped blur tackled Harry. The diminutive house-elf was overjoyed to perform a service for “Harry Potter Sir,” and followed them happily back up to the Gryffindor Fifth Year Boy’s dorm.

“Passway is here, sirs,” Dobby said, patting the wall beside one of the recessed windows. “Password is ‘Klinglt.’”

“Klinglt?” asked Ron puzzledly.

“Is in House-elf language. Klinglt means ‘open.’”

“Can I change the password?” Harry was unsure that he would be able to pronounce the odd word, let alone remember it.

“Of course, Harry Potter Sir. It is easy. From inside, tell the wall to remember new password. Klinglt,” he said clearly to the blank wall. It folded back cleanly and silently into a neat stone arch surrounding a wooden door. Entering the door, Ron described to Harry what he saw, a low, narrow hall of intermediate length which forked about ten feet before a second door, this one inscribed with a radiant Gryffindor Lion.

“That way is leading to the kitchen, sirs,” said Dobby, plucking at Ron’s sleeve and pointing down the fork. They passed it by and opened the second door. Beyond it was large, empty chamber, long and narrow, with three windows along its length. After Ron had described it to him, Harry smiled.

“This is perfect,” he announced. “Dobby, could you and some of your friends please move our stuff in here? Beds and everything?” Dobby nodded eagerly. “Great. Ron and I have to get to class.”

“We do?” asked Ron, checking his watch. “We do! Come on, Harry, we’re going to be late for Herbology!” He pushed Harry’s chair back out into the hall. “Hey! We can take a shortcut through the kitchens to the greenhouses!” He went down the second passage at a jog, pulling Harry behind him backwards. They burst into the kitchens, scattering house-elves as they ran out through the portrait. Harry sped past Ron as they flew up onto the grounds and up the hill to Greenhouse 4, where the rest of the class was assembling. They weren’t late, just barely.

Nothing eventful happened in Herbology, even though all the Gryffindors kept shooting glances at Harry, unsure of what he’d do next. He disappointed them all by listening politely, attentively to Professor Sprout talk about the properties of different kinds of fertilizer. After class, he, Ron, and Hermione returned to the Common Room, as classes were done for the day. The boys smuggled Hermione though the boy’s dorm to show her their new room, where the house-elves had done a great job. Tapestries decorated the walls, and the two poster beds stood at the far end, Harry’s directly under the third window. Their trunks were there, tucked neatly under the beds with their contents stowed away in a pair of bureaus and roll-top desks. To top it off, there were three fatly stuffed armchairs clustered around a lit fireplace.

“This is great!” exclaimed Ron, seeing it all. He described it rapidly to Harry, who had already begun to explore the room by touch.

“It is,” agreed Hermione. They had explained to her why they got their own room, and for once she utterly concurred with their logic. “I’m a bit jealous, actually. Not that you don’t deserve this, Harry, but you don’t have to share a room with Parvati and Lavender.”

“Ha!” laughed Harry smugly, running his hand over the velvet, red-and-gold coverlet. “I don’t envy
The rest of the day proceeded without incident, Malfoy avoided the Gryffindor table at dinner, and so ended the first day of classes.

It wasn’t for three days that Harry ran into Breena. She’d been in classes, but he hadn’t had the opportunity to talk to her until she approached him at breakfast. “Hiya, Harry,” she chirped, tapping him on the shoulder. The shoulder she had tapped was the one away from her, but Harry swiveled to face her anyway.

“I am smarter than that,” he said.

“I’ll bet. Hey, did you catch yesterday’s notes in Transfig? I forgot to write it down, and I can’t remember diddly if I don’t write it down. Nope,” she said, audibly tapping her temple. “Can’t remember squat. Diddly squat!”

“OooooK...,” replied Harry, drawing back from her a foot. “Who had pepper-up potion for breakfast?”

“Not me,” she said laughing. “Coffee, and lots of it. It’s an American thing.”

“Must be. Anyway, you’ll have to ask Hermione for her notes. I didn’t take any. The homework, though, is to read pages 19-38 in Advanced Transfiguration for Marginally Competent Wizards, and don’t forget that quiz on Monday, turning a skunk cabbage into a skunk. Write it down, this time,” he finished, with only a hint of asperity to his voice.

“All right, all right.” Harry could hear Breena’s quill scratching as she used the back of his wheelchair as an impromptu desk. “Got it.”

“Are you going to Hogsmead tomorrow?” asked Harry, changing the subject.

“Are mermaids wet?” Her voice was mocking as she stated the obvious. “Is Peeves insane? Of course I’m going. You’re going with Ron and Hermione, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, them, and George and Fred, and Ginny. You should come, too. With us, I mean.” Harry found himself holding his breath as he waited for her answer and forced himself to relax.

“George and Fred? Oh, right, Ron’s brothers. Twins. They’re sixth years, aren’t they?”

“Seventh. They’ve got a year and a half on Ron. You’ll love them. Were you there yesterday when the Slytherin table flipped over?”

“That was them?” Breena practically shrieked. “Oh, God, I’ve never laughed so hard. Malfoy’s porridge slid straight down his robes. It was great!”

“Yeah, they’re like that,” Harry laughed. “So, you are coming with us?”

“Duh!”

“Excuse me?” Harry didn’t understand the not-quite-a-word.

“Yes. ‘Duh’ means yes, or sure. It’s another American thing.”

“Oh. Well, come on then. We’ve got to get to our first ever Defense against the Dark Arts lesson care of Severely Snapped Severus Snape.” Harry rolled back from the table.
“What’s he like? Everyone I’ve asked about him just looks at me pityingly. Is he that bad?” Breena actually sounded worried, and Harry didn’t blame her one bit. The first time he’d met Snape’s eyes, he’d been scared stiff. Of course, that was really because Lord Voldemort had been staring at him through Quirrell’s turban, setting his famous scar afire with pain, but that wasn’t the point.

“Nah, he’s not that bad. He just hates Gryffindors on principle, especially Gryffindor who are famous through no fault of their own. He’s head of Slytherin House, you see, and the only famous Slytherin is Vol, er, You-Know-Who,” Harry explained, raising his voice as he heard Malfoy and his thugs walk by behind him. “And Blaise, but Blaise is only famous here.”

“Why is that?”

“Haven’t you noticed? Nobody knows if he’s a he, or if she’s a she. Whichever, Blaise isn’t telling.”

“Well, that explains why he sits above Slytherin Table looking like he swallowed arsenic, doesn’t it?” Breena sounded relieved. “I think I can handle him.”

“You haven’t met him yet,” said Harry cryptically.

Chapter: 25

$ Hi. It’s another chapter! Two chapters in one week? I must be getting back to my old stamina. Hooray! Hooray for you, anyway. So, here’s Snape’s first DADA class.$

Chapter 25

Rolling into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom felt to Harry like entering a dense fog. Snape’s presence today was a malevolent influence, vindictive, menacing and cold. The Head of Slytherin House was in a very good mood.

“Class,” he snarled by way of greeting. “Today, we shall review what little you have learned and retained over the past four years in this class. Having had the dubious pleasure of evaluating your progress in your third year, I am not optimistic. Now, who among you, besides Miss Granger, can tell me by which signs a lycanthrope may be recognized, and what a lycanthrope is?”

Snape continued to critically review the efforts of the previous Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, patently unimpressed, if unsurprised with what he was finding. As his near-rant went on and on, Harry’s mind began to roam. He hadn’t thought about what had happened the night of his birthday for some time. What had happened? He supposed that he must have apparated, but how? No one had ever brought it up since that night. Mr. Weasley had seemed only mildly surprised, yet before, he had told Harry and Ron just how dangerous and difficult apparation was, even when you knew how to do it. Harry most certainly did not know how, not even the basics, so how had he done it? As Harry’s mind ran along these tracks, he became utterly unaware of what was occurring in the classroom until Snape’s hand came down heavily upon his shoulder, bringing him back to reality very abruptly.

“Mr. Potter, are you here today? I asked you if you knew what advantages a left-handed wizard has
against the Dark Arts?” Snape’s voice was as contemptuous as ever, but Harry was unfazed. He and Severus had spent three days arguing this very point less than a month ago, and he had a ready answer.

“The left hand is connected to the right side of the brain, the inventive side. Therefore, magic done with that hand is more of an art than a science, and more powerful for it. After all, only a lefty is in his right mind.” He smiled sweetly and Snape’s snarl sounded more amused than exasperated. Behind him, Harry heard Hermione giggle.

After Defense Against the Dark Arts, as Harry was trading acerbic banter with Snape, Breena came up behind him, taking the handles to push his wheelchair. He let her, sensing that she wanted to talk to him, but she kept silent until they were well away from the classroom.

“Why are you and Professor Snape friends, Harry? He used to be a Death Eater, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, but Dumbledore trusts him, so I do too. He helped the Light against the Dark, back when You-Know-Who was rising before. He’s not a bad guy.”

“If you say so...” Her mood lightened almost instantly. “What do we have next?”

“I have a meeting with Professor Trelawney. You have a free period. Ask Ron and Hermione to introduce you to Hagrid. You’ll like him.” They parted ways at a back stair, Harry climbing towards Trelawney’s class, and Breena running outside to enjoy one of autumn’s nicest days.

Harry reflected more as he rolled slowly through the quiet halls. He didn’t much like being outside anymore, when he wasn’t on his broom, that is. Sound scattered out there, making it hard to monitor what was going on around him. In just over a month, his hearing had sharpened incredibly. Here, within the stone walls of Hogwarts, he felt a bit like a bat, using echoes to tell him where people and things were in his vicinity. It was those echoes that warned him, as he mounted the main stairs, of someone’s presence at the top of the flight. He wished that they could tell him who it was.

“Who’s there?” he called out inquiringly. When there was no answer, he backed up a little. The presence advanced, light footfalls ringing on the polished steps. Harry, understandably nervous now, pulled out his wand and was about to cast an identifying spell when the presence charged him. A robe-clad shoulder tackled into Harry’s chest, knocking his chair off its feet just as the stairs beneath them both began to move. He was reminded wryly of the Space Needle as he fell heavily on his side to the steps. The footsteps circled him, then stopped just in front of his face. Harry reached out his hand, but it was kicked aside as the unknown knelt beside him in a rustle of robes. He could hear it, smell it as it leaned very close.

“No matter how rich you are, Potter,” came Draco’s sneering voice, “you are still vulnerable. Mortal. My master will reward me richly for this.” With a stifled grunt of effort, he simply shoved Harry in his chair off the edge of the still-moving flight. Draco laughed quietly to himself as Harry disappeared from sight and the staircase slid home into its new landing.

Even as Harry began to fall, his mind was working rationally. He knew he couldn’t apparate to the ground this time, still didn’t know how he had ever apparated, but a solution came to him almost immediately. “Accio Starstone!” he shouted, not losing his words to the wind of falling. A brief whoosh heralded the arrival of his broomstick directly into his hand. He gripped it tightly, and an arm strengthened by rigorous therapeutic exercises with Madame Pomfrey was strong enough to stop his fall gently. He hung there a moment, still attached to his chair and hanging from the broom. He reflected on what an idiotic image he must present, but called for help anyway. “Someone? Help?”

He wasn’t really panicked, although that surprised him.
“Harry!” It was Ginny’s voice, below him and to the right. “Harry, what are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m just hanging out,” he said, directing his broom to glide towards her. “Could you just keep talking so that I can get to where you are? I think my hand is starting to slip.”

With Ginny’s help, it wasn’t long at all ‘til Harry’s wheels touched down on the marble floor. “What happened, Harry?” she asked anxiously, checking to see that he was indeed alright.

“Draco pushed me,” he said soberly, hardly believing it himself. “Draco Malfoy pushed me. I need to talk to Dumbledore. Excuse me.” He left Ginny at high speed, reassuring her with a word as he sped towards the Headmaster’s office, back up the flights past which he had just fallen.

This time, Dumbledore was obviously not expecting Harry. When Harry reached the door at the top of the stairs, he heard the anxious voice of a boy beyond it, alternating with the Headmaster’s calmer tones. Not wanting to eavesdrop, Harry knocked lightly and the voices stopped. “Come in, Harry,” said Dumbledore. Harry rolled in, curious as to who else was there, but he had stopped speaking. “How was Defense Against the Dark Arts with Professor Snape?”

“What? Er, it was OK, but I need to talk to you about something else. Alone.” He could still hear a third person in the room, as well as a sound something like a slow fan. “Who else is here?” he asked, turning to face the unidentified sounds. Dumbledore chuckled.

“Harry, allow me to introduce Tristan McGinnis, one of your house’s fine young First Years. He was here to try and persuade me to allow him to bring his broom here to Hogwarts. he cited you as a precedent on this case. As Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch Team, do you have an opinion?”

As always, Quidditch readily distracted Harry from anything. He really was turning into Wood. “You’re Tristan?” he addressed the sounds in the corner,

“Yes, Sir.” the boy’s voice was confident and light, and the fanning sound sped up slightly as he spoke up.

“You don’t need to call me Sir,” insisted Harry, and then curiosity overcame tact. “Do you really have wings?” His fingers twitched in desire to find out for himself, but he felt that would be rude.

“Yes, yes, I do. My Mum’s a faery, so I inherited them from her,” he explained, sounding as though he had done so a thousand times before.

Harry laughed. “I’ll see you at trials, then. Leave it to me to convince him.” Here, he jerked his thumb towards Dumbledore, eliciting a warm chuckle from that direction. “If you’re any good, I’ll make sure you’re on the team.”

“Thanks, Mr. Potter,” said Tristan, breathless with excitement now but still confident.

“Call me Harry,” said Harry as he stuck his hand out in the boy’s direction. “Just Harry.” He was pleased to note that the hand that shook his was calloused in the peculiar pattern particular to the dedicated Quidditch Player; smooth across the palm where it is protected by the obligatory dragon’s-hide gauntlet, but rough and wind-chapped across the fingers and at that one little gap between the straps at the joint of the thumb. With a jaunty “See you later, Harry,” the First Year was off.

“Now Harry,” said Dumbledore as Harry swung back to face him. “I believe you had something of a less sporting matter to discuss with me?”

“Oh, yes.” The import of why Harry was here returned to him. “I had an...an encounter on my way up to Professor Trelawney’s attic. It was Malfoy, sir. He pushed me off the stairs in the Grand
Stairwell, Professor Dumbledore, and he told me, well, he implied that he was loyal to Voldemort. Sir, he tried to kill me!” The words all came out in a rush.

When Dumbledore spoke again, his voice was very grave. “Are you sure of this, Harry? I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that these are very serious accusations. Did anyone else see this?”

Harry knew that Dumbledore didn’t disbelieve him, but just the same he was uncomfortably reminded of Fudge’s disbelieve at the ends of his Third and Fourth years. “I don’t think so,” he replied truthfully, “but Ginny Weasley saw me right afterwards.” To explain, he had to back up a little. “I knew I couldn’t apparate in Hogwarts, like I did that night at the Space Needle, so I summoned my Starstone and caught myself.” He grinned ruefully. “At least this time I could save myself, eh, Professor?”

“It seems so, Harry.” Dumbledore’s voice was regretful. “I will talk to the staff about this, Harry, and I’ll send you a note when we need you again. I have to convene the board to expel a student in a matter like this.”

“Expel?” Harry wasn’t sure he had heard right.

“Attempted murder, Harry. You’re already familiar with the maximum sentence, so why should expulsion surprise you? As for him being a Death Eater, to prove that we will have to overcome his father’s influence in the Ministry. That won’t be easy, Harry, and there will be a trial. No doubt about that.”

The trial of Draconis Lucian Malfoy took place the very next day, and it was a disaster. the Malfoys, of course, had already in their employ an entire tribe of the very best solicitors Britain had to offer, as well as, much less publicly, the judge and a fair percentage of the jury. Harry couldn’t prove it, but he knew it, and Draco’s near-complete exoneration galled him to the core. The boy was expelled, but that and a small monetary fine were to be the sole retribution. Nothing at all was said about the Death Eaters, and the entire incident was passed off as a fight between schoolboys.

Chapter 26

That evening, after the trial, Harry followed Draco around the castle as he said his goodbyes, staying about ten paces back no matter what the former Slytherin threw at him, verbal or otherwise. At one point, Ron and Hermione joined him, glaring bitterly at the blonde's unconcerned attitude.

“How does he get off trying to kill you, and then just transferring off to Durmstrang?” Ron’s voice was acerbic and loud enough for the Slytherin Table to hear, as they were currently in the Great Hall. Harry smiled grimly in response.
“He’s not transferring. That’s just what he’s telling everybody. To save face. He’s really. Been. Expelled!” His voice rose, so that he yelled the last word in Malfoy’s direction. Conversation there stopped. “You heard me, Malfoy. You’ve been expelled. Kicked out, wand snapped and everything. You’re just lucky that your daddy’s such a big shot with his Death Eater friends that Durmstrang’ll take you anyway.”

“Shut it, Potter,” shouted back Draco in a wearied voice. “At least I didn’t let a muggle cut me to bits and all but kill me.”

“Maybe not,” Harry retorted, “but you couldn’t even finish the job, could you? What reward will your laughable snake of a master give you now?”

Draco didn’t answer. He walked quickly out of the room, shoving brusquely past Harry and his friends. They followed him as a group, eventually winding up at the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room. Draco had given up trying to avoid Harry, but now, he just stood there, not doing anything or even moving.

“What, Malfoy?” taunted Harry. “Can’t remember the password? Try ‘Pureblood.’” At this, Draco jerked in surprise. Harry was pleased to have provoked a reaction, but he couldn’t see the defeated look on his face. No one saw the mad and treacherous glint in his hooded eyes.

“They’ve changed the passwords,” he said in a leaden voice. “I have to knock.”

Harry crowed in delight, joined enthusiastically by Ron. Hermione tried almost successfully to smother a smirk. “Not even a Slytherin anymore, Malfoy, are you? Not even they want a Death Eater in their ranks. We all want you to leave!” With this, he left the boy, laughing even harder when he heard a knocking on the door behind them.

“That was mean, Harry,” said Hermione, but her heart was not in her words, and she couldn’t keep her face straight.

“That was bloody awful,” joked Ron. “You’ve got an inner Slytherin, Harry. Don’t deny it.”

“Hey!” protested Harry. “I, er, uh, well, no, I can’t really deny it, can I? Not when I can still do this.” The last word came out as a gutturally sibilant hiss and his friends shuddered slightly. Parseltongue came more naturally to Harry now, although he didn’t use it often. None of them were very comfortable with it.

“True,” said Hermione. “Well, if you’re done teasing Draco, let’s head up to the Tower. It’s getting late, and Fred and George are getting us all up early to go to Hogsmead tomorrow. Do any of you know why?” Everyone shook their heads, but she continued nonetheless. “Harry, Breena told me that you invited her to come with us.” Her voice made it a question.

“Yeah, I did. Yesterday morning. I meant to tell you guys, but... It’s OK with you?”

“Yeah, sure, Harry. You can bring your giirtll friennnd.” Ron drew the word out and made kissing sounds. Without a word, Harry reversed his chair to roll a wheel directly over Ron’s overlarge left foot. “Ow!” he shouted. “You know, that chair of yours is a weapon, you great prat.”

“Ha.”

Early indeed the next morning, shouts of shock and fury emanated from the Fifth Year girl’s dorm, along with a tremendous splash. Harry, Ron, and Ginny, already dressed and waiting in the common room, only had time to be puzzled a moment before Fred and George raced past them in a state of gleeful panic, closely pursued by four furious, soaking wet teenaged girls. George, who was running
backwards, wolf-whistled. “Isn’t this a great school, brothers?” he called to Ron and Harry as he circled the room only a few paces ahead of the murderous girls. “Wet tee-shirt contests at five in the morning Alp!” Breena and Lavender caught up to him, and they tackled him and held him to the floor as Parvati did the same to Fred. Hermione advanced menacingly, wand drawn. Ron, when he could draw a breath between gales of laughter, was describing the entire scene as rapidly as he could to Harry.

“Expelliarmus!” she cried through gritted teeth. They tried in vain to hold onto their wands, but she caught them neatly. She shot a shrewd glance to the other girls, and they all grinned toothily.

“Rekoppirts!”

Fred and George fell over as their clothes removed themselves, leaving them only in their boxers just as the rest of the Gryffindors, woken and attracted by the commotion, piled into the common room. They blushed simultaneously as red as their hair, but quickly recovered their sang froid enough to wink at the girls of all years. “Good morning all!” and they whisked off up the stairs.

Not much later, for Harry’s new, talking watch had not yet told him that it was 5:30, the seven of them were strolling down the road to Hogsmead. No one else was out, but why they had to be out so early, the twins would not say. They just kept pushing every one to go faster.

“Come on, Fred, let’s slow down,” complained Ginny, out of breath. “What’s sp important about being there early anyway?”

Fred looked at George. George looked at Fred. “Should we?” he asked cryptically.

“We should,” responded Fred enigmatically, and then they turned to the others, alternating rapidly as they began to speak.

“Last summer,”

“We pitched some of our Wheezes ideas,”

“To Zonko’s.”

“Xavier Zonker Zonko himself wrote us,”

“A letter.”

“A very long,”

“Very enthusiastic,”

“Letter.”

“He wants us,”

“To work for him!”

“On weekends”

“It’s OK with Dumbledore,”

“As long as we keep our grades up,”

“So we’re on our way to our very first ever day of work.”
“Of paid work, anyway.”

“And we don’t want to be late,”

“And we wanted you guys,”

“Here to cheer us on!”

Ron, Ginny, and Hermione just stared at them, something akin to terror on their faces. Breena just looked wary, and Harry put his face into his hand, shaking his head. “Oh no,” he moaned aloud. “It’s the end of the world as we know it! You two, getting paid to prank? Kill me now!”

“Ha ha,” said Fred drolly. “We’re not getting paid to prank.”

“Just to invent them,” piped in George.

“This is serious work.”

“Of course, they will all need tested...”

“But not on you.”

“No, would we ever prank on you?”

“See, we’re not supposed to test them ourselves.”

“Our judgments might be a little...”

“Just a smidgen.”

“A little biased.”

“Corrupted, you might even say.”

“So we need some testers.”

“Some volunteers.”

“Count me in,” said Ron immediately, his voice enthusiastic.

“Me too,” chimed in Ginny.

“Me three,” said Breena, grinning hugely.

“You’ll have to count me out,” said Harry with more than a little regret. “I can hardly report accurately on the results, can I?”

“Yeah, you’re right, I suppose,” said Fred thoughtfully, “but we’ll give you loads and loads of samples anyway. You are our chief investor, after all. Hermione, about you? Willing to throw in your lot with us collaborators?” He hung his arms over Ron, Ginny, Breena, and George, and smirked wildly at her, trying successfully to look like an outlaw.

“No, I’d better not,” she said with a sigh. “I’d get caught in an instant. Can’t keep a straight face to save my life, or anybody else’s.”

“You, Herm-ee-own? I thought you were the Queen of Jesters.” Ron’s voice was sarcastically affectionate, and he pulled her close in a one-armed hug. “Don’t you worry, ‘Mione. I would never
pull any on you.” Behind her back, he tapped Harry with his free hand. Touching it, Harry had to stifle a laugh as he traced this friend’s crossed fingers.

Fred and George led the group around to a door in the back of the infamous magical joke shop. George knocked, a deliberate rat tat ratatat knock that sounded an awful lot like a prearranged code. A moment later, they all herd the bolts being drawn and the door opened. The man standing there looked at them all suspiciously.

“What are they doing here, Weasley?” he asked in a suspicious voice, not distinguishing at all between the twins. Harry suspected that he wasn’t able to. “How can you be sure they’re not spies for Jeegan’s?”

“What is Jeegan’s?” blurted out Harry. He had never heard the name. Fred made a noise of disgust.

“Jeegan’s is Zonko’s biggest competitor, Harry. They’re based in America, but they have shops everywhere.” He sounded a trifle scornful. “Their jokes are plebian, mass-produced things, though. Nowhere near Zonko’s quality. They even use plastic.” Coming from his mouth, the muggle word sounded like an obscenity. “They say it holds magic as well as anything else, but we know better, don’t we, George?” He nudged his brother, who nodded fervently.

“How could it?” agreed George. “It’s so... so... plastic!” Fred snorted and shoved his brother at this bad joke.

“Anyway, we’ve tried it. It just doesn’t hold magic to our high standards. Or to Zonko’s,” he added, sketching a vague bow to the man in the door. “Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Breena, please allow me the great honour of introducing the King of Craziness,”

“The Pasha of Pranks,”

“The Ultimate Ruler of Insanity,”

“And our new boss.”

Fred leaned in to whisper an aside to Harry and Ron. “As well as so paranoid that Mad Eye Moody looks laid back.”

“Wow.” Harry whispered back, seriously impressed. To meet anyone more paranoid than Moody, the real Moody or the fake, was such an impossibility that it was almost an honour. Unfortunately, the subject of their discussion heard the brief exchange.

“In this business, boys, it pays to be a bit paranoid. If your ideas are just left around for anyone to find, you go out of business. Basic rule of a game like this.”

“How true,” said George in a respectful voice. “And that’s why you’re the top in this highly competitive field.”

“Enough with the flattery, boys,” grumbled Zonko, but there was amusement in his voice. Well, if you’re sure about this lot, I guess you can all come in. Don’t touch anything,” he warned sternly. “It might explode.” Remembering the twin’s room back at the Burrow, Harry thought that this was a very sensible precaution. He had almost lost his other thumb exploring in there by touch. The industry of prank-making was apparently a very hazardous profession, but more for the bystander than the prank-maker.

The twins were going to share a workshop in the surprising vast complex that was behind the rather inconspicuous little store. There were three other inventors there, as well as Zonko, and they all
seemed a friendly lot, if a little possessive of their ideas. Territorial, too. Aside from them, though, only two other workers were to be seen. It seemed that the fewer people who had to be trusted, the better. Though they tried, they couldn’t manage to wrangle their way into any of the other workshops, and the door that led to Zonko’s studio was bolted, barred, and generally locked down tight. But Fred and George’s workshop was interesting enough to make up for it. Even though today was to be their first day of work, the small laboratory-like room was awash in things that half the Gryffindor House would kill to be able to slip into the Slytherin Common Room or onto the Slytherin table. Harry’s fingers twitched to get at some of the things that Ron breathlessly described to him. There were liqufious bombs, which were what the twins had used on the girl’s dorm that morning, and there were flowers to be worn on the lapel that shot a goo which, when you tried to wipe it off, squirted you with another color of goo. There was a mirror that showed you that you were bald, and as long as you were looking into it, you were. It was a very novel feeling, Harry thought as he rubbed his bare scalp. Apparently, even though he couldn’t see the mirror, it worked on whatever was in front of it.

They poked around a bit longer, but it was obvious that Fred and George were itching to get to work. Before too long, then, the non-employed parts of the group were on their way out to the rest of Hogsmead. All of them, particularly Harry, were planning to enjoy this day.

$ That was the promised update. It may be late, but it’s here now, so don’t throw things at me, especially you, Kim. No squeaky hammers. I am going to acknowledge my reviewers again!!! And I had better not forget my live-in BETA, Comechatcha. If I do, she’ll parody me hopelessly in one of her many, wonderful* Sailor Moon fics. $

Jamal Mills-
You get the award for my most useless review ever. Here it is in its entirety; Right more.

Laterose-
Very glad to have you back. Coffee and 'Duh' are American things because the Encyclopedia Britannica says so. Or I do, I can't tell the difference anymore.

Sorry I'm not fast anymore.

Glad you like the broom. So do I. As it's mine.

They do have coffee, but the every-morning addiction to coffee is an American thing.

“Duh” is an American thing. I used it on my neighbor’s British exchange student a couple years ago, (OK, so it was a whole decade ago,) and she didn’t know what it meant.

I know I’m brilliant, but be sure to keep telling me.

Traveler-
Hee hee hee. Traveler called this an adult fanfic. Wow. Anyway, glad you like it and I am meaner, aren’t I?

Callas-and-Ivy-
My favorite BETA, because she lets me keep her up all night on IM talking about inconsequential things with which to change the world. She writes good HP stuff and better original. Go and read Unspeakable, on Fictionpress, but be warned. She's as mean to her toys as I am. Almost. She is a Slytherin, after all. (She's going to hate me in the next chapter.) Btw, Callas, Chibi eyes?
I like to think that I am good at images.

Heeee'sssss aaaaa Liiiivvveeeeee. For now.

Of course Snape's a lefty. Is anyone of a more sinister persuasion than good old Severely Snapped?

You would not believe how much work I put into the Weasleys. I’ll send you the whole bloody family tree if you want it?

No. He has not been through enough, as you should know, since you know me.

Also, since you know me, you should know that I can never get enough reviews. Neither can you. **Hey Everyone! Go and read Callas-and-Ivy’s stuff! She’s amazing!** Ahem. I know I’m doing marvelously. The voices in my head tell me so.

Once again, thank you from the bottom of the heart that I don’t have for agreeing to be my BETA.

Wormtail's Worst Enemy-

Please don't review in triplicate.

Frizzy-

I WILL! I'M GLAD!

Scholcomp1-

I know. Thank you

Misty DevilChild-

...

Me3gogi-

What an enthusiastic review, but Malfoy hasn't gotten what he deserves. Not yet.

Glad you like the broom.

theadia-

Omg omg omg thanks! (sdn)

Taka ichijouji

- Neither can I.

Harriet-

And the underhanded compliment of the year award goes to....

Silver_Phaze-

YOU’LL GET MORE. You'll all get more.

Kapies-
Sorry if the meeting with Dumb. was disappointing. The next one will be better.

Lord R-

I like him being better than her, but don't worry. More Harry-torture awaits in the wings for its cue.

I’m so very glad that I improved your day. ;)

Kim-

You didn't hit me this time!

I am so glad I wrote a classic line! Cool!

Do you understand the $FREDo$ Baggins joke yet?

4 evils and a hell in one review. I’m flattered.

Sirius's Mistress-

I don't like Sirius, so all you Padfoot lovers, go get a dog.

Grey Malfoy-

Who doesn't love to see everyone's favorite Slytherin get knocked down a peg, but wait 'til you get my next chapter. (Grins Evilly)

Sara Ane-

Daaaaaannnnnnngggg, I am good, aren't I. But I am still bad, right?

Kateydidnt-

Yeah, he still has to see visions and stuff. They enter the story in force later.

No Sirius! Not yet! He had to be there at one point, he doesn’t have to come back if people keep bothering me about him!

Little Gin Blossom-

Weirder and weirder and weirder.

Of course I could have left it off at a worse spot. I thought I was being nice. But if you want worse cliffhangers… *Shrugs and walks off muttering something about insatiable readers*

Temporary Insanity-

I hate Draco, and so love to be mean to him.

You mean I’m not an evil bastard? But only an evil bastard can write stuff like this, so maybe I’d better stop. Just give up...........Nah.

SnapDragon-

What would Harry be without Quidditch?

I can make you go over the edge, what’s so hard about Harry?
JessicaKou-

You just wait until I write the Quidditch Trials. You are going to scream!
Everyone has poor Severus having to take Harry shopping, so I thought I’d try something different.
Sorry. No mad muggle scientist for you.

Don’t worry. He may get his way for a while, but there are no spoiled brats in my fics.
The money is kind of a point-no-point thing.
I loved *Catch Me if You Can*. The best thing Leo D has ever done, not that that’s saying much.

Lei Dumbledore-

So glad you’ve been to Tall Ships! Isn’t it awesome? However, the one here on the Pacific Side is a little bit different from your East Coast version. Bigger ocean = More ships.
And now you, and hopefully everyone else here, knows what a stone weighs. One stone equals 14 rocks.

AesSedai

- Using Harry’s new fortune-telling ability, I scan the event horizon and see ***censored due to spoilage factor!*** Sorry, but I promise you you’ll like it.

BuzzBuzz16-

Glad you got it.

Coventina-

Glad you got it! ;^)

Poetheiress-

Yay! I’m the Harry torturess! Maybe I should change my name to that…

Shadowarwen-

Believe me, there’s a heck of a lot more that I could put that poor child through. Just you wait. (Grins evilly)(again)

RioRaptor-

Empty a spot for me on that list! You know I’m worth it.

Centra-gala86-

Would I leave Harry in anything but a dire situation? I am also glad that you didn’t stop reading. I wouldn’t have gotten your review.

LynLyn-
Thanks much for the kudos on Harry’s new family. I never get recognized for the hard stuff… Throwing Harry off tall things is easy.

Ashers

- Hey, cool. I’m “ZESTY!” lol.

$ That’s it. I hope I’ve gotten everyone, but if I missed you and you feel slighted, feel free to email me and chew me out. That’s what I’m here for. Wait, no it’s not! Anyway, I like to hear from my readers. If I don’t, how can I write? *veiled threat* $ 

Fyremaker-

YES!!!! I made a guy cry! No offense, but I hope that you are some sort of jock, because to make a jock cry is one of my ultimate goals in life.

“scarily realistic.” You really think it’s realistic?

The Lost Cub-

If I told you, I’d have to kill you.

Englishgirl-

I have a rather twisted mind.

*She’s standing behind me, with a big baseball bat.

Chapter: 27

Chapter 27

An anonymous minion of Zonko’s escorted the five out through a door, which, when they turned back, had vanished into a brick wall. The effect was obviously lost on Harry, who, trailing his fingers across the facade, easily found the lines of the concealed door. They all laughed, and headed out into the main thoroughfare of Hogsmead Village. It was a hot, sunny day, exceptionally so for the middle of September, but it was still too early for the rest of the students. A few witches were out, doing their shopping and glancing curiously at the five teenagers who kept bursting into bouts of unexplained laughter.

“You know,” said Harry, “It’s too bad that Draco got himself expelled, isn’t it? Who am I supposed to try these pranks on?” He patted the unmarked bag, full to bursting, which hung from the side of his wheelchair. Fred and George had been generous with their samples. “At least Crabbe and Goyle are still here, even if they are too stupid to make it much of a challenge.”

Ron laughed. “Well, getting him expelled was worth losing a target. And anyway.” He peered into his own bag. “Some of these are too dangerous even for him, little guy that he is. We might try them on Peeves...” He sounded amused by this, but not terribly thrilled. Breena snorted.
“Oh sure. Play pranks on a poltergeist. That’s going to work real well.”

“She speaks!” Ron jumped in mock surprise. “Sorry, Breena. I’d almost forgotten you were there, you’ve been so quiet. It’s not like you.”

“Ha. Ha,” she said sardonically, clearly not amused. “For your information, thanks to your brothers, I haven’t had any coffee yet. I’m going to continue being an ass until I get some.”

“Uh oh,” said a grinning Harry. “We’d better find her some coffee, then, and quick. Is the Three Broomsticks open this early?” It was not yet 7:30.

“No,” said Hermione, spying the sign. “It doesn’t open ‘til eleven.”

“I smell coffee!” cut in Breena. “And better than coffee. It’s a white chocolate mocha!”

“A what?” Ron sounded clueless, but Breena was off, sprinting full throttle down a nearby side street. With less than a moment’s hesitation, the group ran after her, calling for her to wait up. They spotted her only a few blocks down, where she was politely interrogating a witch holding a steaming paper goblet. The witch, smiling indulgently, pointed her down th next-to-nearest alley. The group caught up with her there, where she was standing laughing hysterically, at the top of a set of steps that led to a dark basement landing. A cracked, dirty sign read “Starbucks.”

“A Starbucks? Here?” Words emerged from Breena’s hilarity. Harry was as shocked as she was. Hogsmead was supposed to be an all-magical community. Starbucks and its popularity had occupied Hermione’s Muggle Studies homework for an entire week back in their third year, as she whispered to Harry and Ron now.

Trooping down the stairs, the door that confronted them was scarred, stained, and locked, with only a tiny, shuttered, spy-hole of a window. Breena, her face set in determined lines, raised her hand and knocked firmly. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny glanced nervously at one another, and Harry was as perplexed as they. Beyond the door, footsteps echoed across a wooden floor. The tiny window slid open.

“Who is it?” rasped a suspicious voice. A single, penetrating eye roved over the group of five, piercingly examining each of them. As usual, the eye did a double take when it came to the boy in the wheelchair. The spy-hole slid shut a moment before the door swung wide, and the suddenly amiable voice was revealed to belong to a middle-aged witch in mostly muggle clothing and an attractive, softly-lit lounge. “Harry Potter!” she exclaimed, ushering them all inside. “Welcome, all of you”

Suddenly, inexplicably, Hermione burst into a fit of giggles. “What?” asked Harry, swiveling to face her. “What’s so funny?”

“It’s a speakeasy,” Hermione giggled. “It’s a coffee-house speakeasy.”

“Aye, that it is,” agreed the woman.

“A what?” Ron was clueless again. Hermione turned to him, and turned into an encyclopedia.

“A speakeasy, historically, is an underground or illegal pub. They originated in the 1930s, in the United States, during the short-lived American Prohibition, when alcohol was made illegal. For the most part, the law was ignored, but not openly, so there were the semi-secret speakeasies, which either hid themselves or bribed the local authorities to look the other way. Which is this?” she asked the proprietress, who was staring at Harry as he explored the cafe by touch.
“A little of both, actually. Certain members of the Magical Law Enforcement are friends of mine, either friends or customers, and they try to keep the... less tolerant officers away.”

“Why is such secrecy necessary at all?” asked Ginny curiously. “Coffee isn’t illegal.”

“No, no it’s not, but muggle franchises aren’t allowed in Hogsmead. Zoning laws, you know.” Her voice was lightheartedly contemptuous and struck a thought in Harry. From his current spot where he was running an observing hand over the labels of a display case full of croissants and biscotti, he spoke up.

“You were a Slytherin, weren’t you?” She certainly sounded like one, ambitious and sly, but she just laughed him off.

“No. I’m flattered, but I’m afraid I’m nothing but a muggle. That’s the other reason this is an underground operation. In a pure-blood town like this, a wandless-wonder like me should stay as low-key as possible. I used to be married to a wizard, and my son’ll go to Hogwarts, so they tolerate me, but...” She shrugged eloquently. “So I sell bootleg espresso and biscotti. It’s a funny way to make a living, really.”

“It is,” agreed Harry. “So, do you take Pounds or Galleons?”

Half an hour later, when they came out of the speakeasy, they knew that the proprietress’ name was Samara Ziechrist, and that, to Breena’s intense delight, she was more than willing to deliver through the house-elves. “Nothing against the school’s coffee,” Breena said, back to her bouncy self after 2 mochas and a yogachino, “But nothing, absolutely nothing compares to a white-chocolate yogachino first thing in the AM.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” laughed Harry. Breena was immediately contrite.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Harry. I am such an idiot. I totally forgot that you can’t eat anything. I didn’t mean anything by it, I just love this stuff.”

“It’s OK,” soothed Harry. “I’m not offended at all. It’s not your fault that I can’t have any of that stuff, so I don’t mind. Really.”

The next stop on their non-existent itinerary was, at Hermione’s insistence, the Hogsmead Public Library. Harry opted to stay there with her as the rest, quickly bored, wandered off to refill their sugar stashes at Honeydukes. He had never been here before, and it fascinated him. The Head Librarian, one Mr. Martinette, was only too happy to show him a simple charm with which to bespell books to read themselves aloud. Surprisingly, the reclusive bookworm didn’t recognize Harry for the Boy-Who-Lived and only showed a researcher’s mild curiosity when Hermione, who was a regular there, introduced them.

“Oh really?” he had said in a mildly interested voice, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Have you ever thought of writing an autobiography?” And then he had gone on to tell them about other biographies he had in his stacks, including a hand-written one by Headmaster Rudolph Dippet, written 6 years after the man’s death. Harry politely declined an offer to “see” this, instead letting Hermione show him the comprehensive section they had of muggle literature. At his birthday party with the Weasleys, he had recieved a book, *A Study in Scarlet,* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. According to Hermione, it was only the first of nearly sixty stories about the Great Detective, and Harry was anxious to read the rest. Ron had briefly teased him about his new bookishness, but he didn’t mean it, and Harry didn’t mind. There was no way Ron could know how boring it was to be blind.
When Ron, Ginny, and Breena came back, sticky-fingered, sticky-faced, and grinning, Harry had a new library card and was checking out a sizable stack of books. “Planning a transfer to Ravenclaw?” Ron asked around a mouthful of Drooble’s Best Chewing Gum. Everyone just laughed it off.

The rest of the day was spent pleasurably in the various shops of Hogsmead’s high street. Their last stop, not long before dusk, was the pet store, Higgin’s Crawling Shoppe. Harry bought a bag of owl treats for Hedwig, even though the snowy owl had become more Ron’s than his over the summer, and Hermione bought a catnip mouse for Crookshanks that scurried about, squeaked, and smelt strongly of chamomile. When Harry noticed that Breena had gone quiet again, he asked her what was wrong. She didn’t answer. With Ron and Ginny’s help, Harry found her a moment later, deep in the recesses of the shop, coddling the smallest of a litter of seven kittens. “Isn’t she precious?” she cooed to Harry, dropping the small beast in Harry’s lap and guiding his hand to it. Harry had never, not once in his life, pet a kitten. Mrs. Figg’s cats were all grown, with slightly sticky, ragged coats. This kitten’s fur was just slightly long, and so fine that it clung to Harry’s fingers as he drew them through it. His fingertips had, by now, become so sensitive in lieu of sight, that he could feel the infinitesimal variations of temperature and texture telling him that this cat was a Siamese. The darker points were just that much more densely furred, that much warmer than the rest. Ron’s patronizing description confirmed it and Harry learned that the handsome pattern was accompanied by a pair of crossed, strikingly blue eyes. The kitten arched her cheek confidently against Harry’s knuckle, and he was lost.

“No fair,” laughed Breena as he rolled up to the front counter. “I saw her first.”

“Yeah?” smirked Harry, “But she likes me better. If you want one, pick one of the others. I’ll buy it for you.”

Ron snorted and elbowed Harry. “You know, Harry, most people buy candy and flowers for their girlfriends before they jump to small, fuzzy animals.” he teased. Breena blushed, ducked her head, and play-punched Ron in the gut.

“I’m not his girlfriend,” she said. “Harry’s just a nice guy, right? Plus, he’s rich enough to buy us all cats.”

“That’s good idea,” said Harry thoughtfully. “Anybody else want a kitten?”

In the end, they all took him up on it, except for Hermione, who already had Crookshanks. Ron was still teasing Harry as they left, although he kept getting distracted by his new cat, a yawning little scrap of brilliant orange fur. Ginny’s was the same, except for a white spot on the inside of one of its forelegs, and Breena had chosen a pure white moggy with a nose pinker than anything that should be found in nature. Breena named her Jennifer right off, because of that white coat, and Harry named his Mystoffelees, but Ron and Ginny chose to wait. “A name should come from a personality,” explained Ginny. “Like Pigwidgen.”

“I thought you chose Pigwidgen because it was cute,” laughed Harry.

“Yeah, well, Pigwidgen’s personality was cute.” Ginny’s voice was defensive, but not overly so.

“No,” corrected Ron. “His personality is annoying, hyperactive, and altogether irritating.”

“No disagreement here,” said Harry, grinning. “That little tennis-ball with feathers almost knocked the Snitch out of my fingers when I was practicing last night. His voice is as high as the Snitch’s.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you, Harry,” said Ron suddenly. “How do you play Quidditch without being able to see? Watching you on your broom, no one can tell that you’re blind.”
“Thanks,” said Harry. “I’m flattered, but there’s still no way I’m going to tell you. That’s my little secret, until you figure it out yourself.” He smiled smugly. Ron had been trying to get him to tell that secret since his little demonstration at the Sorting, but Harry steadfastly had refused, dropping only the barest of hints. Ron would find out when the whole team did, which would be when one of them figured it out for themselves. Harry hoped to make them more observant. To tell the truth, Harry was nervous about the Quidditch tryouts, which were scant days away. He had worked something out, but he still wasn’t sure that it would work. He could only hope that he wouldn’t make a fool of himself.

Chapter: 28

Chapter 28

The next Saturday dawned nasty and wet. Autumn had truly set in now. Harry and the rest of the incumbent Quidditch team were standing on the Quidditch Pitch. Harry, of course, wasn’t standing per se, rather, he was floating on his Starstone. Present was himself, Fred and George, and Angelina Johnson. Alicia Spinnet and Katie Bell had graduated the year before, and Oliver Wood, of course, the year before that, so there were three positions to be filled that day. Two Chasers and a Keeper, and Harry also wanted to find a full complement of reserve players. Wood, he felt, had relied too heavily on his first string players, leading to more than one unnecessary loss. It was not a mistake that Harry intended to make as Captain.

Standing in front of Harry, in a neat, sniffling line, were 17 hopefuls, first years through seventh, each with a broom in hand. Tristan, the winged half-faery, was the only first year. Harry had succeeded in pleading his case with Professor McGonagall, knowing full well that the Gryffindor Quidditch Team was a weak point with her. Aside from him, the line-up held Ron, Dean, Breena, both the Creevey Brothers, and a load of other Gryffindors, all as nervous as could be expected. Harry smiled to hear them shifting uneasily, feet squelching in the rain-soaked grass.

At precisely 8:00, Harry broke the silence. “As all of you know, there are three empty positions on the team this year. Two Chasers, one Keeper. I also want to form a reserve team, with at least one alternate for every position. So there are, in fact, up to ten positions to be awarded. With seventeen of you, that means that you each have better-than-even odds of joining the team. Now, I’ve seen most of you fly in the past, and I know you all can, but today I want to see you at your best. Well, I won’t exactly “see” you,” he said with a self-deprecating laugh, “but I will be observing you in my own way. My teammates will be watching as well, each looking for specific things. Fred Weasley, Beater, will be watching the candidates for Keeper, and George will be watching those for reserve Beaters and Seekers. Angelina Johnson will watch those of you who are going for Chaser. I will be supervising the whole thing from the middle of the pitch.” He raised his wand and called out the spell the McGonagall had taught him the week before. “Seterebreveremoda!” Suddenly, the rain stopped. All present could see it falling outside the perimeter of the pitch and above them, but an invisible dome interceded before it could reach them.

“Cool, Harry,” said an amused Ron.

“Thanks, Ron. Now, I know I should be finding out how well you can fly in any weather, but
there’ll be plenty of time for that. This is Scotland, after all.” The pointed comment drew a round of chuckles, and the mood relaxed distinctly. “So. We have enough here, so what I’m going to do is split you into two teams, and you’ll play a mock game. Angelina, could you split them up for me?”

The numbers turned out to be almost perfect with one extra Chaser to each side and an extra Keeper who they would rotate in at some point. Harry floated slowly upwards while Fred, Angelina, and George made sure that everyone knew what the rules were and assigning them their positions. He positioned himself squarely, precisely, in the center of the pitch, at the very apex of the dome. He pulled from the neck of his robes a tiny silver whistle, and blew on it. One infinitesimal, long, delicate note issued, one that echoed and multiplied all over the pitch, reverberating off the dome like the inside of a bell. Those on the ground couldn’t hear it at all, but it blazed through Harry’s mind, his sensitized ears drawing a detailed map of his surroundings, showing him everything, so long as he concentrated. The other students, just mounting their brooms below him, echoed each their own pitch, slightly softer tones than that of stands, turf, and hoops. Harry smiled. This was really going to work as well as he and McGonagall had hoped.

Almost immediately after his return from Hogsmead one week ago, Harry had gone to the Head of Gryffindor House with his plan. It’s conception had occupied his consciousness ever since he was appointed as Team Captain, and he was glad that he had come up with something.

Sound was the key, as it always was for the blind. In the teacher’s game, that morning before the Feast, he had followed the sound of the snitch and avoided the sounds of the bludgers. It had been simple. But, as Team Captain, he had to be able to “see” everything that was happening on the field. So he had come up with the dome and whistle. The dome was an immense, glass-like arc of magic, meant specifically to reflect sound without distorting it. The whistle was an invention of Harry’s own. Its sound lasted until he cancelled it with a sour note, and the sound was very reactive, echoing differently from every type of surface. A charm from Professor Flitwick had sensitized Harry’s ears incredibly, sharpening them to a point of almost painful acuity. It was a new sense, beyond simple hearing, and it had taken some getting used to. Fortunately, it could be turned off with a simple “Finite Incantatum,” even if he did feel rather head- numb for a while afterwards.

Below him, the game started. It was evident right away that Tristan was definitely worth bending the same rules that had gotten Harry onto the team. He stayed on his broom for exactly the required minute before abandoning it to race across the field, wings beating so fast that Harry could only “see” their outlines. He was by far the fastest of the Chaser-hopefuls on the field, and he scored the first three goals of the game. Ron served as the Keeper for the opposing team, and he was as good as Fred and George had bragged. He had grown over the summer, and was nearly six feet tall now, which gave him an impressive reach. Only Tristan could score against him at all.

The only person on the pitch faster than Tristan was tiny Dennis Creevey, who was trying out for Reserve Seeker. He clung to his ancient Silver Arrow Broomstick like a limpet, urging it to exceptional speeds as he narrowly avoided stray bludgers and teammates. He caromed around the pitch, following a course seemingly laid out by chance, but he caught the Snitch again and again, sometimes mere moments after it was released.

Harry, who at this point was lying on his back on his broom, head resting comfortably on its brush, smiled. He twitched his shoulders to cause the broom’s harness to sit him up, and dropped down to tap the other Seeker-hopeful, a third year named Terry Brock, to sit out. Everyone stopped what they were doing to watch as Harry and Dennis faced off. Smirking, Fred released the Snitch. They gave it a moment’s head start, and then they were off.

Dennis actually spotted the Snitch before Harry heard it, but the difference was less than the space of a heartbeat. In tandem, they bolted around the pitch, Dennis matching Harry’s every move. In the
end, Harry caught the snitch, but only because Dennis deferred to him rather than slamming against him as he would have to against an opponent.

“You’ll have to work on that,” Harry told him when they, and everyone else, were back on the ground. “But you’ve done great. All of you,” Harry said, raising his voice to the crowd around him. “You’ve all done well. My decisions will be posted in the Common Room by 3:00, Tuesday afternoon. You’ve all flown great today, and even if you aren’t chosen, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Thank you for coming this morning, and I’ll see you all around.” Turning away to head back to the castle, he let the hopefuls overhear his comment to Fred, George, and Angelina. “We’re going to have an incredible team this year!” He grinned to hear them raise a joyous cheer.

“I still don’t get how you do it, Harry,” said Ron later, around a mouthful of cheese sandwich. They were eating lunch in the crowded Great Hall. “When I wasn’t playing, I was watching you up there, and you didn’t look like you were paying attention at all. You just looked asleep, but then when you went one on one with Creevey, well, it’s like I said before. No one would believe you were blind, if it weren’t for that blindfold. If anything, you’re better than... before.”

Suddenly, someone let out a loud exclamation from one of the neighboring tables. It cut through Harry’s ears like a blinding light and he winced away from it. Before Ron could ask what was wrong, Harry had tapped his ears with his wand and murmured “finite incantatum.” The room faded around him to a normal auditory level and he relaxed. Being able to hear every single sound was a questionable blessing in a room where that many people are eating and conversing.

Ron was clearly puzzled, but Harry turned the conversation away from there with a well-placed question about Ron’s new cat. The beast’s initial sleepiness and placidity had vanished almost immediately upon its arrival in the Gryffindor, where it had quickly developed a personality that made Ron name him, for the beast was a boy, Gred. Ginny, who had been having the same difficulties with hers, followed suit by naming hers, which was female, Feorge. Their erstwhile namesakes were appropriately flattered, professing paternal feelings for the mischievous kittens. Perversely, the kittens detested Fred and George, adamantly refusing to be handled by them, even though, with anyone else, they begged for attention, twining through ankles and leaping into laps indiscriminately. Fred seemed a little hurt, but George just laughed it off.

“They just recognize the competition,” he had said one evening, holding a snarling, spitting Feorge. “But you’ve got to admire their force of personality. Ow!” He released the cat, who shot away up the stairs to the girl’s dormitories, and sucked on his bleeding finger. “Strike that. You’ve got to admire their razor sharp claws.”

“How’s Miss Myst?” asked Ron in return. The name had been shortened almost immediately, the honorific added due to the graceful kitten’s almost overdone air of dignity. She spent a fair amount of time at Harry’s left side within arm’s reach. She liked Harry, and ignored everyone else. When she wasn’t with Harry, she tended to reign in perfect aloofness from the canopy of Harry’s bed, surveying the territory below her with calm regard. Harry had fitted her with a bell so he could keep track of her, but she moved so softly, so smoothly that it rarely sounded.

“She’s herself,” Harry said. “Her Royal-Highness self. Did you hear her last night, meowing to get out?”

“Oh, no,” said Ron sheepishly. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

Early Tuesday afternoon, a crowd of Gryffindors followed Harry eagerly as he approached the Common Room bulletin board. Excited murmurings broke out as he displayed a roll of parchment,
ceremonially handing it off to Gryffindor’s Head Girl, one Briary Lodge, who scanned it, nodded happily, and tacked it up. The crowd surged up, pressing forward as one to read the list.

Dean Thomas - Chaser
Tristan McGinnis - Chaser
Ronald Weasley - Keeper
Sally-Anne Perks - Reserve Chaser
Gregory Tall - Reserve Chaser
Colin Creevey - Reserve Chaser
Samuel Long - Reserve Keeper
Lee Jordan - Reserve Beater
Terry Thatch - Reserve Beater
Dennis Creevey - Reserve Seeker

Ron, seeing his name, let out a whoop and shoved through the press to embrace Harry, lifting him free of his chair in his exuberance. “Thank you thank you thank you thank you…” he kept repeating.


The Creevey brothers were the next to accost him, though only Dennis dared hug him. Harry shook Colin’s hand warmly. “Welcome to the team.” Somewhere, he heard a camera click, but he pretended not to notice. After a while longer, he raised his hands and waited for the commotion to die down.

“To those who didn’t find there names on the list, I’m sorry. I only had 10 positions to fill, and I filled them all. I had to make a few very hard choices, but those choices have to stand. You all played very well at trials. I thank you for your efforts, and I hope you will all try out next year. After all, some of our team are seventh years, so there will be new openings.

“For those of you who did make it, congratulations. The first practice is tomorrow, immediately after dinner. I’ll see you all there.”

“You know, Harry,” remarked Angelina as crowd ebbed away. “You’re going to be a great diplomat someday.”

“Someday? I thought he already was,” added George, clapping Harry on the shoulder. “Great job, Harry.”

“Thanks.”

Fortunately, the following day was free of rain. It was cool, with hints of frost in the omnipresent wind, but there was no rain. For that first practice, Harry was early to the pitch. He had planned to set up his dome before hand, but someone was already there. He could hear running footsteps on the opposite side of the field.

Deciding that the other person was far enough away, Harry raised his wand. “Seterebreveremoda!”
Soundlessly, the dome spread out once again across the field. “Echolosquery,” the spell to sharpen his hearing was next, but then he reached a quandary. He was still in his chair. He could get on his broom unaided, but it was an ungainly and graceless maneuver. Not something he wanted to do in front of an unknown spectator.

Suddenly, however, he recognized the sound that accompanied the running feet. It was Tristan, his wings outspread and whistling through the air as he ran. “Oy, Tristan,” Harry called out. The footsteps sped up briefly, and then Harry heard the other boy leap into the air. He landed a moment later by Harry’s side.

“Did you want something, Harry?” he asked. Harry nodded.

“I could use a hand, for just a moment. I just need you to hold me upright, so I can get on my broom. It’ll only take a moment.” With Tristan’s help, it did only take a moment. The boy was tall for an eleven year-old, and strong, so between him and Harry’s strong right arm, Harry was soon mounted on his broom. “Forget the chair,” he remarked. “I’m going to live on my broom.” They both laughed, and Harry sent his chair to wait by the team’s entrance. “So,” he started, a little embarrassed by the request he was about to make. “Your wings, er, can I, um, touch them? I just want to know what they look like, and that’s the only way I can ‘see’ them.”

“Oh, sure.” Tristan didn’t sound at all offended. “Here.” He took Harry’s hand and guided it to a wing. “Just be careful of the feathers.”

“Feathers?” Harry was surprised. “I thought faeries had wings like a butterfly’s.” Tristan just laughed.

“I get that a lot,” he said. “That’s the little faeries, like pixies and fae. My mom’s one of the big ones, the Ys. We have hawk’s wings, because bug wings are simply too delicate for a man-sized person. Plus,” he said in a smug voice, “they would be far too delicate to play Quidditch. Anyway, you can touch them, but be careful, and don’t rub them wrong. They only lay right in the one direction.” With Harry’s hand on the appendage, he stretched it and flexed it. “See, that’s what I was doing, running with them out behind me to align the feathers. I wear a cloak over my wings all day, just ’cause people get too curious about them, and it messes them all up. They have to lie just right for me to fly my fastest, and running like that fixes it. It also builds up my stamina. Call it a warm-up.”

The feathers under Harry’s hand were fine, small feathers, the pinions, the largest, being only a handspan long. They all lay precisely in a smooth layer over the muscular wing. Harry could feel, when the wing flexed, the work of the muscles under the skin, and the adjustments made by each feather to accommodate its new position. The wing was a marvelous piece of living machinery.

“Sometime,” Harry mused aloud, “when I’m on my broom, it feels like I have wings. This harness pulls at my shoulders, and the tiniest adjustments send me in whole new directions. It really is an incredible feeling. I wish I had real wings.”

Before Tristan could respond, Ron hailed them loudly from the entrance. “Hey, Harry. What are we going to do today?” He was obviously excited about his first practice as part of the team. The rest of the team, including all of the reserves, arrived a moment later, and Harry officially began the practice.

After a few rudimentary drills, Harry set the players against each other in another mock-game, mixing reserve and prime team members on each side. He kept Dennis out, racing against him around and around the pitch, faster and faster until they were both ready to fall off their brooms. That was all they did for Seeker practice, but it was overall a very good practice. The fourteen of them were windswept, blue-lipped, and numb-fingered when they came in, but they were raucously happy, chattering of strategy and skill. Harry was doing well, so far. Time would tell. Their first
match, against Hufflepuff, was but a month away. Time would indeed tell.

Chapter 29

The Monday after the tryouts, Dumbledore tapped his glass to gather the students’ attention. It was dinnertime, and with trials for all the house teams recently completed, the chatter that filled the room was mostly Quidditch-based. When it had quieted, Dumbledore spoke.

“At the start of term, I told you all that I would choose 8 new prefects. I have. Professor McGonagall shall read the list to you, and those whose names are called should come forth to recieve their badges.” Smiling, he sat down and McGonagall stood up.

“This year’s new prefects are as follows. For Ravenclaw, Terry Boot and Padma Patil. For Gryffindor, Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger. For Hufflepuff, Ernie Macmillan and Susan Bones. For Slytherin, Morag MacDougal and Blaise Zabini. Good luck to you all.”

The entire student body stood up and cheered as the eight new prefects filed up to the High Table to receive their shiny new silver Prefect’s Badges. Harry, laughing, had to give a stunned Ron a shove to make him follow Hermione, and then he cheered as loud as anyone else. Except, perhaps, for Parvati Patil, who cheered doubly hard for both the Gryffindor appointees and for her sister in Ravenclaw. Fred and George, of course, were the loudest of all.

“Yay, Ron!” yelled Fred, deafening those around him. George was even louder.

“Way to go!”

When Ron and Hermione returned to their seats, Harry clapped them each on the back.

“Congratulations, guys,” he said, grinning broadly. “Always knew you would make Prefect, Hermione.”

Hey,” said Ron in mock-affront. “What about me?”

“You were a surprise.”

“Gee, thanks,” but the sarcasm was affectionate.

“You’re quite welcome. I don’t envy you at all, Ron. Now you have to deal with Quidditch and being a prefect.”

“Oh. Right.”

Those words were not a mere jibe. Harry understood only too well right now the occupation of responsibility. Practice five nights a week and four mornings, plus homework, left Harry little time for anything else. When he wasn’t playing Quidditch, he was thinking of it, or talking strategy with Angelina Johnson, his Second-in-Command. He let Hermione set up a schedule for him, for his homework, because, left to his own devices, he would let his studies slide in favor of the game. He
knew, when he let her do that, that he had changed. That more than his body had changed since the last year.

It wasn’t until after classes the day after the roster was posted that Harry found a moment to talk to Breena alone. He finally caught her after Transfiguration.

“Breena, wait,” he called into the noisy hallway. A pair of footsteps faltered, and Harry orientated on them, catching her quickly. He caught at her sleeve to force her to stop, and pulled her aside, into the lee of a suit of armour. “Are you mad at me, Breena? You’ve been scarce since yesterday.”

He could feel the muscles in her arm tense, but she didn’t pull away. Her voice was controlled when she spoke. “I’m not mad at you, Harry, I’m mad at me. Quidditch... Quidditch is important to my dad. I wanted to make the team for him. For Cedric.” The last word was a whisper.

“Come here,” Harry said softly, pulling her gently towards him. She didn’t resist, collapsing carefully into his lap. They just sat there for a moment, him holding her, and then she took a deep breath, shook her head, and returned his embrace.

“I’m sorry about that, Harry,” she began to apologize.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about, Breena. Cedric was your brother. Nothing can ever replace him, no matter how hard you try. It’s ok that you aren’t him.” His voice was low, tinged with his own sorrow, but it got to her. She wiped her eyes and extricated herself from his chair.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said lightly, a laugh in her voice, but it sounded forced, just the slightest bit.

“I’m sorry about that, Harry,” she began to apologize.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about, Breena. Cedric was your brother. Nothing can ever replace him, no matter how hard you try. It’s ok that you aren’t him.” His voice was low, tinged with his own sorrow, but it got to her. She wiped her eyes and extricated herself from his chair.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said, the beginnings of a smile evident in her voice. “I have a study group now, but I’ll talk to you later, I promise.” She moved out into he crowd, and Harry turned away, only to be drawn back.

“Breena?” he called out. Her footsteps stopped, and spun to face him.

“Really, Harry,” she said lightly, a laugh in her voice, but it sounded forced, just the slightest bit.

“You’ve known me long enough now to call me Bree. I’ll see you later” As she hurried away, her footsteps rapidly losing themselves to the converging masses, Harry found himself clinging to their sound as long as he could, and wondering why he had such a foolish grin spread wide across his face.

The time before the match flew by in a welter of responsibilities. Harry tried to make time for Breena and his friends, but he couldn’t make nearly so much as he would like. He only made it down to Hogsmead with her once, and it wasn’t for very long.

About a week before the match, Harry arranged a one-on-one Seeker practice with Dennis. For the last several practices, he had charmed a spare Snitch to be three times as fast as it should be, figuring that, if the diminutive second year could catch it now, he would be well-equipped to catch the game Snitch, which would seem sluggish by comparison. The boy was good, there was no doubt of that, but it was because he was reckless with his safety. He just locked onto his target and sped towards it, ignoring obstacles such as teammates, opponents, or bludgers. Cho Chang was much the same way, Harry had realized. It was why he hadn’t encountered her in a match until his third year. Harry had plans for Dennis, and they did not include him confined to the bench by injuries all season. That was why they were here today.

“We’re going to work on your agility today, Dennis, so we’re not going to practice in the ordinary way. Look up there.” He gestured up, to the air above the pitch. Dennis obediently raised his eyes. What he saw was another of Harry’s Quidditch innovations. Between the stands where students and staff would sit was strung a tangle of thin, brightly colored cables, swaying slightly in the light breeze
that penetrated Harry's invisible dome. Large, man-shaped dummies suspended from a number of these, and bells hung everywhere, silent in the breeze. “Those bells,” Harry explained when Dennis asked about them, “will only ring when you run into a rope or a dummy. They’re for me, so I can know when you’re messing up. Remember, just because I’m good at this game doesn’t mean I’m any less blind on the pitch.” This was a reference to an earlier practice, about a week ago, when Dennis, while attempting a Wronski Feint, has yelled out, “Harry! Watch this!” The entire team had gotten a good laugh out of it, especially Harry, but Dennis had been absolutely mortified by his gaffe. Harry was still trying to put him at ease about it. He laughed weakly, which was an improvement. “So, I’ve set the Snitch to go as fast as it did yesterday, and to stay within the ropes. Your goal is both to catch it, and to avoid touching the ropes, or the things hanging from them. There’ll be two bludgers up as well, so be careful. Think of this as a test. If you pass, I might let you play in tomorrow’s match.”

He released the Snitch, which zipped up and rapidly lost itself in the web of ropes. At Harry’s signal, Dennis launched himself upwards, entering the tangle with only a moment’s hesitation. It took him a while to get the hang of it, and he narrowly avoided getting knocked off his broom several times. So many bells were rung that Harry’s ears were ringing as well, but eventually, they decreased and then lay nearly silent. He could hear Dennis flying confidently after the Snitch, which let off a soft chime every time he caught it. Then Harry dropped his dome, and the wind picked up substantially. The ropes began to dance wildly, and the player-forms began to slide to and fro across the pitch. “Harry?” Dennis’ voice was a query. Harry laughed to himself, and then he raised his voice to be heard above the wind.

“This is even closer to a real game, Dennis. Nothing ever holds still. Try not to ring any bells.”

By the end of practice, as dark was falling, Dennis hadn’t mastered the exercise. That wasn’t a surprise. Harry had designed it, once again, to be more difficult than anything the boy would encounter in a match. He wanted to see, exactly, how good he was. He had to be ready, though for what, Harry did not know.

When match day arrived, Harry gathered the entire team in the common room before classes. He didn’t give them a pep talk, as Wood would have. Instead, he merely complimented them on yesterday’s practice and exhorted them to relax over the day and to make sure they got at least one good meal. He remembered his first match, and picking nervously at a piece of cold toast. Classes flew by, as they do when one is both looking forward to and dreading something, with teachers as well as students excited by the prospect of the first Quidditch match in two years. Outside, it was a nice day, cool, but not cold, and dry. Harry had his dome set up before he joined his team, his team in the locker room.

“Now is my real chance to sound like Wood,” he said, quelling the excited chatter. The older students, those who remember Oliver Wood, laughed. “Today, we represent Gryffindor. Today, we are Gryffindor. We are courageous, and we are strong, and we will win this match. This is a great team, for all we haven’t been together long. Fred, George, you’re here to do what you do best. Run into people and hit things with sticks. Ron, you keep your eye on the ball. If it gets anywhere near those hoops, its your responsibility. You’re our guard, our bastion. I know you’ll be great. Angelina, Dean, and Tristan, from you I want speed today. Hufflepuff’s biggest weakness is that their Chasers are slow on their brooms. I know that this shouldn’t be a problem for you, right? Tristan, you got your wings settled?”

“Yeah, I didn’t wear the cloak today, and I had a good run this morning.”

“Wonderful. Everyone, I want the school to see your best today. Reserves, be watching the game
carefully. You might be called, and you have to know what’s going on. Lee, are you announcing
today?”

“Yes, but I’ll have my broom with me.”

“Good. Well, then, it’s time. Remember, we are Gryffindor!” A raucous cheer rang out, and they all
ran out to the pitch, still cheering. The crowd’s cheer joined them, and it was time to play.

Taking his place above the rest of the team after shaking hands with Chadwick Compton,
Hufflepuff’s new captain, Harry blew his little whistle, sighing in satisfaction as the pitch sprung into
auditory relief around him. Madame Hooch put the Quaffle into play, and the game was joined. The
Hufflepuff Chasers were slower, as Harry had predicted, but not by much, and they made up for it in
flawless teamwork. When they had the Quaffle, they passed it between themselves with seamless
precision and dead-accurate throws. Ron, however, foiled them nearly every time, passing the
Quaffle off to one of his own teammates.

Three hours into the game, Lee Jordan was proudly announcing that the score was 120-70,
Gryffindor’s favor, and Harry was getting irritated. His team was playing great, but he was not. It
had never taken him this long to catch the Snitch, except for the teacher’s game, and it was
embarrassing. It helped that, while he had heard it several times, if only long enough for a fleeting
chase, the Hufflepuff Seeker had yet to spot it at all, but it was still frustrating, not to mention tiring.
Harry was breathing hard, and he couldn’t seem to catch his breath.

Suddenly, just as Hufflepuff scored a goal, Harry heard the Snitch. It was across the Pitch, near
where the Hufflepuff Keeper guarded his hoops. “Finally,” he thought as he sprinted towards it,
keeping a wary ear on the Hufflepuff Seeker, who took a moment to realize what Harry was doing,
then raced after him. Harry leaned forward in his harness, willing the broom to its top speed, but the
Hufflepuff was just as fast, astride what Fred and George, in their self-imposed role as Gryffindor’s
spies, had told him was a Firebolt. The boy was right on his tail, and creeping up. The Snitch was
still half the pitch away, and Harry was losing ground. Gritting his teeth, he willed the broom faster,
pushing at it with his mind. Abruptly,

something gave, and the broom leapt forward, tearing through
the air like a lightning bolt. Harry let out a whoop as his opponent fell behind, but his exhilaration
was short-lived. The broom kept going faster, kept accelerating through the air, but Harry couldn’t
breath. He couldn’t feel anything save the burning that had taken over his chest, the agonizing
signals from his brain that what his lungs were receiving was vacuum. A blackness that had nothing
to do with blindness crowded at the edges of his mind, and his ears were ringing with colors that had
nothing to do with sight. He couldn’t feel his hand, his arms, not even the wind on his face. He was
losing it all to the vacuum.

Harry didn’t hear the succession of players from both sides shout as they tried to catch him, didn’t
feel the beats of Tristan’s wings as they slowed his fall, didn’t feel the ground beneath him. There
was only the vacuum, bright and dark, cacophonous and silent together. And welcoming. It was
peaceful there, close and tempting. He succumbed to it gladly, and then it betrayed him. There was
no light, there was no sound, and it was so cold. He struggled silently against it, but there was
nothing he could do. The vacuum had him firmly in its grip.

Chapter: 30
“Harry? Harry! Wake up!” Ron was screaming at his friend as he ran up to the Hospital Wing, Harry in his arms. Harry wasn’t breathing, his lips were blue and his skin like ice. Dumbledore had joined him as he left the pitch, along with most of the student body, but Ron hadn’t relinquished his hold on his friend. He let the Headmaster turn back the crowd as he ran, still trying to awaken his friend.

Reaching the infirmary, Pomfrey was already waiting for him, and she grimly set to work immediately. “What happened?” she asked while she loosened his robes and bared his chest.

“He was going after the Snitch, and he just passed out. I don’t know what happened to him. He just passed out and fell.” Ron was trying hard to keep from crying in worry for his friend. Hermione ran in, having sprinted as fast as she could from the prefect’s stands.

“Is he OK?” she asked. Ron shook his head, almost crying.

“I don’t know. He’s not breathing.”

“I need you two to leave,” Madame Pomfrey said politely, not looking up from Harry. “I’m sure he’ll be all right.”

“Is it just me,” said Ron with forced levity as he and Hermione were ushered out of the Infirmary, “or does Harry have his own, reserved bed in there? Oh, Headmaster, Harry’s already in there, with Madame Pomfrey.” Dumbledore smiled an absent reassurance at them as he strode past and into the room they had just left.

“What’s wrong with Harry?” the Headmaster asked the Nurse, speaking in a grave tone.

“I can’t explain right now,” she replied impatiently. “He’s not breathing and the Ressucio Charm didn’t work. I have to do this the manual way. Will you help?”

“I don’t know what to do.” For the omniscient Headmaster, that was an uncharacteristic admission. There was so very little that he didn’t know.

“I’ll walk you through what you need to do,” she said, a little startled. “I’m going to do the chest compressions, so you’ll have to breath for him. When I tell you, breath in through his mouth, one deep breath.” She rolled up her sleeves and positioned herself to start. “Are you ready? One...Two...Three...Four... Five...now, breathe!” With each number, she pressed her hands deeply into Harry’s chest. No air was expelled, despite the force behind the thrusts. When Dumbledore breathed in, his chest didn’t rise. The air would not go in, though nothing blocked his throat. They repeated the operation three times, with as little result. Madame Pomfrey checked his pulse again. It was still there, though it was thready. “I’ll have to put in a chest tube. His lungs are deflated. Did something hit him in the chest?” She didn’t wait for an answer, just continued summoning the things she would need. “This is a mundane operation. Usually, I can fix this with Ressucio, but it’s not working, and I don’t know why.” She cast a sterilization charm around the Infirmary, and then she set to her task. “I have to cut into him, and put in a tube to inflate his lungs by hand.” She shuddered. “I hate operating,” she said, but her hand was steady as she put the scalpel to his skin. A few careful, controlled cuts brought her to Harry’s chest wall. No air was expelled, despite the force behind the thrusts. Working quickly, for Harry’s heart, deprived of oxygen, was beginning to falter, she cut a small slice through it, and inserted the tube. A simple charm sealed the muscle and skin around it, and then she conjured a medical bellows to pump up the collapsed lung. A few slow pumps, and Harry’s chest rose. A few anxious moments later, it fell, and rose again. Harry was breathing again. Madame Pomfrey and Dumbledore breathed themselves,
deep sighs of relief. It wasn’t long at all before Harry’s colour returned to normal.

The first sensation of which Harry was aware was a small pain, in the right of his chest. It was the only thing in the vacuum, so his consciousness drifted towards it. It grew, possessing his chest in a fire that hurt horribly, but he knew that healing was being done. Abruptly, his chest heaved, and he was back in his body. The vacuum was gone.

He tried to speak, to ask who was near, but before he could make a sound, he felt a staying hand. “Don’t try to talk, Harry, not yet.” It was Dumbledore’s voice, kind and warm. “You’ve just had a rather trying experience.”

“What?” he mouthed, no sound to waste precious air. “What happened?”

“What happened? We don’t know yet, Harry. We were hoping that you could tell us, but that can wait until you’re a bit better. You’re going to spend tonight in the Hospital Wing and tomorrow night as well, I’m sure you’ll be glad to hear. I know how you love this place.” A dry chuckle. “Now, I’m sure that Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley would like to monopolize your time.”


“He’s not supposed to talk yet,” said Madame Pomfrey from behind them. “You can stay a while, but then I want him to rest.”

“Alright, Madame Pomfrey,” said Hermione. When the matron had gone, she stepped closer to Harry’s side. “I’ve got your broom, Harry,” she said, and pressed it into his hand. “It didn’t fly off, it just fell with you on it.” Harry closed his fingers around it, but made no more response than that. The two stayed by his side in silence until Madame Pomfrey came to shoo them out. Harry drank the sleep potion she gave him without protest, which worried the Nurse mare than his injuries.

The next morning, Pomfrey told Harry that he could talk, but that he had to stay in bed. It was a Saturday, so Breena, Ron and Hermione spent the entire day by his side. They talked little, mostly of what had happened after Harry left the game. There had been a long break, but it had eventually been resumed. Dennis, Harry was glad to hear, had caught the Snitch, but it really didn’t matter who had caught it. Tristan, who had returned to the game after catching Harry, had scored 12 goals. Gryffindor had won by over two hundred points. At some point or another over the day, the entire team drifted into the Infirmary to wish him well. Harry smiled and made merry while they were there, but when it was just him and his friends, he deflated and retreated back into silence. Late in the afternoon, Dumbledore came back to visit. He and Pomfrey came in together, conferring in low voices, a fact which made Harry unaccountably nervous. When Pomfrey retreated to fiddle nervously with something in the back of the room, the anxiety increased. “Professor Dumbledore?” Harry asked in a voice scarcely more than a whisper. “What’s the matter with me?”

Dumbledore tousled Harry’s hair affectionately, but his voice, when he spoke, was grave. “I’m afraid, Harry, that we were overeager to declare you recovered. Your lungs, it appears, have not healed fully since your ideal this past summer, and you overstrained them yesterday in the match. You had a pulmonary seizure, Harry, a seizure of the lungs. They just stopped working, at which point you lost consciousness, and when you blacked out, your broom stopped functioning, and you fell. Young McGinnis caught you, that admirable young man with the wings. What we are worried about is it happening again. That, Harry, is why I have to deliver some very bad news. Madame Pomfrey has insisted, and I, I am afraid, have to support her. You can not play in the matches anymore. You can still captain the team, but I’m afraid that we are worried that this will recur, and that, next time, we won’t have such good fortune. We were very lucky this time, Harry. You were oxygen-deprived for a dangerously long time.” Warily, Dumbledore and the others waited for Harry’s response. Whatever they were waiting for, however, they didn’t get it. Harry merely blinked
blindly a few times, and then turned his face to the wall. He didn’t say anything, and they didn’t press him. He would talk when he was ready.

Late that night, after pretending to take another of Madame Pomfrey’s sleeping drafts, Harry lay awake. He had never turned down his hearing after the match, and he could hear all the tiny noises of the castle at night. Nearly a dozen floors below him, he could hear the gossipy chatter of the house-elves in the kitchen, working to prepare food for the next day. A floor above, he could hear Argus Filch talking to his ancient cat, Mrs. Norris. ‘Who’s Mr. Norris?’ Harry wondered absently. His mind wandered blankly, not wanting to settle on a thought, but one kept cropping up. Quidditch. The Quidditch pitch was his life now, the only place where he never felt crippled or blind, and it was lost to him. He couldn’t play, but, oh irony of ironies, he was still captain. He had to watch over the practices, attend every game, but he couldn’t play. He gripped his blanket in a fist, gritting his teeth against despair. He couldn’t play. His broom still leaned against the table by his bedside, taunting him. At least he didn’t have to see it, he thought wryly, but he knew it was there. At least he had a replacement. Suddenly, he realized something. This was why he had been training Dennis so hard. Something in him had known that this would come to pass. He had foreseen it, but not realized it. He could have avoided it, if he had known. That forced a bitter laugh from him. He was a seer now, wasn’t he? He should have seen this coming. Then and there, Harry resolved to train his new talent. Starting in the morning. With that thought, he rolled over and went to sleep. He never knew that his foot had twitched twice during his introspection, and no one was there to see it when it twitched again.

Chapter 31

(Disclaimer: I know I said I was only going to do one of these, but now I’m adding a few characters to the story. I have borrowed these characters ever so politely (and sneakily) from Dominic Deegan, Oracle for Hire, a webcomic copyrighted by Michael Terracciano, who, To read this absolutely incredible comic, copy/paste the link here. , and be sure to check it out. This is truly an awe-inspiring comic. Oh, and I still don’t own Harry Potter or anything else from his universe, except the Starstone Broomstick. That’s all mine, friends. Oh, and Breena. She’s mine too, in a way. Now, on with my tale.)

Chapter 31

The next morning, before Madame Pomfrey could wake up and forbid him, Harry summoned his chair and, by dint of no little effort, pulled himself into it. He let himself out of the Hospital Wing, rolling silently through the halls. Reaching the Fat Lady, he gave her the password, “Victorious,” but ignored her anxious questions as he passed. He slipped through the boy’s dorm and into the room he shared with Ron, all without waking anyone. He could hear his friend’s light snores as he whispered a summoning charm, caught the few books he wanted, and retraced his steps back to the Common Room. Being careful to remain quiet, he cast his Eladmij charm to make the books read themselves to him, and settled in to study his new talent.

A few hours later, when the castle began to stir, Harry had read the first two books cover to cover and was well started on the third. He closed it as sleepy Gryffindors began to trickle into the Common Room, and, without a word to anyone, he slipped out with his books. He passed a few
professors in the corridors, but they had heard of his loss through one avenue or another and so left him to his silence. But it wasn’t silence he was seeking this morning, nor solitude. His wheels led him to the room below Professor Trelawney’s attic.

“Professor Trelawney?” he called out loudly. When there was no immediate response, he levitated the heaviest of his books to the ceiling, using it to knock on the trap door there. That provoked movement above, and a moment later, the trap door opened.

“Harry!” exclaimed Trelawney in a shocked voice. “What are you doing here?” Since his demonstration on the first day of class, she had dropped her airy-fairy act around him. It was a refreshing change.

“I want training in being a Seer,” he called up to her.

When they were ensconced together in her office, which was a comfortable enough room if one left the window open, Trelawney questioned him. “Now, Harry,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “What brought about this change of mind? As I recall, you wanted to ignore this skill so long as it didn’t interfere with your life.”

“Well, now it’s interfering. I was training Dennis Creevey to replace me, and I didn’t even know it. All I knew was that I had to be ready, but I didn’t know what I had to be ready for. Now I do, and I wish I’d known before. I could have prevented this.” His voice was tight with frustration.

“Seeing a thing and being able to prevent it do not always come hand in hand, Harry. The damage that caused this was done long before you manifested this ability to see. To tell the truth, I...” Harry could hear her fidgeting, but she went on. “I would not be the best person to instruct you in this. My strengths are in the lesser Divinations, as I’ve told you before. What you are capable of is beyond that, something that we call True Seeing, or Oraclamancy. The name is misleading. What you may See is not what will, definitely, assuredly come to pass, but it is the most likely possibility. It is what will come to pass if specific action is not taken to prevent it. That is, of course, if you are Seeing into the future. What you See in the past, or in the present, those occurrences are already set in stone, but from there, from now, what may happen is fluid, alterable. Oh, I wish...” Her voice changed, lightened. “Why not? Up for a stroll down to Hogsmead, Harry? There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

Surprisingly, out of the school, Trelawney proved an easy companion. She let Harry keep to his introspective silence, humming gaily as she strolled alongside his wheelchair. She had already refused to tell him where they were going, saying that it was to be a surprise. Somehow, Harry got the impression that the surprise was not for him.

Reaching the edge of town, Harry had to let her direct his chair, and he was surprised when she skirted the village itself, following instead a dirt track that led across the train tracks and up the foot of the nearby mountain. Harry estimated that they were near the cave in which Sirius had hid only the year before. They turned through a garden gate that creaked gently, up a gravel path, and mounted a wooden porch. Stepping ahead of him, Trelawney knocked. Rather, she would have, had the door not opened under her fist.

“Sybil!” came a delighted voice, that of a young man. “What brings you to my door this fine morn?” His voice was smug, but friendly. Harry liked him immediately.

“Good morning, Dominic, but you know perfectly well why I am here, for all I was trying to surprise you. You knew I was coming before I was, didn’t you?” Her tone was one of easy camaraderie, Harry noticed, but with a deep respect for this Dominic.
“Certainly I knew, Sybil,” he said, a self-satisfied laugh ringing in his voice. “But one does not parade the fact that one is All-Knowing. I frequently act as though I am not possessed of the Inner Eye, so as not to make others nervous.”

At this echo of Professor Trelawney’s own words, Harry gaped a moment, then burst out laughing. Trelawney made small sputtering noises, and the man laughed as well, a warm, only slightly superior chuckle. “Oh, don’t take teasing so seriously, Sybil. A joke’s a joke. And you then, since I am possessed of the Inner Eye, are Harry Potter. A pleasure to meet you. My name is Dominic Deegan, and, since Sybil has neglected to explain anything to you, I am a Seer, and I’m going to train you to be one too. Er...” He stopped short, listening to something that Harry could not hear. A moment later, though, two loud crashes resounded from the rear of the house. “Right on time,” he sighed. “Excuse me a moment. Stunt and Bumper need to be put out.” The two adults laughed at a shared joke, and Dominic left the room. From the back, they could hear 3 raised, male voices; something about trapdoors and idiocy, then a door slammed, and Dominic returned. “They will never learn,” he said, more to himself than those present. He sat down in a chair beside the empty fireplace. Harry heard the scraping and tamping sounds of a pipe being filled, a sound familiar to him from the Weasleys. When the warm scent of pipe tobacco filled the air, Dominic sighed and spoke again. “I have the feeling that this, me teaching you, would be a useful endeavor for us both, but the decision is ultimately yours.”

At his words, Harry felt something very odd. A heavy, mist-like sensation overtook him, making him feel somehow less substantial, less solid. From Trelawney’s indrawn breath, he knew that she felt it too. “What...?” Harry began to ask, but Dominic cut him off with an explanation and a laugh.

“Don’t worry. This is a peculiarity of mine. Whenever I’m on hand to bear witness to a life-altering decision, like this one, the world around me goes somewhat... grey. I don’t know why it happens, although I have several theories.”

The sensation, unnerving though it was, didn’t last long. All it took to strengthen Harry’s decision was to remember why he had made it in the first place. “Teach me,” he said firmly, and the feeling was gone, as thoroughly as if it had never been. “I don’t want to be caught be surprise again.” He heard a dry chuckle in response to his determined statement, and a hand took his and shook it.

“Well chosen, Harry,” said Dominic sincerely, all sarcasm gone from his voice. “That’s exactly why I chose this life, and it’s the best reason I’ve ever come up with. Down to business, then.” His tone turned brisk. “Headmaster Dumbledore has already approved this, I assume?” Trelawney made a small squeaking sound, which Harry rightly took to mean that she had forgotten that particular detail. “Well then, it’s a nice day, we can all walk up to the castle together. I’d like to see it.”

All the way back up to Hogwarts, Dominic and Professor Trelawney chattered argumentatively about the relative merits of different varieties of tea leaves for readings. Harry lagged a space behind the two, not particularly wanting to be included in a conversation between two obviously close friends. As they neared the castle, however, Dominic fell slowly silent. Harry could hear his footsteps slow now and again, as though he was trying to absorb the surroundings. “Wow,” he murmured under his breath.

“What is it?” asked Harry, catching up to them.

“The castle,” said Dominic in a low voice. “It’s... incredible.”

Harry was puzzled, but he let it slide. From behind them, a noise was distracting him. Pawsteps were following them, from the edge of the road. He was sure the others had not heard it; his enhanced hearing has barely brought it to his attention. He was about to mention it to them when a brash, inhuman voice called out from the vicinity of the stalker. “Hey Boss!” it called. “You forgot to feed
me!” Then, abruptly, several things happened so rapidly as to seem all at once.

First, Harry heard a whistling, as of an object hurled rapidly through the air. Before he could cry a warning, the object connected with someone’s head with a solid thunk, Dominic cried out in pain and anger, and then something, probably that same something on a rebound, bounced off Harry’s shoulder and landed in his lap. At least, he assumed that was where it landed. He couldn’t feel anything there, after all, but he hadn’t heard it fall to the ground. He was groping around for it in his chair as he heard Dominic grumbling and swearing. He found the object wedged next to his hip, and held it up. It was a sphere, he found, made of something very smooth. Glass, probably. It was a glass ball.

“That would be mine,” growled Dominic. “Spark always throws it at me when he’s mad.”

“Spark?”

“My cat. He tends to think with his stomach, and I apparently didn’t feed him today. Spark, go home! I’ll feed you after I get back.”

“Fine,” sulked the voice, “but it’d better be fish...” Spark stalked off, muttering dire threats that only Harry could hear. He offered the ball to Dominic, but when the man touched it, meaning to take it, he froze. Harry felt him start to tremor before he, too, felt the rigid cold that crept from the sphere. Try as he might, he found that he could not let it go. As though from a distance, he heard Trelawney’s cries of alarm and felt her try to pull the ball from his hand, but it seemed of no consequence. What was important was the tiny point of light that dominated his vision.

The point expanded, adopting a greenish tinge as it approached. It opened into a scene, one that chilled Harry more than the ice coating his hand. Voldemort, standing in a circle of Death Eaters, holding a child. Rather, the body of a child, for no neck of a living creature would hang at that angle. She was a heart-breaking sight, a tiny girl, dark of hair and skin, dressed by some loving mother in a yellow dress, with a bow in her hair to match. Voldemort held her as though she were alive, cradling her, brushing the hair away from her staring eyes. They were blue, Harry noticed in his stunned state, a clear, surprised blue. A snake of red crossed one, where the tiny blood vessels had burst in the moment of death. A matching trickle of blood trailed from her lax mouth, smeared slightly by her killer’s hand. No painless Avada Kedavra had taken her life. Voldemort had killed this child with his own hands, and he had laughed. The knowledge sickened Harry, but he could do nothing to refuse it. It poured into his mind, as had the knowledge of Professor Trelawney’s life at the start of term. He watched, in a horrible doubled layer of vision, as Voldemort ripped the crying child from her mother’s hands, as he killed her with one awful blow in front of her family, as his Death Eaters held the father and the two sons at bay. They were muggles, this family, and had done nothing to call this down upon themselves, nothing save give birth to a witch, that tiny child that lay limp in evil’s arms. Her name was Arriana, Harry knew. She was four, and had just lost her first tooth. It was under her pillow, waiting for the tooth fairy to replace it with a Pound. He knew that it would still be there, weeks hence, when the bereft relatives of this doomed family came to claim their effects. He knew, too, that the oldest son, a boy of fourteen, named Aaron, would be missed at school by his girlfriend, a girl who, driven to promiscuity by grief and rage, would bear another boy’s child by her sixteenth birthday. The younger son’s dog, a week after his master’s death, would chew through the rope that held him in the yard, run into the busy nearby street, and three people would die in a screech of steel. All of this, Harry knew, and more. The man who would replace the father in his job as a security guard at a nearby bank would be corrupt, and two women, one pregnant, would be shot in a hostage situation. The mother, had she lived, would have finished her Doctorate in a matter of months, and become a surgeon in an emergency room in London. She would have saved scores of lives in the six years she had left to her natural life. But her life, unnaturally or not, ended tonight, and she was glad to die, for she had seen her children die first. She pleaded with evil to let her join them, and he
obliged in a flash of green light.

That same flash that released the ravaged mother released Harry from his vision. He stared gratefully into his familiar blackness, scarcely aware of the muffled thump of the glass ball falling to the grass, or of Dominic’s panting. He merely sat there, stunned and trembling. His scar burned dully, but deeply, as though the mark were bone-deep. The sun still shone, warm on his cheek, but Harry felt nothing but cold. He had seen Voldemort before, it was true, but this, this was worse than seeing him. Harry had seen him kill with his own hands, had seen his obvious pleasure in the deaths, and he had seen the repercussions. He could still feel the ripples spreading, as though the air itself was transmitting Voldemort’s evil. A hundred names and more streamed through Harry’s mind, all future deaths that could be traced to this one vision of murder.

Arriana. A moment of clarity in his terror brought him another unwelcome vision. Had she lived, she would have gone to Hogwarts. She would have been one of Hermione’s first students, and she would have sat in the front row, always with her hand up. She would have been a Ravenclaw, eventually a prefect, and after school, she would have worked in an obscure office at the Ministry. There was no possible reason for Voldemort to kill her, yet there she lay, dead in his arms. All because of her muggle blood. The sheer unfairness of it hit Harry like a wave, drowning him in a tide of bitter rage. Everything, every hardship that Harry had faced, all of it was Voldemort’s fault, but it was nothing compared to the loss of this one, innocent life. She had been four.

“She was only four, you bastard!” he screamed into the morning, shattering the last vestiges of the vision. Dominic’s moaning stopped, as did Trelawney’s hennish queries.

“You saw a girl?” Dominic asked, his voice hitching and pained as he knelt by Harry’s side. “A girl in a yellow dress, killed by a monster?”

“Yes,” said Harry in a biting voice. “And her family, and a hundred more people. Voldemort would kill the world, if he could. Just to rid it of ‘impurities.’” He lifted his head to the sunlight, trying to erase the coldness of the vision from his skin. “That’s how he thinks of muggles, and to him, muggleborns are worse. The little girl, Arriana, was a muggleborn.” She’s dead. The words did not need said.

“I only saw her,” said Dominic softly. “In his arms. So that was Voldemort?” Harry nodded mutely, noticing without caring that Dominic didn’t falter to speak the most hated name in the wizarding world. “But you saw more?” Harry nodded again. He wasn’t going to describe his vision, wasn’t going to live through it again, but Dominic didn’t press. “I saw one more thing,” he said softly. “A page, from a book. I didn’t understand the language, but there was a lightning bolt repeated over and over as the border.” Harry nodded a third time, still silent. He had seen the page as well, but it was overshadowed. In his vision, it was soaked in blood, torn and ground under Voldemort’s feet. Harry could read it, though. It was clear as day in his mind’s eye, but he refused to read it. Not just yet.

“Let’s go to Dumbledore,” suggested Trelawney hesitantly. The Seers started, having forgotten that she was there. Dominic stood up, and he pushed Harry’s chair the rest of the way to the castle. Harry didn’t speak a word. The warmth of the sunlight seemed to slide over him, avoiding him. He flinched when they entered the shadow of Hogwarts.

Dumbledore wasn’t in his office, nor was he to be found anywhere in the halls. Harry was ready to scream in frustration when they finally found him, putting around in one of the greenhouses. His cheerful humming grated on Harry’s nerves, but he sobered when he saw Harry’s face. “I had a vision,” Harry said, his inflection toneless and flat. “Of Voldemort. He’s killed a muggle family, all because their daughter was a witch. She was four.” Still, no emotion infected his voice. He had locked it away, to keep it from drowning him again. “Her name was Arriana, and she would have
been a Ravenclaw Prefect. Hermione was supposed to teach her Transfiguration. So many deaths..."

His voice cracked. He couldn’t continue. Dumbledore, at a loss for words, patted his shoulder. Harry was gasping for breath as the remembering became too much. There was too much to remember, too much to know. It was a sharp pain, a hitch in his heart and in his throat. “It’s too much,” he whispered.

Dumbledore stepped back from Harry a moment, conferring quietly with Dominic and Trelawney. “Harry,” he said gently. “I am going to go and get something that will help you. Will you let Mr. Deegan take you up to your room, and will you wait for me there?” At Harry’s mute nod, he left in a swish of robes.

Harry was forced to speak, to direct Dominic through the labyrinthine castle. To all appearances, the man had never seen it before, yet he was a wizard. It would have puzzled Harry, under any less distracting circumstances. As it was, he spoke no more than necessary, directing the man left or right at intersections, up this stair or down that one, and giving the various passwords.

When, at last, they reached Harry’s room, they had encountered few students, and those they had seen had been turned aside by Dominic’s deft sarcasm. When the entered Harry’s room, however, Ron was there.

“How’s it going?” he asked, seeing the pain in Harry’s face. “And who’s that?”

Gracefully, Dominic introduced himself, giving Harry time to work up an answer, truthful or not, for his friend and brother. “My name is Dominic Deegan, and I’m Harry’s new teacher. I live down in Hogsmead, which is where I’ll be teaching him, and where he’s been this morning. I’m a Seer,” he explained. “And Harry is going to be one too. In fact,” he said, his voice going sad. “He already is.”

I know that,” scoffed Ron. “He saw old Trelawney’s whole life the other day, didn’t you, Harry? Harry?”

“I had another vision, Seeing, whatever you want to call it, today, Ron. I don’t want to talk about it. Dumbledore is going to meet me here. You can stay, if you want. In fact, I’d like you to be here.” Harry’s voice was fragile and cool, hiding most of what was running through his mind. Four. Blue eyes. A dog in headlights. The knowledge wouldn’t stop coming. He could still feel the glass ball in his hand, he realized, still feel the ice that had crackled under his fingernails and around his palm. He rubbed his hand fiercely against his robes, trying to erase it. “It was Voldemort. I saw him.”

Ron winced at the name, as Harry had expected, but he moved to offer sympathy nonetheless. He came to sit next to Harry’s chair, patting his shoulder awkwardly. It wasn’t much of a comfort, but Harry was grateful for the effort. Together, the three of them sat in silence and waited for Dumbledore.

It was nearly an hour before the Headmaster appeared, coming not by way of the door, but rather through the fireplace, in a swirl of green flame. Three quick strides brought him to stand in front of Harry, and he placed something in Harry’s lap. Exploring it with his hand, which was at last beginning to feel warmth again, Harry found a smooth, stone basin, carved around the rim with symbols that Harry’s fingers did not recognize. It was a pensieve.

“I believe I showed you how one of these works, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Do you think it might help?”

Harry nodded once again, eager to get the swirling thoughts out of his head. He placed the tip of his wand immediately to his temple, shuddering in relief as he felt the image of Arriana in Voldemort’s arms slide out of his mind’s eye. It was still there, when he deposited the liquefied thought into the
basin, but it seemed to have faded. To have taken a step back. Encouraged, he put the entire vision into the bowl, strand by strand. He was oblivious to the reactions of the others in the room as his vision unfolded on the surface of the light made liquid that filled the bowl. Dumbledore’s face grew still, his eyes hooded as he saw the future that Harry had seen. Dominic and Ron cried out softly as each person died, although they saw only the family. Of the future beyond that, the bowl concealed what Harry had seen.

“Harry!” said Ron when he was done. “Merlin, Harry!” He couldn’t seem to articulate a thought beyond that. Harry, on the other hand, slumped in relief. He could breath again, could take a deep breath without rage that Arriana would never again draw air into her lungs. The anger was still there, would never leave completely, but it was no longer stifling.

“I’ll be alright, Ron,” he said with a half-smile. “I’ll be okay. It was just...”

“It was terrible.” Dominic completed the sentence for him. “I didn’t know that you saw all that. All I saw was that first scene, and the page. You didn’t put the page into the pensieve.”

“Oh, right.” Harry pulled that one final thought from his head, putting it into the liquid. Dumbledore made a small exclamation.

“You both saw that? And you could read it?”

“I couldn’t.” said Dominic.

“I can,” said Harry quietly.

“You can?” Dumbledore sounded incredulous. “Harry, it’s written in the Griffon Hand. It’s an ancient language, rumoured to be only myth. No one still living can read it. I can’t, certainly.”

“I can,” repeated Harry. It still shone in his mind’s eye, undiminished by the strand of thought that he had taken out. He read it aloud.

“As a phoenix rises, born from death, so shall he.
Killed four times over in the space of a circle,
By family, life, friends, and foe.
He shall yet live to learn.
Of four, he is heir to two, and bound to one from youth.
“It’s a prophecy,” murmured Dumbledore.
“It’s the beginning of the Prophecy of the Wood,” corrected Dominic. “Merlin himself wrote it, over fifteen thousand years ago.”

“The beginning?” asked Ron. “Do you know the rest of it?”

“No, I don’t. That’s the only part that’s been translated.”

“I haven’t heard of this prophecy,” said Dumbledore curiously.

“It’s kind of obscure,” admitted Dominic. “But I am something of an adept at obscure research. I enjoy it.”
“You sound like our friend Hermione,” said Ron in a half-hearted attempt at levity. With an effort, Harry smiled, and even managed a laugh.

“You do, you know, if you like research that much. She’s probably in the library right now.”

“She is,” confirmed Ron. “Looking up stuff for that essay in Transfiguration that’s due in two weeks. It’s not even been technically assigned yet.”

“I know,” said Harry wryly. “But that’s Hermione for you.”

“Well,” said Dumbledore with an air of moving on. “Do either of you know what provoked this vision? Did you touch anything, smell anything?”

“My crystal ball,” said Dominic. “We touched it at the same time, after my cat threw it at me.”

“That’s right,” said Harry. “It bounced off Mr. Deegan’s head and landed in my lap, and when I was handing it to him, that’s when it happened. We both froze, and ice grew over our hands.”

“Is that an ordinary side effect when you see, Mr. Deegan?” asked Dumbledore. “The ice?”

“No,” said Dominic. “That’s never happened before, but I’ve also never Seen with someone. This was the first time someone else has Seen what I’ve Seen.” There was a strangely relieved tone to his voice. “I think that I was only Seeing an echo of Harry’s vision, though. I wouldn’t have Seen it if he weren’t there.”

“I’m sorry,” apologized Harry.

“I didn’t say it was your fault, did I?” said the Seer. “If anything, it was mine. I should have fed Spark this morning.”

After explaining this apparent non-sequitor to a puzzled Ron and Dumbledore, they agreed mutually to abandon the topic, and set off to Dumbledore’s office to discuss Harry’s tutelage as a Seer, or as Dominic preferred to call the profession, an Oracle. It didn’t take long to decide that Harry would study independently during the week, meeting with Dominic on the weekends at his house in Hogsmead to discuss his progress. He would meet with Trelawney too, although he was excused from her everyday classes, but she would be more of an aid than a teacher. Most of what Harry was going to be learning was beyond her.

All of this was settle just in time for lunch, so Dominic joined him at the Gryffindor table. Harry, not eating as usual, made an effort to act as cheerful as he had been before the Quidditch match, and most of his classmates were fooled. Dennis was apologetic in the extreme about replacing Harry as Seeker, but Harry reassured him as best he could.

“You’re going to be great, Dennis, and I knew you were going to replace me anyway. I didn’t know that I knew, but I knew, if that makes any sense. Now I have time to train as a Seer, so I won’t be surprised like that again. I’m still Captain, but that doesn’t mean I have to be at every practice. I’ll be at the general practices, and your Seeker practices, but Angelina and the Twins can direct the rest. They have more experience than I do anyway. And of course, I’ll be at the matches.” The words were eating him hollow, and no one saw it. “I can captain just fine from the sidelines, and this team is so good they don’t need me breathing down their necks in the air.” No one at all saw it, except Dominic, sitting next to Harry and letting the conversation wash over him as he ate. He, in that same doubled vision that had nauseated Harry earlier, saw Harry’s fall two days before, but what Dominic saw was not the truth of what had happened. He didn’t see Tristan’s spectacular and heroic catch of the unconscious Seeker. Rather, he saw the winged boy miss by a hand’s length, saw Harry hit the
ground hard, saw him bounce on the hard ground and lay still, unmoving. He saw Dumbledore’s
grieving face as Madame Pomfrey shook her head in negation. He saw Harry dead, two days ago,
yet there he sat, laughing with his friends at Dean’s amazement when the pastry he was eating turned
him into an orange Labrador. You couldn’t see a past that hadn’t happened. That was one of the first
things he had learned in his own training as a Seer, not so long ago. A vision of the past was true.
But this vision, obviously, was false. He excused himself politely from the table and retreated to a
point outside the front doors of the castle. There, he lit his pipe to aid his concentration, and pulled
his crystal ball from his pocket. Wiping the grass stains and dew from it, he gazed into it, willing to
see farther into Harry’s past. He, like everyone else, had heard of the boy’s trials at the hands of his
uncle, and he looked back to see his rescue from that. Through a thick cloud, he saw Dumbledore,
Snape and the adult Weasleys apparate on the curb in front of Privet Drive. He watched them walk
around the Dursley’s car, which was parked haphazardly across the front lawn, and up to the porch.
Snape blasted the door down, and they all hurried inside, where they found a drunken Vernon
Dursley passed out in front of a blaring television. There was no sign of Harry, and Vernon was in
no condition to tell them where he was. Dominic was forced to watch as nearly two weeks passed,
and then a decomposing body washed up near Calais, France. Voldemort’s forces were the one to
find it, and to identify it as the corpse of the Boy-Who-Lived. When the vision released him,
Dominic sighed. There was a sense of wrongness to these visions, beyond the mere wrongness of
Seeing something that had not happened. He didn’t have the energy, just then, to See forward into
the boy’s future, and he would not be able to trust what he Saw.

“Mr. Deegan?” called a girl from the castle door. “Harry’s looking for you. I’m Breena, by the way,”
she said in a cheerful, American accent, as he turned to follow her in. “I’m one of Harry’s friends.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Back in the Great Hall, Harry’s classmates were finishing their lunches. Ron and the others had
succeeded in cheering him up as much as could be expected, and plans were being made for a chess
tournament in the Common Room that evening. Harry found himself irritated at the amount of noise
around him, but he ignored it in favor of being around his friends. His need for solitude that had
marked this morning had fled. When he noticed that the seat next to him was empty, he had asked
everyone if they had seen where the man had gone, and Breena had volunteered to go and get him.

“Hey, Harry,” said Dominic as he returned, but he did not sit back down. “I’ve got to head home
before Spark hunts me down again, so I’ll see next Saturday, around 10 in the morning, alright?”

“Alright,” said Harry amiably. “See you then.”

That evening, Harry joined in the chess tournament, but he was one of the first to be disqualified. He
couldn’t concentrate on the strategy and the advice of his pieces. He went to bed early, and was
asleep before his cat could curl up at his side. Before morning, though, his twitching foot would
drive her away, but, once again, no one human was there to see it.

(Look, I ended another chapter with Harry falling asleep.)

(Oh, one last thing. My beta, Callas-and-Ivy, has once again gone to heroic efforts on my behalf.
This extraordinarily long chapter kept her up all night for nearly no reason. I must have been on roll,
but there was very little for her to do on this chapter.)

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Chapter 32

Around midnight, Harry’s sleep was gripped by terror. Voldemort stood before him in his mind, alone this time. The Dark Lord wasn’t doing anything much, merely examining his own hands. With one long, claw-like fingernail, he picked blood out from beneath another. His hands were covered in dark blood, dried into every crack. The simple dream lasted for what felt like hours before it faded into the fog of peaceful sleep. When he awoke, all Harry could remember of it was the pervading sense of terror.

During breakfast the next morning, Harry stayed up in his room. A new set of books had arrived for him in the night, and he poured over them with Hermione-like diligence. He was easily distracted this morning, however, and had only finished one by the time he had to leave for his first class of the day, Transfiguration. He focused on his classes as best he could, almost to the exclusion of all else. Professor McGonagall praised him when he successfully managed to turn a book into a baidarka, and Lupin found nothing to criticize in his Puzzling Potion, but Harry just smiled distantly and nodded politely. At lunch, he went straight back to his books, and then he disappeared into Trelawney’s attic for the afternoon, which was a free. There, they discussed theory and history of Seeing, vying away by mutual agreement from any practical practice. Harry frankly did not want to See anything right now, for a sense of terror still lurked in that idea. So instead, he and Trelawney bantered about famous Seers, such as the famed Oracle of Delphi, whom Trelawney had actually met once, when she a young girl, and Rowena Ravenclaw, who, Harry learned, had been known as the fortune-teller Hawksight in her youth.

That night, when Ron was helping him get ready for bed, they talked about that day’s practice, which had been just between Chasers and Keepers. Tristan had a cold, Ron told Harry, but it hadn’t slowed him down much.

“I should have known that,” said Harry as Ron pulled his pajamas down over his head. “Maybe I should step down as Captain.”

“Don’t say that,” said Ron firmly. “It’s okay for you to be off for a few days. You’ve been through a lot since Friday.”

“Ummm...” Harry didn’t know whether to be mollified or not. He didn’t want his friends treating him like he would break. He smiled at that thought. You just didn’t get much more broken than this, yet he was worried about what his friends thought. Ironic. “I guess so, but I’ll be back tomorrow morning. Dennis has a Seeker practice before breakfast.”

“Right,” agreed Ron, getting into his own bed. “Well, wake me up when you've got to go. I'll just go back to sleep after.”

“Okay,” said Harry.

The next morning, however, he didn’t waken Ron. Once again, he pulled himself into his chair. He didn’t bother with his clothes; they could wait until after practice. He just pulled his robes on over them, grabbed his cloak for warmth, and headed out to the Pitch. Dennis was already there, and Harry’s broom was still in Madame Pomfrey’s office, so he forewent setting up his dome. Instead, he set Dennis to flying laps, timing him around the Pitch until he was satisfied with his speed and timing before he released the super-powered Snitch. It looked a short practice, just Dennis catching the Snitch over and over, but then Tristan showed up for his morning run.
“Morning, Harry, Dennis,” he called, jogging over to where Harry sat. “I’m sorry about your problem,” he said softly to Harry as he watched Dennis weave through the loops, looking for the small gold ball. “Not to be able to fly... I can’t imagine it.”

“I can still fly,” said Harry defensively. “I’m just not allowed to play in the matches anymore. Too stressful.” He mimicked Pomfrey’s words from the morning after the game. “Did someone explain it to the team?”

“Yeah, Ron did. Boy, was he ever mad at Madame Pomfrey.”

“I was too, for a while. It’s not her fault, though. It never is. She’s just protective. I would be too, of a life I’ve gone through so much trouble to save, and more than once.”

“I think she’d be this protective of any of the students, Harry. It’s not just you.”

Harry swiveled to face the half-faery. “You sure you’re eleven?” He didn’t sound like a first year.

Tristan laughed, that light, musical laugh again. “No, I’m not. I was born 19 years ago, but I’ve spent most of those living with my mother’s kind, and they don’t consider a person to be old enough to leave his mother’s side until he’s at least 16, and I won’t be an adult until I’m 27. Time is different there. I look about 14,” he added, for Harry’s benefit. “I would have come to Hogwarts two years ago, but it took some time to convince the Ministry to let me have a wand. I am, after all, a non-human magical creature.” He said the words easily, but there was an edge to his voice. His pinions rattled as he shook his wings to settle them. “It didn’t help that my mother had taken up the case of that half-giant’s pet Hippogriff in front of the board for the Disposal of Dangerous Magical Creatures only the year before, and then the vampires in Australia revolted...... What it all amounted to was that they were paranoid about anyone who wasn’t human, and then I had the nerve, nay, the gall!” His voice took on theatrical overtones. “To ask for a wand of my own, so that I, a half-breed, might go to Hogwarts, to learn to use the powers I had inherited from my father. First, I was too inhuman, then I was too old. Finally, Mother talked to Dumbledore himself, and here I am.” He sighed. “And I’m so happy here. In Gryffindor, people don’t even worry about my wings. They, they accept me. On the train, I was worried that I would get sorted into Slytherin. I encountered Draco Malfoy on the train, with his friends. Lucius Malfoy was on the board that tried to keep me from getting my wand, and Malfoy knew about the whole thing. He was teasing me about it, calling me half-bred and stuff like that. One of his hulks, Doyle, I think, got behind me and snatched my cloak off. When I’m startled, sometimes, my wings jerk out. One hit Malfoy across the face, and he got mad. He grabbed my wing, and he was twisting the feathers when Hermione Granger came along behind him. I know she wasn’t a prefect yet, but she sure acted like it. She told him off, and he and his hulks went off into a different car. She let me sit with her and Ron the rest of the way here, and she wished me luck before I got into the boats.” He stopped abruptly, sounding as though he was worried that he had said too much. Harry grinned.

“If you’ve got a crush on her, I’m afraid you’re going to have to get through Ron. He got pretty jealous last year when she went to the Yule Ball with another guy.”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” muttered Tristan. “Everyone knows about Ron and Hermione. It’s, in the compartment with them, I met Ron’s little sister. She didn’t even mention my wings, the whole trip. She didn’t seem to care that they were there at all, and she was the first person to ever be like that. And she hugged me today.” He shut up fast after that admission, closing his mouth with an audible snap.

Harry smiled. “Sounds like that wasn’t such a bad thing.”

Tristan fidgeted, rattling his wings again. “You aren’t mad?”
This puzzled Harry. “Why would I be mad?”

“Er, well, everyone says that you and Ginny are a couple.” The words came out in a rush.

“Ginny and me? That’d be wrong. She’s my sister!” Harry wondered who had been spreading that rumour. He knew that Ginny had had a crush on him, once upon a time, but she certainly hadn’t protested becoming related to him, so he thought that her attraction had cooled.

“That’s right!” Tristan’s voice lifted. “Well, then, you don’t mind if I, if I try?”

“It all depends on what you try,” said Harry in his best approximation of a protective older brother, but then he laughed. “She thinks you’re cute, you know.”

Tristan made a little embarrassed noise, scrubbing his toe in the grass. Harry laughed. “Don’t worry about it, Tristan. Hey, I heard you scored a grand total of 19 goals in Friday’s game. Very impressive.”

“Thank you,” he replied proudly. “But Ron deserves more credit than I do. Hufflepuff’s Chasers were incredible. They kept getting the ball away from me?”

Harry had a shrewd thought. “Want to improve your skills?”

“Always!”

“Go up there,” Harry said, gesturing to where Dennis was circling lazily as he watched for the Snitch to reappear. “And play tag with Dennis. Hey, Dennis!” he bellowed as Tristan sprung into the air. “Tristan’s the Snitch! Catch him!”

They came in late to breakfast, the three of them, laughing and joking together. Harry invited them to eat with Ron and Hermione, but he declined to do so himself. “I’ve got more studying to do,” was his excuse. He headed up to the Gryffindor Tower, where he buried himself in Dominic’s books until time for class.

They had Care of Magical Creatures today, which meant that they would be meeting their new projects. For today, Hagrid had procured a brood of jarveys, which they were to train over the next several weeks. They each picked one out of the large pen. Harry got the only one that didn’t outrun his questing fingers, a fat sleepy one that Ron said was black, with buff under-hairs. It curled up in his lap, and promptly began to snore.

“Is yours alive, Harry?” asked Ron jestingly. His was so active that it was slopping the water dish Ron had just put in.

“Yeah,” Harry answered, poking the animal. It scratched lazily at the disturbance, then went back to sleep. “He’s just lazy. I could name him Ronald,” he teased.

“Yeah?” said Ron in mock-belligerence. “Then I’ll name mine, hey, what’s Harry short for, Harry? Harrison, or Harold?”

“You know,” said Harry, pondering the question. “I don’t know. No one’s ever called me anything
but Harry. Dumbledore would know, I should think, or Sirius or Remus.” He shrugged. “Any of the
professors, I guess.” It bothered him a little, even though it was something he had never thought of
before. “Imagine, not knowing my own name.” It was a very unsettling moment, but it passed when
Ron’s jarvey, unsatisfied with it’s cage, ran up his arm and into his clothing. Harry laughed heartily
with the rest as Ron crashed about, trying to dislodge the ferret-like creature from the inside of his
robes. By the time class settled down again, the mood of unease had fled.

After the last class of the day, Harry was tired, content to sit doing his homework by the Gryffindor
Common Room fire. Breena moved to share a table with him, but they worked in companionable
silence for a time.

“What do you want to do when you graduate, Harry?” she asked suddenly. Harry and Ron had
asked this of each other so often that Harry didn’t think before he answered her.

“Play Quidditch for England.” The truth of his words hit him a moment too late, and it left him
gasping. That was what he had wanted for his life, but it wasn’t possible now. In those words, his
world shifted just that much. He would have to re-evaluate a few things in his life. He knew that the
goals of a fifteen year-old boy were fluid things, but that made the loss no less real. Even blinded,
that goal had not left him. To play Quidditch, in front of a crowd like that at the World Cup, it had
been his dream from that first match, all the way back in his first year. To play, like his dad. “Well,”
he said finally, aware of Breena’s discomfiture at his side. “I guess I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“Well,” she said, rallying. “I want to be a doctor. I’ve wanted to be one ever since I was a little kid. I
just like to help people.”

“You’ll be great at that,” Harry said, smiling as he reached over to find and pat her hand. “I know
you will.”

“Aww...” came Fred’s voice from behind them. “How sweet!”

“Harry and Breena.” George joined in the friendly teasing.

“Sitting in a tree.”

“No, you, too, Ron!” bellowed Harry, although he did not contest their allegations. “Maybe Breena
and I should go somewhere private to study.” He closed his books. “Like the Quidditch Pitch. I want
to fly, right now. We can study later, eh, Bree?” His tone made light of it, but flying was more
important to him than ever. Which is why, ten minutes later, he was aloft, the wind in his face
washing lost dreams out of his mind.
Chapter 2

Chapter: 33

{A/N; Hi, me again. I’m just here to acknowledge once again my valiant Beta, Callas-and-Ivy, authoress of the incredible original work, Unspeakable. Go and read it, now. Once more, due to my chronic insomnia, I have kept her awake to ungodly hours beta-ing, and when she has slain the last of the typographical demons, I keep her awake still longer for the company of her razor wit. *shakes head* Oh well. So from the two of us, I present Chapter 33.}

Chapter 33

The last of September and then October passed in an unremarkable manner. Looking back, what Harry remembered most was the rain, the cold, and the visions that held him every night. It was always raining, it seemed, and he was always out in it, whether at Quidditch practices, practical lessons in Defense Against the Dark Arts and Herbology, or the trips to and from Dominic’s cottage in Hogsmead. He longed to feel well and truly dry.

Warmth, too, he craved. He had the fireplace in his room kept well stoked with wood, and he moved through the castle bundled in more clothes than anyone else. The line below his heart, where sensation stopped in a tingling line, was a layer of ice through his chest. In classes, he huddled miserably in his chair, gripping his left-handed quill awkwardly through a thick glove. Taking notes for himself, rather than borrowing Hermione’s, was a habit he had finally formed this year. He wrote using ridged parchment to guide his hand straight, and his notes were all charmed to read themselves back to him. It was a working system. Now, though, it was hard to write, shivering as hard as he was. In Transfiguration, and in Charms, the professors had taken pity on him and let him sit by the fireplaces at the side of the room. He was too cold to be anything but grateful.

The visions had not stopped, but nor had they worsened. He saw Voldemort every night now, but what he saw were not visions of torture, nor murder. One night, he watched a calm moment as Voldemort drank a cup of steaming tea, grimacing slightly when it proved to be too hot. Another, he observed as the monster stood at a window, one hand absently stroking the snake coiled around his right wrist. Voldemort had a restless, distant look to his serpentine face then, and Harry knew that he was waiting for something, but neither of them knew exactly what it was. Harry had a vague sense of anticipation for days after that one, causing him to wander the castle restlessly. He didn’t sleep the night after, sitting instead in the common room, in front of a window thrown wide. He let his senses quest out into the wind, searching for something unknown.

A third night, he saw Voldemort outside, striding across a grass-swept field, scowling at a missive in his hand. In the distance, Harry could see the skyline of a big city. The city wasn’t London, and there were no landmarks that Harry recognized. He put the vision into his pensieve, as he did with all of them, and showed it to Dumbledore. What he made of it, Harry didn’t know.

Now, sitting at the Halloween Feast, Harry was almost able to forget all that. Around him, his classmates laughed raucously and ate, and he joined in the former as best he could, trying not to be jealous of the latter. He had lost two senses at Vernon’s hands, he thought. Sight, of course, was the most obvious, but he found himself craving the flavours that he smelled almost as much as he did light and color. Still, the enthusiasm of his friends was a hard thing to resist. Ron was on a Quidditch high, stemming from the previous day’s game against Ravenclaw. Gryffindor, once again had won, but still Harry reined his mind away from thoughts of that. He laughed along with everyone else, though, when Ron embroidered his saves into great, heroic stories full of his almost diving off his Nimbus to catch the speeding Quaffle at the last minute, almost crashing into the hoops. Dennis was
full of stories too, mostly of Cho Chang’s wiliness as a Seeker. He had finished the game in a race, head to head against the Ravenclaw Seeker. Only the interference of a Bludger, accurately struck by Fred, had decided the competition, forcing Cho to veer off course long enough to Dennis to stretch out and catch the Snitch. Harry had sped to meet him as he landed, and was one of the first to shake his hand in congratulations, but it had hurt, to be so ably replaced. Quidditch was the main topic of conversation tonight, along with the spectacular decorations, and, as always, the above average repast in front of them. He went quiet after a while, not contributing comments to the general flow of conversation, but answering when one was directed to him. Pleading fatigue and chill, he fled the Hall over an hour early, going, not to his room, but rather to the Hospital Wing, where he begged a Dreamless Sleep potion from Pomfrey. He avoided them as often as he could, for under their influence, he slept heavier and longer than he would like, but he wanted sleep to be an escape tonight.

Back in his room, it was with a rueful grin that he added the potion to his nightly mix of nutritious liquids. He had hesitated in deciding to “drink” it, but the desire for silent sleep weighed more heavily tonight than the craving for the colour and light that he only found in his visions. He was asleep before he could drag the blanket up over his shoulders.

Sleep under the influence of the Dreamless Sleep potion was generally exactly that. Dreamless. Therefore, Harry was quite shocked when he began to dream. Moreover, he was surprised when he realized that he was aware of his dreaming. He looked around, trying to place himself, or to find something with which he could wake himself. All he saw, though, was a white void. There was nothing more to the dream. He just was there, in a world that was the exact opposite of his day-to-day blackness. Eventually, that faded, and his sleep was truly dreamless, if short.

Miss Myst, his cat, woke him by stretching against his shoulder when Ron came in. The other boy was trying to be quiet, but Harry’s ears followed him across the room. When Ron stopped by his bed, Harry didn’t speak. He knew it was petty, but he let his friend think him asleep. He didn’t want to be drawn into yet another critical analysis of yesterday’s game. Ron stood there a moment, and then turned away, getting into his own bed. Harry lay awake in silence as Ron’s breathing deepened into the rhythm of sleep, and a long time after. When he did sleep again, it was with a limp relief, and no dreams came.

The next morning, he woke up headachy and stiff. He had left the window open, and so was freezing to top it off. He let Ron help him, this morning, as his brother was already awake, but they spoke little. There was nothing of resentment or disagreement in their mutual silence. It was just that Harry’s face was drawn, and he did not invite conversation, so there was little of it. It was an amiable lack.

Classes were dull, except for Potions, where Harry was too cold to be bored. Lupin did not appear to notice Harry’s shivering, but he did not remark when Hermione took the knife from Harry’s hand before he cut himself, slicing his Shripe roots for him, and he suggested that Ron trade seats with Harry, that he might be nearer the fire that blazed under their shared cauldron. He was so desperately cold, and his scars were even colder. The stump of his arm burned in ice, chafing horribly against everything, while the skin around his eyes was too numb to hurt. His glove rubbed harshly against the thick scar that still crossed his palm, but writing kept that hand warm enough that it was more of an irritant than a pain. Halfway through Potions, he abandoned the effort of taking notes, shrinking as far as he could into his robes to conserve heat. After class, Hermione and Ron pulled him aside.

“Are you okay, Harry?” asked Hermione, in a worried voice. Her hand was warm on Harry’s arm, and he leaned unconsciously towards that heat.

“I’ll be fine, Hermione,” he said. “I’m just so cold.” His jaw ached with the effort to keep it from
shaking.

“We noticed,” said Ron anxiously. “You’re practically blue. Do you think you should visit Madame Pomfrey? Ask her for a warming potion, or something?”

“I tried that,” Harry replied. “She’s added one to my nutria-potion, and it’s helping. Otherwise, I’d be even colder.” At that, he did shudder. The only time he’d ever been colder than this, he’d been in the arms of a Dementor, about to be Kissed. “I’m going to go back to our rooms when classes are over, I’m going to pull all of the blankets off of both of the beds, wrap myself up in them, and sit in front of the fire. I’d sit in the fire, if I could.”

Hermione made a small noise of amusement. “Have you gone mad?” she said sarcastically. “Are you a wizard or not? We learned Fire Freezing charms in third year, remember? Sitting in the fire would keep you warm, wouldn’t it?”

Harry grinned. “Now, that’s a good idea,” he said. “And if that doesn’t work, I can always set fire to some Devil’s Snare.” Ron snorted in laughter, and Harry chuckled as he tucked his chin back into his scarf. Together, they headed for Gryffindor Tower.

And so it was that Fred and George, coming down to the Common Room the next morning, found Harry Potter, sound asleep in his chair, sitting in the huge fireplace that dominated a whole wall of the room. Around him, the fire roared, but Harry slept soundly, unaware of the flames that reached up past his head, or of the breeze that stirred his hair and robes. He only woke when Fred, in a panic, reached into the fire with a hooked poker to pull him out. “No, don’t,” he said, smiling reassuringly. “I’m finally warm.”

“Warm?” George repeated, confused. “You’re sleeping in the Common Room fireplace to stay warm?”

“Yes,” Harry nodded. “The one in my room isn’t high enough for me and my chair.”

The twins just gaped at him, although why this was such a surprise in a castle full of witches and wizards, no one knew. It was just that no one had ever done this before.

Harry remained in the fireplace as long as he could, happily ignoring the exclamations of surprise and consternation that came whenever people first noticed him sitting there. The best was undoubtedly Neville, who after settling himself in one of the squashy chairs before the fire, had taken out his books and begun to study his potion’s assignments before he noticed Harry. The results were highly amusing. His books flew into the air as he leapt up, and one clouted him across the head as gravity made itself known. This caused the hapless boy to stumble forward, which would have been disastrous if not for Harry’s Fire Freezing charm, for he landed across the hearth, nearly in Harry’s lap.

“Good Morning, Neville,” said Harry blandly. The twins, who had appropriated Colin Creevey’s camera, laughed uproariously at the look on Neville’s face as he jerked back, checking himself all over to see if he were alight while at the same time calling for someone to help Harry. “Neville,” Harry laughed, barely able to speak for his hilarity, “I’m fine. It’s a Fire Freezing charm, is all. Remember them? I’m warm, for once.”

And so passed the next couple of weeks. After a few nights of sleeping in the Common Room, Harry convinced the House-elves to enlarge his own fireplace, and slept in it every night thereafter. His search for heat was almost an obsession now, and he went so far one day as to set his chair on fire, using a Sraftine Charm, which causes a thing to burn without burning, so that nothing was consumed or damaged. Nothing may have been burned, but Harry smelt of smoke for the rest of the
day, and decided that lighting his chair like that was not such a good idea.

He found himself changing still more as time passed. His sense of humour changed, for one thing. He preferred to trade jokes with Dominic now, rather than Ron and the guys, for the Seer had a sarcastic, edged sense of the ridiculous that appealed to Harry when adolescent jokes about Quidditch and girls wore thin. He found himself spending more and more time at Dominic’s house, and not only because it was warmer. One weekend, early in his studies with the man, the two had been talking freely about the construction of a proper crystal ball. Harry was extremely reluctant to touch Dominic’s, after what had happened the first time, but he was excited about the possibility of making his own. It was a complicated process, involving raw glass, a few potions, and a great many spells, but Harry didn’t feel that it would be too difficult for him to do. Dominic seemed to be sure he could, too, although he had never done it himself. Their conversation had ranged from there, going off on tangents and stories, and they had both lost track completely of time. When the conversation finally ran down, it was full dark, and too late for Harry to go back up to the castle. A fireplace conversation with Dumbledore arranged matters, and Harry spent that night in Dominic’s spare room, where he slept a dreamless night, without the aid of a potion. He woke relaxed, warm, and dry, three qualities rarely found simultaneously these days.

Another reason that he began to spend more and more time at Dominic’s was that the man never pressed conversation on him. Ron and Hermione, well meaning as they might be, talked too much. They, concerned by his reticence, were always drawing him into discussions of schoolwork, Quidditch, or something like that when all he wished was to sit in the presence of his friends, listening to everything around him. His dreams had something to do with this. While they were his only access to the realm of sight, they were soundless. He cherished the everyday sounds of the school as a refuge from the dreams. Even in Dominic’s house, there was none of the silence that pervaded Harry’s nights. More often than not, rain drummed against the windows and the roof, and various experiments bubbled and chimed from his workroom. Spark, the temperamental cat, could generally be heard muttering about something or other, and Dominic himself puttered around non-stop when he wasn’t occupied, tapping at his pipe or flipping through a book. The constant stream of small sounds might have irritated most people, but Harry found it a soothing balm when compared to the awful silence of his dreams.

Dominic, one Saturday morning, brought up the subject of Harry’s vision from their first meeting. He told Harry, then, of his two visions that had happened afterward, of Harry’s deaths that hadn’t happened. Harry listened in silence as Dom recounted them, and didn’t respond for some time afterward. When he did, it was the same question that Dominic had been asking himself.

“Is it possible to See a past that didn’t happen?” His voice was emotionless again, as it had been the day of the visions. Dominic shook his head, then caught himself and spoke aloud.

“It shouldn’t be;” he said. “And it feels really wrong to See it, like the world is turning upside down. There was a flavour to them.” Dominic was struggling to describe it. “Like meat gone so far off that you can taste its scent. It’s stomach-turning, and it’s nauseating, but that’s so you won’t eat it, or touch it, so it doesn’t have the chance to make you ill. That’s why you can’t use the Sight to imagine things,” he said, trying to lighten the mood. “Except in the future, and even then it’s hard. It has to be something that could happen without too much effort on the part of the universe. In other words, something that may well happen anyway, without more action than would otherwise be applied to it.”

“Ah,” was Harry’s simple reply, and they continued with the lesson from there. Neither of them spoke again about those three visions.

If sleeping in the fire made the cold of the day easier to bear, it did nothing for his visions. They
came when they would, which was nearly every night. The nights they did not come, Harry did not sleep. One night, a bit less than two weeks after the Halloween Feast, a vision changed the pattern.

Harry, sitting in the fire, had tried everything to get to sleep. He had, of late, found himself craving sleep, going so far as to nap during the day, when his still-hectic schedule would allow it. It wasn’t that he found any pleasure in seeing Voldemort, no matter how harmless the activities he witnessed. The pleasure he found was in seeing at all. His mind’s eye delighted in the colour, the light that he found in these dreams. He became so wrapped up in the experience of sight that what he was seeing lost all meaning and importance. He could enjoy the curve of sunlight along Voldemort’s sleeve as much as he could dread the fact that he was seeing the man at all. He mourned his return to blind darkness every morning even as he breathed a sigh of relief that Voldemort wasn’t there in the waking world. Tonight, though, Harry knew he wasn’t asleep. He could hear Ron, muttering nonsense in his bed, and Miss Myst and Gred had found a dust bunny, which they were chasing around the room on almost-noiseless feet. But light was creeping into his vision again, soft, flickering firelight. It brought with it Voldemort, sitting contemplatively at a desk, looking at a piece of old parchment. Harry’s heart turned over. It was the Marauder’s Map. He could see it clearly, as though he were watching over Voldemort’s shoulder. He could see Snape’s dot, unmoving in the staff wing, and Dumbledore’s, and McGonagall’s. Only the dots labeled Argus Filch and Mrs. Norris were moving, stalking rapidly through a corridor on the fourth floor, near the Ravenclaw Tower. Looking closer, he noticed that his name wasn’t on the map, and that neither was Ron’s. This room was not on the Marauder’s Map. Despite himself, Harry smiled. He now knew more about the castle than his father and his friends ever had. Most of the house-elf passages, Harry realized, were missing from the Map as well. This he filed away as a possible advantage, if Voldemort were ever to put this map to use in an invasion of Hogwarts.

When, eventually, the vision faded, Harry was still awake. From outside the window, birdsong told him that morning was imminent. Rolling out of the hearth, shivering a little as he left the heat behind, he put this latest vision into his pensieve, and then went to wake Ron up.

“Hey, Ron,” he said, shaking his friend’s shoulder. When his friend threw his pillow at him, Harry smiled. “Ron, I’m going out, okay? I’ll be out on the Pitch, okay?”

Grabbing his broom, Harry took no time at all in getting down to the field. As usual, Tristan was already there, running his morning laps. It had become a daily event for the two, to meet there. There was nothing of intent about it, they merely both were there at the same time everyday, and it had become habit. Tristan helped Harry onto his broom, and Harry would pace Tristan for a while as he ran, and then race him in the air. By the time they both were grounded again, Harry was calm. Repetition, he mused, can turn the terrifying into the everyday. His only complaint right now, aside from the cold and the threatened rain, was that Tristan had refused to push himself, and Harry, harder in the race. There was a Gryffindor conspiracy to keep him from over-exerting himself again.

As usual, Harry chose to skip breakfast, going instead back up to his room, his fireplace, and his books.

By late November, Harry’s life had settled into yet another new routine. He spent as much time as he could in various fireplaces around the castle, for the cold had only intensified as autumn deepened.
into winter. In the afternoons, when he had to be out on the Quidditch pitch, he wore a robe that
Hermione had charmed to keep him quite warm. She had overdone the charm a little, though, so the
robe was useless indoors, but it was a blessing to Harry now, as he oversaw a general practice.
Gryffindor’s next match, against Slytherin, wasn’t until after the Christmas holidays, so practice
today was laid back and fun, for everyone but Harry. Even with the charmed robe, he was too stiff
with cold now to steer his broom, where an unintended shudder would send him into an out-of-
control spiral or off over the lake in a sharp dive. So, he was confined to the ground, where all he
could do was listen to the echoes of his teammates calling back and forth. Once again, no one was
close enough to observe the tiny jumps his leg made, and it stopped after a time.

Fred landed alongside him late in the practice, announcing his presence. That, too, had become habit,
not only among the team, but among all of Gryffindor. It was only polite, after all, to let those present
know who you are. “Fredo Baggins, reporting for duty,” he quipped, tossing off a smart salute. “We
were wondering, oh captain sir, if you would end practice early tonight. You see, there’s an informal
dance for the Seventh Years tonight, and....” His voice petered off suggestively, and Harry finished
his sentence for him.

“And you, George, and Angelina want to go. Well, it’s okay with me,” Harry said, pulling his
whistle, his regular whistle, not the tiny, charmed one, out of his robes. Blowing it, he called all the
flyers down. “Good job today,” he said, although he had scarcely paid attention to the practice once
it was under way. “Practice ends early tonight, so make the most of your free time.” His words held a
heartiness he did not feel.

As the team headed back up into the castle, Harry lagged behind. Ron jogged back to join him. “You
okay, Harry?” he asked, twirling his broom absently. Harry didn’t answer right away. As his chair
trundled up the hill, Harry pulled his blindfold off, flinching a little as cold air gusted across
uncovered skin. “I’m cold,” he said at last, fiddling with the cloth in his hand. “And I’m tired.” He
said no more than that, but he was glad when Ron laid his hand across his shoulders in a mute
gesture of support.

Harry had planned to skip dinner that night, had planned to absorb his nutria-potion quietly in his
room before going to sleep early in his fireplace, but events conspired against him. First, he was out
of the potion, so he had to go to the Hospital Wing to procure some more. Halfway there, he ran into
Breena, who he had been trying to avoid. She, of course, insisted that he spent too much time alone
in his room lately, and, allowing him no argument, dragged him off to the Great Hall with the rest of
the students, which was exactly why he had been trying to avoid her in the first place.

The Great Hall was, as always, noisy and packed. Harry sat uneasily in his usual spot, laughing half-
heartedly at Ron’s jokes and Hermione’s scoldings. He was gradually becoming aware of a vague
unease, a restlessness that had his fingers wandering the table in front of him, picking up an apple,
rolling it around in his hand, setting it down, only to pick it up again. He stole Ron’s fork, which he
wasn’t using anyway, to drum it against the edge of the table in a quiet, fast, agitated beat. Ron and
Hermione went on talking about the day’s Potions lesson, in which Neville had melted not one, not
two, but three pewter cauldrons in his attempt to brew a poly-juice potion. Professor Lupin, patient
man though he was, had come remarkably close to losing his temper, but in the end, he had awarded
points to Gryffindor for Neville’s final near-success. If they noticed Harry’s increasing silence,
neither of them mentioned it. Nor did they say anything when he put his chin in his chest and began
to doze. It was exhausting, being cold all of the time.

Voldemort was standing in front of him, staring straight at him.

Harry jerked awake, staring madly into his blindness. He was where he had been a moment ago, in
the midst of hundreds of happily dining students. Safe. He relaxed. It had only been another vision,
but never before in his visions had Voldemort shown any evidence of being aware of Harry’s presence.

After a little while longer, Harry’s eyes drifted shut again. Voldemort was there again, but he was again at a desk, reading a note, an owl perched on his narrow shoulder. Harry saw him raise his head, smiling nastily as another man entered Harry’s view. This new man, who Harry did not recognize, bowed low before the evil wizard, long, dark hair sweeping aside as he rose again to bare the Dark Mark, tattooed in harsh, bold lines across the man’s profile. His face was a carefully set mask as Voldemort gave him what were obviously a detailed set of instructions and handed him the note that he had been reading. In the total silence typical of the visions, Harry watched as the Marked man shook his head, never losing the blank mask. Voldemort’s face grew angry, than enraged as the man remained obstinate, but it was a surprisingly long time before he drew his wand.

Even threatened with that, the man did not back down, or cringe as Wormtail would have done, but nor did he draw his own wand. He merely stood his ground as whatever he was refusing to do drove Voldemort’s rage to new heights. At last, the dark wizard aimed his wand, screamed a word that Harry could read off his snake-thin lips, Crucio, and fired a blast of energy to knock the man down. As Harry’s scar began to burn, a thin, high scream of sound entered the vision, increasing and multiplying and resounding through the corridors of his dream until he felt he would rather go mad than hear it any longer.

“Harry! Harry, wake up!” Ron was shaking him, pushing at his shoulder in concern. Harry’s face was wet, dripping with cold water. His throat was raw from the scream that had rose with him from the depths of his vision. Just at that moment, the concern in his best friend’s voice was too much.

“Get away!” he shouted, pushing as hard as he could at Ron. The boy stumbled back, astonished, but Harry wasn’t finished. “Get away!” he screamed, pushing away at the world around him. Every bit of glass in the Hall shattered, leaving an empty, ringing silence. Dumbledore, pulling his ruined spectacles from his face, hurried down from the Teacher’s Table, followed by McGonagall, Lupin, Black, and Snape, but as they converged on Harry, he continued to push. The Gryffindor table slid away from him, pushing students and benches over in its path. Around him, a circle about twenty feet wide was cleared of everything. Flagstones were starting to prise up from the floor, and not even Dumbledore could reach Harry, who sat at the center of it all, curled in on himself as best he could in an effort to shut out the scream that still drowned everything else out.

[I know that this chapter was short, but I am so tired. Those of you who IM with me may know why; for the rest of you, all I’ll tell you is that Harry’s nightmares are nothing compared to mine. So, no sleep, so, I’m too tired to write any more tonight, but I wanted to update. This chapter hasn’t been beta-ed, but it will be soon. Like tomorrow. That’s it. I’m going to bed.]
Suddenly, a presence wrapped itself around Harry, stilling the scream with a merciful abruptness. The presence was silence, the tranquility of stone and slow-moving magic, and it coiled around Harry like a faithful cat, warming and comforting and silent. He felt the wall he had built collapse with a sound like water poured over smooth stones, felt the world recede from his senses like an ebbing wave.

In the Great Hall, Dumbledore and the others had been pushed still farther back, and all four of the tables had been knocked askew by the force emanating from Harry. Those Gryffindors who had been nearest Harry, namely, Ron, Hermione, and Breena, who had been sitting across the table, were pinned firmly to the nearest wall. Minerva was trying to reach them, but she was making as little headway against Harry’s wall as Dumbledore was. Less, in fact.

With a suddenness that made them all stumble, the wall ceased to push them outwards, vanishing into nothingness. The respite was brief, however, for an instant later, a bubble of glass-like magic rushed outwards from the floor beneath Harry, pushing every student and professor firmly, gently, but inexorably out of the Great Hall. The doors slammed shut behind them, and refused to open again. No matter what spells were hurled at them, they held firm.

Inside, Harry was still held by the unknown presence, and he gradually uncurled, spreading out his senses one by one until he was sure the threat was gone. Silence met his ears, stillness his other senses, and he breathed relief. In the moment of waking from that dream, he had felt that he was drowning in the world. Now, though, it was more like he was floating on a still pond. He could extend his awareness out, he found, to touch the frightened people outside the Hall doors, but he pulled back from them as though burned. The slightest touch brought too much knowledge. He didn’t need to know, for instance, that Fred had lied to him about a Seventh year dance, didn’t want to know that it was one more example of the Gryffindor “protect Harry” Conspiracy. Nor did he need to know that Snape had had egg salad for lunch, or that Dumbledore loved muggle candies so much because his wife had loved them. He withdrew back into himself, letting the presence seal him into his own body, much as a mother would tuck a child into bed. In fact, the presence did feel decidedly maternal, and familiar. It lingered a moment longer, departing with a silent sigh and a gesture as though it had drawn a hand across Harry’s cheek. It withdrew, fading into the walls and away, leaving Harry sitting alone in the middle of the Hall just as the doors burst open, spilling a surprised Dumbledore into the room, the rest of the school crowding close behind him.

Harry lifted his head as though looking at them all, then a sob burst from his throat. The cry modulated into a laugh, that same, strange, high laugh that had overtaken him back when he first awoke after being rescued, four months ago. Now, like then, he laughed with complete, terrible abandon, losing himself entirely to the hilarity. The laughter rose and fell in waves that were frightening in their intensity. A few of the first years began to cry, and not a few of the older students looked ill. Harry just kept laughing, oblivious to their discomfiture. Cautiously, Dumbledore approached him. When he met with no resistance, he wasted no time in pushing Harry out of the Great Hall, past the onlookers, and up to his office. He knew that, whatever had happened to Harry, it was not helped by being witnessed by the entire school.

By the time they reached the gargoyle, Harry was beginning to quiet. He was giggling dangerously now, face set in a rigid grin. His chest began to heave in sobs as Dumbledore opened the door at the top of the stairs. Dumbledore let him cry, a hand resting lightly on his shoulder his only contact with the boy. It was a long time before he composed himself, and longer still before he spoke.

“I can’t stay here anymore,” he said quietly. Dumbledore started. “Not after everyone saw that. They’ll pity me, or make fun of me, or be afraid of me, and I can’t stand it anymore. I have to leave.”

Dumbledore didn’t argue. He should have, he knew, but there was a grim determination in Harry’s
voice and face that made him think better of it. “Where do you want to go?” he asked solemnly.

“To Mr. Deegan’s,” Harry replied. “If he’ll have me. That way, I can keep learning to control this, and maybe, someday, I can come back.”

“I think that’s a good idea, Harry, if you are set on leaving. So close, you’ll still be able to meet up with your friends, and, if you want to, you can continue your studies. I do think that you will be coming back, and you don’t want to fall behind, now, do you?” Dumbledore stood up and strode across the room to the fireplace on the far wall. “Dominic Deegan!” he called, tossing a handful of glitter into the flames. “Could I have a word?”

“Headmaster?” came Dominic’s voice from the fire, clearly surprised at the summons. “What can I do for you?”

“I have a matter of importance to discuss with you about Harry,” Dumbledore said, smiling gravely. “Could you come through, so we can talk it over here?”

“Right,” said Dominic. A moment later, the Seer arrived in a flare of green flame. “So, what is this about?” He spotted Harry, sitting silent in a corner of the office. “Harry?”

“Could I come and stay with you a while?” Harry blurted out, wiping belatedly at the half-dried tears on his cheeks. “I can’t stay here.”

Dominic rounded on the Headmaster. “Has he been expelled? What’s this about?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Dumbledore reassured him. “This is a decision that Harry has made, following a... disturbance in the Great Hall at dinner. Harry can explain it better than I, I’m afraid. I still don’t know quite what happened, to tell the truth.”

“I had a vision,” Harry said slowly, as though he were forcing himself to admit to it. “Of Voldemort. Another one, like my old ones. He tortured a man, a man with the Dark Mark tattooed across the side of his face. He used Crucius.” Harry shuddered hard. “And then something woke me up, and the whole world attacked me.” He shrugged. “That’s what it felt like. I was drowning in everything around me, so I pushed it. I pushed everything away from me, so I had space to breathe. And then I couldn’t stop pushing. I could feel all the student’s panic, and it made it even harder to breathe, so I couldn’t stop pushing it all away.” His voice slowed, took on a tone of wonderment. “And then she was there. I don’t know who she was, but she wrapped around me, like a mother holds a child. She felt good, quiet, like a cat. She took away the scream.”

“Who is she?” Dumbledore asked, a concerned frown on his face.

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “I’m not even sure it was a woman. She just felt... motherly.” His voice was fond. “She loves me, like a mother loves a son. It’s the most incredible feeling.”

Dumbledore was wary. “Harry,” he said. “You don’t know who she is and you don’t know what she is, so be careful. Can you tell me anything more about her?”

Harry let his eyes shut, a soft expression on his face. “She felt like water, water and stone, quiet, cool, and so incredibly old. She loves me,” he repeated. “Me. Harry. She doesn’t even know who the Boy-Who-Lived is.” He sighed and opened his eyes again, saying, “But I still can’t stay here. I won’t be pitied, and I’d really rather not be mocked or feared. I had enough of that in my second year, when half the school believed that I was Slytherin’s heir. So, can I borrow your spare room for a while? I would go home, but Molly and Arthur would fuss over me, and I wouldn’t be able to continue my training with you.”
“Sure,” said Dominic, smiling. “You can stay as long as you need to, Harry.”

Harry moved to the Seer’s house that very night, pausing long enough in Gryffindor Tower to explain his decision to his friends. Hermione, as could be expected, was reproachful about the school he would miss, and Ron was worried that it was his fault. Breena was silent, but she held Harry’s hand for the whole leave-taking. Harry reassured them all that he would, most probably, come back, but only when he could control his Seeing. They all helped him pack, and then he left, going with Dominic out into the gathering darkness.

Reaching Dominic’s, Harry didn’t even unpack. He dragged himself out of the chair, into bed, and fell fast asleep. He slept without dreams for the first time in over a month, and slept clear through the night.

The next morning, he woke to a quiet far more profound than anything to be found in the Gryffindor Tower. The only sounds were the stealthy paw-steps of a cat, approaching Harry’s bed. Suddenly, Spark, with whom Harry had never quite come to terms, exclaimed loudly, “What is she doing here?” Harry felt his bed quiver as the cat leapt up onto it, stalking across the coverlet. Miss Myst hissed sharply as the other cat approached her nest of blankets near Harry’s shoulder. “This is my house,” Spark complained. “There isn’t enough room for two cats! Boss! There’s another cat here!” He raised his voice to call out of the room. When there was no immediate response, he backed down, muttering, “What good’s a boss when he’s never awake in the morning? Don’t move, you,” he hissed at Harry’s kitten before whirling and leaping from the bed, streaking from the room while still yowling for Dominic. Harry, deciding that, like it or not, he was now awake, summoned his chair, using it to pull himself out of bed. He chuckled at the sounds of outrage from Dominic’s room, down and across the hall, and at Spark’s continued complaints.

“This is a one-cat house,” he was saying as Dominic plodded down the hall, sleepily following the bossy cat. “You hardly have enough fish for me as it is. How are you planning on feeding another cat? I bet she’s a glutton, and an ingrate, and a thief...” His list of accusations ran on and on. Dominic trudged straight past Harry’s door, muttering a bleary “M’ning,” on his way to the kitchen. As Harry got ready for the day, he could hear water running, and then a kettle being heated over the fire. When he came out to the kitchen, Dominic was sitting at the table, nursing a cup of tea and a pipe.

“Sorry about that,” he apologized sheepishly. “I’m not really a morning person.”

“I guessed that,” said Harry, smiling. “Have you ever noticed? Smart people aren’t morning people.”

“What does that say about you, then?” asked Dominic in a mock-growl. Harry shrugged.

“I never said I was smart, did I?”

“I though it was obvious,” Dominic said, more awake now. “So, I had a few plans for today, but nothing that you can’t come along for. I’m going to visit my brother, Gregory. He lives over on the other side of town, near the forest. Or, if you want, you can just stay here, where it’s quiet. I’ll be taking Spark with me.”


“Oh, believe me,” Dominic said. “If it were raining, you’d hear it. This isn’t exactly a huge stone castle. In fact,” he added, leaning to see out the window. “It looks like it’s going to be a nice day.”

“Then I’ll come with you.”

“Only in the winter,” Harry qualified, grinning. “I get cold way too easy now.”

“Oh, right,” Dominic mumbled, pouring himself another cup of tea. “I forgot.”

And so it was that they crossed through the village on a sunny morning. People in the street shouted hellos to Dominic, and he waved back, returning the salutations. “this town is so much nicer than my old village,” he commented to Harry. “The people here are smarter.”

Arriving at Gregory’s house was not what Harry had expected. He followed Dominic across a grassy lawn, and heard the Seer knock on something that sounded like a tree. From above him, a voice shouted down “Who is it?”

“It’s me,” Dominic shouted back. “And I’ve brought a friend. Can we come up?”

Branches rustled loudly above them. It was a tree. Gregory’s voice grew nearer as he replied. “You have a friend?”

“Ha, ha,” Dominic replied sarcastically. “Greg, this is Harry Potter. He’s going to be staying with me for a while, while I teach him to See. Harry, this is my little brother, Gregory.”

“Nice to meet you,” Harry said politely, putting his hand out. Another hand shook it firmly.

“Same here, Harry,” said Gregory. He sounded in his mid-twenties, Harry thought. “Why don’t you guy’s come up? I was drawing out the preliminary plans for my new game.”

“You design games?” Harry asked as Dominic pushed his chair onto some sort of platform. He was startled when it lurched and started to rise. “What?”

“Oh, don’t worry, Harry,” said Dominic from a distance below him. You’re on Greg’s lift. I forgot to tell you that he lives in a treehouse. There’s not enough room on the lift for three, so I’ll come up after you.

“A lift. For a tree house.” The idea struck Harry as funny, and Greg laughed too.

“Yeah,” he said. “I can’t climb ladders very well, with my leg being, well, dead, so I designed a tree-lift. That’s what I really do for a living. Magical architecture. For fun, I design muggle video games. There’s not all that much difference. It’s hard here, with no electricity or computers, but I manage. There are magical equivalents, after all.”

“Sounds cool,” said Harry, honestly impressed. Then they had reached the top, and Harry’s chair rolled forward onto a wooden deck. As Gregory led him into the house that stood there, Harry could hear the “tunk... tunk....tunk,” of a cane on the floor, and the sound of a dragging foot. No wonder Greg needed the lift. Harry didn’t ask about it. He knew firsthand how sensitive people could be about terminal injuries. A moment later, Dominic came up behind them.

“So, why do you live in a tree house?” Harry asked, trying to make conversation. Dominic snorted, and then Gregory replied.

“Because my loving brother wouldn’t let me live in a couch fort in his living room.”

“It’s my living room, and my couch. I needed them both for customers. Honestly, between you and Spark...” His voice trailed off in mock-exasperation. Gregory was chuckling at him.

“Between me and Spark we keep your life interesting. Without us, you’d go mad from boredom in a week.” This was obviously a well-loved topic, at least for Greg. Dominic glared blackly at him, but
joined his brother sitting at the small kitchen table. After asking permission, Harry wandered the
house, exploring the place with his fingers. He traced the woven branches that made up the walls,
levered himself up to follow one particularly large one that stuck through one corner of the small
kitchen. Overall, it was one of the most interesting houses Harry had ever been in. Returning to the
table where Dominic and Gregory sat talking, Harry’s fingers found papers, not parchments, but
actual papers, spread out across the surface. These, Gregory explained, were the blueprints for his
newest game, which featured a labyrinth. Harry tentatively offered a few suggestions for it, drawing
on his memories of the first, less horrible part of the Third Task, the year before. Gregory seized on
the idea of the mist that flipped the world upside down, but he already had a sphinx, two in fact, both
with more sophisticated riddles than the one Harry had had to solve. Grinning, he posed one for
Harry.

“I drive men mad for love of me,
Easily beaten, never free.”

Harry, who had never been very good at riddles, sat for a while to figure this one out. “I don’t
know,” he said at last, shrugging.

“Gold,” said Dominic off-handedly. “I’m good at riddles.”

“No,” said Gregory. “You cheat. That’s not the same as being good. It doesn’t take skill to look into
the future and see the answer to a riddle.”


“Smug bastard,” he muttered.

“It’s not being smug when you’re always right.”

Suddenly, Dominic sat up so fast that the chair he was sitting in flipped over with a crash. “I’m
alright,” he said immediately, lying on the floor. “Just a vision. Nothing important,” he said, standing
and dusting himself off. “Mrs. Hardwick’s husband is cheating on her again. I’ll tell her on the way
home. We’ll pass their shop, I think.”

“Do visions always hit you like that?” Harry asked curiously.

“No, not often,” replied Dominic. “I just wasn’t ready for this one. I can usually control myself
during one.”

“I can’t,” said Harry, downcast. “I could have hurt my friends.”

“Ah, but you didn’t,” said Dominic cheerfully. “No one got hurt, so no guilt. And that’s why you’re
here with me anyway. To learn to control yourself. It’s not something that you can learn overnight,
you know. It took me years, but I had to teach myself to See. What we have to teach you, is not to
See, only to control your Seeing. I had the second sight. I was born with it, but what you have is
different. I’m not sure how.”

“As much as I’d love to listen to more of this fascinating lecture, Professor Dominic, some of us
have regular jobs to go to. You two are welcome to stay here if you want, but I have to be in London
in an hour.”

“Oh, you have to work today? I forgot.” Dominic sounded abashed. “Harry, I guess we’ll head
home, then. We can get started on today’s training, then.”
Walking back across Hogsmead, Dominic stopped in various shops, buying fruit here, a few books there. One shop, he bid Harry wait for him outside, and when he came out, he was empty-handed. Harry’s sensitive ears could hear a woman’s voice, swearing up a storm in the shop. This, then, must be the Hardwicks’ shop.

Back at Dominic’s, they got down to business. Dominic put Spark outside and locked Miss Myst into Harry’s bedroom, ensuring that there would be no distractions, and then he got his crystal ball from its stand upon the mantle. “A crystal ball,” he said conversationally, setting it in front of Harry on the desk. “Is a catalyst for the Inner Eye. It doesn’t create visions, nor does it allow the Sightless to See. All it does is prompt that part of the mind that knows how to See to do its job. That’s all. I know that it was traumatic, to say the least, last time, but would you try again? It might not be so bad this time.”

Reluctantly, and without a word, Harry reached out, his fingers finding the smooth glass sphere of their own accord. Nothing happened. Emboldened, he lifted it, setting it in his lap. His mind turned inward as his fingers wandered over its surface, noting tiny imperfections in the glass. He draped his hand over it, arranging his fingers so that each fell over a perfect surface, unmarred or scratched. And then the vision struck, as though it had been waiting for him all along, like a predator for its prey.

Chapter: 36

Chapter 36

All there was was a child. A young boy, no more than eight, running through a dark forest, glancing fearfuly over his shoulder for signs of pursuit. Harry, seeing through his eyes, saw the followers before the boy did, saw the trees being blasted out of the way of a score and more of Death Eaters, saw them approach, terrifying in their blank masks. He felt the boy’s heart beating wildly in his chest, his pure blood racing through his veins, felt his tongue dry in his mouth. He was the boy, running so raggedly through the brush, but his mind floated free, looking ahead, where he could see the trap being laid. The boy, Rand, never had a chance. He burst into the clearing, his eyes watching his feet to keep from tripping, and ran straight into the bullet. It took the top of his head off, and before his body had hit the ground, he was alone, save for an unconcious muggle holding a smoking rifle.

Two hours before, Harry saw the boy playing in his back yard with a new puppy. His mother was watching him from the porch, where she was talking on a muggle telephone, even though her attire clearly declared her a witch. Inside, his father worked at a roll-top desk, stretching from time to time as though his work were tense. At one point, he looked out the window; a scowl crossing his face for the amount of noise his son was making. Three hours later, boy and wife were dead. A bullet in her heart, he in the forest. The father paced the police department disconsolately, describing to them the man he had seen, a madman in a black trench coat, with a gun, blowing a hole in his wife’s chest, chasing his son off. He didn’t mention the snake-eyed man who had laughed at him as his wife pleaded for their son’s life, nor the dozens of faceless men who had cleaned up any traces of magic around the place once they had had their murderous fun. He didn’t remember them. He remembered the muggle, and identified him when they brought him into the hospital. Three policemen had to hold him back, to keep him from killing the unconcious man. “You bastard!” he screamed from a place beyond simple rage. “You utter fucking bastard! She was innocent! He was eight! You killed them, Charles! I’ll kill you, you fucking muggle!” They had to sedate him, in the end. He was raving about revenge, and they wrested a stick of wood from his grasp when he began jabbing it towards the man,
trying to articulate a word, but too enraged to complete it. “Avada...” he kept saying, even after they had confiscated his wand. “Avada...”

The man who was convicted for the murders of Rand and Morning Thebes was one Mr. Charles Devon, a man who was in negotiations with Samuel Thebes, the father, over a possible merger between their respective small corporations. They had both been heavily involved in the research and invention of medical technology; for all that Samuel was a wizard. That merger, had it happened, would have led in only a few years to the invention, by accidental progress, of a functional artificial nervous system. Harry saw it all in a flash, saw a boy stand up from a wheelchair, grinning madly, but then it faded impossibly far into the future, out of his reach. Other futures faded too. Rand, beaming in dark blue robes and brandishing his diploma from Beauxbatons, sailing a small boat on impossibly blue waters, smiling tenderly at a child in his arms, and proudly as that same child, grown to a man, waved from a television screen as he boarded a space shuttle unlike any Harry had seen.

Ripples. As the vision faded, all Harry was convinced of were that the ripples were real. Nothing else, not the vision etched into his mind’s eye, not the ice that splintered under his fingernails as his hand twitched, not Dominic’s anxious voice in his ears, was as real to him as the ripples he felt. They flowed out through him, racing from one end of the world to the other in the space of a heartbeat, from one time to another, leaving him above them, gasping for a breath that had nothing to do with air.

Before he could catch his breath, the type that used his lungs, the door burst open, bringing with it a swirl of heat that nearly made Harry faint. “What was that?” It was Greg’s voice, worried and panting, as he limped as fast he could to Harry and Dominic’s side.

“What?” asked Dominic, finally prying the ball out of Harry’s hands.

“A rush of magic,” Gregory replied impatiently. “Like a tidal wave. It was centered here, I’m sure.”

“I didn’t feel it,” Dominic replied.

“No, you wouldn’t have, I guess. It was tainted,” Greg said dully. “I feel sick.”

“Tainted?” Harry asked, groggily. “How?”

“It was like something was riding it, surfing it like a, well, like a wave. Can I have a chair, bro?”

Dominic stood up, and his brother collapsed gratefully into his vacated seat with a groan, letting his cane drop to the floor. “I’m sensitive to magic gone bad,” he explained.

“Magic can go bad?” Harry was having trouble concentrating on reality, and he was easily confused.

“Yeah,” Gregory replied. “When ‘good magic,’ things like healing spells, or stuff like that gets misused, it becomes rotten.”

“I was Seeing,” Harry admitted, still fighting to stay awake. “But I wasn’t misusing it. I wasn’t even controlling it. If anything, it was misusing me.”

“No, Seeing is a neutral magic. It wouldn’t have made that wave.”

“Don’t look at me,” said Dominic. “I can’t do anything but See.”

“I know,” said Greg dispiritedly. “So what was it?”

Harry shrugged. Dominic sighed, pulling over another chair. “I don’t know, Gregory. I thought you
were going to London.”

“I was, I did, and I’m back. It’s been most of the day since I left, Dom. Look outside. It’s getting dark.”

“What?” Dominic’s voice sounded shocked as he rushed over to the nearest window, throwing open the shutters. “It is. When did that happen?”

“When the sun went down, Dom. It happens every day around this time.”

“I must have been pulled into Harry’s vision too,” Dominic said, coming back to the table. “But I don’t remember anything.”

“Uh, Mr. Deegan?” said Harry, worried. “I can’t stop my hand from shaking.” It was true. Harry’s hand, though the rest of him was lax with exhaustion, was shuddering with a life all its own, alternately stretching and clenching so tightly into a fist that the tendons stood out sharply against whitened skin. As they watched, however, it slowed, lashed out with one final spasm, knocking the ball to the floor, and then lay still. Harry flexed it carefully twice, and then let it drop to his lap. “Well, that was odd,” he remarked.

“Quite,” said Dom.

“Can I have a look at it?” asked Greg, moving closer. “I dabble in magical healing.” Dominic snorted, but did not comment as he got up from the table, going to make tea.

“Sure,” said Harry. A little confused, he put his hand out in the direction of Gregory’s voice. A warm hand took it, and dropped it immediately. “Merlin, Harry, you’re freezing!” His hand was picked up again. “Look at this, Dominic, he’s got frostbite! Weird. He has it on his palm, and on the pads of his fingers, but none on his tips, where it should have been first. Does this hurt, Harry?”

Gregory tugged at Harry’s index finger, then his little finger.

“No. Should it?”

“A little. How about this?” He pinched Harry’s thumb, hard.

“Ow!”

“Oh, good,” Gregory sighed. “That means it’s not too deep. I can fix this in a flash.”

Harry expected the younger Deegan to give him a potion, and sighed in preparation of telling him that he couldn’t drink anything, but instead, he gripped Harry’s lone hand him his two. “Heal!” he muttered, and a burning warmth filled the extremity, replaced immediately by a rushing sensation, and then it was gone. Flexing his hand, it felt better than it had in months. The soreness around the scar that bisected the palm was gone, and the skin that had been chapped by that day’s cold wind felt better.

“What was that?” Harry asked, perplexed.

“That was my brother showing off,” said Dominic with some more humour than asperity. “You know you’re not supposed to do that, Gregory. That type of magic is for emergencies only.”

“This was an emergency, Dom,” said Greg in a cheerful voice, holding up Harry’s healed hand as evidence. “Frostbite can lead to gangrene, and Harry here needs all the body parts he’s got.”

“Thanks,” Harry said dryly, reclaiming his hand.
“No problem,” replied Greg, “Now that I’m breaking the rules anyway, let’s see what else I can do for you.”

{And that’s it for tonight. I got my new car, I got into the college I wanted, tomorrow’s Monday and my birthday. I’m going back to bed.}

Chapter 37

With Harry’s permission, Gregory ran his hands over the old injuries; sending twining tendrils of tingling power into his flesh. Harry hadn’t dared to get his hopes up too high, so he was not overly disappointed when Greg sighed and leaned back. He had soothed an incipient headache, eased the omnipresent tightness in his chest, and warmed him overall, but nothing really had changed.

“Thanks,” he said sincerely, no trace of disillusionment in his voice. “That feels better.”

“Well, good,” said Greg, sounding tired. “I wanted to do more, but they’re too extensive and too old.”

“It’s okay,” reassured Harry, sensing Gregory’s self-disappointment. “I’m used to my body like this. I’m resigned to it. Thank you for trying, though.”

“You’re welcome,” replied Greg, but he sounded miserable.

“You overdid it,” cut in Dominic sharply, cuffing his brother, who swayed dangerously in his chair.

“Maybe I did,” agreed Greg defensively. “But I couldn’t not try, could I?”

“No, I suppose you’re right,” muttered Dominic.

“You know I was, Dom. You’re just being an over-protective big brother again.” A smile was back in Gregory’s voice, though he still sounded exhausted. “Since it’s begun to snow,” he added, leaning to see out the kitchen window. “Can I spend the night?”

“You’ll have to sleep on the couch,” warned Dominic. “But you know you’re always welcome here.”

Gregory snickered wickedly. “Did you say couch?” His weariness instantly vanishing, he leapt from the chair and dashed to the sofa.

“No!” exclaimed Dominic half-heartedly. “Not a-

“Couch fort!” was Gregory’s muffled reply. Dominic groaned, his head in his hands as his younger brother burrowed happily into the couch. “Hey! I found a Sickle! And a stick of gum!” Harry laughed, and Dominic threw his hands up.

“I give up,” he proclaimed. “I’m going to bed. Good night, Harry.” He pointedly ignored his brother as he swept from the room, his robe swishing behind him.

“Good night, Greg,” laughed Harry as he retired to his own room.
The next morning, Hedwig was waiting for Harry in Dominic’s kitchen, a letter in her beak. “Get her out of the kitchen,” growled a tea-less Dominic. His voice was humourous, but Harry stiffened in fear for a moment, then relaxed. Dominic was not Vernon, nor was he drunk. Harry was safe. Letting her out the back door, Harry shook away the feeling of deja vu, opening the letter.

“Eladmij,” he said, tapping the missive. It unrolled and began to read itself. Dominic moved away, into the kitchen as Mrs. Weasley’s voice filled the air.

“Harry, dear,” she wrote. “I understand that you need some time away from the school, and Dumbledore explained that you need to work with this Mr. Deegan to develop your skills, so it’s okay with Arthur and I that you chose to stay with him. I just wish you had asked us first. I know you’re not used to having parents, but we’re used to having sons, and we like to know where they are before they go there. You can meet Ron, Ginny, and the Twins at Hogsmead Station when term ends, and come home with them for the Christmas Hols. Arthur and I have something rather special planned as a present for the entire family, and we wouldn’t want you to miss it. Love, Molly. PS: Be sure to thank Mr. Deegan.”

Setting the letter aside, Harry smiled wryly. He knew he had been right not to go home to the Burrow, but he hadn’t considered his parents’ feelings in the matter. He was glad that they were so understanding.

Later that day, after Gregory, who was less of a morning person than his brother, had gone home, Dominic received customers. Harry knew that he did this, for Dominic had talked about the professional side of his life before, but he hadn’t had the opportunity to observe him in action. Today, however, Dominic let him sit in the corner of the room, ostensibly reading, as his clients came and asked their questions. Spark, Harry was amused to see, acted as a secretary, far more politely than Harry would have given the cat credit for.

Dominic’s first customer was a nervous wizard from a nearby village. He wanted to know if his muggle neighbors would notice if he used a little magic to help his garden grow faster. Dominic, after tapping his crystal ball exactly like Dudley had tapped his TV when it was being recalcitrant, told him that his neighbors would notice, but only if he started growing plants that didn’t ordinarily grow in a muggle garden. “No mandrakes,” he cautioned the man. “The little boy that lives across the street likes to pull up garden plants.”

The next client was a witch, a young one who fusssed and dithered about whether the young wizard who worked cleaning tables in the Three Broomsticks would ever notice her. Dominic’s voice was puzzled as he tried to See for her, but for some reason, the ball would not clear into a vision. Dominic grumbled perplexedly at it. “I can nearly see your future,” he said. “Wait, it’s almost there, I can just barely... Ah, damn. Lost it.”

The client, instead of being mad, snickered. “Hey,” she smirked. “Looks like you got a case of crystal blue ba-...” Dominic interrupted her, a scowl in his voice.

“Get out of my house.” he growled flatly. When she had left, still chortling to herself, Dominic hung his closed sign. “Idiots,” he remarked to Harry as he rubbed his temples. “Are the biggest drawbacks of this profession.”

“I can see that,” agreed Harry, smiling. He had found the incident hilarious, but wasn’t about to tell his host that. “Well, kinda.”

“I know what you mean,” Dominic said irritably, before changing the subject. “Go and get that book
on glass-blowing that I gave you. We’re going to have a practical lesson today.”

Under Dominic’s careful supervision, Harry then began preparations for the making of his very own crystal ball. It would be some time before he was ready to actually blow the glass, but there were potions that had to be made first, and new spells to learn. It was a complicated process, but Harry relished the distraction. When he slept, now, he dreamt of glass and fire. Voldemort was wholly absent from his sleep, though his dreams were no less vivid. Miss Myst, as annoyed by his near-constant nightly twitching as she was by Spark’s continued haughtiness, took to sleeping under his bed, curled up on a discarded robe.

{Short, pointless chapter, I know, but at least I included some more twitching for you optimists. I know you’re out there.

The scene with Dominic, the idiotic customer, and the crystal blue, well, you know, was taken verbatim from the comic strip, which you all really should go and read. The link is in my bio page. Go and check it out, and be sure to tell them that Lady Russell Holmes sent you.

On another note, I have put some of my own really bad art for BBH up on my yahoo group. There’s a concept sketch of Tristan there, as well as two really, really, horrid pictures of Harry, and a picture from the future of BBH. I drew these on MS Paint, but that’s no excuse for how bad they are. Could somebody please, please, pretty please take pity on me and draw me some better art? That link’s in my bio page too.}

Chapter: 38

Chapter 38

Blowing glass, Harry discovered, was far more tricky a business than he had expected. It took him nearly two full days of practice before he could properly melt the glass ingredients into a gather, lift it onto the pipe, and get the pipe to his lips without dropping the gather. Another day went to learning how to breathe properly, for a breath gone wrong could fill his throat with a liquid spray of burning glass. He had to breathe a smooth, sustained, forceful breath. This, Harry thought, was no less taxing on his lungs than Quidditch, but he never voiced that irony.

After a week’s practice, he could blow a smooth, round sphere nine times out of ten. Spinning the pipe to keep the ball round was difficult with only one hand, so they made a leather cap, fitting over his stump, attached to a double-pronged steel hook. With that, he could support the pipe while he spun it with the other hand. The potions were ready, and he had learned all the necessary spells, so today, he was going to make his first attempt at a crystal ball.

“It’s okay if you don’t succeed the first time,” Dominic assured him as they set up everything that they would need. “I tried to make one when I was a little older than you are now, but mine never worked, which is why I order mine from Seer’s catalogue. It’s very tricky.”

“Well, I’ll try,” said Harry, smiling. He really wanted to make his own, out of a sense of curiosity. Through a ball tuned to him, he thought that maybe he could be a little more in control of what he saw. Seeing through Dominic’s ball, was, to say the least, traumatic.

Setting to work, Harry mixed the sands and minerals that would melt together into the gather, adding the potions that would insure a clear, even flow of light through the glass, and a steady, dim light
when a vision was in play. A spell set it to melting even before he put it into the fire. Now came the delicate part. Whispering another spell, he lifted the molten gather onto the iron blowpipe, giving it a preemptory spin to settle it into place. He lifted the pipe to his lips, beginning the slow, steady stream of air with a puff to get the glass started. With the air, he sent a series of silent spells, one after the other, mere motions of his tongue giving them shape. Dominic kept up a running commentary to Harry, telling what he was seeing as the glob of glass expanded and changed, but Harry could feel what was happening in his fingers and lips through the blowpipe. When the liquid glass slipped into the shape made ready for it by the potions and spells, Harry felt it, and he pulled it away from the small furnace. Taking a deep breath, he plunged the hot sphere into a roiling cauldron, breaking the pipe off in a smooth stroke, then backed off rapidly as the potion hissed and boiled itself dry. It issued a vapour of steam and visions as it did so, fragments of sound and color that meant nothing, but told Harry that he had been successful. His crystal ball would See.

After an hour and unable to wait any longer, he reached into the dry cauldron to retrieve his ball, exploring its shape eagerly with his fingers. Its surface was smooth, its only disruption a small seam where a thread of glass had cooled faster than the rest. It was a jagged, lightly etched line. Harry knew from his studies that imperfections like this weren’t flaws, but more of a maker’s mark. How appropriate, then, that his was a lightning bolt.

The ball wouldn’t be ready for use today; it had to cool completely to seal the spells to it, so Harry reluctantly set it aside. The rest of the day, his hand kept wandering to it, picking it up absently as he performed other tasks, familiarizing itself with its shape. Harry felt proud of the object, as though it were a particularly clever pet that he had trained. He was impatient to use it for its intended purpose. Perhaps it was that agitation that opened his mind once more to the vision-dreams.

Voldemort was lounging indolently in front of a roaring fire, slouched casually across a winged chair. It was passing strange to see him in so human a pose; head lolled back in a corner of the chair, legs sprawled over the opposite arm. Harry realized that he used to sit the exact same way, back when any freedom of pose was possible. Voldemort’s eyes were shut, but his long, spiderish fingers wandered precisely over the surface of a fist-sized ball of aged ivory. His hands, glowing in the firelight against the black of his robes, appeared disembodied as they explored the sphere, pressing gently here and there. Seemingly without interference or direction from his mind, the white fingers arranged themselves over certain points, indistinguishable from Harry’s point of view, but obviously crucial, for, as he pressed gently inwards, the sphere unfolded like a cluster of flower petals, allowing a single, large, black pearl to roll into the Dark Lord’s palm. He smiled without opening his eyes, a perversion of a simple, contented smile, before he sealed the pearl away, back inside the ivory puzzle.

Suddenly, a sound that Harry couldn’t hear brought Voldemort out of his tranquil reverie, opening his burning eyes as he sat up. He was replacing the ball on a stand obviously made for it on the mantle when Lucius Malfoy walked in, bowing obsequiously as he did so. He glanced questioningly at the ball, wondering plainly if it had some special significance, but Voldemort’s reply was plain enough that Harry could read it from his lips. “It’s nothing,” he said errantly. “A toy.” A wind blew in a window that Harry couldn’t see, and carried him away from the bright-edged vision.

The breeze, apparently, was from the real world, for it drew him back to his sightless reality and a morning filled with birdsong. Dominic was already up, and had already had his tea, to judge by the cheerful tune he was whistling, so Harry knew he had overslept his normal waking hour. He spent a lax moment wondering why, and then remembered yesterday’s events with a rush of pride. He put his hand out to the bedside table, finding his new-made crystal ball precisely where he had left it. It seemed to wake slightly to his touch, an elemental stirring beneath his fingers. It was ready.

Willing himself to wait, he pulled himself laboriously from his bed to his chair, a task that had grown
no less onerous with repetition, but relying on the aid of others was far worse. That accomplished, he rolled out into the main rooms, grinning to Dominic’s cheerful “Good morning.”

“It’s ready,” he exclaimed happily, brandishing the ball. “Should I try to See yet?”

“Well, I can’t understand how you’ve waited this long,” replied Dominic. “I tried mine before I had it all the way out of the box.”

Harry laughed, settling the ball comfortably in his lap. His fingers clung slightly to its charged surface, and then the ball began to chill. His fingers remained locked to it as it cooled past mere coolness into a cold almost painful in its intensity. It was happening slowly, almost as though the ball were leading Harry gradually into the experience, trying not to overwhelm him as Dominic’s ball had. Ice crept at an infinitesimal rate up his wrist, halfway up to his elbow. “That’s unusual,” Harry heard Dominic say before he was absorbed by the ball’s vision.

The ball was young, Harry knew, so it needed direction to See anything. Undirected, as it was now, all that it showed to Harry was the room around him, as it was now. For the first time, he saw Dominic, a solemn young man, perhaps in his late twenties, with an unruly quantity of reddish-brown hair, frameless spectacles, and, of course, the expected pipe. The best way to describe him would be to call him sincerely sarcastic, for so he was.

Dominic’s voice cut into Harry’s blissful exploration of the visual world, reminding him of what he was trying to do. “Look up, Harry,” he said, tapping his shoulder to get his attention. “What do you see?”

Harry’s voice was distant, as though he was speaking from under water. “I see a layer of light. Clear, perfect light, with every color possible in it. It’s incredible!”

Dominic smiled, remembering that sight himself. It was a heady moment; one’s first controlled Seeing. “That’s the future, Harry. Or actually, the futures. All of them. Concentrate. Try to slow it down, focus on one particular event, and try to pick it out. Try something simple, like what I’ll be wearing tomorrow.”

Harry’s brow furrowed as he concentrated. In his vision, the field of futures divided into liquid threads, each a story that called him to pursue it. In truth, it was an effort to keep from following them all. It took him all of ten minutes to figure out a trick of thinning them out. Eventually, he did it by isolating his own thread, a twisting branching twine unlike any near it, and find Dominic’s where it crossed his, and then following that strand a short distance, through six forking to the most likely tomorrow. It was easy to tell which future was the most possible, for the rest tattered and frayed visibly as they left the true. The whole shifted with each breath of the world, but certain threads remained relatively constant. “You’re going to wear a yellow sweater tomorrow, with grey slacks and a red and purple scarf. Am I right?”

Dominic chuckled. “We’ll have to wait until tomorrow and see.”

{Yeah, I’m posting again. Short, I know, but it was a busy chapter, plus I’ve had a lot on my proverbial plate as of late. (Stop rhyming. Now.) Major kudos go to my beta, Callas-and-Ivy, as always, and everybody go read her original story, Unspeakable on fictionpress. Tomorrow, well, today, seeing as it’s almost 2 a.m, here, her husband, also know as a personal Bishi-by-law, is graduating with his Masters in some computer-related-thingy. As a congratulatory present, for her, because he doesn’t fic, go and read and review Unspeakable, or either or both of her wonderful Harry Potter fics, Ultimate Gift of Friendship and Potions and Daggers. Be sure to tell her that LRH sent you. :-) As always, reviews are important to me, and to you, seeing as how they inspire me to write faster. Constructive criticism is always welcome, as are creative flames. Note the creative.
That’s important.

I have a few responses, because some questions bug me until I answer then.

Julie: 1) They could do that, if he still had a spine to attach them to. He’s literally missing about three inches of it. 2) I hadn’t thought of that. It’s not a big enough part of the story to matter, though. I’m glad that you like it, overall.

mooneyes, and everyone else who noticed, thanks for pointing out the Snape-potions thing. I fixed the references in chapter 32, and would appreciate anyone pointing out other, similar mistakes.

Thank you all so much for reading and reviewing this fic. Also, due to my l337 hit counter, I know that for every reviewer, I get approximately 70 readers. For all you lurkers, thank you too, but I really, really love reviews. *grin* and now, since I’m as tired as can be expected, I’m going back to bed. Cya all soon!}

Chapter: 39

The next morning, Dominic was in a rather off mood. When Harry, during a break between customers, commented on it, Dominic replied in a sulky, yet self-deprecating voice. “You were right,” he muttered, tapping irritably at his desk? Harry smiled.

“What’s wrong with that?”

Dominic stood up, started pacing. “I, pettily, tried to prove you wrong. I made the decision this morning to wear anything other than what you had predicted, but.... But Spark, that dratted cat, has stolen most of my clothing to pad his cushion! All that was left was my yellow sweater and grey slacks. But,” and here his voice turned sly. “You didn’t mention the gloves!” He patted Harry’s hand, and Harry could feel that he was, indeed wearing his typical fingerless gloves.

“Well, it was my first, controlled Seeing,” Harry excused himself. “Perfection only comes after as many years of practice as you’ve had.” Being around Dominic was wearing off on him, he thought. Sarcasm came naturally.

“Yeah,” said Dominic slowly, drawing the word out in a drawl. “You keep thinking that.”

Later that day, they sat down together for another lesson. Harry sank his awareness deep into the crystal ball, being careful this time to leave a thread in his own body, as a surety against accident. This also made it easier to listen to Dominic’s instructions.

“Now, Harry, listen, because this is important. Controlled Seeing has a danger that uncontrolled Seeing lacks. You see that flow of futures, above your head? That’s the danger. You can get lost in it, completely lost and unraveled, and then you’ll be just as though a Dementor had Kissed you, soulless. Now, it’s a particular danger because it’s tempting. Getting lost in that would be like getting lost in an endless flow of the most beautiful music imaginable, or in the scent of fresh-baked bread, but it’s more than that. It’s a sensation of pure, unadulterated pleasure, and it’s infinite. It would never end, but you would be completely dissolved in it. There would be no you left to enjoy it, or to be recovered. Once you’ve abandoned yourself to that, even for an instant, you’re gone. No chance of recovery.” His voice was very grave. “None at all.”
Harry, in his vision, put up his fingers to trail them through the flow, watching it separate into strands, each representing a life. Around his hand, the river of future was warm in a comforting, familiar way. He could see why Dominic called it tempting. Setting his mind firmly on what he wanted to see, he began sorting through the strands, discarding one after the other until he found the one he wanted. His task for this lesson was to double check the reading Dominic had made for one of his clients earlier that day, just to check his accuracy. He found the woman’s thread with little trouble, and followed it only long enough to insure that, yes, she was pregnant. Her new son would be born in June, and she would name him Bradley. He reported his success to Dominic, coming briefly out of the vision, then went back in before the Seer could comment. This time, he was after a specific thread. He knew it was petty, but he found great pleasure in the grey, unchanging misery that he saw there, in his uncle’s future. He saw, through the ball, Vernon Dursley sitting in his bare, rocky Azkaban cell, staring dully at the wall from beneath a curtain of matted, filthy hair. He saw the same thing for each tomorrow he looked into, until Dominic’s persistent voice called him away.

“Where did you go, just now?” he asked, a trace of teacher-ish disapproval in his voice. Harry smiled.

“I just wanted to check on an old family member.”

“Oh,” said Dominic, discomfited. “Did you find him or her well?”

“Not at all,” said Harry, a huge, wolfish grin spread across his face.

Dominic, needless to say, didn’t quite know what to make of that. He pondered it for a moment, as Harry couldn’t stop smirking vengefully to himself, and then he got it. “Ah,” he exclaimed. “You went to See your uncle, the man who put you in that chair.”

“No, not my uncle,” answered Harry. No one had ever come out and said it so plainly before. “Vernon. My uncles, Arthur’s brothers and Malachi, are great people. Never use the word uncle to mean Vernon”

“Sounds fair,” said Dominic seriously. I think we all have a relative like that.”

Harry didn’t say anything, but he was smiling again.

{My chapters may be getting shorter, but they’re also getting more frequent. You notice that? Anyway, tune in again next week, same cat-time, same cat-channel. Actually, make it more like tomorrow, or maybe the next day. I’m a review junkie now, so if I go into withdrawal, this story will definitely suffer. Review, unless you want it to turn into happy fluff. *teasing* Could I ever write happy fluff? I think not, but please, review anyway. Also, has anyone read the Farseer Trilogy, by that goddess of fantasy, Robin Hobb? If so, 10 points go to your house if you correctly identify which element of this chapter I stole, er, borrowed from her. Also, I really want to talk to a fan of that series, because I have never run across one. To everyone reading this, I love to talk on MSN Messenger, where you can find me via the email address in my bio page. Hope to see you there, and review!}

Chapter: 40

Chapter 40 (Wow, 40 chapters. This is longer than the books!)
One week later, it was time to leave. Harry and Dominic braved the deep, new-fallen snow in a final visit to Gregory before Harry had to meet the Hogwarts Express. Harry was in an odd mood, half fearful of his reception at the Borrow, half ecstatic that, for once, he would be going home for the holidays. He didn’t want to be pitied there, but he felt that to be home outweighed that possibility.

“So,” Gregory said as they stood beneath his tree house. “Are you coming back after the Hols?”

“Probably,” said Harry seriously. “I don’t think I’ll be ready to go back to Hogwarts yet.”

Spark, who was curled around Dominic’s neck to keep his feet out of the snow, said, “If you do come back, leave that cat of yours behind. She’s been a pain in my tail the whole time you’ve been here.”

To everyone’s surprise, Miss Myst answered for herself, from her place in Harry’s lap. “I’d happily stay away, you uncultured cretin,” she purred. “Your presence is hardly conducive to restful naps or solemn contemplation. I would prefer the company of a shedding dog over yours. Unfortunately, I have to go wherever my Seer goes.” Silence reigned for a moment.

“You can talk?” Harry stuttered at last. Crookshanks had never shown any signs of being able to talk.

“Of course I can talk,” she replied, in a superior, feline sort of voice. “You’re a Seer, I’m your familiar. All Seers have a familiar, and all familiars need to be able to speak.” She paused to lick her paw. “After all, someone has to keep them out of trouble.”

Spark laughed. “Now, you’re right about that. Why, once, I had to save Boss here from a sea serpent.” Dominic glared at the cat, then shrugged, a gesture which, coincidentally, dislodged the fractious cat from his perch, dropping him into snow that rose above his crested ears.

“He threw my crystal ball at my face,” he explained. “The sea serpent’s head just happened to get in the way.”

“You told me to!” shouted Spark, levitating himself, as cats do, from the snow onto Gregory’s elevator pad, where he began to dry himself meticulously with his tongue. Miss Myst laughed sharply at him.

“And you take orders from him? You’re a cat, he’s a human. You may be his familiar, but humans still exist only to serve us. You call him Boss. You have no right to call yourself a cat. I should confiscate your whiskers right now.” A cat’s laugh, as Harry was discovering, was more versatile than a human’s. The one she graced Spark with now conveyed a sense of almost-affectionate sarcasm. Apparently, it grated on the older familiar’s nerves.

“Now listen, kittling,” he said. “I’ve been a familiar to Boss a lot longer than you’ve drawn breath through those pretty little points of yours. He’s one of the best Seers in the world, so what does that make me? You, you’ve not even entered your first heat, and you’re a familiar to a child! He’s been Seeing formally for what, a week? Get some experience before you criticize an older, wiser cat, kittling. You have to earn that sort of thing.”

“Wiser?” she answered, sounding bored as she chewed at an overlong claw. “Older, perhaps, but that’s scarcely a thing to be proud of, now, is it? After all, all it really means is that you’ll die before I will.” Her voice was very, very smug. She stood up, kneaded a little at Harry’s lap, and then settled herself again, her front paws tucked neatly beneath her breast. “Now, I believe that we were on our way to somewhere warmer?”
“I agree with the cat,” said Harry, smiling around chattering teeth. “I’m freezing.” His lips, behind a heavy Gryffindor scarf, were a tight, blue line, although he was smiling.

“Of course you agree with me,” she answered primly. “I’m the cat.”

“That never works for me,” Harry heard Spark grumble from behind them.

“Ah, see,” Mystoffelees purred as Harry, Dominic, and Gregory set off through the snow. “That’s because you are a dog.” Laughing again, this time with a mocking inflection, she leapt off of Harry’s lap to run lightly over the crust that had formed atop the snow. Spark, shouting curses and imprecations, was hopelessly outraced as he blundered through the deep snow, too heavy to mimic her.

That was the manner in which they arrived at the platform. When the three humans got there, Myst was sitting calmly atop a lamppost, while Spark snarled at her from below. “Point proven,” she smirked, jumping down smoothly into Harry’s lap, where she promptly curled up, tail wrapped neatly over her nose, and to all appearances, fell asleep.

“I’m jealous,” said Harry, petting her absently through his thick gloves.

“Of what?” replied Dominic. “such adept sarcasm?”

“Such light-footedness?” quipped Gregory.

“Well, those,” answered Harry. “But more of the ability to fall asleep so fast. I was awake all night last night.”

“You were supposed to tell me if you had trouble sleeping,” said Dominic concernedly. These were Madame Pomfrey’s orders.

“I know,” answered Harry, annoyed. “But I didn’t feel like it.”

“When are they going to get here?” Harry asked after a while of waiting. His voice was slurred with cold, though neither Dominic nor Gregory seemed in any difficulty. “Just a little bit longer,” said Dominic. “I see them down the road a way.” Sure enough, soon the excited shouts of scores of releases students reached Harry’s ears.

“Oy, Harry!” was Ron’s voice, louder than the thunder of feet on the wooden platform. “Hey, Ron,” Harry answered, waving briefly in his direction before tucking his hand back into his cloak.

“Is Hermione there too?”

“Yes,” she said from nearby. “I’m here. How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been good,” Harry said warmly. “Cold, but good. I’ve been pretty busy the last two weeks, see?” One-handed, he fumbled his crystal ball out of its pouch at his waist. “I made this last week.” Reluctantly, he let Hermione take it.

“You made this?” She sounded impressed, but reserved.

“It’s not Divination, Hermione,” he said, divining her hesitation. “Seeing is a whole different game. It’s not even really the same type of magic. Here, let me show you.” He had learned he could do this the day before, when he was playing a dice game with Gregory. He took Hermione’s hand, touched his crystal ball with the other, and pulled her into the vision with him. “See?” he said, turning to face her in the realm of the flowing futures. Here, she looked a little different then he remembered her.
Apparently, so did he. Her hair was longer, smoother than it had been, and she had a faint trace of a
tan left over from the summer. Her face was set in an expression of shock s she turned to see him,
giving way to delight, and then humour.

“You look great!” she exclaimed, smiling to see him whole. “But you don’t look quite, you know,
like yourself.”

“What, this version of myself?” He twitched at the fabric of the vision, showing her his real self,
sitting at the train station with ice along his arm. The ice, he was curious to notice, didn’t extend to
her arm, but rather stopped abruptly where his fingers touched the ball. “Why would I? This isn’t the
real world.” “No, I mean you don’t look like you did before.” She started to walk around him,
examine him critically. “You’re taller, for one thing, and…” She paused, genuinely startled. She
looked at him closely, getting right in his face. “Your eyes are blue!”

“What?” He conjured a mirror from the stuff of the vision and peered into it. A pair of unfamiliar
eyes, cobalt blue, peered back. “My, my scar’s gone too!”

“Odd,” she said, looking a little concerned.

“I’ll ask Dominic about it when I get back,” he said, checking the mirror a final time before waving it
away. “But I brought you in here to show you this.” He directed her gaze upwards, to the flow of
futures that was eternally just above his head. Don’t touch it, he warned. She looked, but shook her
head.

“I don’t see anything.”

“What? But,” he sputtered. How could she not see it? He reached up into it, separated a random
strand from the flow, and pulled it down, displaying it over his arm like a sheet of cloth. “This is the
future of a little girl,” he said, reading it easily. “She’s about four now.”

“I still don’t see anything,” Hermione said. As a last resort, Harry spread he strand out into an actual
vision of its own, so that it filled the space around them. Hermione gasped.

“See it now?”

“Oh, Harry, this is, this is incredible! I didn’t know that Seeing was like this!”

“Well, neither did I, until I started using the ball. Seeing without it is… less controllable. Without the
ball, all I seem to be able to see is Voldemort.” Carefully, he pulled out of the vision, drawing her
along with him. Back in his own body, the cold hit him like a wall, sending him into a fit of
coughing.

“Are you alright, mate?” asked Ron, thumping him helpfully on the back.

“Yeah,” said Harry, still coughing. “But can we get on the train before I freeze to death?”

“Well, that sounds like my cue to leave,” said Dominic. “Have a happy Christmas, Harry.” Gregory
echoed the sentiment. Spark stayed silent.

“You too,” Harry called back, waving as he boarded the Hogwarts Express. It wasn’t until the train
was speeding up on its way out of Hogsmead that Harry remembered; he had forgotten to ask
Dominic about his vision-self’s odd appearance.

The train, according to Ron’s narrations, was decorated lavishly for the holidays, every available
surface covered in holly and wintergreen, and mistletoe hovering here and there in the corridors.
Hermione and Ron invited Harry and Ginny, who found them as the train was getting under way, to ride with them in the Prefects’ car, where there was, to Harry’s delight, a fireplace. As they were Ron’s family, the other prefects couldn’t complain. Breena, because her mom, who she lived with, lived in the United States, had stayed behind at the castle. “She misses you,” Hermione told Harry. “She said she’d send you an owl. Did she?”

“I haven’t gotten any owls,” said Harry.

“Oh, well. I’ve got a Christmas present that I’ll be sending her, so maybe she’ll send me a letter when she replies.”

“Oh?” Ron’s voice held a smirk. “What’d you get her?”

“As if I’d tell you,” Harry smirked back.

Well, then, what’d you get for me?” Ron asked, opening a chocolate frog.

Harry appeared to ponder this for a moment. “Er, um, I think I forgot to get anything for you,” he said at last, scratching his head. Ginny and Hermione laughed at Ron’s crestfallen face. “Ah, joke’s on you, Ron,” Harry laughed. “Your present’s safe and sound in my trunk. Which you are not going to pillage looking for it. Myst’s guarding it.”

“No, I’m sleeping on it,” snarled the cat, having been woken by the conversation. The other occupants of the compartment gaped at her.

“Didn’t I mention? I have a familiar now.” Harry said smugly.

“Oh, don’t be smug, Seer,” she said, gliding down to curl up in Harry’s lap, unfazed by the fact that he was sitting in the fireplace. “You only found out an hour ago.” Now it was Ron and Hermione’s turn to laugh at him.

“But,” Hermione asked. “How could Myst be your familiar? You bought her when you got Ron, Ginny, and Breena their cats, and they aren’t familiars. Weren’t they all from one litter?”

“The cat you bought,” said Myst haughtily. “Was just a cat. It takes a Seer to make a familiar, and you weren’t quite a Seer yet.” She rubbed her cheek against Harry’s chest. “If I weren’t a cat, I’d say thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Harry quipped, petting her.

“Impudent brat,” she purred, curling up once again in his lap after rocking his robes into a comfortable nest.

“That reminds me,” Ron said, laughing self-consciously from his seat beside the luggage rack. “You forgot your invisibility cloak when you left the school. It was in my bureau, remember? Here, I brought it for you.” He lobbed the shimmering fabric at Harry’s face, hitting it dead-on. “Gred found it, day before yesterday.” Ron went on to recount the story, which left them all laughing hysterically.

Two days ago, it seemed, a disturbance had drawn all the Gryffindors to their common room. A hissing, flailing ball of fur and disembodied claws occupied the floor in front of the hearth, and a very frightened, bleeding Fred Weasley was backing away from it rapidly on all fours. A book, thrown by George, caused the culprits, the cats Gred and Feorge, to reveal themselves as they sprinted spitting for their respective dens, leaving Harry’s invisibility cloak in a silvery puddle on the rug. Fred had, apparently, trod on them as they lay there sleeping on the floor before the fire.
“Now that’s funny,” laughed Harry from his place in the fire in the train, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. “Oh, I wish I could have seen that.”

“Can’t you look back and see it in that ball of yours?”

“Probably not. I can see almost any future, but the past is harder. I think I can only see important points in the past.”

“Can I see what you showed Hermione?” Ron’s voice was a little jealous.

“Yeah, but not right now, okay? I’m not supposed to do too much with my ball yet. Controlled Seeing is addictive, and kind of dangerous to the Seer.” He told them what Dominic had told him about the perils of the future-flow, adding, “But don’t worry. As long as I’m careful, I’m safe, I think.”

“Good,” said Hermione. “But if controlled Seeing is dangerous, isn’t uncontrolled Seeing more dangerous? That would be logical.”

“Oddly enough, I was safer before I started to control it. See, only when you can control the vision can you reach that flow, and that’s where the danger is. I could get lost in that, and I’d be gone. Just like being Kissed by a Dementor.” The mention of Dementors reminded Harry of his spying on Vernon, and he grinned a sly grin.

“Then you just keep being careful,” Hermione said.

A knocking at the door to the compartment interrupted them. Ron, being closest, opened it.

“Is Ginny in here?” Tristan asked, sounding uncomfortable to be asking her brother. Ginny hurriedly mumbled a “See you at King’s Cross, and fled out of the compartment with the winged boy.

“Er,” said a confused Harry. “What was that?”

“Oh, Ginny’s with Tristan now,” Ron said, settling into a seat and a book with studied casualness. “Even though he’s just a firstie and all.”

“Well,” answered Harry lightly. “At least he’s a Gryffindor, and a star Chaser to boot.” He remembered Tristan telling him of his crush on Ginny, back in autumn, not too long after that Quidditch Match. He was glad he had acted on it. “So, are you going to play the over-protective-older-brother, or should I? You might be a little more impressive.”

“Nah, the Twins are doing it. Who better than a matched pair of Beaters, eh?”

Harry laughed. “You realize that he is dating our little sister. We should all interrogate him. Do you know where we can get a polygraph machine?”

“Very funny, you two,” Hermione remarked dryly. “Leave them alone.” She cuffed Ron, who was sitting next to her. “Tristan’s nice.”

“Yeah, but he’s a firstie.”

“So?”

“She’s in third year.”

“Fourth,” said Harry quietly.
“What? Oh, right,” Ron said, abashed. “I’ll just stop now, shall I?”

“Good idea.”

When the train pulled into King’s Cross Station, Platform 9 and 3/4, Molly and Arthur were there, waving happily from the sea of parents meeting the tide of students that spilled from the train. They collected Harry and Ron first, then the Twins found them, but Ginny was still missing as the platform began to empty. Finally, she came out of the train, grinning foolishly. Tristan was nowhere to be seen, though Harry heard wings beating from the other side of the train, where the platform was open to the sky. Apparently, Tristan had his own way home.

Arthur had somehow acquired a new car, so the whole family piled in. It took two tries, but the car lifted off the ground alright, invisible until it got into the clouds. It was a straight flight home, filled with laughter as the five Weasley children recounted the past term to their parents, who in turn filled the kids in on the actions and adventures of their absent siblings. “Percy’ll be home in a week,” Molly said. “Bill’s already home and Charlie’ll be here on Saturday. My parents and Malachi will be spending Christmas with us this year, too, but they can’t get here until Christmas Eve. Do any of you need to go into town this week to do any shopping?”

At home, Harry discovered that a fireplace had been added to his room. “Dumbledore told us that you’ve been having problems keeping warm, Harry,” was all that Arthur said about Harry’s problems, for which Harry was grateful. He’d talk about them on his terms.

That evening, once everyone was settled in, the whole family gathered in the living room, cooking popcorn over the grate. The wind howled outside, and snow was falling again, but the den was warm, and the stories flew thicker than the snowflakes. Everyone tried to beat out the others telling of their misadventures over the past 3 and a half months. Harry mostly stayed quiet, preferring to listen as George and Fred competed head-to-head against Bill. His story about a treasure that the Gringott’s goblins had sent him out after, but what they had not told him was that the treasure was cursed. He had spent two weeks in St. Mungo’s, raving mad, and another four with an extra head, which had eventually dropped off.

“Crazy, he was,” he said of the extra head, whom he had named Mark. “Always talking about doom and death. He tried to kill me one night, see?” He pulled his hair back from the side of his neck, and everyone could see the scars of a set of sharp teeth. Harry, he allowed to touch them, seeing as he couldn’t see them any other way, but he said that they were still tender.

The tale that the twins were competing with was from their job with Zonko’s. A few weeks ago, it seemed, right after Harry had left Hogwarts, they had attempted a project that was, in Fred’s words, “Probably maybe a little too ambitious.” They had tried to invent a potion that, when spiked into someone’s food or water, harmlessly imitated Harry’s dead eyes look. “We heard about you scaring the first years,” George explained. “Sounded like fun.” They laughed at Molly’s look of frustrated forbearance, continuing. The potion, it turned out, ended up turning them entirely black, head to toe, when it exploded in their lab. Fred still had a few black streaks in his hair, and George’s eyelashes were rather darker than they should have been. Ironically, the only things that hadn’t been dyed matte black were their bright blue eyes.

“Eh,” said Harry when they were finished. He had been appointed judge. “Sorry, guys, but Bill wins. Explosions in a lab are everyday occurrences to anyone who’s had potions with Neville Longbottom, but a third head that tries to eat you? Now that’s an adventure. The award for weirdling of the year goes to, drumroll please, William Weasley!” Everyone except the Twins applauded, Bill took his bows, and Molly declared it bedtime. Harry climbed up to his room, told Ron a sleepy good night on the landing, and rolled straight into his fireplace. He fell asleep quickly, deeply, and warm.
{Look, a long-ish chapter, written in less than 2 whole days. I wrote most of this when I should have been doing homework, but I needed the therapy I get from it more. Also, this is fluff. I am sorry, but it is. Happy fluff. I told you I would, but I didn’t think I was serious. Guess I’m more tired than I thought I was. To give you a hint as to how my world is working right now, the last time I slept a night through, I was eighteen and looking forward to April Fool’s day, when I got to paste paper fish on people’s backs. Poisson d’Avril!!!! I had a weird dream about that, but they were real fish, and I thought, hey, fish goo works better than glue.... Now I forgot what I was going to say. Review, please. I need a good fix, bad little review junkie that I am. Cowboy Bebop’s starting, so I’m going to abandon you all for the night.}

Chapter: 41

Chapter 41

Christmas at the Dursleys had been a busy affair in Harry’s youth, mostly involving him decorating for dinner parties that he would not be allowed to attend and cooking seasonal treats that he would not be allowed to taste, and going with Petunia as she shopped for presents for her “precious Dudders.” He remembered one year, when he was in first or second form, when his teacher had had all the class write a letter to St. Nick. She collected them, saying that she would mail them to him, but instead, she sent them to the parents of the children. In Harry’s case, to the Dursleys. Harry had come into the kitchen several days into the holidays to find Vernon reading it aloud to a sniggering Petunia in a mincing, sing-song voice.

“I know you’re busy, St. Nicholas, but I don’t want very much toys. All I want is a toy gun, like that one my cousin Dudley has, and a book, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. I used to have one, but Dudley took it away and threw it over the fence...” Vernon stopped reading, his face purpling. “What’s this about Dudley stealing from you? You write lies like this for your teacher to read?”

Harry, on the verge of tears, had balled up his fists and shouted at his uncle. “It’s not lies! Dudley and Piers took my book and they made me chase them and then they threw it over the fence into the yard with the big dog.”

“You nasty little liar,” Petunia snapped. “My Dudley would never do anything like that.”

“If you had a book anyway, which I doubt, you must have stolen it,” growled Vernon, glaring at the angry seven year-old before him.

“I didn’t steal it! Mr. Delutri, at the school library gave it to me, for being such a good reader.” Harry couldn’t keep a small note of pride from his voice, and his stance firmed. He looked ready to fight. “He gave it to me in front of the whole class. I earned it, an’ it was mine, and he stole it!”

Vernon cuffed Harry then, and banished him to his cupboard for the remainder of the holidays. He had missed Christmas entirely that year.

This year, however, everyone seemed determined that Harry’s first real Christmas, as they called it, be a rousing success. The Twins decorated the entire house with a plethora of singing pine garlands, putting holly over every window and door in the old tradition. Harry and Ron spent one enjoyable afternoon crafting large ornamental snowflakes from real snow, and then hanging them on the enormous tree that Arthur, Bill, and Charlie had set up in the front yard, along with long strands of popcorn and dried cranberries. Another tree, inside, they decorated with the family’s ornaments;
spun-glass baubles, lit softly blue from within, that had been Bill’s take from one of the first treasures he had found: clever little scenes, carved on large, iridescent dragon scales in Charlie’s free time; a set of tiny, intricately charmed scrolls from Percy, each saying something different and inspiring each time you unrolled them: a dozen or so crystal-clear orbs in which Fred and George had trapped miniature displays of fireworks. The Twin’s contributions were new, just this year, and Ron and Ginny would be making their own in their seventh years, as would Harry. From Molly, there was a beautifully embroidered chain of snowflakes that wrapped around the foot of the tree, but Harry’s favorite was Arthur’s addition to the ornaments.

One day, maybe a week before Christmas, Harry came to the back porch to find his foster-father sitting there, gazing out into the falling snow and turning something over and over into his hands. “What do you have there?” he asked, parking his chair nest to the bench there.

“Here,” Arthur said, putting the object into Harry’s hand. It was a small wooden medallion, carved intricately on both faces. Harry’s sensitive fingers picked out the florid “H” adorning one side, and the entwined “P” and “W” on the other, both adorned like the illuminated letters in old manuscripts, with vines and small, detailed animals. It was a beautiful piece of work, and Harry said so. “You like it?” asked Arthur, smiling. “I’m glad. It’s something I’ve done, for each of the children. There’s a W for Bill, a C for Charlie, a P for Percy, an F and a G, together, for the twins, an R for Ron, and a V for Ginny. Virginia. And now, there’s an H for Harry.” He showed Harry the full set, putting each of them into his hand so he could “see” them. Harry’s fingers ran across them, discovering clever little details that made him laugh. They were a true delight. Later, that night, each of the children hung their letter on the tree as the parents looked on.

They were happy days, leading up to Christmas. Three days before the day, Harry was sorting out the gifts that he had bought in Hogsmead, seeing who he still had to buy for. He had his presents for Ron, Ginny, Fred but not George, and Charlie, but he still needed to buy for George, Bill, Percy, and their parents. Putting the gifts away, hidden neatly in his school trunk, he crossed the landing to ask Ron for ideas.

“Eh, get a book for Percy, something thick and dull. He’ll love it. For Bill, I dunno. I never really know what to get him, he’s just not home that often. Anything muggle for Dad, of course, and for Mum...” Harry heard an indrawn breath. “Oh, Harry, I just thought of the perfect gift for Mum. She’s wanted to go and see this, what’s it called, musical for years. The Phantom of the Opera, it’s called, I think. You could get her tickets for that.”

“Good idea,” was all Harry said, looking thoughtful. “Got any ideas for George?”

“The next day, he bribed Charlie into taking him into Diagon Alley, where he found gifts for everyone, which he had wrapped, labeled in a raised print, and sent to the Burrow. Then, telling Charlie that he would meet him back in the Leaky Cauldron, he made a large withdrawal from his vault at Gringott’s, went out into muggle London, and took a tram to Her Majesty’s Theater, where the musical would be playing. He bought 13 tickets, one for each of them, and, after making a few other arrangements, he caught a tram back, arriving just in time so that Charlie never knew he’d left the Alley.

“Got everything?” he asked, pushing Harry onto the Knight Bus. Harry smiled, patting the tickets, hidden inside of his robes.

“Yeah. I’m all set.”

Back at the Burrow, Harry arrived just in time to help Ron win a snowball fight against the twins. All he could do was roll snowballs, but that freed Ron up for his rapid-fire technique, which kept Fred and George pinned behind a tree until Molly called for them all to come in. He wasn’t aware of
how cold he was until he entered the warm kitchen, and then he started to shiver violently. Snow caked on his gloves was sprayed across the room as he shuddered, trying hard not to bite his tongue. Ron, concernedly, asked him what was wrong, but Harry was coughing too hard to answer. By the time he could speak again, he had warmed enough to stop shivering. “I'm fine, Ron,” he said, divesting himself of his snow gear and joining the rest of the family in the den. Fred and George were trying to teach Myst a few Christmas carols, and she was stoutly refusing to play along.

“A cat does not sing;” she said, washing her face with a licked paw. “Dogs howl, cats do not.” All in all, the household hadn't remarked much on the talking cat. Bill and Charlie both, it seemed, had worked closely with Seers before, as had Arthur. At any rate, she was a household fixture now, despite her unwillingness to sing. The Twins, undaunted, sang anyway, inviting the entire family to join in. The song for the night was Good King Wenceslas. Harry didn’t know all of the words, but he sang as lustily as Ron, who knew all the words, but sung them wrong on purpose, following a version that Peeves had made up that year and earning a glaring scowl from his mother.

“Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen,” they sang together, Molly laying down her knitting and Arthur his newspaper.

“When the snow lay round about, deep and crisp and even.

Brightly shone the moon that night, though the frost was cruel,

When a poor man came in sight, gathering winter fuel.”

Fred took the melody here, in a strong, deep baritone that surprised Harry. The rest dropped back, Ginny and Molly singing descant to the song.

“Hither page and stand by me if thou knowst it telling

Yonder peasant, who is he, where and what his dwelling?”

When George’s voice rose in a high treble response, Harry almost choked in surprise. He had a beautiful voice, all the more so for its rarity.

“Sire, he lives a good league hence, underneath the mountain,

Right against the forest fence, by Saint Agnes' fountain.”

It was a joy to hear them sing together, as they had clearly done so often. They finished the song, the rest singing on the chorus lines, and then blushed furiously, bowing their heads against Bill’s wild cries of “Encore! Encore!”

“Shut it, Bill,” said George half-heartedly, trying not to grin at the applause.

On Christmas Eve, Molly’s parents arrived, just ahead of a white-out blizzard. Grandma Claire and Grandpa Colum, and ‘uncle’ Malachi, were all well greeted, arriving as they did with arms full of brightly wrapped gifts. Ron and the Twins magnanimously offered to carry the burdens into the house for them, an offer which was laughingly refused. Dinner that night was louder than ever, with thirteen crowded into the Burrow’s kitchen, and after, the adults claimed the den for “serious conversation,” so the children all went to Harry’s room, which was the biggest, owing to his need for clear space in which to maneuver. Malachi had brought a fenetram, which was a sort of wizard television, so they all watched that. Actually, the Twins watched that as Harry, Ron, Ginny and their uncle planned a grand attack on them, to be executed that night.

Much later, when the household was sound asleep, Ginny crept into Harry’s room, where the three
boys had fallen asleep.

“They’re asleep!” she hissed, shaking Ron and then Malachi. Malachi woke quickly, Ron more slowly, and then they woke Harry. Together, they crept down three floors, to the Twins’ room. Harry’s chair had been deemed too loud on the stairs, so Ron was carrying him on his back. Harry could hear the two pranksters snoring beyond the door, so he signaled the group to go in, stepping as lightly as they could. They needn’t have worried. Neither Fred nor George took the slightest notice of their nocturnal invaders, sleep undisturbed by their machinations. Harry had to clap one hand over Ron’s mouth at one point to keep him from laughing aloud at their own cleverness. Finished, they tiptoed back up to Harry’s room, congratulating one another on their genius. Sleep was a long time coming, but come it did.

Sleep was shattered pleasantly the next morning by surprised shouts from the Twins’ room. Harry, Malachi, and Ron carefully schooled their faces to an expression of innocent curiosity before they descended, where they found a fuming Fred and George frantically trying to scrub the red dye from their skin and the green from their hair. They hadn’t yet noticed the fact that their eyes had been turned a vibrant gold, with a Christmassy star motif in them. Harry had, using the sack of pranks that they themselves had given him, concocted the potion that they had tried and failed at themselves. A little tweaking had fixed the problems, and a little more, with Malachi’s help, had changed the colors. So Fred and George went through the day looking like a pair of wrapped packages, unable to retaliate under their mother’s, and grandmother’s, nose, and unable to decide who had done the deed.

And what a day it was. Harry had never known a Christmas like this. He had scrupulously resisted looking into the future to determine the contents of the presents that had appeared under the tree marked with his name, so he was eagerly looking forward to opening them. There were family traditions here, though, that let Ginny open hers first, as the youngest, then Ron, then Malachi. Harry beamed as they each opened their gifts from him. For Ginny, there was a scarf in shades of grey that brought out the color in her hair and eyes. Dominic had helped him with that one, but Harry had seen the scarf around her neck, so he knew already how it flattered her. For Malachi, Harry had found an authentic Swiss Army Knife, the one with a dozen different blades, a compass, a corkscrew, and who knew what else. Ron’s gift had been easy; an official Chudley Cannon’s autographed Keeper’s glove.

And then it was Harry’s turn. Ron tossed him his present first, an oddly shaped package that felt lighter than it should for its size. It proved to be a puzzle, but with the added difficulty of being a floating, three-dimensional puzzle. From Ginny, Harry received, ironically enough, a scarf, in rippling shades of red and gold. Fred and George relayed a gift from the entire Gryffindor team, a framed photo of the entire team, taken right before the first match. It had been treated so that the image was raised, so Harry could “see” it with his fingers. The signatures of the entire team were inscribed around the frame. Harry traced them with a single finger. It was a goodbye, and he knew it. “Who’s the captain now?” he asked, donning a smile for the family’s benefit.

“Erm, they elected me,” admitted George apologetically.

“Great,” said Harry, making every attempt to sound sincere. “You’ll be great for the team.” Setting that topic resolutely aside, Harry continued to write the rest of his presents. There was a thick book on dragons from Charlie, and a thicker book from Percy on the history of the British Ministry of Magic. There was a small box with a tag that read “Open later, in private, if you value your life,” from Bill.

Arthur presented him with a wristwatch, but not one that told time. It had nine hands, each inscribed with a Weasley’s name. All nine of them pointed now to “Home,” inscribed on the rim of the watch, along with “School,” “Work,” “Traveling,” “Dire Straits,” and a few more places that a Weasley
might be. All of the hands were vibrating slightly, which Arthur explained meant that the Weasley's in question were in the room with him. He showed him how, by twisting the dial one way or the other, he could localize it to tell him where in Hogwarts, Hogsmead, or the Burrow each family member was, or have it simply point to them. It was a very thoughtful gift.

His grandparents presented him with an attractive wizarding chess set that Colum had charmed himself. He picked up the pieces, feeling the difference in texture between the dark and light pieces and squares. Malachi gave him a small, handheld wizarding radio, which he said might or might not work at Hogwarts. He thanked everyone effusively, and the present-opening moved on. Fred was ecstatic about his new kit of prank parts, and George was effusive in his thanks for Curses and Counter-curses (Bewitch Your Friends and Befuddle Your Enemies with the Latest Revenges: Hair Loss, Jelly-Legs, Tongue-Tying and Much, Much More) by Professor Vindictus Viridian. Ron nudged Harry surreptitiously, whispering, “Why did you give him that while he’s still red and green?” Harry just laughed.

For Percy, Harry had gotten a gag-gift, a plaque reading, “Percival Weasley, Minister of Magic.” Percy, although he put up a token indigence, seemed pleased to Harry. For Charlie, Harry had gotten a Dragon-Detector. Most people used them to avoid dragons in the wild, but Harry had the feeling that his older brother shared enough of Hagrid’s passion for the hazardous beasts that he would use the item to seek them out.

Bill’s present from Harry was a long, narrow package that opened to reveal an odd device, a black metal pipe with a flat disk on one end and a box and handle on the other. Harry explained that it was a metal detector, a muggle device used to find hidden treasure and rubbish alike.

To find Arthur’s present, Harry had stopped at a muggle pawnshop just outside Diagon Alley. It was a television, intact and working, and a gas-powered generator to power it. His father was all for setting it up immediately, but Molly bade him wait at least until the presents were all opened. Then came the moment that Harry had been waiting for all morning. Molly’s turn.

“Open mine last,” he said, showing her the small package that he had had Ron wrap for him. He held it in his lap as she opened her other gifts, oohing over a shawl from her mother and sighing at the pranks that were a gift from her fourth and fifth sons. Then she sat back, looking expectantly to Harry. He handed her the gift, unable to keep from grinning as he heard the layers of wrapping fall away from the white, porcelain half-mask. She recognized it immediately. “Look in the back,” Harry said, and her excitement increased when she saw what was taped there.

Molly Weasley was speechless. She gripped Harry’s hand so hard he thought that the circulation was being cut off, and she made little squeaking sounds as she riffled the thirteen small slips of paper. “What are they, Mol’?” asked Claire, leaning to see them.

“Tickets,” Molly said in a thick voice. She hugged Harry hard. “Tickets to The Phantom of the Opera, for tomorrow night. Enough for all of us.”

“Look closer,” Harry said, still grinning. “Look where the seats are.”

Molly looked, and then squealed, sounding remarkably like Ginny. “Box Five, first tier! Harry, how could you get these seats? They’re, they’re...” She couldn’t finish, just waved the impossible tickets incoherently at him.

“They’re a gift,” Harry said firmly. “A present, from me. So, do you want to go?”

“Do I want... Do I want to go? Of course I want to go!” She hugged Harry again, lifting him clear up and spinning around in a mad happy dance. “Phantom at Her Majesty’s Theater, tomorrow in Box
Five! Can you believe it?” She was ecstatic, and Harry flushed with pleasure. He was going to pay back his debt to the Weasleys, one good deed at a time.

{Well, I didn’t plan to leave it here, but I also planned to post this chapter yesterday, or even the day before. So, here’s what you get. Happy, happy time. No twitches and only a wee bit of angst. Be happy and review, or review if you’re mad at me. I just want reviews.}

Chapter: 42

{This chapter is dedicated to Harriet, for her generous help with my school project. Go Harriet!}

Chapter 42

That evening, in the middle of the most fantastic Christmas feast that Harry had ever had, someone knocked at the front door. Arthur, wondering loudly who would be calling during Christmas dinner, got up to answer the door. Harry, with a vaguely anticipatory feeling, followed him, and was not surprised to hear Sirius’s voice on the other side of the door. “Hey, Arthur,” he said as the man opened the door. “Sorry about the hour, but I just got back and wanted to make sure Harry got his Christmas present. Hi, Harry.” He came in, brushing the snow from his cloak and set a large package in Harry’s lap. At Arthur’s suggestion, Harry tore into the wrappings, revealing a sizable roll of thick cloth. It was a blanket, a thick one, emitting its own heat. “Now you can have a warm Christmas, Harry,” Sirius said, ruffling his hair.

“Thanks,” Harry said. “Where did you just get back from.”

“I can’t tell you that,” replied Sirius impudently, winking at Arthur. “Auror business, you know.”

“You’re an auror again? You’re still teaching at Hogwarts, right?”

“Yes to both, but strictly on a part-time basis for the former. Just during the holidays.”

“Cool.”

“Won’t you come in for dinner?” Molly asked, coming in from the dining room. “We’ve almost finished, but there’s still plenty.”

“I was hoping you’d ask,” said Sirius. “Thank you.”

Sirius was a congenial dinner guest, full of stories from his day as a Marauder. The Twins hung open-mouthed on his every word. At one point, Ron sounded about to make a derisive comment, but Harry coughed into his sleeve with a sound like “Krum!” and he subsided. He hung around just long enough to befriend Colum, who had been an auror in his youth, flirt flatteringly with Clair, and trade a few tips on handling mummies with Bill. Then he left, but not before Harry, with Molly’s puzzled permission, invited him to come to the theater with them the next day.

“But where are you going to get an extra ticket?” she asked, already concerned about the expense at which the first thirteen had been bought.

“Don’t worry about it,” Harry said, waving her concern off. “It won’t be a problem.”

The next morning, the house was a flurry of preparations, interrupted by howls of “where’s my nice
dress?” and “who took my clean shirt?” flying from floor to floor. Harry was ready and waiting by the door, listening amusedly as his family scrambled to collect themselves and each other. Bill, fastening his cufflinks, stood by him, whispering to him out of the side of his mouth. “You still have my present?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, producing it from a pocket in his chair. “Why couldn’t I open it yesterday?”

“Open it now,” he whispered. Harry needed no second bidding. Inside, he found, of all things, a fang earring, just as he had seen Bill himself wear the year before. Now he understood why he couldn’t open it in front of Molly. She would have freaked. He said as much to Bill.

“I know,” he smirked. “And she will when she sees you wearing it. Go on, put it on. It’s got a Painless Piercing charm on it, so just push it through.” He helped Harry place it right. “Perfect. Right rakish, between the fang and the blindfold. You look a bit like a pirate,” he said critically.

Harry grinned. “Thanks.”

Finally, the whole lot of them was assembled, just in time to hear a car horn honk from the lane.

“I hired us a limousine,” Harry said demurely as they piled onto the porch, staring in awe at the stretch limousine that gleamed blackly before the house. “At our beck and call all day.” Ron cuffed him on the shoulder for the smug note in his voice, but he piled into the automobile just as eagerly as any of the others. They all fit easily, with room to spare.

It was a long drive to London, made shorter by the raucous and pleasant conversation. Harry and the others played a verbal game designed specifically to annoy the adults, but they, especially Molly, were too content and excited to become irritated.

They picked up Sirius at his apartment in London, and arrived well over an hour early at the theater. No one complained, as it was a beautiful and fascinating place to explore. Sirius had gotten in as Harry’s guide dog, Snuffles. They had even transfigured a tangle of twine into a passable harness for him, though it took some persuasion to get him to wear it. Molly, entranced by the building, didn’t even notice, though Arthur did, snorting in humour and pointedly ignoring the trespass. Myst, as Harry had found out on the ride, had stowed away in one of the compartments built into his chair. Fortunately, as long as “that dog” was there, she was perfectly content to stay where she was.

Box Five, First Teir, was as opulent and luxurious as Harry had predicted. He had read the book too that this play was based on, and mischievously grinned as he knocked on several of the pillars, startling when the first of them proved hollow. That they were all hollow, not just that one, reassured him somewhat. Ron asked what he was laughing at.

“Oh, in the book, The Phantom of the Opera, Box Five belonged to the Phantom, and he made sure that everyone else believed it was haunted by projecting his voice from a hollow pillar. Of course, that was supposed to be in an Opera House in Paris, not here, but still...” He shrugged. “It’s fun to imagine.”

An hour before the play would start, when the sets below them were just beginning to fill, someone knocked on the box door. Ron, the only other person besides Harry and Snuffles in the box at the moment, opened it.

“Can I help you?” Harry heard him say to the person standing there.

“Excuse me for the awkwardness of this question, young man, but is there a handicapped child in here?”
“Hey,” said Harry, rolling into the man’s view. How come he’s a “young man,” and I’m a “child?” The half-smile on his face took the sting out of his words.”

“Ah, sorry sir,” said the man, for man it was, who stood at the door. “At any rate, one of the actors in tonight’s production saw you come in. Mr. Owen-Jones, who plays the lead, thought that you might appreciate the musical better if you were to “see” the stage before-hand.”

Harry was astounded. “I can go backstage?”

“Yes,” the man affirmed in a friendly voice. You can bring your friend with you, if you like.”

“Come on, Ron,” Harry said, starting out after the man. “You want to come, don’t you?”

“To tell the truth, Harry, I think you should take Mum, if you can. This is her thing, isn’t it?”

“You won’t mind?”


The man, who never did give his name, followed Harry as he followed his watch surreptitiously to Molly, who was, of course, ecstatic at a chance to actually meet the cast. The man took them to a small door, deep in the back corridors of the theater, knocked, and introduced them to another nameless, person, who spoke very rapidly about the honour that this was for them.

“Cheryl?” came a voice from across the room. “Leave them alone.”

“Yes, Mr. Owen-Jones,” Cheryl said meekly, backing off to another task. The owner of the new voice approached Harry, looming tall over him. A hand took his and shook it. “I’m John Owen-Jones,” he said in a pleasant, non-descript voice. “Call me John. I thought that you might like a chance to ‘see’ the play, as it were. I have a friend who is visually impaired, so I understand a little of the limitations that that imposes on you. So, you can explore the set while we get ready, ask questions, stuff like that. Everything’s set up early today, so most of us have some down time.” So, as Molly collected autographs, Harry got to explore the set, his fingers wandering lightly over everything. He got to touch, lightly, ever so lightly, John’s made-up face as Erik, the tragic Phantom of the Opera, feeling its grotesque misshapenness, as well as the discreet microphone hidden in his left temple, under the smooth mask that he would wear for most of the play. He was allowed to run his fingers along the gilt circles that were the frame of the fateful chandelier, and the throne through which the Phantom would make his final escape. One of the more helpful stagehands lowered one of the dummies that would be used in a scene late in the play so Harry could examine its exotic costume with his fingers.

“Thank you very much,” he said politely to John when it was time for them to return to their box. The actor shook his hand again, giving him a program in brail signed by himself and the rest of the core cast in a raised ink that someone had found.

“Have fun, alright?”

“I will, thank you.”

Molly was bouncing with joy all the way back to their box, ecstatically clutching her own signed program. She hugged Harry fervently from time to time, saying, “Thank you, thank you,” into his hair until he laughed.

“Gerrof, Molly,” he said cheerfully. She laughed, practically skipping as they reached Box Five.
“And where’ve you two been?” said Arthur genially from his seat. “The play’s about to start. Curtain Call was about a minute ago.”

“I know,” Molly chirped happily. “Harry got invited backstage, and I got to go with him!” She sounded less like her normal, motherly self, and more like Ginny, her teenaged daughter. Sirius, who had changed back to human form in the privacy of the box, remarked on that.

Everyone quieted as the lights blinked, blinked again, and then went down, and the curtain rose.

A loud knock started the play, with the scene an auction house. Several small pieces were sold off, and then, with came the chandelier, being sold as a relic from the bygone days of the Opera house. Then, with a flash of light that was lost on Harry, the grand theme began to play, powerful, crashing notes from the orchestra.

The play progressed too quickly, in Harry’s view. Christine Daae’s debut flashed by, capped beautifully by the Phantom’s haunting “Bravi, bravi, bravissimmi,” from the cupola above the stage. For all the actor’s speaking voice had been average, his singing voice was unbelievable. It soared through octaves as though it were on a broomstick, flying effortlessly from high to low in a single breath. And Christine’s was even more amazing. She sang her solos with incredible confidence, almost out of character for her meek, weak-willed character. Harry couldn’t keep still, tapping his fingers against the arm rest of his chair to the tempo. His foot tapped too, although not to the beat, and it was so slight a movement that, hidden in the dark of the box, no one noticed.

By the middle of Act One, in the duet between the Phantom and Christine as he spirits her away to his lake-side, subterranean lair, Harry was completely lost to the music, oblivious to everything. The twitching in his foot slowed and stopped, and a muscle on the side of his knee jumped but once. He rolled forward to the rail as the Phantom began his solo, completely in empathy as the man extolled the virtues of darkness. Unconsciously, his hand crept to his crystal ball, perpetually in its pouch at his waist. His fingers brushed against it, and a sensation of falling overtook him so forcefully that he threw his arms out in front of him to halt his fall. Fortunately, he had not had time to dry out, for he found himself still stably seated at the rail of the box, with Ron’s whispered narration still in his ears.

“Harry?” Ron asked, noticing his friend’s distress. “You alright?”

“Something’s going to happen,” Harry replied in a low voice, fitting his fingers in postion on his crystal ball, hoping for a better look. Before him, Carlotta and the Managers on stage were defying the Phantom at the top of their lungs and then the play-within-a-play began, but Harry was deep in Sight, trying to find the vision that had found him a moment ago. He didn’t find it until Carlotta’s voice had cracked in the famous, breathless moment.

“Behold!” cried the Phantom madly from high above the audience. “she is singing to bring down the chandelier!” Harry gasped as he finally clarified what he had seen, and he cried out, reaching blindly towards the prop chandelier, rocking wildly above the orchestra pit.

“No!” he shouted, reaching for it and almost throwing himself from his chair in his urgency. “It’s going to fall!”

“It’s supposed to fall, you prat,” Percy shushed him, pulling him back from the edge. Harry fought him.

“Not like this!”

“Go!” shouted the Phantom maniacally, and the huge construct of glass and steel began to drop. It was instantly apparent that something was wrong. The chandelier was supposed to swing over
downstage as it fell slowly, let down at a reasonable and dramatic pace by cables. Not this freefall, accompanied by a huge, horrible sound of impending doom. The audience was screaming, but Harry was louder, still reaching for the stage as though he could stop the tragedy at hand.

“No!” His vision, not done with him yet, forced upon him the names and faces of the people who, in mere moments would be dead. One name, familiar, leapt out through his panic. “Fudge! Fudge is down there!” Before he could finish, a resounding, unending crash told him he was too late. The chandelier landed in a magnificent spray of glass that killed three more people even as they ran for their lives. No part of the theater was safe from the glittering shrapnel, and Harry even took a shard in his cheek, just below his right eye. Suddenly, as the dust was settling, a new wave of screams arose. Molly screamed shrilly, and Harry batted Ron away from trying to pull the sliver of glass from his face.

“What?” he asked urgently. She replied in a shaky voice, sounding as though she might faint.

“There’re words,” she whispered. “In the air above the stage.” She read them to him in a trembling, tiny voice so unlike her normal self.

“Dear Harry,” the words read.

“Think of this as a punishment for you, from your own personal Phantom. Surely you know better than to sit in Box five? Every death here tonight is on your head, Harry. Signed, your angel of death, L.V.”

“And below it,” whispered Molly, having to take slow, deep breaths to keep from hysteria. “Is the Dark Mark!”

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Chapter 43

“The Dark Mark!” Claire screamed, fainting dead away. Harry couldn’t think at all. He shook the last of the ice from his hand in a moment of numb calm, hearing nothing but the screams and moans of the wounded and dying below him. He knew every single voice, every face, every single name. Jasper Rhine, Cornelius Fudge, Trinity Ewan, Stephen Krelt, Amarie LeMarsielee, Michael Almond and nearly a dozen more lay beneath those tons of steel and glass. Arthur, Sirius, Colum, Bill, Charlie, Percy and the Twins ran from the box to help the survivors dig out those less fortunate, while Ron stayed behind to help Ginny deal with their hysterical mum and unconscious grandmother. Harry followed the men, passing them as his chair scrambled down the stairway, barely staying upright. He didn’t take the time to fold back the legs into wheels when his chair reached the floor, skittering instead on its pointed feet down the aisle to the disaster area that was the orchestra pit. The legs extended, and the chair picked its footing carefully as it carried Harry carefully over the rubble, heading for the nearest voice. Arriving above it, as the man, for so it was, was buried in the rubble, Harry reached down with his wand, levitating the debris out of his way. A clutching, seeking hand caught his, and he strained back, bringing the injured man with him. He could hear and had Seen further creakings and breakages in the mound of twisted metal, heralding further collapses, so he could not leave the man there, no matter how badly he was injured. To leave any of them would be a death sentence, he knew.

“Thank you!” gasped the man, clutching a broken arm, but not too badly hurt otherwise. “The rest of
the orchestra, though!”

“We’ll get them,” Harry promised, already leaving him behind to find the next trapped person.

“No!” Harry yelled back over the noise of the escalating rescue effort. “I Saw this, and it was my fault! You saw what Voldemort said! I know who every one of these people are! They wouldn’t have died, if I wasn't here!” He pulled Trinity from the wreckage as he spoke, flinching as her head rolled limply against his arm, blood leaking from her mouth in a sluggish stream to stain his cloths. “She’s dead!” he choked, showing her empty face, eyes blankly open, to Bill. “She would have graduated Oxford in six months, married in eight, but she’s dead! See why I have to be here? To help what I can? My futures are all death! Let me help some live!”

“Okay, Harry,” said Bill, more quietly. “Just be careful.” He stayed with Harry after that, helping him pull bodies, both alive and not from the pit, until a loud groaning and shattering sound warned everyone to get back, scrambling as rapidly as they could away from the orchestra pit, for the floor was giving way. Bill had to pull Harry bodily away from a victim that they were trying to pull free.

“No!” Harry cried, more a sob than a word. “I can’t leave her!” Bill didn’t waste time answering, merely banished Harry in his chair across the room. It was a rough ride, but it threw him far across the rows of seats, safely out of danger. He himself ran as fast as he could, away from the floor that was sinking down into the lower reaches of the theater. The chandelier and the 19 people still trapped under it plummeted to the floor below, and through it, to yet another basement in a deafening crash and explosion of dust. Screams were silenced in an awful abruptness that left the survivors gasping in the dust-choked air. One woman was wailing, one of the ones that Harry and Bill had pulled free, but the rest of the lookers-on could only stand in stunned silence.

“No,” choked Harry. “No, no, no, no, no, no, no...” He continued in a low, wavering monotone. He put his hand to his face, biting his thumb hard to distract himself from the rising hysteria that was about to take him once again. “No, no, no, no, no, no,” he kept murmuring, muffled now. Arthur and Sirius caught up to Harry and George then.

“The boys went up to get Molly and the others,” Arthur said in a tired, flat voice. “The muggle authorities are arriving, they’ll handle this. We should get out of here before they get here, and we should probably fetch the Obliviator Squad and..., and someone to collect the Minister.” He slumped defeatedly. “Colum, you get everyone home, alright? Harry can’t use a portkey, so find some other way home. Percy and I are going to the Ministry.” With a pop, the two disappeared. Harry let Bill push him out of the theater and into a neighborhood just as the police and firemen began to arrive, ambulance sirens following close behind. They and the others waited there for a time, joined by Molly, Claire, Ginny, and Ron. They stayed there, watching until they would not be conspicuous, and then crossed the street in a grimly nonchalant stroll, and then caught the tram to the Leaky Cauldron. There, they headed straight for the fireplace. Ron Flooed away with Harry, as Harry hadn’t come back to himself enough to say anything more than, “No, no, no, no, no, no, no.” He had been silent in muggle London since they had left the theater, but he resumed as soon as they entered the pub. Ron stepped into the fireplace with him, pulling his chair as close as possible.

“The Burrow!”

When everyone save Arthur and Percy was back in the Weasley’s kitchen, there was a general air of release. Molly and Colum collapsed into chairs at the table, while Claire numbly sought the couch in the darkened parlor. Ginny was sobbing into her mother’s arms, Fred and George were stoically
pretending that they weren’t crying, and Bill went out into the back garden, where he began to punch furiously at the trunk of a willow tree, grunting with effort and anger.

Harry eventually lapsed into silence, his voice just fading away, but he kept mouthing the word over and over and over. “No, no, no, no, no, no.” That sickening feeling of vertigo that had first alerted him to the impending catastrophe clung to him, as did the scent of Trinity’s blood. He had pulled her body away from the wreckage, laying her in the growing rank of dead that lined one of the aisles. His wheelchair, far from being an encumbrance as it usually was, had seemed to react to his thoughts, or possibly even to direct itself, reacting to his intentions. Moving the woman, more of her blood had flowed, though no beating heart drove it out through the many wounds that had killed her. It was all over his hand, his fingers, caked under his nails. He couldn’t get it off, scrubbing his hand slowly against his cloths.

As though she sensed his distress, Mystoffelees crept from her compartment beneath his chair and leapt lightly into his lap, purring supportively. When he didn’t life his hand to pet her, she thrust her pointed nose beneath his palm, forcing the issue. Unconsciously, he stoked her, running his hand down the length of her back as she arched against it. “It wasn’t your fault, you know,” she murmured, pitching her voice for Harry’s ears only. He didn’t seem to hear her, but he blinked slowly behind the black sunglasses that he had donned that morning for the benefit of the muggles. Tears wet his eyes, but none fell.

Seeking something to do with herself, Molly stood abruptly and began making tea, rattling pans and the water pump with unnecessarily loud, eschewing magic in favor of distracting physical activity. She was nervous, dropping things and forgetting others. Ron, sitting across from Harry, watched him flinch at the first sound of shattering glass, but the second and then the third didn’t seem to reach him. Ron broke down himself as he watched his friend and brother shut down, closing into himself. Harry wanted an escape. He was once again drowning in the world, but he couldn’t, he wouldn’t hurt his family by pushing it away again. Instead, he sought her. He could feel her, had felt her all along, somewhere near. She tugged at him, like a thread tied to his wrist. He followed the strand through a spaceless void, drawing it in slack loops behind him as he went. She was waiting for him, he knew, somewhere not too far away, and she missed him. He jogged on, running through the space on legs longer than he had ever known them. He stumbled a few times, tripping over shapes and ridges that he couldn’t see. His steps resounded in his ears, echoing his only thought back to him.

“No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No.” It was a hypnotic rhythm, and after a while it began to suggest music. His heartbeat provided a counter-point, his breathing the melody. He began to hum the tune, and then to sing it. “No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.” He smiled.

The thread was growing tauter as he neared her. He could feel her even more clearly now, that same, placid, maternal sensation of stone, water, and gentle, measured magic. She was right there, if only the air would clear he could see her, but then, just when he knew he would reach her, a wall stopped him. A sheer wall of golden light appeared suddenly from the mist, blocking his path. She was beyond it, out of his reach. He beat at the wall, knowing intrinsically that he was strong enough to breach it, if he only had enough time.

Ron grew more and more worried as Harry’s eyes slid slowly closed and his head fell forwards. His breathing slowed, shallowed and then stopped. “Mum!” Ron yelled, grabbing Harry as he toppled sideways off his chair. “Harry’s not breathing! He just stopped! Harry!” He shook him, trying to wake him, get him to breath again.
Harry was still at war with the wall, and he could feel it beginning to crack, but then another thread tugged at him tied to his other wrist. With its first tug, hers fell slack as abruptly as if it had been cut. His sense of her fled. He clutched after it, but the second thread pulled him sharply away. It was a red thread, this one, shot through with love for him, and concern, and the grey strand of fear. It was Ron, a small connection left over from his time as Harry’s Secret Keeper. He was calling Harry back, and Harry had no choice. The thread, growing into yarn and then into an ever-thicker rope as the rest of his family added their pleas to Ron’s. They wanted him back, alive. He hadn’t even known that he was dying, but now that he was thinking again, he could see where the threads that connected him to his body had been cut. They were black, those dangling threads, a brilliant, shining black. He could see the other halves of them, far in the distance, floating loose near the origin of Ron’s red thread. As the thread drew him past them, he grabbed as many as he could. Some, he saw, were withered and weak, drawn back from the rest and out of his reach. He only managed to snap one of the withered threads, one that hadn’t withdrawn quite so far, before Ron’s thread drew him to its end. There, everything stopped as his body in the physical world spasmed in great, leaping tremors. He could see Ron and the rest of his family outside, frozen in worry for him, unmoving, the clock behind them as still as they, but he could still see the threads he held, the black ones. As he watched, they each glowed a shade somewhere between gold and silver and, leaping out of his grip, they twined like snakes around him, each seeking its severed half. Finding it, they joined seamlessly into an almost invisible strand, linking Harry to his body, part to part. Only the strand that had been damaged remained black, stretching from him to his mouth, and down his throat. Connected, it shone a brighter black than it had before. He had only an instant to see it, though, for then time once again resumed its flow, trapping him back in his blind, crippled body.

One difference he noticed immediately. He was hungry. His stomach, which he hadn’t felt in months, grumbled unhappily at him, stilling all other noise in the kitchen. He shuddered once, a jerk of his shoulders and neck, then coughed.

“Harry!” Ron cried, still holding him. “You’re alive!”

“I am,” Harry affirmed, still re-discovering the boundaries of his body. Nothing had changed, that he could feel, except for his stomach. He could still feel it, it hadn’t been an imagining. It clamored and belled for food now that it was awoken once more, clenching in a manner that would have been painful were it not so welcome and novel. “I’m hungry,” he said, smiling, even as the memory of his time in the spaceless void drained away from him like rainwater after a storm.

Though Harry’s stomach could be plainly heard, Molly insisted first on talking to Madame Pomfrey, who asked her to bring Harry to Hogwarts. He and Molly went by Floo powder, accompanied by Ron, who would not be left behind. After a thorough, and somewhat embarrassing examination by the school nurse, she declared it a miracle.

“I don’t know how to explain it,” she said, clearly at a loss. “There just isn’t any way I can think of that a paralyzed section of the body could suddenly decide to work again. Particularly such a limited part.” One thing that the tests had shown was that only his stomach was functioning; He still had no sensation or control of the muscles near it, or of the skin of his torso. All he could feel was the turning inside his stomach. “As to eating again,” she said, looking at her notes. “I recommend that you stick with the nutria-potions for now at least, but you can snack if you need or want to. Not a lot, nothing heavy, but you can try it. Be sure to tell me if anything unusual, well, anything else unusual happens. Which brings me to my next point. I’m afraid you must be beginning to resent me, seeing as I am so often the bearer of bad news for you. I would like you to stay here, at least until term starts again, so I can keep an eye on you.

Harry sighed. “Fine, I’ll stay,” he said. “But do I have to stay in the hospital wing?”
Pomfrey was a little taken aback at his easy acceptance, but she rallied quickly, as was her wont. “No, you can stay in your own room if you want. I can keep track of you just as easily there as here.”

“Good,” he said, smiling wanly. It had been a very long day, and yet it was scarcely evening. “Then I think that I will have a snack, and go to bed. Ron? Are you going to stay here with me?”

“Yeah,” said Ron. “Of course.”

“Harry!” Breena’s voice came, frantic with worry, from the doorway. “What are you doing here?” He could hear her limping slightly as she crossed the floor towards him.

“Me? I’m fine. Better than I’ve been in months. What are you doing here? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, giving him a friendly hug. “I just fell down some stairs a few minutes ago. That’s why I’m here. But shouldn’t you be at home, with your family?”

“Yeah, but something happened.” He smiled at Ron. “What did happen? I can’t remember?”

Ron stared at him. “You almost died, Harry. You don’t remember?” Breena looked about to say something, but he waved her off. “What’s the last thing you remember, Harry?”

Harry had to think about that. “I remember the play,” he said slowly. “And then... something big happened, something bad, but I can’t remember what. Was it my fault?” His voice grew small and his face donned an apprehensive air. “Did I do something?”

“No, no, Harry,” Ron and Molly both hastened to assure him, and then Ron continued. “You didn’t do anything, nothing. Voldemort attacked the theater, it wasn’t your fault.”

“Voldemort? Oh no,” Harry muttered. “That’s right. He killed all those people. He dropped the chandelier. What happened after that?”

“Well, we all went home, except Dad and Percy went to the Ministry, and Mum started making tea, and you just kinda went quiet, and then you were really, really still, and you stopped breathing and toppled over. I caught you, and then you woke up.”

“I remember coming home,” said Harry pensively. “And I remember waking up. Molly, did you break a tea cup, or am I imagining that?”

“No,” Molly answered with a relieved sigh. “Oh, I’m glad you remember.”

“So am I,” said Harry, seeming more like himself. “It was like I couldn’t find myself for a while. Everything was foggy.”

“Oh, Harry,” came Dumbledore’s voice. “I’m glad to see you back, although not, I think, under these circumstances. How is he, Poppy?”

“I’m amazed, actually,” she said, turning to put away the tools she had used for the examination. “The nerves in his stomach have regenerated completely, all along his digestive tract. He’s hungry, Albus.”

“Hungry? Really? Then by all means, he must have something to eat.” As if on cue, Harry’s stomach rumbled once more. “Shall we make our way to the kitchens, then? I’m sure that Dobby will be very happy to hear that you can once again partake of his cooking.” He offered Molly his arm, which caused her to smile, and they, meaning Harry, Ron, Molly, Dumbledore and Breena, made their way
down six flights to the kitchen. Dobby, as predicted, greeted Harry enthusiastically, flying at him from a far corner of the cavernous room.

“Harry Potter!” he squealed, latching his thin arms around Harry’s knees. “You is coming to see Dobby!”

“Hi, Dobby,” Harry said warmly, patting the elf’s head. “How are you?”

“Dobby is good, sir,” he answered, bobbing happily. “Can we do anything for you, sirs and miss?”


“Harry Potter can eat food again?” Dobby squealed, as happy as a house-elf gets. He would permit none of the other elves to help him as he rushed around, gathering the foods that Harry had liked before. In no time at all, he presented Harry with a heap of food, all of it appealing. Harry couldn’t decide where to start.

“I’d start with something light,” advised Dumbledore. “Your stomach is going have to get used to food again.”

“Okay,” Harry said, eager to start. He found a pear in the stack, one that felt good to his hand, smooth, with a rich, enticing scent. He bit into it with a foolish, ecstatic grin, letting the juice run down his throat, savoring the flesh before he began to chew. It had been so long since his injuries made eating impossible that he had to consciously move his teeth, but instinct took over quickly, and he couldn’t eat it fast enough. “Oh, that’s good,” he said, speaking when his mouth was empty. The others laughed, and sat down as the house-elves brought over enough food for them and a score more of diners. Harry’s stomach didn’t take long to satisfy, in fact, it soon felt quite full, but he kept sampling all the foods that he had been craving for months. He had some mince pie, some pumpkin juice, and a small sliver of apple pie, an intensity of taste that put him in a state of unbelievable bliss. Ron laughed at the dreamy expression on his face. “What? If you hadn’t had anything to eat in five months, you’d make a day of it too.”

“A very understandable sentiment, Harry,” said Dumbledore, standing from the table with a pastry in one hand. “I must away, for duty calls me. I believe that there is an owl, waiting for me in my office.”

“There is,” Harry said, touching his crystal ball briefly. “It’s from the Ministry.” His eyes widened. “Oh, Fudge,” he exclaimed, remembering. “The Minister of Magic is dead!”

“What?” Dumbledore was shocked. “Harry, are you sure?”

“I Saw it,” Harry affirmed, still breathing hard. “I was there, in the theater when the chandelier fell. Voldemort blamed me, and Fudge was sitting in the very front row. Arthur and Percy went to the Ministry to tell them. I’d..., I’d forgotten.”

“Perfectly understandable, Harry,” said Dumbledore shakily. “The mind forgets that which hurts too much. Now, I had better go and see to that owl.” His steps as he left the kitchen were slow and heavy. They left the kitchen in absolute silence.

“Imagine,” said a stunned Ron. “Dumbledore not knowing something faster than anyone.”

“He’s getting old,” Molly admitted sadly. “I hate to see him like this. He’s supposed to know everything.”
“I know what you mean,” agreed Harry morosely. “Do you think it would be alright if I went to visit Mr. Deegan?”

“I think so,” said Molly, rallying to any ready distraction. “I would like to meet him.”

So they went down, across the grounds and into Hogsmead, all four of them, and knocked on Dominic’s door. He opened it, and exclaimed, “Harry! I’m glad you’re okay! I just saw you, just a moment ago, and you were lost, somewhere, with cut threads.”

“What do you mean, cut threads?” Harry asked as they all went inside, settling themselves in his living room.

“I don’t know,” Dominic shrugged. “That’s what I saw, you lost, with cut threads dangling from you. Only, it wasn’t quite you.” He seemed like he was struggling to remember. “You were whole, and you might have been taller. It’s hard to tell, seeing as I’ve never seen you standing. And your eyes were a clear blue. Everyone knows that your eyes were green, thanks to Rita Skeeter. And I don’t think that you were wearing Gryffindor colors, though you were wearing a school uniform. I can’t remember what you were wearing, though. This is very frustrating! Why can’t I ever See you clearly?”

“Never? You’ve never Seen me well?” Harry’s Seer’s curiosity was aroused.

“Yes, once I diagnosed the peculiarity. I’ve tried to See your future, your past, your present, anything. I either can’t See you at all, or it’s too hazy and vague to make anything out, or sometimes, I See billions of overlaps, too many for me to make anything out. It’s as if my Sight is taunting me.” He lit his pipe to calm himself, chewing perturbedly on its stem. “This is all very frustrating. So, what does bring you to my door today?”

“We were at the theater in London, Her Majesty’s Theater in London, and we were watching the Phantom of the Opera, and I guess I was kind of caught up in th music, and for some reason, I touched my crystal ball, and I Saw the chandelier fall, and then it did, right into the orchestra pit. I Saw all the people die, Mr. Deegan, and I Saw Fudge there, dead, with...” His voice lapsed into a miserable whisper. “With a big, brass bar through his chest. His thread was cut.”

“Thread?”

Harry shook his head. “Not like you mean, Mr. Deegan. His thread in the future flow, his current. He had a future, and now he doesn’t.”

“Oh Harry,” said Molly, hugging him. “I’m so sorry.”

“Not your fault,” he said. “I wish people would stop apologizing to me.”

“Sorry, er...” Molly made a face, and Ron laughed. The tense moment passed.

“So,” Dominic asked, serving the tea and making a point of serving a cup to Harry, tapping the cup loudly against the saucer as he set it down. Harry grinned and gulped it eagerly, then coughed when it proved too hot. He smiled abashedly, excusing himself. “So,” continued Dominic, overlooking the interruption. “Are you going back to school after the holidays, or are you going to come back and
stay with me?"

“I don’t know,” said Harry, sipping his tea more cautiously. “I want to go back, kind of, but they won’t have forgotten what I did. I don’t want to be always be around people who are afraid of me, especially if they used to be my friends.”

“They still are your friends, Harry,” Breena said quietly. “Hermione and Colin and Dennis and Seamus and Dean, and me, we all miss you. Won’t you come back?”

“I told you,” Harry said kindly. “I don’t know yet. I promise, when I do, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Aww,” said Ron, sweetly mocking. “Just look at you two. Ack!” His sudden exclamation was a mystery to everyone except Harry, who had just rolled over his foot. “You keep doing that,” he growled, hopping up and down.

“What do you mean?” said Harry ingenuously, one eyebrow raised.

“You prat,” Ron said without rancor, taking a seat and tucking his feet under it out of reach.

“Who, me?” Both eyebrows went up now, framing a face of perfect innocence. Ron just scowled.

Harry stayed in his room at Hogwarts that night, and the next, and the night after that. He meant to leave each day, to gather his things and show up at Dominic’s door, but something held him back. The castle itself seemed to welcome him. This was home, in a way that Dominic’s or even the Burrow could never be. He kept coming up with reasons, both for himself and the others, why he was not leaving. And so it was, almost a surprise, that he was still there when school started again.

Chapter: 44

The day school started again, Harry was almost caught by surprise. He had been aware, of course, that the castle would soon again be filled with his peers, but he had been intentionally ignoring that fact, as if hoping that it would go away. He was eating lunch, marveling at how good a chicken sandwich could taste, when the doors to the Great Hall opened and the students poured in, red-nosed and laughing after a ride through the deep snow. Seamus and Dean were the first to spot Harry, and they rushed over to him, full of questions and an eager “Welcome back, Harry,” from each of them. All of Gryffindor House, it seemed, was happy to see him back, although the younger students seemed to hold him in a half-fearful awe, as though he might launch an attack on the Dark Lord at any moment.

That night, in the Common Room, Harry was pestered incessantly by Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil about his Seer training. Neither of them would yet believe that he, who had been so skeptical and rude during Divination classes, was a better Seer than Trelawney, even though she herself had admitted it to the class. So he pulled out his crystal ball, let them ooh and aah over it for a moment, then reached out, grabbed one’s hand, and then the other, and pulled them both in with him. Parvati and Lavender, unlike Hermione, were able to see the future flow above their heads, but they didn’t see the beauty in it that Harry did. He showed them a vision, refused to show them their own futures, and then took them back out with him, all in the space of a minute. Returned to themselves, they both gasped lightly, thanking him profusely before running off to their dorm. Mission accomplished, Harry thought smugly.
Going to bed, Ron asked him about Breena. “Well, you and her do seem pretty close,” he said equably after he had helped Harry into his bed. “People talk, you know? According to Neville, you and Breena have been a couple since before the Quidditch trials.”

“According to Neville? Since when did he become a follower of the Potter fan club?”

“Oh, get off it,” said Ron, throwing a pillow at him. “It’s not you, this time. It’s Breena. You may not know this, but she’s not half-bad looking, for all she’s shorter than Dobby.” He ducked as Harry threw the pillow back. “Kidding, kidding, although she is a looker. All that bright hair, and those dark eyes, you don’t see that every day.” He was acting exactly the way a fifteen year-old boy should act, with nothing but girls on the mind.

“Oh yeah?” replied Harry? “Well, according to Tristan, your thing with Hermione is more than public rumour, it’s public fact. You two are famous here, as the couple who fight more than they snog.” This time, he heard the pillow coming, and hot it off course. Unfortunately, it hit a sleeping Myst, waking her up. She didn’t appreciate the awakening.

“If you two are going to act like a pair of tussling puppies,” she snarled, stalking arrogantly off Harry’s bed. “Then I’m going to sleep up here.” Harry’s bed shook slightly as she leapt up to the canopy. Ron laughed at the haughty cat, who hissed back once before curling up, her tail over her nose, and falling asleep. Harry followed suit soon after, and Ron soon after that.

Around midnight, Harry was woken up by a shaking of the bed. It felt like someone was kicking it, but his ears told him that there was no one there. After a time it stopped, so he blamed it on Peeves, rolled over and went back to sleep. His foot twitched twice more that night, a sharper, more violent twitch than had ever happened before.

Their first class the next morning was Defense Against the Dark Arts, with Snape. Harry’s absence before the holidays was a point of irritation for Snape, one that he made painfully obvious by asking the boy harder and harder questions and then asking Harry to demonstrate his patronus, since that was what the class would be working on that day. That done, he let Harry sit down, pointedly ignoring it when he moved closer to the fire. Harry let his mind drift away from the cold castle, away from Neville’s repeated failed attempts to cast anything more than a dusky silver haze. He was completely distracted and, as such, he was utterly unaware of his body, and what it was doing. His foot was twitching. It was just a small, sporadic jump, but it was there. As Harry was sitting in the front row, next to the hearth, Snape saw it and stopped his lecture mid-word, just staring at Harry’s foot. Soon, the whole class was staring, although not everyone knew how extraordinary this small twitching was. Harry, still lost in thought, didn’t notice the stunned silence until Ron nudged him.

“What?” he whispered loudly to Ron.

“Harry, your right foot is twitching!” Ron replied urgently.

Harry was shocked. “It is? I can’t feel.” He slid his hand down his right leg as far as he could. He could only reach a little below his knee, but he could feel the tendons there bunching and pulling. His foot was moving, but entirely of its own volition. He didn’t know how it was doing it, and he couldn’t stop it.

The entire class was watching Harry intently, lesson utterly forgotten. As they watched, the tremors spread to his whole leg. Harry began to panic. “Professor Snape?” he said anxiously, still trying in vain to halt his kicking leg. “What’s hap-

Suddenly, his back arched, tearing loose from the grip of the chair. He screamed sharply, bucking in a seizure. His body threw itself to the floor. His back continued to curve backwards through the
spasms until it was bent almost double. He clawed at the air senselessly, every tendon in his hand and stump standing out as he strained against his own muscles. It wasn’t until his head began to slam against the floor that Ron, freed suddenly from shock, was able to react. He flung himself down on his friend, using his weight to still the convulsions, one arm intervening between Harry’s head and the flagstone floor.

“Get help!” he shouted roughly as Harry’s flailing stump caught him across the throat. “And help me!”

Snape hurriedly dispatched Dean Thomas to fetch Madame Pomfrey before coming to Ron’s aid, Hermione reaching them at the same moment. Between the three of them, they managed to pin the still-thrashing Harry to the floor, doing their level best to keep him from hurting himself. By the time Madame Pomfrey arrived, disheveled and concerned, he was still straining violently against them, and all four were covered in a sheen of sweat.

Abruptly, Harry’s back arched again, so powerfully that Ron, who was lying across his chest to hold him down, was thrown off. A second, inarticulate cry issued, one that chilled those present to the bone. Only Ron had heard the sound before, back in their Second Year, while he had waited for Harry to return from the Chamber of Secrets. It was the scream of a basilisk, and it came this time from Harry’s throat. Unexpectedly, as though the strings of a puppet had been cut, he collapsed. His eyes, which had been clenched tightly shut since the first scream, snapped open and those around him gasped. Before, they had been lusterless, black, dead cinders in his face and unnerving enough. Now, they were cracked, and through the cracks shone an awful, malevolent, blood-red glow.

Harry’s mouth opened, but it was not the Boy-Who-Lived who spoke.

“Bow before me!” demanded Lord Voldemort.

{Two chapters in one night! Hoorah!}

Chapter: 45

Snape made a split-second decision then. From his postion, already on his knees by Harry’s side, he bowed even lower, pulling his hands back from Harry/Voldemort’s ankles. “Master,” he groveled, his nose almost touching the floor. His mind was racing, panicked thoughts, one after another. What had happened to Harry? How was Voldemort in his body, and how could he get him out? Snape knew that he could only help Harry if he were still alive, so he had to try his hardest to maintain his cover as a loyal Death Eater. “Master, how is this possible?”

Voldemort laughed, a high, horrible sound that resounded through the silent classroom. He looked directly at Snape through Harry’s dead eyes and spoke. “Ah, Severus Snape. You are still loyal to the old ways?” He voice was very serpentine as he asked such a loaded question.

“Yes, my Lord,” stuttered Snape. “Of course I am loyal to you.” He tried very hard to ignore the outraged looks of betrayal he was receiving from the class and Madame Pomfrey, but they were supporting his cover. “How could you doubt me?”

“Hmmm.” It was a sinister, speculative sound. “Well, you will have opportunities to prove yourself. Now,” hissed the Dark Lord. “Help me up!”
Reluctantly, Snape clasped the outstretched hand, trying very hard not to cringe away at the feel of evil crawling over and through Harry’s skin. Despite the crippling of the body, Voldemort caused it to stand up, balancing as perfectly on the single foot as if it were two. Looking around, he pulled Harry’s wand from its place in his abandoned wheelchair, caressing it. “So like my own,” he murmured affectionately before waving it in front of him. A smoky silver arm formed, then a foot. They both flew to Harry’s healed stumps, affixing themselves seamlessly. “Much better,” announced Voldemort smugly. “Now, I believe that I would like to have a word, or several, with Fool Dumbledore.”

“Of course, master,” said Snape, still bowing, but inwardly he smiled humorlessly. Dumbledore would know what to do, and when it would come down to it, as it would, he was the only wizard who had a chance of defeating the Dark Lord. Straightening, he swept over to the fireplace at the front of the classroom, where he threw in a handful of sparkling powder. “A word, Headmaster,” he cried, hoping desperately that what he was doing was the right thing.

As soon as Dumbledore crossed the hearth, his eyes were drawn straight to Harry, or rather, to what stood wearing Harry’s skin.

“Voldemort,” he said soberly, his wand instantly at the ready. The two wizards faced off against each other, teeth bared, until Voldemort suddenly laughed.

“Albus, what are you going to do? Kill me? You’d have to kill your precious Harry, too. I can hear him in here, you know.” He tapped his temples. “He’s screaming, hysterical to get out, like a bug in a jar.” The evil wizard sounded amused.

The evil wizard was lying. He could hear Harry, trapped powerlessly inside his own mind, but Harry wasn’t hysterical. Rather, he was soundly cursing his captor while examining his new surroundings. He found himself floating in an immense, white space, and he could see something in the distance. He could **see**! He could also, he found, move his legs and even feel his feet. Feet! He had two! And two hands, complete with two thumbs. He was whole! In short order, he had discovered that he was also astride a broom, which, judging from what he had been told, must be his Starstone. It was spectacularly beautiful, seemingly made out of blue-tinted ice with little veins of silvered bubbles running down its length. Harry was distracted for a moment, both by the broomstick and by the sensation of sight, but only for a brief moment. Recalling his situation, he flew towards the only variation in the blinding whiteness of the space.

As he approached, he saw that the aberration was a pair of many-paned windows, hanging in space. Through them, he could hear and see his Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Dumbledore stood in front of him, wand ready and aimed. He could hear Voldemort taunting the older wizard, and he beat impotently at the glass, wanting to help his headmaster. Suddenly, one pane broke under his pounding fist. Beyond it, instead of the classroom and freedom, lay another void, as black as this one was white. Harry peered through it and saw, on the opposite side, a gilded handle on the window frame. With only a small qualm of uneasiness, he reached through, opened the window, and crossed to the dark side, still on his Starstone.

“Who comes?” a high, harsh voice called from the shadow. Harry didn’t answer, but a moment later the speaker approached him, materializing from the darkness. “Hello, Harry,” said ... Harry.

Only at first glance could the newcomer be mistaken for Harry Potter. On a second glance, anyone could, and Harry did, see the malignant shadow in this older version of his face. Tom Riddle smiled ferally at Harry.

This was not the same Tom Riddle that Harry had met in the Chamber of Secrets. This was a middle-aged man, scarred and grey-haired temple, but with a triumphant grin spread now across his face. He
was standing on nothing that Harry could see only a few feet from the boy, and he closed that
distance in a single stride to grab Harry’s restored right arm. An echo of Vernon flitted across his
face in Harry’s mind, and then was gone. This man was far more dangerous. “So nice to have you
here,” he hissed. Harry tried to pull away, but his grip was like iron. “Where would you go?” asked
Riddle laughingly as Harry struggled. Harry looked wildly around for the windows, but they had
vanished into the dark, as had his Starstone. “Believe me, Harry, you don’t want to go off in here on
your own.” A sweeping gesture indicated the lightless space. “It is my mind, after all.”

Still holding Harry’s wrist, Voldemort reached with his other hand to grab Harry’s face, and Harry
couldn’t avoid it. The claw-like hand burnt against his jaw, but he couldn’t pull back. Harry couldn’t
move at all, and Voldemort laughed to see him try and struggle, his eyes the only thing that he
could move.

“I am in control here, boy. Let me demonstrate. Sit, boy!” He released Harry as his legs buckled, and
the boy abruptly found himself sitting on the invisible floor at Riddle’s feet. “See?”

“What have you done to me?” asked Harry through gritted teeth, still unable to move his jaw.
Voldemort threw his head back and laughed.

“Let me explain, my dear boy, for it really is a coup of mine. You really should keep track of
yourself, Harry-boy. Set-aside body parts are dangerous in the wrong hands.” He reached into his
robes, and pulled out a small, shriveled thing. Harry’s stomach twisted to recognize his own thumb,
cut away almost two months ago. “You see, Harry-boy, pieces of your body can be used against
you. I used this.” He tossed Harry’s thumb into the air nonchalantly and caught it again. “To form a
bridge between us. It’s taken me months, but, as you see, I have succeeded, and no one, not one of
your loyal friends or valiant guardians so much as noticed my efforts. Unfortunately for you, you
seem to be immune to the Imperius Curse. That would have been much less painful, both for you and
me. This way, though, is more thorough. I am actually possessing you, exactly like I did those snakes
and rats in that awful forest in Albania. Do you want to see what I am doing with your body?” He
didn’t wait for an answer from the fuming Harry, merely gestured around himself, and he and his
void faded from Harry’s view.

Harry found himself back in his own body, but he was only watching though his eyes. He could feel
Voldemort controlling his every movement, his very breathing, could see his own wand brought to
bear on Dumbledore. “Expelliarmus!” his voice cried, but the Headmaster held fast to his own wand,
still not retaliating. *That old fool,* snickered Riddle’s voice in his head. *He could kill me now if
he had a spine. One Avada Kedavra, and the wizarding world’s problems would be finally solved. I
would finally and truly die, but so would you, and that sentimental excuse for a wizard is unwilling
to sacrifice the Boy-Who-Lived. The Cruciatus Curse would free you of me, but he may not know
that.* Then he spoke aloud, addressing Dumbledore. “Kill me, Albus. It’s easy. I’m here, I’m here,
standing in front of you, vulnerable in the body of a child. One stroke of your wand and all you’ve
been wishing for more than two decades would be yours. Of course, Harry, will die, but is not one
innocent life a small price?” He opened Harry’s arms wide, daring Dumbledore to take a shot. “Even
the life of the Boy-Who-Lived?”

“No life is too small a price, Tom,” growled Dumbledore. He stood tall as he raised wand.
“Comacophany!”

Harry watched and cheered as a blaze of orange light leapt from Dumbledore’s wand, rushing
straight for his face. It engulfed his head, and even as his body flew backwards, darkness overtook
him.

Harry didn’t know how long he was out, but when awareness returned, he was blind again, and
lying uncomfortably on a floor, his one hand bound tightly behind him. He could hear a voice nearby, Dumbledore’s.

“Hello?” he called out and the voice stopped.

“Harry?” said Dumbledore cautiously, coming closer. “Is it you?”

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “Voldemort?” He didn’t have the energy for more conversation than that.

“He is still in you,” said Dumbledore gravely. That explained the binding. “We haven’t found a way to expel him yet.”

Suddenly Harry felt the evil presence in his mind. It stirred and he spoke quickly. “I can feel him. Listen, if you kill me, you’ll kill him. Do it. He was right, my life is a small price.”

Dumbledore cried out. “Harry, you can’t know how wrong you are!”

“Crucio, then!” screamed Harry as a new seizure struck. “It’ll drive him out!” His words turned into a scream as his spine arched, farther than before as he tried to resist the invasion. He could feel Voldemort’s anger as he pushed Harry from his own mind. Despite Harry’s efforts to resist, he found himself once again floating in the white space as Voldemort effortlessly broke the bonds that held his body and caused it to stand. Wandless, he lunged for Dumbledore, hand and stump outstretched to throttle him. Harry smiled wryly as Dumbledore raised his wand again.

“Crucio!” he screamed, tears forming in his eyes. “Forgive me, Harry!”

Time seemed to slow as the invisible curse flew towards, into Harry’s chest. Then the pain began. His skull felt like it was shattering, lines of fire drawn inside his head. His body shuddered and fell, but Dumbledore held his wand in Harry, crying freely as he prolonged the curse. Harry couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe. He wanted to die, to end this agony when, from inside himself, he felt a tearing. He could feel Voldemort struggling to stay with him, and it felt like claws burying themselves in his heart, but he could feel him being slowly ripped away. Through the pain, he cheered.

Ron stood by helplessly, watching his best friend writhe on the floor. When Harry had opened his eyes, and Voldemort had looked out through them, he and the rest of the class had found themselves unable to move. He had watched in horror the duel between Voldemort-as-Harry and Dumbledore and had cried out when Harry fell, unconscious, to the floor. He understood when Dumbledore conjured bonds to hold Harry. When Harry asked Dumbledore to kill him, he had been too shocked to cry out. Now, he could only watch.

“Kill me!” Harry screamed, a sound torn from the depths of pain. But this torture was working. Harry was in control of his own body again. Ron suddenly broke free and ran to his brother’s side, cradling him as best he could as he arched and kicked, ignoring the echoes of pain that overflowed through their contact. Finally, after an eternity, Harry bucked, one final, wrenching spasm, and lay limp, eyes half-closed, in Ron’s arms. Slowly, his mouth opened and a pool of dense, blood-hued vapor emerged. A face formed in it, inhuman and agonized, and it screamed the basilisk’s scream again before speeding through a window and out of the castle.

Silence reigned for a long, long moment after Voldemort’s departure. At last, into that silence, Harry drew a slow, ragged breath and opened his eyes. They were flat black again, and Ron breathed a sigh of relief. “Dumbledore?” Harry called. The Headmaster swept down to kneel beside the two boys.
“Yes, Harry?” he replied.

“I can’t feel him anymore. Is he gone?” Harry’s voice was strained, for he was trying very hard not to cry. Dumbledore saw this and smiled kindly.

“He is, Harry. He’s gone.”

“Good.” His eyes drifted closed.

“Harry? How do you feel?” asked Madame Pomfrey, tentatively approaching him.

“Like hell,” he replied succinctly, not opening his eyes. “Still blind, still crippled, and now I feel like I’ve been skinned and burnt alive.”

“That’s my fault, I’m afraid,” said Dumbledore apologetically. “I had to hold you under the Cruciatuts Curse for a dangerously long time to expel Voldemort. I’m so sorry.” His voice was fervent and regretful. But Harry waved such apologies aside.

“’S okay,” he said softly. “Not your fault. No choice. Could I just sleep now?” His voice broke and he sounded like a much younger child. “I’m so tired.”

“Of course, Harry,” replied Dumbledore tenderly. He moved to lift the boy, but Snape, who had kept to the shadows, stepped suddenly forward.

“Let me, Albus,” he said, lifting Harry in gentle arms.

“Don’t let him touch Harry, Albus!” shrieked Madame Pomfrey suddenly. “He’s a Death Eater! He’s loyal to You-Know-Who!”

“No, he’s not,” murmured Harry from Snape’s arms. “He’s a spy, for the Light. He’s just pretending to be loyal to Voldemort, aren’t you, Professor?”

“That’s right,” said Dumbledore firmly. “Poppy, he had to maintain his cover, but he did the best thing he could possibly have done in summoning me. It saved Harry’s life.” With that, he escorted the nurse from the room, answering her questions patiently. Snape followed them, Ron and Hermione at his side, jealously guarding their best friend and brother. Instead of taking him to the hospital wing, however, Snape let the other two lead him up to Harry and Ron’s room. Without hesitation, Ron said the password (Fredo Baggins) to let them in. Snape laid the already sleeping boy into his bed, before turning to his friends.

“He’s going to be OK, right?” Hermione’s voice was shaky, an understanding reaction in face of all she had just witnessed.

“He should be, Miss Granger,” replied Snape softly, not wanting to wake Harry. The three drew to the opposite corner of the room.

“What did You-Know-Who do to Harry?” asked Ron. “He should have been safe here, shouldn’t he?”

“He should have been, yes. We don’t know how Voldemort reached him. Harry may know and we’ll ask him when he wakes up, but for now, we can only hypothesize. Possession is a very serious and very dangerous form of the Dark Arts. Dumbledore, or even I, could have easily killed Harry, and Voldemort would have died with him. Actually died, once and for all.” Snape’s voice was steady, but Ron could see a note of anxiety in his face.
“Than why didn’t Dumbledore do it?” Ron asked. He hated himself for the question, but he had to know.

“I honestly don’t know, Mr. Weasley, aside from being unwilling to kill an innocent. It was the Headmaster’s choice. This is a very sensitive topic. You should…” He looked discomfited. “Maybe we shouldn’t discuss this here and now. Harry could wake up at any time.”

Snape strode hurriedly out of the room, leaving behind a very puzzled Ron and Hermione. They looked at each other in silence before turning to sit by Harry, keeping vigil by his bedside once again. After a few minutes, Madame Pomfrey knocked to come in. Careful not to wake him, she examined Harry thoroughly, then spoke to his two friends.

“He’s bruised from the seizures and from the Cruciatus Curse, and he’s torn some muscles in his back and his shoulders,” she said somberly. “But that’s all the damage. He’ll be sore for a couple days. If you could fetch me or bring him down to the hospital wing when he wakes up?”

Harry didn’t wake up until nearly dinnertime, but it was a very uneasy sleep. Eerie dreams haunted him, in which a red ghost chased him through the halls of a deserted Hogwarts, but a very different Hogwarts than the one he knew. Corridors were occasionally streets; classrooms sometimes became courtyards or empty shops. The ghost, he knew, meant him harm, but there was something almost intimately familiar in its voice. It called his name in anguished fury, and other names that Harry felt he knew: Godric, Rowena, Helga. There was a name missing, but Harry couldn’t remember it. The ghost replaced it with father.

Eventually, after running through empty rooms, streets, shops, and corridors for a lifetime, the voice ceased. Harry knew that the ghost was gone. For now, he felt safe. He began to wander the castle absently, searching for something that he couldn’t identify. An instinct drew him to Dumbledore’s office, where it did not seem at all strange that the guardian gargoyle bowed deeply and let him pass, or that the door stood wide at the top of the stairs.

He was also unsurprised that the office had changed. Instead of Dumbledore’s homely clutter of whirring things, the room’s only furnishings were four high-backed chairs, arranged in a circle. Three of these were occupied by hooded figures, one each in Blue, Green, and Yellow. Only the Blue one was facing him, and Harry didn’t find it odd at all that it wore his own face beneath that hood, but with eyes of an eerie, ice-cold blue. Of the others, he knew he had nothing to fear from Yellow, and although the Green-clad one made him wary, there was the knowledge that they had once been good friends, and that they would be so again.

Something in Harry prompted him to take the unoccupied seat, the one on the North point of the circle. He found that he, too, was hooded, in a simply elaborate Red robe that left his arms bare, revealing a gold ring around his right arm, exactly where, in the waking world, it ended. Incised into the band was a rampant griffon, fangs bared but claws sheathed, and wings only half-spread.

Slowly, the other two figures turned to face him, and, as one, raised their hands to their faces, clearly meaning to lower their hoods. As they did, however, a blinding white light filled the room, obscuring everything. Once it faded, Harry found himself staring intently into darkness. He was awake, and once again blind.

Listening carefully, he could hear a muted conversation between Ron and Hermione. “I’m awake” he announced, not wanting to eavesdrop on them. He heard them both rush over to his side.

“How are you, Harry?” asked Hermione.

“‘How are you, Harry?’” asked Hermione.

“‘To be honest, ‘Mione, I feel like I’ve been beaten by a mountain troll with a big, spiky stick. But I
had the strangest dream.” He explained as much as he could to his friends, but they could make no more sense of it than he could. He resolved to tell Dumbledore. Maybe he would have some insight. “Could you get me into my chair, Ron? I need to see the Headmaster.”

“Madame Pomfrey wants to see you,” said Hermione as Ron lifted Harry into his wheelchair.

“Dumbledore first,” he insisted. The images from the dream were still vivid in his mind’s eye, persistent and puzzling. So the three friends left the Gryffindor Tower, passing students heading to dinner as they went. No one asked Harry if he were all-right, which was odd, but he was so preoccupied in his own thoughts that he hardly noticed.

At Dumbledore’s office, the password was still Skittles. Dumbledore was at his desk, apparently writing a letter when Harry came in. He had asked Ron and Hermione to leave him, for he wanted to discuss this with the Headmaster in private.

“Hello, Harry,” said Dumbledore, looking up. “How are you doing?”

“I’ll be all right,” responded Harry distractedly. “Professor Dumbledore? I wanted to talk to you about a dream I just had.”

“Oh,” said Dumbledore, resting his chin on steepled fingers and regarding the boy. “Go on.”

So Harry once again described his dream, Dumbledore nodding sagely. “Well?” he asked when Harry had finished. “Who were they?”

“That’s just it,” said Harry frustrated. “I woke up too soon to see! But I knew them, I know it. They were so familiar!”

“The symbolism in this dream is obvious, Harry. The four figures, if one is to include yourself, must represent the Hogwarts houses, or perhaps the Founders. Blue for Ravenclaw, yellow for Hufflepuff, green for Slytherin, and you, in red, as Gryffindor. The red ghost is Voldemort, who has hunted you most of your life.”

“Okay,” said Harry, seeing the logic in this interpretation. All of his questions weren’t answered, but he had a feeling that Dumbledore couldn’t offer any more help. “But who was he calling ‘Father?’”

“Salazar Slytherin, of course. Remember, Tom Riddle is the heir of Slytherin, his reincarnation, if you will.”

“That explains a lot,” replied Harry musingly. “Thank you, Headmaster.”

“Were you worried about this dream, Harry?”

“No, not really. It just, you know, bothered me. The dream felt so... inevitable.” Harry shook his head. “I’m sorry. I really can’t explain how it felt any better than that.”

Dumbledore patted his hand. “No need, Harry, no need at all. Unless you think that it’s some manifestation of your powers as a Seer?”

“It could be,” said Harry slowly.

“This dream could be a vision of the past, then, or the future.”

“The future,” said Harry firmly. “I know it hasn’t happened yet, if it was a vision. It could have been just a dream, though, couldn’t it?” There was something of a plea in his voice.
“It is possible. One more thing, however, before you go. This may, just may, happen again.” Harry’s heart sunk. He knew Dumbledore wasn’t talking about the dream. “Voldemort’s link to you cannot be blocked by anything we know, nor can it be cut until he loses its source, whatever it is he’s using to get to you.”

“He has my, my thumb,” interrupted Harry, swallowing hard.

“That would be it, then, but how did he get that? It should have been... disposed of, immediately after the trial. Things like that are very dangerous to have about.” His tone was very grave as he continued. “The Ministry must not know of this, Harry.”

“What?” exclaimed Harry, startled.

“They would want to exploit Voldemort’s weak spot, Harry. In this case, that is you. They would be willing to kill you to defeat him.”

“And why shouldn’t they?” asked Harry, so softly that Dumbledore barely caught it.

“Harry! I wish that I could explain to you just how important it is that you live, but I can’t. Not just yet. I really want you to know, I really do, but I’m not allowed.” Dumbledore was almost grinding his teeth in frustration. Harry sympathized.

“Well, as long as the Crucio...”

“Curatus” Curse works, we can keep using that, I guess. It’s awful, and it makes me want to die, but I can take it. After all, I’m the Boy-Who-Bloody-Lived.” His voice was heavily sarcastic, but he squared his shoulders all the same.

“You certainly are your father’s son,” chuckled Dumbledore paternally, ignoring the catch in his throat. Standing, he walked around his desk to pull Harry from his chair into a strong, fatherly embrace. After a moment’s startlement, Harry returned it, hugging the old man fiercely. They stayed that way, in understanding silence, for some time.

“So, Harry,” said Dumbledore at last, settling him back into his chair. “You understand why this can not become public knowledge? I explained this already to the rest of those who saw it, right before I selectively altered their memory. None of them, save Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger, remember this morning’s Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson as anything other than boring. I’m not proud of it, but it was necessary. I did explain it to Remus, and to Minerva, as they both asked about you, but no one else knows. You shouldn’t even discuss this with your friends, anywhere you might be overheard. Your room should be safe enough, but nowhere else.

“Now,” he added, his voice lightening from its sober tone. “Perhaps you would like to join your friends at dinner?”

Actually, after leaving Dumbledore’s office, Harry didn’t go to the Great Hall. He had meant to, but halfway there, another seizure slammed him into the white space, so fast this time that he did not have time to scream.

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“Leave me alone!” he screamed into the void, but there was no answer, not even an echo. He couldn’t see the windows, this time, but high above, where he had not looked last time, he saw a miniscule patch of color. As, once again, he found himself astride his Starstone, he pulled up sharply
and headed for it, as fast as he could.

In this peculiar realm, no air rushed past Harry’s face as he sped straight up. The only way he could tell that he was moving at all, in fact, was that the square of color above him was growing. It was disconcerting, but he was too angry to care. All that mattered to him at that time was to find a way either to evict Voldemort or to wrest control from him.

It took Harry quite a while to reach the colorful thing, which proved to be an aperture in the white space. Sticking his head through it cautiously, Harry found that it led to a room. A simple, bright room, neatly cluttered with Quidditch things and bright, comfortable furnishings. Disconcertingly, however, scattered among the innocent playthings were weapons. A longbow made of some black wood was in a rack along with a number of broomsticks, its single arrow twisted into the string, and a lethal-looking double-edged battle-axe was nearly hidden beneath a pile of comic books. A sword lay on the luxurious bed.

Harry did a double take at this last. The blade, he recognized. It was the blade from Godric Gryffindor's sword, but it was set in a strange hilt. This hilt was almost a sculpture, depicting a wild-eyed griffon, wings spread to from the crosspiece. It was a beautiful piece, and, when he picked it up, it felt warm in his hand, almost alive. As he held it, a sense of grim purpose filled Harry. Using knowledge he had not had until that moment, he put his hand to the nearest wall, opening a door to Voldemort’s black void, directly in front of the image of Tom Riddle.

The man who was Voldemort started, clearly not expecting to see an armed Harry Potter. He recovered his composure quickly, but his eyes kept straying to the sword.

“I’m busy, boy,” he sneered, looking distracted. “Sit”

This time, as he had not been able to before, Harry fought the compulsion. Planting the tip of his sword firmly into whatever surface it was that they stood on, he stood his ground. “Not this time, snake!” he growled. “I refuse to be your puppet again.”

This caught Riddle’s entire attention. “Oh, you do, do you?” he said amusedly, turning to face the boy. “You refuse?” His face suddenly darkened. “Obey me, boy! Kneel before your master!”

As he had the night of the Third Task, Harry felt an invisible hand push him to his knees, but the moment it let up he leapt back to his feet. Voldemort was laughing hard, head thrown back and eyes squeezed shut. Harry took his chance.

“Gryffindorrrrrrr!” he screamed, without knowing why, a battlecry as he ran forwards, the griffon sword trained unerringly on the laughing monster. His aim was flawless. The point of the blade pierced Voldemort’s throat, cutting off the mocking laughter in a font of blood. Harry felt bone and cartilage crunch as he rammed the sword through to its hilt, feeling no remorse whatsoever at taking a life.

He pulled the blade free as Voldemort fell to his knees, wiped it callously on his robes as the body of the monster fell heavily, face-first, to the invisible floor. Harry didn’t know what he had expected to feel, but he hadn’t expected not to feel anything at all. He stood there, looking numbly at the corpse of his nemesis, waiting to feel... what? Triumph? Relief? Joy? Exultation? Pride? Even guilt or confusion would be better than this nothing.

Unbeknownst to Harry, his entire confrontation with Voldemort had taken only an instant. His body had only begun to rise from the seizure when he struck his tormentor down, and it was still that way, frozen on one knee, flame-crazed eyes half-lidded and vacant, when Professor McGonagall rounded the corner and saw him.
Still trapped inside his own brain, emotion was beginning to find Harry. He had killed Voldemort, You-Know-Who, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, the terror of the wizarding world. Voldemort was dead and he had done it. He had avenged his parents, brought their murderer beyond the reach of justice.

“Yes!” he shouted, punching a fist into the air in the long-awaited exultation. “Yes! He’s gone! I did it!” Suddenly, a sound cut into his elation. A low, sinister chuckle.

“You are an idiot, boy,” said Voldemort as he gained his feet, smiling above the bloody mess that had been his throat. “You forget that this is not the real me. And that,” Voldemort added, nodding to the bare blade still in Harry’s hand. “Is not the real Griffon Blade. You may have broken my concentration for the merest fraction of a moment, but it will avail you nothing to do it again. Not that you are going to get the chance.” Suddenly, he bared his teeth and snarled. “Now, come here!”

Harry, caught very much in shock by Voldemort’s revival, dropped his sword. He didn’t hear it land as he stumbled forward, drawn to the outstretched hand. Only when Voldemort had grasped him cruelly by the throat did Harry awaken to his situation, but it was too late.

As Harry writhed, trying in vain to free himself enough to breathe, Riddle waved his free hand around him. Iron bars materialized around Harry, curving into a sphere. A cage! Voldemort withdrew his hand, leaving Harry to fall, gasping, to the floor. “Now, boy, leave me ALONE!” His voice carried an aura of command and it threw Harry painfully against the bars at his back as the cage itself flew backwards through the air, back into the room from which Harry had come. Through the still open door, a dazed Harry could only watch numbly as Voldemort entered the room.

Something very primal in Harry made him certain that Voldemort should not be in this room, that this was a sort of sanctum. A pain began, low in his chest, as the evil man walked idly towards him. He stopped just out of Harry’s reach.

“I told you, Harry-boy, I am in control here.”

With a flash, Harry was once again a passenger in his own body. He watched mutely as Voldemort accepted Professor McGonagall’s astounded hand and rose to his feet. He sat back into Harry’s wheelchair and deliberately fastened Harry’s blindfold before raising Harry’s wand.

“Obliviate!”

Oh, hello, Harry, I didn’t see you there,” said Professor McGonagall dazedly. “Were you headed for the Great Hall?”

“Yes, Professor, McGonagall,” said Voldemort politely through Harry’s mouth.

By the time his body was sitting at the Gryffindor table with Ron, Hermione, and the others, the situation had worsened inside Harry’s head. To maintain his charade, Voldemort needed information from Harry. With a grand gesture of his hands he caused an ornate bookstand to appear before him. Atop it rested a huge, leather-bound book.

“Let me explain, Harry, said Voldemort cruelly. “This, however cliched it may sound, is your life story. In here is everything you know, and nearly everything that is known about you. Nobody, not even you, is meant to read this book with the paying of a rather high price.” Flippantly, Voldemort opened the book. Harry, who had winced when he touched it, began to scream. It felt like a red-hot wire was being drawn out from his temple, something like an evil version of what happened when he fed his pensieve.
A few hours later, as Harry’s body went to Care of Magical Creatures, he was lying on the floor of the room in his head, twitching and mouthing half-formed words. He was reliving the Third Task and what came after as Voldemort read those pages.

“Ah!” he exclaimed to the prone boy beside him. He had dispensed with the cage the first time Harry lost consciousness, for when Harry was out, the book disappeared. “So that’s why that didn’t work. I knew your wand felt familiar. We share a core. Now,” he said, more to himself than to Harry. “What, exactly, makes you so important?”

“You mean,” said Harry, fighting through the overwhelming imagery from the book. “You don’t even know why you’re after me?”

“I didn’t say that, Harry-boy. Anyone with aspirations to rule the world would do best to eliminate those more powerful than oneself. Or, at least,” he amended, closing the book, “anyone with the potential to become so.”

“I.” Harry was gasping as he tried and failed to gain his feet. “I am more powerful than you?” Given the current situation, that seemed unlikely.

“Don’t bother, boy,” Voldemort set a foot on Harry’s back as he tried again to rise. “No, you’re not that strong. Yet. As an adult, as a fully trained wizard, you would be unstoppable. The most powerful wizard ever, no doubt. I wouldn’t stand a chance.” Voldemort laughed. “But I have nothing to worry about; as you will never grow up to be that wizard. Now, let me read some more.”

A few more hours later, Harry’s body was in bed, ostensibly asleep. Inside, in the colorfully, childish room, Voldemort was pacing to and fro in rage, kicking Quaffles from his path and ranting. “What language is this written in?” he shouted, his face stormy as he thrust the book, open to a page near the middle, into Harry’s face. Harry tried to avoid looking at it, knowing somehow that to read the book, even one word, would seriously endanger his sanity, but it was too late. He couldn’t look away.

What he saw was a bold, flowing script, utterly foreign, but Harry could read it fluently, naturally.

“Read it to me!” hissed Voldemort from over his shoulder. Harry found that he had no choice.

“The year 412 AD,” he read. “Was the year of Merlin. It was the apex of wizarding history, with magical and none-magical men living side by side, openly, as equals and partners. In such a manner did both Merlin of the Wood and Arthur Pendragon rule over Britain. In 412, Merlin was 219, and a new father of four children by the fey Lady Nimue, Godric, Rowena, Salazar, and Helga. An aging Merlin was paranoid enough to believe that non-magical and heirless Arthur would be jealous and willing to kill his quadruplets, so, to protect them, he cast an enormous Obliviator spell. The mundane world forgot the wizards.

“When Merlin died, only four years later, his offspring were scattered, to be raised by different bands of wizards, as had been his final will. Godric, the eldest, was sent to be raised by the Gyrfalcon Tribe, a clan of independent warriors living on Dartmoor. Rowena was adopted by a secluded community of scholars. Helga, despite her magical skills, went to a convent, but she was unhappy there and left as a young woman to travel alone. Salazar was raised by a traveling band of nomadic wizards, with whom he roamed Europe.”


“It isn’t. I haven’t heard this version. Keep reading.” He sounded very interested, and again, Harry
had no option but to obey.

“When the four scions of Merlin reached adulthood, they were widely recognized as the most powerful wizards of the age. As was customary of that era, they were each awarded a new surname by their closest peers. We know them today by those names: Godric Gryffindor, Rowena Ravenclaw, Salazar Slytherin, and Helga Hufflepuff.

“Reunited, the four became inseparable. They traveled abroad, learning all they could in an effort to further expand their abilities. When they returned at last to England, in 452, they were immediately in demand as teachers. At this point, the only schools of magic were both highly expensive and in the Far East. For the average English citizen, they were an impossibility. So, the Four decided to open a public school of magic, open to anybody with the talent, regardless of birth or upbringing. They called this school Hogwarts, in a moment of humor. Over the following years, the school expanded, bringing in experts from the world over to teach an ever-growing number of students.

“Before Hogwarts, during the Four’s travels, Godric met a witch named Elsibet in Rome. They were married in 449, and a daughter, Arriana, soon followed. Arriana grew up at Hogwarts, growing even as it did, and married one of its first students, and a potter’s son from a nearby village, named Thomas. They had one son, who they named Arden. Arden Potter.”

There followed a long, dry list of names, tracing the now-forgotten Gryffindor heritage through more than a millennium and a half. Compelled by his own curiosity as much as by Voldemort’s, Harry read it aloud through to the end. “In 1963, William Potter and his wife, Serai, had a son, James. Now, Harry,” said the book, words rearranging on the page to address him, even as he read them. “Here’s where this tale becomes interesting for you. When James Peche Potter was 11, he went to Hogwarts, as had all of his ancestors, and in the family tradition, was promptly sorted into Gryffindor. That night, at the Gryffindor table, chance sat young Potter across from another first year, muggle-born Lily Evans. It was actually love at first sight, despite their wildly different backgrounds. Not only was James the heir to Godric Gryffindor, he also stood to inherit the vast and ancient Potter fortune, and the lineage of the pureblood Potter family. Lily, on the other hand, came from a middle-class muggle family. They could not have been more different, yet they never looked back. They were married only a month after Lily’s eighteenth birthday, and less than a year later, you, Harry, were born. By this time, the Gryffindor heritage had been utterly forgotten, except by one secretive, scholastic society. The Order of the Phoenix.

“What makes you, Harry, so special, more so than your ancestors, is an odd circumstance of your birth. You are the first wizard to be born within Hogwarts itself since it was commissioned as a school, and the school has marked you as its own. It will defend you as best it can, as will its inhabitants, and it has granted you unusual and potent powers, although most of them will not realize until you reach maturity. Also, under any but the most extraordinary of circumstances, you can not die within the environs of the school. Something will always intervene and it will seem like chance, rather than the design of the school.” Harry, remembering how Fawkes had helped him at the last minute in the Chamber of Secrets, nodded in agreement to himself as he continued to read, but Voldemort interrupted.

“That explains a lot, boy,” he exclaimed, slapping Harry’s shoulder. Harry was shocked to find himself agreeing with his mortal enemy. Voldemort sounded slightly irate. “I’ll just have to bring you to me, then. Get you out of Hogwarts.” He took the book back from Harry, closing it and setting it back on its stand. “That shouldn’t be too hard, so long as no one suspects that you aren’t you.”

Harry’s anger built back up to full force, now that he was not distracted by his own history. “Dumbledore’ll stop you,” he said defiantly. “He won’t let you just walk out, even if you do look like me.”
Voldemort was unconcerned. “Then I’ll sneak out,” he said airily. “It can’t be that hard. You’ve done it, and I even have the map you used.” With that, he turned and melted through a wall, leaving Harry alone in his room. Presently, although he tried his hardest to cling to wakefulness, Harry fell into an unnatural sleep. The same dream came again.

In the morning, when Harry’s schoolmates woke up, he woke up as well. Rather, Voldemort allowed him to wake up, for he was still in control. It was Voldemort who sat up in Harry’s body before remembering that he couldn’t, and Voldemort who called in Harry’s voice for Ron to help him up.

He largely ignored Harry that day, except when he wanted Harry to see something, no matter how the boy raged within his own head. Harry eventually quieted, which should have worried the evil wizard, but he didn’t know Harry as well as he should have. Harry was plotting an escape.

He found that he could no longer find the door that had previously led to Riddle’s mind, that black void, but he wasn’t deterred. He took up the bow and arrow, fashioned a belt of sorts to hold the battle-axe at his waist, determined to do what he could to defeat Voldemort when he showed up again, despite his previous failure. As the hours wore on, however, with no indication of what was happening out in the real world, Harry’s mind kept returning to the book. Eventually, curiosity overcame sense, and he opened it.

This time, perhaps because he was doing this by choice and not under compulsion, the book was much harder to read. Light, almost too bright to bear, emanated from each page, delineating the words rather than obscuring them. Harry had to squint to see them, but not to read them. The script seemed to writhe at the edges of his vision and indistinct voices filled his ears, threatening madness, but he could not stop.

Only the first few chapters were written in that clear, foreign hand, those that dealt with Harry’s heritage. The first few pages were filled with what seemed to be a prophecy, but Harry could make neither heads nor tails of it, nor, after he had turned the page, could he remember having read it. Later, the book changed to formal English, telling of events intimately familiar to Harry. These, then, were what he knew. There were chapters of dry facts interspersed with diagrams and sketches, and Harry skipped most of it.

At last he came to a chapter labeled “What You Can Do.” Avidly, he read descriptions of several dozen spells, which, while he had never learned them, felt familiar, as though he had known them once and forgotten. Among these, he was disturbed to note, was Avada Kedavra. It was easier than he had imagined, but he couldn’t use it from here. It just wasn’t possible.

Less morbid were the paragraphs on apparition. He had apparated that night in Seattle: now he knew how, and could do it again, if he only had his body back. He couldn’t work any magic at all, here in inside his head. He needed to oust Voldemort! But from in here, there was nothing at all he could do.

Through the day, Voldemort carried out the charade of being Harry perfectly, until an incident just before dinner. As he watched, through the semi-transparent blindfold, Ron and Hermione play a game of chess, he was unaware of a look of scorn that crossed his face, curling his lips. Ron, engrossed in his next move, didn’t notice, but Hermione did. Looking closer before asking Harry what was wrong, she noticed something more: the infinitesimal adjustments of posture made by a person watching something.

“Excuse me, Ron, Harry,” she said, suddenly standing. “I have to go...” She waved her hand vaguely in the direction of the stairs.

“Got a meeting with Moaning Myrtle?” quipped Ron, not looking up from his pieces.
“If you hurry,” added Voldemort-as-Harry, “you’ll be back before Ron decides to make a move.” Hermione laughed nervously as Ron cuffed Harry distractedly before she turned to run up the stairs. Once out of sight, she sped up to a sprint, racing past startled students and teachers. Suddenly, a hand caught her arm. “Where are you going in such a hurry, Hermione?” asked Professor Lupin. Remus’s voice was amused, until Hermione clutched frantically at his arm. “What’s the matter?”

“I need to find the Headmaster!” she said, pulling wildly to get away from the Potion’s teacher. “It’s Harry!”

Instead of letting go of her arm, Lupin pulled her quickly into an empty classroom, looking rapidly to see that no one had seen. “What about Harry?” he asked anxiously.

“I think that Voldemort’s possessing him again. He was watching Ron and me play chess, and he kept looking irritated.”

“Well, that’s hardly conclusive... wait.” Lupin picked up on the word she had used. “He was watching you? Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” said Hermione fervently. “That’s why I need to talk to Dumbledore, now!” She was nearly hysterical, and Lupin released her arm.

“You’re right,” he said simply. “He should be in his office now. Come on.”

Together, Lupin and Hermione dashed the rest of the way to the Headmaster’s office. Lupin led the way past the gargoyle and up the stairs, but Hermione opened the door at the top.

“Professor Dumbledore,” she gasped. The man in question looked up from paperwork on his desk. “It’s Harry. You-Know-Who. He’s there!” Out of breath, she couldn’t form a coherent sentence, but she got her point across. Dumbledore didn’t question, just stood up and addressed Lupin.

“We have to surprise him, Remus. He’s too powerful in Harry’s body. If it comes to a battle, people will be killed. Crucius worked once, it should work again.”

Down in the Great Hall, Voldemort-as-Harry was gritting his teeth in simple frustration. Ron had still not made a move. *How* he asked Harry in his head, *can you tolerate the company of such a brainless git. He’s been staring at that board for 10 minutes, where, if he would just look, he’d be only two minutes from checkmate.*

Harry, who had been allowed to watch the game through a whim of Voldemort’s, suddenly laughed. *He’s trying to find a move that ensures that she wins,* he crowed, forgetting for a moment his predicament. *I knew it!*

Suddenly, Dumbledore and Lupin swept into the Great Hall. Harry had only time to see that both of them had their wands drawn before Voldemort cut off his vision.

Dumbledore and Lupin immediately shouted “Crucio!” In unison, wands trained on Harry/Voldemort, but before the spell could strike, Voldemort-as-Harry had erected a magical shield. He laughed stridently as he rose, again balancing effortlessly on Harry’s single foot. Seeing Hermione behind the two men, he spoke with Harry’s voice over the shrieks of the other students present.

“You took long enough to figure me out, Mudblood. I thought you were this school’s prize brain.” He raised his wand, obviously intending to strike her down. “Avada...”

Before he could finish the dire curse, however, four voices screamed “Crucio!” The four succeeded
where two had not, bursting the shield and over-whelming Voldemort-as Harry. In front of everyone in the Hall, he fell, screaming, to the floor.

Inside the Quidditch Room, as Harry had begun to call it, a door appeared suddenly, startling Harry. Riddle ran in, looking distinctly panicked. Harry, who had only a small idea of what was going on out in the real world, laughed at the alarm in his face. “You’ve been found out, haven’t you? Dumbledore’ll kick you out again, and,” he taunted, sudden knowledge coming from an unknown source, “and you don’t have the strength to keep doing this. Possessing someone is very draining, isn’t it? Coming and going hurts you, the real you.” He was as certain of this as he had ever been, even though he didn’t know why.

“Yes, yes,” agreed Voldemort impatiently, “but he shouldn’t be able to get me in here. If his Crucius reaches this far, you may not recover.”

“Why didn’t you hide in here last time, then?” asked Harry shrewdly. Riddle didn’t look very confident.

“I couldn’t,” he responded, a trace of smugness to this statement. “You had to open it to me, or I never could have entered.”

Harry sobered, remembering how what Voldemort said was true. He had opened a door from this room to Voldemort’s void. “Then,” he said bravely. “We’ll just wait here, and see what Dumbledore does. I bet he won’t stop until he knows you’ve left.”

The four voices that had called “Crucio” belonged to Dumbledore and Lupin, along with Professor McGonagall and---Hermione. The four advanced on Harry’s prone form, not relenting as he writhed and howled in protestation.

“Stop it!” shouted Neville, grabbing Dumbledore’s arm. “What are you doing?” The four, however, couldn’t spare any concentration for him. Ron dragged him away as Dumbledore spoke to the others.

“It’s not enough!” he cried. “On three, touch your wands to Harry’s forehead. Keep up the curse! It’s the only way! One... Two...”

On three, the four wands converged to meet at Harry’s scar. His screams redoubled, filling the hall. The castle itself began to shriek in agonized accompaniment.

A rushing sound was Harry’s first indication that freedom was imminent. The next second, the room filled with a solid wall of flame. Instinctively, Harry protected the book, wrapping himself around it as the conflagration raged above. Somewhere nearby, he could hear Voldemort shrieking in furious pain. The inferno licked at Harry’s skin, and he could feel it, could hear it burn and crack. He screamed himself, but he did not release the book. Suddenly, a new sound entered his consciousness. An eerie, sucking sound. Harry turned and, through the fire, he could make out a vortex. Suddenly, Voldemort brushed past him, obviously being pulled by this maelstrom, even though Harry couldn’t feel its effects at all. He managed to laugh at his enemy as he continued to be dragged out of his head. Just before he disappeared, however, Voldemort’s hand shot out, burnt to a blackened claw, and grabbed Harry’s ankle. Before Harry could even begin to react, he lost his grip on the book and was drawn in after Voldemort.

Even before Dumbledore and the others let up on the Crucius Curse, Harry stopped screaming and lay limp on the floor. His blindfold had come dislodged during his struggles, exposing the red-veined eyes beneath them, but now they stared, flat black, at the ceiling.

“You’ve killed him!” burst out Ron, shoving past Hermione and Lupin to kneel at Harry’s side,
shaking his brother’s shoulder anxiously. “Harry? Harry!”

Dumbledore crouched down beside Ron to examine Harry, tears still wetting his beard. “He’s still alive, Ron,” he said calmly. “He’s breathing.” And he was, if shallowly. Dumbledore gathered him into his arms and stood. “Ron, if you could run ahead and tell Poppy that I’m coming with Harry?” Ron glared at Dumbledore, but did as he was bid. He clearly would have preferred to stay at Harry’s side. The Headmaster turned to Lupin and McGonagall. “Minerva, Remus, I need you to explain all of this to the students. I can’t modify the memories of the entire student body.” Lupin looked around. All of the students were present, as it was almost dinnertime. The crowd stood at the entrance, staring in shocked and betrayed silence at Dumbledore and the still form of Harry. Dumbledore pushed brusquely through them, leaving the two Professors to it.

As Dumbledore jogged towards the hospital wing with Harry’s body, elsewhere, Harry was waking up. He sat up on a cold, stone floor in a cold, stone corridor, completely alone. Not trusting himself to stand just yet, he regarded his surroundings, taking stock of himself at the same time. He was still whole, which meant that he was still not in the real world. The hall in which he found himself stretched into blackness on either side, and it was lined with doors, each recessed into the stone.

He was unsurprised to find that he was still in a great deal of pain. Raising his hand to the back of his head, he found that the hair was burnt away in back. He winced to touch an open sore, but the pain wasn’t crippling. He was reassured to find himself still armed. Aside from the bow and the axe, the sword, the Griffon Blade, which he had left in Voldemort’s dark void, was somehow hanging at his side in an unfamiliar sheath. Coming to his feet, Harry drew the sword. He felt much safer with it at the ready in his hand. He opened the door nearest him cautiously, and went through, blade poised.

His mind was whirling, off-balance, but he knew that this was a place of which to be wary.

On the other side of the door, Harry found a park-like room. Very high above him, he could see a glowing ceiling; else he would have believed himself to be out of doors. He stood on a ledge, above a small sea of swaying trees. Halfway between himself and the opposite wall, a greater tree stood, at least a dozen times again as tall as the rest. Shading his eyes, Harry could make out an elegant spiral staircase wending up the immense trunk, leading to a door high in the branches. Seeing a ladder leading down from his current perch, Harry descended into the grove.

Under the foliage, the trees proved to grow in rigid lines from a smooth, grassy lawn. With no distortion from subterranean roots or underwear, it seemed unreal, more like a set for a play than a forest. The giant tree was a landmark, so Harry made for it. In about a quarter of an hour, he stood at its foot. Here, a thick carpet of discarded needles replaced the plush grass and the turf was broken by substantially swelling roots. Harry couldn’t see any sign of the stairs, so he circumnavigated the enormous girth of the tree. When he reached the far side, however, a very unexpected sight greeted him.

Pinned to the rough bark by a trio of long, black-fletched arrows, was a woman. Harry couldn’t even begin to guess her age; even while she appeared asleep, her face held an ancient ageless quality. She simply radiated wisdom. She wore loose, white clothing, pants and a tunic. Harry noticed uneasily that, while the arrows most certainly pierced her shoulders and thigh, no blood marred the smooth delicate linen. Her hands and feet were especially trapped, with the bark of the tree itself grown over them.
Harry stared at her, trying to decide what he should do, but his brain refused most adamantly to settle on a course of action. He just could not think straight, and his head felt like an asleep limb, painful and buzzing. Images he had no control over flashed through his head, making concentration impossible. Eventually, he was forced to decide not to decide. He turned abruptly and walked away from the sleeping woman, back into the trees.

He left the park room behind, choosing instead to wander the seemingly endless corridor. He passed dozens, than hundreds of doors, all identically plain until one. Harry brought his trudging to a halt, staring at the ornately gilded entrance. He put his hand on the golden latch, but it was securely locked, so Harry went on. 434 plain, uninteresting doors later, however, he came across a second decorated door. This one too was locked, but the third, a further 434 doors after, was not. He went in.

The first thing in this room that struck Harry was the light. It came, not from above, but from below. The floor was illuminated, glowing brightly beneath his feet. For some vague reason, the glare made him uneasy, and he cast about for a hiding place.

The room was vast, a wide arena outlined with fluted columns. Oddly enough, the one nearest him had what were obviously hand- and footholds carved up its length. Still unnerved by the luminescent floor, Harry did not hesitate to climb.

It was much, much darker at the top of the columns. About halfway up, he had passed another bank of lights, aimed downwards, so he was confident that he would be all but invisible to a watcher from below. The pillar itself tapered, so that the top was a small, slightly concave platform. Harry, a little delirious still, settled himself comfortably in a cross-legged position on the small surface. It was a perfect fit. Amused by his unconventional state of mind and perch, off-balanced Harry began to sing, a tune appropriate to the eerie setting.

“Nighttime sharpens, heightens each sensation.

Darkness stirs...”

As Harry sung that line, darkness did in fact stir, in the opposite corner of the room. Harry didn’t notice as Tom Riddle emerged from the columns. He was too wrapped up in his aria.

“No... S... Silent... Silently the senses... Abandon their defenses...”

“Who’s there?” demanded Riddle, sounding anxious. “Who is it?”

“Is that you, Riddle?” called out Harry, breaking off his song. The other man was almost unrecognizable. The fire in Harry’s head had burnt him worse than it had Harry, and he looked more like he had as Harry had seen him before he was restored, except man-sized. Harry laughed, high and insane. “Riddle. What a name. Riddle me this, Riddle, riddle me that.” Harry was definitely not himself now. He gripped the edges of the platform beneath him and swayed wildly. “Let’s play a game of riddles, Riddle.”

Voldemort cast about for the source of the mocking voice, but the room echoed it around so wildly that he couldn’t place its source. “Harry?”

“First riddle solved, Riddle. Now it’s your turn.”

“Alright, I’ll play,” said Voldemort slowly, still trying to pin Harry’s location. “Here’s one for you, then.
“I drive men mad for love of me,
“Easily beaten, never free.”
“Ha ha! Simple!” crowed Harry. “I’ve heard this one before. Gold! My turn!
“Who makes it has no need of it,
“Who buys it has no use for it,
“Who uses it can neither see nor want it.”

Voldemort had to ponder this for a moment, muttering to himself. “No need, no use? Uses it? Ah! A coffin! Morbid turn of thoughts for a Gryffindor.”

“For a crazy Gryffindor? I think not. Your turn.”

“Let me think a second, boy. Oh, here’s one.
“I am, in truth, a yellow fork,
“From tables in the sky,
“By inadvertent fingers dropped.
“The awful cutlery
“Of mansions never quite disclosed
“And never quite revealed.
“The apparatus of the dark
“To ignorance revealed.”

Harry rocked back on his heels, chortling richly. “Easier than the last! Lightning! And I, of all people should know. Guess this one.” He stood up now, assuming the pose of a pompous orator.

“Many-maned scud thumper,” he intoned.

“Maker of worn wood,
“Shrub-ruster,
“Sky-mocker,
“Rave!” His voice rose almost to a scream, startling Voldemort, and then he quieted to a low monotone. “Portly pusher,

“Wind-slave.”

“You insult me, Harry-boy. Of course I have read Shakespeare. I am an educated man. You are referring to the ocean, and it is now my turn.

“Thirty white horses, on a red hill,
“First they champ, then they stamp, and then they stand still.” He couldn’t really think of anything
better, not there on the spot, and Harry knew it. This time, he didn’t even bother to taunt the evil wizard.

“Teeth, in a mouth. Now mine.

“I’ve measured it from side to side,

“Tis three feet long and but two wide.

“It is of compass small, and bare

“To thirsty suns and parching air.”

Voldemort, who still had not figured out where from it was that Harry taunted him, was puzzled anew by this enigma. “Small... 3 feet by two, parching suns...”

“No, Riddle, no. Thirsty suns, and parching air. Are you stumped?”

“Of course not, boy,” he snapped, but long moments later he had to concede. “What is it, boy? I haven’t the bloodiest trace of a clue.”

“Oh, but the riddle’s the clue, Riddle, and here’s another one. I ought to have one. Still, nothing? If I have to tell you the answer, you lose to me.” Harry’s voice was taunting, cruel and unhinged.

Even with the additional hint, Voldemort could make neither tails nor heads of the conundrum.

“Alright, Harry Potter, I concede. What is it?”

“Aha!” Harry crowed from his lofty perch. “Yet again, the great, the infallible Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Can-Not-Die, has defeated You-Know-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, the despicable, infamous embodiment of Evil with a capital V, His High and Mighty Royal Git, Lord Voldemort the Moldy.” He bowed deeply to an imagined audience. “Thank you, thank you. One last riddle, Riddle,” he said, his voice turned deadly serious. “What have I got in my pocket?” He drew the bow from his back, nocked its single arrow to its string.

“That’s not a riddle, you fool,” said Voldemort angrily. “Play the game fairly!”

Harry lowered the bow to aim directly between Riddle’s shoulder blades. “The game is over, Voldemort,” he said gravely, and let fly.

At the last possible second, Voldemort turned and the arrow only grazed the point of his shoulder. Harry let out an inarticulate cry of rage, and leapt down to land lightly behind Voldemort. His sword leapt back into his hand, seemingly of its own accord even as Voldemort clasped a hand to his wound. Spinning to face Harry, his face had a panicked look. Harry’s expression was predatory as he circled his foe, and he licked his lips as he brandished the sword.

“Lord Voldemort,” he hissed, bowing facetiously. “I would ask you to duel, but we are both wandless, and only I have a sword. Oh well. Fair fights are for the sane!” Abruptly he charged. Voldemort turned and ran. This was the real him, and could therefore be hurt. “That won’t save you!” cried Harry, gleefully giving chase.

He pursued Voldemort back the way he had come, through an unobvious door behind the colonnade. Through it, he stopped abruptly, for the floor ended below his feet. He found himself on the balcony he had seen earlier, high in the grand tree in the park-that-was-a-room. Somehow, Voldemort was already a quarter of the way down the tree. Laughing manically, Harry simply leapt. Despite the long drop, he once again landed effortlessly on his feet.
“You.” A cultured voice spoke from behind Harry. He spun around to see the woman, still pinioned by the three arrows. She was awake now, and staring straight at him with clear amber eyes. “You,” she repeated. “I know you. You’re Harry Potter.” It was a flat statement. “You’re Merlin’s Heir.”

“I am, aren’t I?” Harry hadn’t thought about it like that, but he was Gryffindor’s heir, and Godric was Merlin’s first-born son. “Who are you?” he asked bluntly, still waiting for Voldemort to reach the ground.

“I am Nimue,” she said simply. The name flagged something in Harry’s memory. Something from the book.

“Nimue, as in the wife of Merlin?”

“The mother of his children, yes.” She smiled, a small tight smile. “Your ancestress. You may call me Lady.” She spoke with the assurance of one used to respect from those around her.

“Lady,” said Harry diffidently. He liked her immediately, and respected the power that he sensed within her. “Forgive me, but why are you here? Like this? Shouldn’t you be, well, dead?”

She laughed. “If I were human, son, but I am not. Don’t tell me you didn’t notice the ears?”

Truth told, Harry couldn’t understand why he hadn’t. She twitched them through her hair at the top of her head, like a cat. They were even lightly furred. They certainly made one pause, even if they did nothing to detract from her striking looks. Her hair, a silvery shade of black that had nothing to do with age, fell smoothly past her feet to the grassy floor. Her features were delicate and, now that Harry noticed, had a vaguely feline cast. She smiled, exposing sharp, predatory teeth. What figure she had was disguised by the loose, flowing clothes that she wore, but the slimness of her wrists and ankles led to hands and feet hidden in the bark of the tree. Harry could see something of himself in the cast of her eyes, the shape of her head.

“As to why I am here,” she continued, laughing at herself this time. “Thomas trapped me when he was a young man. It’s really a long - and rather embarrassing - story. But first, could you release me? These arrows are very uncomfortable, as you may be able to divine. If you could just pull them out?”

She couldn’t shrug, but the gesture was contained within her words.

Harry shook his head, still trying to clear the unsteadiness from his mind. “Just pull them out?” He wasn’t quite sure he trusted this strange, inhuman woman who claimed to be his great-grandmother, albeit many times removed. He liked her, and he respected her, but he did not trust her. “If I do,” he asked slowly, “what will you do?”

“There’s not much I can do,” she replied nonchalantly. “I am as trapped here in Thomas’ head as you are.”

“Is that where we are?” It explained a lot to Harry. Suddenly, he heard a sound above him and looked up. Voldemort had nearly reached the ground. As Harry watched, he looked fearfully over his shoulder. He obviously did not know that Harry had beat him to the ground and was waiting for him at the foot of the tree. Harry made a sudden decision, thinking, the enemy of mine enemy..., reached out, and tore the first arrow from Nimue’s shoulder. She cried out in pain, but she was smiling and there was no blood. Her linen tunic was not even torn.

Harry didn’t pause as he pulled the other two arrows from her flesh. He was about to take his sword and cut her hands and feet from the entrapping wood, but Riddle had finally seen him.

“No!” he cried in fury. You can’t let her go!” He looked about to leap down on them, anger plainly
visible in his face. Without thinking, Harry caught up one of the black-fletched arrows that he had just pulled from Nimue. Before Voldemort could clear the intricately carved balustrade, he had nocked the arrow, and loosed it. His aim wasn’t perfect, but this arrow did hit the evil wizard. Its narrow head passed completely through his right shoulder and carried him backward to pin him against the wood, embedded deeply in the trunk of the monolithic tree.

Nimue laughed joyously, although she couldn’t see what had happened. “Now who is trapped, Thomas? Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll free yourself before too long. It is your head, after all. Come on, Harry, get me off this tree.”

A few swipes of the Griffon Blade cut her hands and feet free, revealing delicate claws. She accepted his proffered hand and stepped down to the lawn, a simply elegant motion. Harry, grinning broadly, waved wildly at Voldemort before turning to follow the woman. “Where can we go?” he asked, bouncing alongside her like a much younger child. “I thought we were trapped here.”

“We are,” said Nimue, climbing to the door to the corridor, “but there are more comfortable places to wait for rescue than this. Also, I doubt very much that either of us wants to be very close when Thomas looses himself.” Harry immediately saw the logic in this. Behind them, he could still hear Voldemort ranting volubly, so he followed her out to the dim corridor.

This time, as they passed the endless series of closed doors, Harry was aware of disturbing noises from beyond them. Once, a shrill scream split the air as they passed yet another decorated door, but Nimue did not let Harry investigate. Finally, the pair came to a door that stood open, thrown wide. Brazenly, Nimue led the way in. Harry followed with only a moment’s hesitation and a drawn sword.

There was no one in this room, however, but as soon as Harry entered, lights came up, torches flaring into existence. This was a cozy room, a father’s study. Toys, elegant, expensive toys were displayed neatly on glass-fronted shelves, and a desk occupied one corner, surrounded by bookshelves. Against the opposite wall was a plush couch and a long, comfortable-looking chaise lounge. Nimue stretched herself out on the latter, looking for all the world like a contented cat.

“I would make myself comfortable, were I you, Harry. Dumbledore is trying as fast as he can to find you, but it will be a bit of a wait.”

Dumbledore was stumped. Harry Potter wasn’t unconscious, nor was he petrified, comatose, or dead, yet there he lay, unmoving and unresponsive. It was almost as though he’d been Kissed, yet he knew that was not the case. “Did our Cruciatus do this, Poppy?” he anxiously asked. Was he responsible for destroying the Boy-Who-Lived?

No,” she answered firmly. “No, this isn’t the result of that. His soul, is just... missing. I don’t think there’s anything I can do, and I’m tired of saying that for this boy, but it’s true every time. All we can do right now is wait.” Her voice was cracked with strain. She, like all of Hogwarts’ staff, cared deeply for Harry.

Hermione lifted her head. She was sitting nearby, deeply entrenched in a monolith of books summoned from the library. Something about Harry’s condition had prompted her into a mad bout of research. “Did you say his soul is gone?” she asked. At the matron’s nod, she delved into a stack of tattered parchments, coming up with a relatively new-looking one. “And Voldemort’s gone too, right? Listen, this has happened before. This,” she said, waving the page. “Is an account by a medi-witch in St. Mungo’s from about 45 years ago. Here.” She began to read aloud to those assembled.

“We had a bit of excitement here tonight. A woman came into the emergency ward, disheveled and bruised. She would not let us help her, but kept screaming that a man named Thomas was trying to possess her. As possession in a rather rare and dangerous Dark Art, I’m afraid we were rather
skeptical. In fact, we were about to remove her to the mental ward for observation when a seizure began.

“It was the worst seizure I have ever seen. It took seven men to hold her down, and I treated them all for bruises at the end of it. That was when we discovered that she was not human, not fully at least. Her hands and feet had cat-like retractable claws, despite appearing otherwise human; she had well-developed fangs, as is evidenced by the bite marks in Mueller’s shoulder, and she had a pair of furred ears concealed in her hair, on top of her head, like a cat, rather than on the sides, where one might expect them to be.

“When she quieted, she began to display all the symptoms of possession that we are taught to recognize. An echo in the voice, red, crack-like formations in the eyes, and uncharacteristic strength. Fortunately, very fortunately, one of our other patients present was an auror, being treated for a minor allergy. He immediately employed the Cruciatius Curse to drive the possessing force out, but the woman did not reawaken afterward. Dr. Lector Morgant, chief resident, pronounced her officially soulless at 11:31 PM, and we removed her to the terminal ward. One more Jane Doe.

“Dr. Morgant explained to the staff that, when a possessing personality is cast out from his or her unwilling host, he or she may drag the soul of the host along, out of their body and into the other, where it is trapped.” Hermione laid the parchment aside, already searching about for another as she spoke. “So, now we know what this is, and that it has happened before, and I think I’ve got something here that’ll tell us what we can do to fix it. Here it is.” This time, she displayed a book, riffled through its pages, and began again to read aloud. “On the side affects of being possessed and what to do about them,” was the chapter heading.

“One possibility in any instance of possession is that, upon expulsion, the soul of the possessor will adhere itself to that of the possessed, thereby taking that soul with it to its own body.

“To reverse this is simple. The soulless body must be brought into contact with the body with two souls, and the property of vacuum will return the soul to its rightful place.”

See?” Hermione sounded smug. “There is a cure.”

“But it means we have to take Harry’s body to You-Know-Who!” cried out Ron. “How are we going to manage that? It’s not like we can just waltz up to his lair and say ‘Hey, can your dead-looking mortal enemy hold your disgusting, slimy hand long enough for his soul to escape your evil clutches? Please?’” He sounded more sarcastic than any of those present had ever heard him, and then Snape interrupted him, having just entered the room at a run.

“Albus? I’ve been summoned.” His voice was grave as he showed the Headmaster his forearm, where the Dark Mark burned black.

“This is perfect!” burst out Hermione. Everyone turned to stare at her as she continued. “Professor can take Harry to Voldemort, trick him somehow into giving his soul back, and then Dobby can bring them both back here as quick as anything.”

Dumbledore looked speculative. “Risky. I suspect that casting him out of Harry’s mind may have incapacitated Voldemort, but we can’t know how much. He could be unconcious, although I doubt that is the case if he has summoned you, Severus. No, the transfer takes time, and you won’t have it. No, what we need is a receptacle, something that can carry Harry’s soul from there to here.” His eyes slid slyly to Snape, who looked pensive. “Do you have an idea, Severus?”

“I could carry his soul,” Snape said resolutely, squaring his shoulders and glaring at Dumbledore. “It wouldn’t be the first time.” With that he spun on a heel and stalked out of the hospital wing and out
of the school, oblivious to all stares.

As soon as Snape was off the school grounds, he apparated to the Dark Lord’s lair. What met him was complete and utter panic. Lucius Malfoy ran up to him, nearly hysterical.

“Severus! You’re here, finally! Come along, something is wrong with our Master. He collapsed about an hour ago, and nobody has been able to rouse him. Before that, we knew he was to be left alone, something to do with the Potter boy, but he wouldn’t tell us any more than that. But now, he’s scarcely breathing. We were hoping you might have a potion, or something?” Lucius’ voice petered off hopefully as he led Snape into an ornate bedchamber, where Voldemort lay as still as Harry did, miles away. “We brought him in here,” explained Lucius, but Snape waved him away.

His heart leapt at this opportunity. Under the guise of examining Voldemort, he would have ample time to find Harry’s soul, if it was here after all. And then he would be able to return to Hogwarts under the pretext of needing a particular potion ingredient. This was far more than he could have hoped for.

He laid two long fingers under Voldemort’s serpentine jaw, feeling for a pulse and trying not to shudder at touching the palpably evil man. He focused inward, trying to feel the point of contact as a portal from his mind to Voldemort’s. *Harry?* he ventured cautiously, feeling as though he were peering through a door into an unlit and potentially dangerous room. *Harry?*

*Professor Snape?* Harry’s voice was distant, but strong and amazed. *What are you doing here?*

*I should think, Potter, that you would be a little more grateful to your rescuer.* Snape’s mental tone was sharp with relief.

*Rescue? Did I need rescued? I thought I’d done quite well for myself in here.*

Suddenly, to Snape’s intense surprise, a third voice entered the conversation. *Don’t be an ass, Harry. You did very well, but we still do need this man’s help.* It was a woman’s voice, Snape decided, friendly, but cunning.

*We do? We do.* Harry sounded a little puzzled, off-balance. *Lady, you can come too, right? Professor, can Lady Nimue come too? I can’t just leave her here, and I don’t know where her body is, but I promised her I’d find it as soon as I could, so she’s coming or I’m not.*

*Nimue?* Snape didn’t ask for more explanation. He knew his time was limited. *Explain later. Just come on! I’ve got to take you back to your body!*  

*Alright, then.* Suddenly, Snape’s head felt full, uncomfortably so. Feeling rather as though his head were an overfilled glass that might spill at any jar, he rose to his feet. He turned cautiously to face Lucius, who still stood anxiously behind him.

“I need to go back to Hogwarts, to fetch some potions ingredients I have there. They are rare, but this is of course a worthy cause. I’ll be back presently.” He swept past Malfoy in a grand sweep of robes before apparating away mid-stride.

As he ran up the grounds towards the castle, suddenly a voice rang out by his ear. *Is this Hogwarts?*  
*His run was immediately arrested as he spun around, trying to locate the speaker.*

“Where are you?” He could see no one.

*I’m here.* This time, Snape recognized the voice, and the fact that it was coming from inside his head, rather than out.
“Lady Nimue?” *Lady Nimue?*

A mental laugh preceded her reply. *Yes, Mr. Snape. Is this Hogwarts?*

*It is,* he replied cautiously, not really sure where this conversation was leading.

*It looks quite different as a school.*

*What do you mean?* Snape was puzzled. Hogwarts had never been anything but a school. He told her so, and felt her retreat.

*If you say so,* she murmured politely.

*Come on!* cried Harry, breaking into the conversation. *Let’s get me back to my body! No offense, Professor, but I don’t particularly like being in your head, and I’m sure you don’t want me in here.*

*For once, Potter, we are in complete agreement.* Snape was mounting the stairs now, speaking out loud as well as in his head. Students and staff alike were looking at him oddly, but his preoccupation was such that he did not notice their existence at all. He threw open the door to the hospital wing, startling those gathered around Harry’s body. “I have them!” he explained triumphantly. Blank looks greeted him, and then Dumbledore spoke.

“They, Severus?”

“Potter found the soul of a woman who calls herself Lady Nimue in the head of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. He says that he’s promised to find her body.”

“We’ll let Harry explain,” said Madame Pomfrey as she herded Snape over to where Harry lay. “He should be returned to his body as soon as possible.”

Nodding, Snape lay his hand across Harry’s forehead. He thought he heard a faint *Goodbye* and then his head felt normal again. In front of him, Harry opened his eyes.

“Oh, goodie,” he said dryly. “Blind again. I had more freedom in Voldemort’s head.”

“Well.” Snape addressed the entire group. “If I don’t return soon, the Death Eaters will become suspicious.”

“Why were you summoned, Severus?” asked Dumbledore quietly. “Is Voldemort planning something?”

“No,” said Severus with a rare smile. “He’s unconscious, and no one knows why. I do think our own celebrity might have something to do with it, though. The Death Eaters are utterly confused.”

Harry laughed, a high, childish laugh that caused everyone to stare at him. “I know, I know,” he said in a singsong voice. “I took the arrow from the cat-girl and I shot him and I left him on the tree. I could have killed him, but then who would have answered my riddles? He wasn’t very good at riddles, though, even if he is one.” He giggled and grinned evilly.

[I’m afraid that I have very bad news for all you BBH fans out there. But it’s good news for me. Yesterday, I took a ferry ride out to an island near here with the intent of seeing if a certain resort was hiring. Turns out, they were. Half an hour after I got there, I was putting my new uniforms into my new dorm room, which is where I’ll be staying weekends ‘til school ends and full time after that. This is a rather primitive place, for all the resort is the lap of proverbial luxury, and I will have very}
limited access to a computer. I will continue writing BBH, but updates will be few and far between, I fear, limited to when I can use a public computer at the local library. They will, hopefully, be longer chapters, unless, of course, an irresistible cliffie comes up. :) Then I’ll just have to cut you all short. I’m expecting flames for this, but please, keep them creative. If they’re not, I will ruthlessly dissect them in a review response. I will have access more often to email than to, so I would love to hear from you all. Just remember to put BBH or something similar in the subject bar so my filter won’t drop it in the junk bin. Actually, just leave me a review, unless you have a pressing question. I need the review count to keep me sane. (You? Sane?) Shut it, Quill. Anyway, thank you for putting up with me, and I hope that I can keep this fic up. I love it so.}

Chapter: 48

“Harry?” asked Ron anxiously. “Are you OK?”

Harry’s face turned abruptly mournful. “Not really. The book got burnt.”

Dumbledore glanced a question at Madame Pomfrey, but she only shrugged helplessly. “What book, Harry?” he asked gently.

“My book. It has me in it.” Harry shook his head, struggling to explain. “It holds everything I know, and everything anyone knows about me. Voldemort read some of it, and I read it, and then it got burnt. It hurt when we read it, but it’s numb now.” He seemed about to say more, but within his own head, Nimue interrupted him.

*Is this the book you mean?* A twinge of pain caused Harry to shout out, startling those who weren’t privy to the mental conversation.

“Don’t touch that! It hurts! Alright, that’s the one, but leave it alone!”

*Okay,* came the meek reply.

*Well,* said Harry, silently this time. *I’m sorry I yelled at you, Lady. It just really hurts.* Curiosity overtook him. *How does it look?*

*Well, the cover is burnt rather severely, and the edges of the pages are scorched. If I’m careful, can I open it to see what damage there may be?* Nimue’s voice was maternal and Harry began to trust her.

“Are you talking to this Lady Nimue, Harry?” asked Dumbledore curiously. Harry nodded. “Can she talk to us?”

“No really,” said Harry offhandedly. “And I don’t think she can hear you either, but I can hear you both, so maybe I can relay a conversation.” The idea appeared to interest him.

*Nimue, Dumbledore wants to know about the book, and how damaged it is. Go ahead and open it, but don’t read it!* he finished vehemently. As she oh-so-carefully followed his instructions, Harry relayed her findings to Dumbledore and Madame Pomfrey, who took notes. “As far as she can tell, no pages are missing or destroyed, but the first and last are really badly burnt, almost unreadable.”

“I think, Albus,” said Madame Pomfrey excitedly. “That this book is a metaphor for Harry’s mind. It may have been damaged in the Cruciatus Curse that drove You-Know-Who out.”
“I knew that was a possibility,” said Dumbledore regretfully. “But that was a risk that I had to take. I had no choice.”

“Am I crazy?” asked Harry naively. Ron laughed nervously and Dumbledore smiles sadly.

“Just a little, I should think. It’s not so bad. And I should know,” confided Dumbledore in a mock-whisper. Harry snickered.

“Will Harry be alright?” asked Ron worridly. “He won’t have to go to St. Mungo’s, will he?”

“No, of course not,” laughed Dumbledore. “No, his mind should recover itself, given a little bit of time.”

“And rest!” asserted Madame Pomfrey firmly. “It’s quite late, and you should all be abed, even you Albus.” She began to shoo everyone out of the hospital wing.

“No,” said Harry candidly. “I think I’ve had enough of this place. I’m sleeping in my own room tonight.” Before anyone could react, he levitated himself out of the hospital bed and deposited himself neatly into his waiting wheelchair. Everyone stared at him, astounded.

“Harry, where did you learn that spell?” asked Dumbledore in a low, uneasy voice.

“What spell?” asked Harry ingenuously. His face was the picture of innocence.

“You just levitated yourself, Harry. That is very advanced, very powerful magic, especially without a wand. Where did you learn that?”

“It was in the book.”

“What else was in that book?”

“Umm, how to apparate, and Avada Kedavra, and the Morsmordre charm, and some weird stuff about summoning... There was a lot of stuff I’d never seen before, but it was more like I was remembering it than just learning it. This was knowledge that belonged to me. Oh, and this.” Harry’s wand leapt into his hand of its own accord and he whirled it through the air. A sleek cloud of silver vapor pooled at its end. The mist formed into a hand, which flexed its fingers gracefully before gliding to affix itself to Harry’s stump. He wriggled his new fingers. “Why didn’t I do this before?” he asked in a wondering voice. He couldn’t see the stunned looks he was being given.

“Harry,” moaned Dumbledore. “Those are Dark Arts. That hand is not worth it.

Harry flexed the hand in question thoughtfully. “What makes this Dark?” he asked, holding it out to Dumbledore. “Why is this any worse than levitating a feather or putting your thoughts into a bowl? It’s just power, and power isn’t good or evil. It just is. There for the taking.” Dumbledore wasn’t the only one who heard the echo of Voldemort’s voice under Harry’s words, though none of them had heard him in that chamber with the Mirror of Erised. There was a collective shudder. “And I’m strong enough to take it.”

“Don’t talk like that!” cried Ron. He wanted to slap his Harry, knock his brother out of this frightening mood. Harry just smiled distantly.

“Well, I am. I am powerful enough that Voldemort is afraid of me, of what I can become. Of what I have become.” He took a deep breath, and the air around him shimmered faintly bronze, flexing in ripples of force. He drew the power back within himself, sealing it away. “I’m not supposed to use that yet, though,” he said regretfully.
“Harry, what was that?” Dumbledore asked, obviously concerned.

“I just pushed,” Harry shrugged. “Like I did before, but I controlled it this time. I held it close, rather than letting it go where it wanted. Magic is all about what you can control. Voldemort should never have let me read that book. Control is what he had, and he doesn’t have it anymore. I control myself.”

Dumbledore sat down in a chair beside Harry’s bed, letting his head drop to his hand. “Harry, you’ve learned this too fast. You don’t know what it means yet. Magic is about control, yes, but it’s also about rules. The Light has rules that we have to follow. Those rules are what separates Light from Dark, that’s why they’re important.”

“Who made those rules?” Harry asked insolently.

“We don’t know. Merlin wrote the first chronicle of them, back in his youth, but he never wrote where they came from. We follow them because they make perfect sense, even the limitations. They’ve become law, and more than that. The basis of wizarding society is built upon these rules. Without them, we would most likely be at war with one another constantly. Power, after all, is something that we all have, and power unregulated breeds corruptness. I would like to think that, left to my own devices, I would stay as moral and upright as I have always prided myself on being, but wisdom, perhaps, makes me know better. I have lived 309 years. In that time, I have been tempted more than once to do the easy thing, rather than the right thing. The rules held my course true.” He looked up. “Do you understand this, Harry?”

Harry nodded slowly, but the insane grin on his face did not fade. “The rules are there to protect those with less power from those with more.” He laughed, but it was an indecipherable sound. Those around him couldn’t tell whether he agreed with what he was saying or not.

“That’s part of it,” said Dumbledore, choosing to sound encouraged. “The most important part, you might say.”

“I’m tired of this moral lecture,” Harry said, yawning ostentatiously. “Like Madame Pomfrey said, I’ve been though a lot and need my rest.” He tapped his chair with his wand, heading for his room. “I’ll see you all in the morning.”

“Harry.” Dumbledore placed a restraining hand on his shoulder, keeping him there. Harry swiveled to face him, an air of bored patience on his face.

“What do you want?”

“Harry, you’re still a danger to your fellow students. Voldemort could possess you again. I would like you to volunteer to stay here, where we can supervise you.”

Harry’s tone, when he replied, was polite, but inattentive. “I told you. I’m in control of myself now. He won’t get back in.”

“Has he tried? Have you tested this new-found control?”

“No, but-”

“Would you risk the lives of your friends?” Dumbledore’s voice was low, almost pleading. It was so out of character for him that it gave Harry pause.

“Ron, Hermione? What do you think I should do?” he asked sincerely, facing them. “Ron, you’re my brother. What should I do?”

“I know that you want to do everything you can with this, Harry,” she said, taking his hand imploringly. “I was the same way when I first found out that I was a witch. I tried every spell I could understand in the first three days after I got my books. I got in trouble with the ministry.”


“Well, I did,” Hermione insisted, intentionally lightening the mood. “Imagine, getting a threat of expulsion before I’d even seen the school.”

Ron and Dumbledore grinned, relieved. Ron patted Hermione on the back.

“So,” Harry said, grinning. “Now that you’ve distracted me, you think I’m going to drink that potion that Madame Pomfrey is carrying towards me and go to sleep like a nice little boy until you can figure out how to make sure that Voldemort can’t possess me again. It’s not going to happen.” He raised a finger and the glass that the nurse was indeed carrying vanished, sending the sleeping draft previously contained in it splashing all over the floor. “I’m sick of potions and draughts. I can eat and drink again, and all I get are potions and draughts. I want ice cream, and soda, and teriyaki chicken with sweet and sour sauce.” He laughed. “But your rules say that I have to do things right. So does Nimue.” He cocked his head, obviously listening to the woman who inhabited it.

*Harry, those rules are older than my kind, far older than yours. We all follow them, even those of us who aren’t human. They’re afraid of you. Can’t you smell it? No, don’t answer that; I know how worthless human noses are. Anyway, you can hear it. You terrify them. I thought that these were your friends.*

Her words reached Harry, stung him. The grin faded from his face. *They are my friends,* he replied silently to her. *And more than that. Family.*

*So why are you doing this to them? You know it hurts them, to see you like this.*

*Like what? I’m free now.* He began to get defensive. *Why can’t they be happy for me?*

*Be happy for you? They hardly even know you any more. All they see is that Voldemort did something awful, and you changed. How could they see that as anything other than a bad thing?*

*You’re right* There was a sort of relieved defeat in his voice. It was a very odd thing to hear, a broken sound combined with a sort of thanks. “You’re right. Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore, I’m sorry. Nimue just told me off, so I’ll say I’m sorry, and I’ll take the potion.” He raised his finger again, and the spilt sleeping potion rose off the floor back into the restored beaker. With a snap, he summoned the drink and downed it in one go, grimacing slightly at the taste. “Lovely,” he said slurredly, and then he fell asleep.

“Well,” said Ron, a little baffled. “That was odd.”

The potion was a particular one. It was made to keep Harry’s body asleep until an antidote was applied, keeping him harmless even if Voldemort were to possess him again. The problem was that his mind woke up in the morning, just as it always did. He awoke, but his body remained sound asleep. He was completely paralyzed, unable even to change the rhythm of his breathing, and deaf to the world. It was as though he was suspended in that black void that he had visited in those terrifying moments of suffocation in the Quidditch game, months ago. He spent an eternity panicking, expecting at any second to die, to cease to exist, but then he began to become accustomed to his
isolation. He sought out Nimue.

*Are you there?*

Her reply was almost instantaneous. *Where else would I be?*

*The mall?*

He could feel her glare, for all she had no eyes. *Hardly amusing, Harry.*

*Sor**ry,** He wasn’t. He followed her voice through the void, and presently, with no transition at all, found himself in the Quidditch Room. The weapons were there once again, scattered around the room like playthings. Nimue was sprawled cat-like across the bed, juggling a quartet of golden Snitches. Harry noticed absently that, instead of the lace-like wire wings that normally graced the small balls, real feathers lay quiescent against the filigreed surface. “I want to find Voldemort’s bridge,” Harry told her, brushing the wall to open a door into the blank white void that he had visited before. He never even got through the door however, for Riddle was standing on the other side, grinning like the proverbial canary-eating cat.

“Hello once again, Harry.”

Chapter: 49

(This is, I think, my most violent, or at least my most gory chapter yet. Flame if you must, but remember to be creative. It is also short, and I apologize most dearly for the long wait that you all have had to endure. I now have a computer of my own, but I do not yet have internet there. Soon, so cross your fingers for me, and review!)

Chapter 49

“Not again,” Harry groaned. “Go away. You can’t use me now. Dumbledore put me to sleep, and he won’t wake me up until we’ve found a way to keep you away.”

“Oh, did he?” Riddle looked pensive a moment. “What method did he use to put you to sleep while leaving your mind awake?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. It smelled like old fish and burnt salad.”

“It was the Morpheus Tincture,” said Nimue, rising from the bed to stand behind Harry. “Not that that helps you any, Thomas.”

Riddle’s cheek jumped in annoyance, but he didn’t respond to Nimue’s use of his given name. “Ah, my Lady Pet. How very nice to see you again, and under such favorable circumstances. And yes, it does help me. The world will always find a way to bend to my will. In fact, your information aids me a great deal.” Quick as a striking snake, his hand shot out and grabbed Harry once again by the jaw, and he shoved Nimue fiercely away with the other. He was terrifyingly strong. He lifted Harry off the ground until they were eye to eye. “You went somewhere on the day after Christmas. Tell me where.” He shifted his grip to the back of Harry’s head so the boy could speak.

“I went to London,” Harry spat, not giving his captor the satisfaction of a struggle. “You know that already. You were there; you killed all those people.”
“No, after that,” Voldemort said impatiently. “You went home with that so-called family of yours, and then you went somewhere on your own. You drifted away like smoke in still air, you nearly died, and then you came back. Where was that. I tried to follow you, but she blocked me, turned me back.” He spoke the female pronoun with a gut-deep revulsion, tempered with something unidentifiable. His lips curled back from the single syllable, but whether that was to keep it or his mouth pristine and separate, Harry could not tell.

“Who?” Harry asked belligerently, but then he remembered who. His eyes grew wide and he shut his mouth tight. Voldemort wanted him to betray her. Harry would sooner die.

He didn’t have a choice in the matter, however. Once Voldemort saw that Harry clearly knew something about the woman in question, he didn’t waste time trying to get the boy to talk. Instead he dropped him to the floor before banishing both Harry and the stunned Nimue out into the white void. As the door closed, Harry saw his book in Riddle’s hands. He convulsed in gripping pain as the cover opened, then the door shut with a decisive click. The pain continued. Riddle was reading the book again.

After an eon, Voldemort reopened the door and pulled Harry back in, leaving Nimue out in the void. “The world has yet again bent for my advantage,” he said, smiling with all of his pointed teeth showing. “Oh, I couldn’t read where you had gone, and you will be punished for that.” He showed Harry the relevant pages. The ink was made indistinct and indecipherable by water and crusted sand. “But I found something else.” Another page held Riddle’s discovery. It was a stylized drawing of a human figure, recognizable as Harry only though the scar that was inscribed in exaggerated detail above the figure’s temple. Rendered in a fine hand, it depicted the threads that Harry was beginning to recognize from his forgotten sojourn to that realm of shadowy mist. It was just as he remembered it; some whole, others withered and rotted away. It even showed the absent strands that had once bound Harry to his right arm, his left foot, and his blind eyes. But a strong thread, horrendous and unnatural to see, connected him to his long-abandoned thumb. That was Riddle’s bridge.

“See, here,” said Voldemort. Indicating a short paragraph of tiny, formal text on the facing page, he read it aloud. “The Morpheus Tincture and draughts like it slacken the lines that hold body and mind together. Lacking an external antidote, extreme internal stimulation may reunite the two.” His smile stretched wider still. “I think that a judicious application of pain would be an extreme internal stimulation, don’t you, Harry? Hmm?” He raised his eyebrows. “And you can’t die here, on school grounds, so I can do whatever I want.” He was all but rubbing his hands in sadistic anticipation. “Oh, this is going to be very enjoyable.”

He reached for Harry. Harry saw it coming, tried to dodge, but his efforts only seemed to amuse the monster, who caught him effortlessly and bore him to the floor, pinning him there through the simple expedient of sitting on his hips. He used one hand to pin Harry’s head down by the face. The other, he stiffened into a claw, drew back, and then he drove it forward, into Harry’s stomach just barely below his ribs. Harry screamed into Voldemort’s right hand as the left plunged into him, slashing through skin, muscle, and viscera like a dull knife. Riddle laughed in pleasure, and then he got to work. Harry’s scream cut off abruptly, deprived of any strength at all as Riddle’s fingers found the band of leathery muscle that was his diaphragm, tore through it like it was tissue paper. He managed a weak sigh of anguish as Voldemort shoved brusquely past his lungs, then choked on blood as his heart was gripped in that freezing, clawed hand. Frantically, Harry reminded himself that this was not real flesh, not real damage. Then Voldemort began to pull.

(Pretty, pretty please, reviews for the poor?)
Chapter: 50

It had been three days since Harry had taken the sleeping potion. Hermione, Breena, the Weasleys and the Quidditch team had all been in to see him at one point or another, but at the moment, only Dumbledore and Madame Pomfrey kept the vigil. Pomfrey was pottering about in her office, but the Headmaster was sitting at Harry's side, alternating between dozing and reading. He came fully awake when Harry spoke. He had to strain to hear the words; they were no more than a breath of air given shape into a voice that was not Harry's.

"Just a little more, dear boy," hissed Voldemort through his lips. Then Harry screamed, a high breathless scream that brought Pomfrey running before it cut off abruptly. Voldemort opened Harry's eyes, looking through them as Harry could not. "Ah, Albus. Just the man I'd hoped to see. I just wanted to let you know that I'll be taking Harry, right from under your nose. And he'll beg me for death with his own tongue before I give it to him. You see, I am merciful." He folded Harry's hand in a mockery of piety, eyes turned soulfully upward. "You, he asked you for death, and you gave him pain." His hand opened to reveal an image of Harry as he was right then; lying on the floor of his Quidditch room, eviscerated. Voldemort had strung the intestines of his image-self around the room like so much garland. Only his wide eyes and moving lips indicated that the boy was still alive. Not only alive, but conscious. Dumbledore breathed an oath of shock, and Voldemort laughed. "See, I give him pain, but when he asks for death, asks and truly wants it, he shall have it." He handed the image to Dumbledore, who took it numbly. The headmaster was too stunned to follow when Voldemort-as-Harry took Harry's wand and brazenly left the infirmary. It took a moment for Dumbledore to come back to himself, and he exploded from his chair to give chase, recruiting Snape as he passed him at a sprint. Voldemort, though, had a substantial head-start, and he knew where he wanted to go.

Voldemort on Harry's legs was faster than Harry had ever been, faster than those pursuing him, faster even than the spells that they threw at him. He had read the Marauder's Map, and beat them both to the statue of the humpbacked witch, cursing students out of his way with flashes of green light. He opened the statue and leapt into the passage beneath it, running full-tilt into the darkness. As soon as the tunnel left the school grounds, he apparated away.

From inside Harry's mind, it was as though the lights flickered, and then his body fell hard against something. Voldemort was letting him see though his eyes, more likely though inattention than intent, and Harry cheered to see the Great Hall. He had fallen onto the Gryffindor table. Voldemort growled in frustration and ran again, blowing down the Great Doors, summoning a broomstick and speeding out over the lake, but he only got a few yards off the grounds before the world blinked again and he once more found himself sprawled on the Gryffindor table.

"What is this?" he snarled aloud. Harry didn't answer, and he didn't know either. He had found his image-self healed after the first flickering, so he sat on the bed, watching the proceedings with amusement. Trying to come up with an explanation for this, for himself, not his
The possessor, he stood and walked around the room, looking for the door that he knew was there. He found it behind a tapestry that had woven itself a few minutes ago, and it opened into an endless corridor, lined with doors. Unlike the hall that Harry had found in Voldemort's head, the doors here were decorated, stained glass, enameled metal, carved wood, and every one unique. As he stepped out into the hall, a voice spoke up behind him. "I was just looking for you, Harry," said Nimue, coming up the hall from a room about 9 doors down. The door that she had shut had an abstract image of a cat burnt into its surface.

"Do you know what's going on?" Harry asked her, referring to Voldemort's inability to take him off the campus.

"No, what?" Her face was puzzled, and it was clear that she knew nothing of what was going on outside Harry's mind. Harry explained what he knew, that Voldemort was trying to get him off the school's grounds, and that it clearly wasn't working. He didn't mention his recent torture.

"I wish I knew what was going on," he said at last, punching the wall in frustration.

"So do I," chimed in a sneering voice from behind them both. Riddle strode down the passage behind them, glaring in pent-up ire. "But I intend to defeat it nonetheless. Watch." Gloating, he gestured a window into existence. Harry and Nimue could see branches and shadows. Voldemort-as-Harry was running flat-out through the Forbidden Forest. Shouts and spells could be heard behind him, but he was too fast for them, running on Harry's one foot as though it were two, the shortened stump finding its footing securely in the air. He twisted and dodged through the thick undergrowth, ignoring the branches that caught and tore at him.

The Riddle in Harry's head faded away, returning his attention to the task of controlling Harry, and Harry lost interest in the window. Nimue stayed behind as he wandered off, peering into one room after another. He didn't know what, if anything, he was looking for, but when he reached a smooth door of frosted glass, he knew he had found it. The door knob was a lacy sphere of silver gilt, and he intentionally used his right hand to turn it, opening the door slowly.

"Hello, Harry," said the teenager who stood on the other side of the door, obscured inside of the flow of futures that filled the room like water. It was more tempting than it had ever been before, reaching out to Harry like a lover, promising him everything. He reached out on finger to touch it and his own thread, knotted and branching, reached back to him. "No, don't touch him," said the other boy, and the thread obeyed him, drawing back into the overall flow. "It would have taken you," he explained to an affronted Harry. "The future is always hungry to become the present. It would have taken you to do that."

"Who are you?" Harry asked, trying to peer through the futures and see more clearly the boy standing there.

"I'm Seer," said the other boy, stepping closer so that Harry could see him. He was tall, probably a full foot taller than Harry was, with black hair cut short above a smooth forehead and blue-grey eyes that reflected one future after another, but he was Harry, undeniably so. He shared the same face, marked with less pain, and the same slim seeker's build.

They examined one another carefully, those two Harrys, leaving as close to that barrier between future and now as they dared.
"Are you a future me?" Harry asked. Seer smiled condescendingly.
"No, of course not," he said. "I'm you now, but now here and now. Think. When would you ever be a Ravenclaw?" He tapped his chest, where a prefect badge shone silver, bordered in Ravenclaw blue and bronze. "Or a prefect, for that matter?" Harry bristled a moment, and Seer laughed. "Poor little Gryffindor," he said. "Here. Let me show you who I am." He wrapped Harry's thread of future around his arm and pulled, drawing the past into view. He pointed to a tiny knot in the strand, from which emerged two threads; one whole and clear, leading to the present and beyond, the other tattered, short, and unwholesome-looking. Seer ran the dissolute thread through his fingers, letting it cling to his hand. "This thread," he said. "Is me." He opened it to Harry, showing him a single, small event from before Harry's birth, from his father's youth. Harry recognized the boats that carried new students across the lake. One boat, with three young boys, was the nearest. Young voices rose above the water.
"My name's James," said the first, offering a friendly hand to the boy sitting alone in the bow of the boat. The boy took it, shaking it formally.
"Sev Snape. It's a pleasure to meet you."
Sev's interest visibly sharpened. "You're of the Godric's Hollow Potters?"
"Yeah, but that doesn't mean anything." James waved his heritage away like an annoyance. Just then, a boat nearby lurched in the water, knocking into the boat holding Sev and James. The third boy in their boat, a lean, quiet, serious boy with dusty brown hair turned promptly green, clutching the side of the boat.
"Hey you!" James yelled at the laughing occupants of the other boat. "Cut it out!"
"Sev!" the tallest of the other boys yelled back. "Get out of that boat before you catch Griffindorkitus! Come over here."
"I'm fine here, Sirius," said Sev coolly. "Over there with you, I'd be more worried about catching Slytherinfluenza." He and James shared a laugh at the look on the other boy's face.
"So you aiming for Ravenclaw, then?" James asked. Sev nodded.
"Yes. You?"
James threw off a mock salute. "Gryffindork as charged. Never been a Potter as didn't wear the red and gold."
"We are more than our families traditions," Sev said stiffly. "If that weren't true, I'd be sure of my place in Slytherin, like my father, and his father, and his father..." His sigh spoke volumes about past heated discussions.
"Oh, I know that," said James breezily. "But I am a Gryffindor, through and through. OR at least, I like to think so. Courage and stubbornness, or tenacity, as my mother calls it. Sounds like good stuff to me, eh?"
"If you say so," said Sev noncommittally. "Me, I prefer brains to brawn and I know I'm clever. Ravenclaw's the house for me, I know it."
Two spots of high color showed in his face, high on his cheek bones. He
looked ready to defend his choice, but there was no need. "Well," James said glibly. "Good luck."
"That's me past," Seer said gloomily. "Now see what really happened."
The scene backed itself up, rewinding to the point where it had started. There were the boats again, and first-year James was introducing himself to young Sev.
"My name's James," said the first, offering a friendly hand to the boy sitting alone in the bow of the boat. The boy took it, shaking it formally.
"Sev Snape. It's a pleasure to meet you."
Sev's interest visibly sharpened. "You're of the Godric's Hollow Potters?"
"Yeah, but that doesn't mean anything." James waved his heritage away like an annoyance.
Just then, a boat nearby lurched in the water, knocking into the boat holding Sev and James. The third boy in their boat, a lean, quiet, serious boy with dusty brown hair turned promptly green, clutching the side of the boat.
The other boat knocked into theirs again, harder this time. The third boy, his balance already precarious, was thrown out of the boat into the dark lake.
"Remus!" James yelped, lunging for his friend. It was clear that the other boy couldn't swim, but James caught a floundering hand and hauled him bodily back into the boat. He turned to the offending craft, where the boys were laughing too hard to sit upright. "You morons! What do you think you're playing at?"
"Spoken like a true Gryffindork!" cried the tallest of them, a rugged-looking kid with a crop of long, black hair. "Get over here, Sev, before you get Gryffingook all over you. You know that's Potter, don't you? The ultimate Gryffindork! Get over here before you catch it."
With a defeatist shrug, Sev stood up, rocking the boat as little as he could as he scrambled lightly from one boat to the other.
"Bah, Slytherins," James growled to Remus, who nodded damply.
"That's it?" Harry asked, not knowing what to make of what he had seen. "That's the difference between us? Five minutes on a boat eight years before I was born?"
"That's the start of it," Seer affirmed. "In your time-line, your father formed an instant antipathy against Sev and Sirius. When Sirius got sorted into Gryffindor, he apologized, and he and Dad were friends by Christmas. Snape, unfortunately, got sorted into Slytherin, which confirmed Dad's low opinion of him. All because of that second bump."
"But how does that change you to me?" Harry was still confused.
Seer sighed forebearingly.
"What does Sev do for Dumbledore?"
"He spies for the Light, pretending to be a Death Eater."
"And if he had the choice, do you think he would do that alone?"
"I don't know. Probably. Snape's a real loner."
"Well, I know better," Seer said crossly. "Snape and Potter were two of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's most notorious Death Eaters by the time I was
born. But they were also the best of Dumbledore's spies. They were one another's Secret Keepers, hiding each other from Voldemort and the Ministry alike. Uncle Sev." Seer sighed sadly. "They kept their Secrets so well that only Dumbledore knew about my existence. Lupin didn't even know when Dad married Mom." He laughed wryly. "I'm talking about all of this as if it had actually happened. This is all what would have happened, if your history had followed my path. But it didn't." His laugh this time was bitter. "So here we are. You're you, and I am only the part of you that Sees. A cog in the mind of the Boy-who-Lived.")

Harry could hear the jealousy plain in Seer's voice, and it grated at him. "You want a life of your own? Take it. Take mine!" He reached into the future-flow and pulled Seer out by the front of his robes, spinning around to shove the larger boy against the wall across the hall, opposite the door. "It's all yours," he said, and stepped backwards into the flow.

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Chapter: 51

He was enveloped entirely in a perfect moment. There was no time, no worry, nothing at all to fear. Only the liquid light, the silent song, the aromatic, sensual taste of pure bliss. Harry's eyes drifted shut and then open again. With an utter lack of effort, he saw every future laid out in front of him, so many strands and threads.

He found himself on his knees in the corridor, gasping for breath with his forehead pressed to the rough stones of the floor. The Sight had rejected him. Seer reached a hand down, helping Harry to his feet. When Harry met his eyes, he gasped. Before, they had been alive and focused. Now, they were flat and still, reflecting nothing. "You see?" he said dully. "I'm Seer, not Harry. You are Harry, with all that entails."

"But I don't want to be Harry anymore," Harry proclaimed adamantly. He reached back into the flow, drawing out a single image from the past. Himself, his real self outside this mind-world, slumped to the side in his wheelchair, stumps of arm and ankle plainly and pathetically visible; matte eyes staring. "That's who I am now, a broken toy for Voldemort to play with. Broken beyond healing. I'm not good for anything."

"And you think I could do better?" Seer asked blankly. "You've lived a life, you have a life yet to live. All I am is one of fate's jokes, an idea that didn't work out. Try it once, decide it doesn't work, recycle the parts. A leftover from the future, from the present, and from the past. All I am is a rough draft. You're the finished product." He waved his arm significantly at Harry, who snorted. "Then someone's failing a course in Harry-making."

"Be that as it may, you're you. I can't be you. No one else can be you. Just you."

Harry slumped, knowing that what Seer said was nothing less than the truth. The body, the life; they were both his responsibility, but at the moment, he was almost willing to let Voldemort have them both.

Almost.

Harry straightened, feeling as though a burden had settled more evenly on his shoulders. He knew how powerful he was. Voldemort had told him. If Voldemort took complete control of Harry, infiltrated every level of him until he was as rotten as a worm-riddled log, then he would have that power. The very world would shudder.

"But if I'm so powerful," he said aloud, articulating his thoughts to Seer. "Why can't I just shake him off? Why is he the one controlling my body?"

Seer shrugged, his eyes preoccupied and distracted. He seemed to be fading, growing as dull as the
scales of a fish left too long on the dock. He spoke slowly, as if each word had to be conceived and constructed. "He has the bridge. The... The there-to-here, the him-to-you. Your flesh, your blood, your bone." His eyes unfocused even further, one wandering absently while the other stared fixedly upwards. "I can't See where it is. I can't See anything." His voice broke weakly. Harry realized what was wrong with his doppleganger. Seer was drowning in the present, just as Harry had drowned in the futures. He grabbed the other boy just as he collapsed, staggering under his greater weight. It was fortunate that he had only to take three steps to reach the future-filled doorway. He all but threw Seer through it, pulling back himself before he touched the tenuously tantalizing surface.

Back in his element, Seer shuddered in ecstasy, eyes closed in joy at his renewed contact with time's passing. When he opened his eyes again, serenity had returned to them. They once more reflected the silvery glare that was the flow. "Thank you," he said gravely, inclining his head in a formal gesture that was almost a bow.

Almost.

"Show me where Voldemort is taking me," Harry said. Back to the business of survival. Seer nodded and pulled a thread out of the flow, opening it to Harry. He saw an anonymous clearing, presumably in the Forbidden Forest. Looking closely, Harry saw something odd. Along the far edge of the clearing, a line ran visibly through the plants. There was no bare spot, but no plant straddled the line. They were all entirely on one side or the other. Not even the fluttering leaves of the trees above crossed the demarcation.

"The wards," Seer explained. "That line is the Hogwarts wards. Voldemort is still trying to take you outside them."

"Do you know why he can't?"

"No!" A troubled frown crossed Seer's face. "Something won't let me See there. Stone walls... Water..." His voice trailed off into uncertainty. "I can't see past them."

Something tried to click into familiarity in Harry's mind. Water and stone, quiet, slow-moving magic. Her. She was blocking his Sight. He felt a keen sense of betrayal, feeling like a child whose beloved grandmother had just stabbed him. He didn't even know who she was, but her treachery hurt him as much as Voldemort or Vernon had ever done. Worse. What he had felt from her, for her, was a perfect, pure, familial love; as all-encompassing as a mother's love for an unborn child. It had surrounded him, supported him. He had breathed it in and out with the very air and not even noticed its presence. But he felt the rift keenly now. It crushed his heart as Voldemort had done, twisting it right out of his chest.

He gave one choking sob and sank to his knees. He pressed his burning cheek to the cool, forgiving stone of the wall and let the tears flow. The stone grew slick with water, warm from his cheek, but he didn't stop until he had cried himself into an exhausted sleep. His body, still running through the forest under Voldemort's command, collapsed in midstride, sprawling among the roots of a gnarled old tree.

"Harry!" Voldemort's roar of rage echoed through the corridors. Seer, thinking fast as only a Ravenclaw can, pulled the sleeping Harry into the flow with him. As Voldemort's yells grew nearer, Seer wove a net of slight irritation and discomfort around Harry to protect him from the pleasure of the flow, and then he wove a cloak for himself, using Harry's own self image. When he stepped out into the corridor, shutting the door of frosted glass behind him, he resembled Harry in every way. Short, scarred, green-eyed Harry. Voldemort swooped down on him, gripping his arm in a vise-like claw.

"What did you do?" he hissed. Seer/Harry looked at him coolly.

"I didn't do anything."

Voldemort growled, and then stalked back to the Quidditch room, dragging Seer with him. "You'll undo it, whatever it takes. Come on, boy."

At the door to the Quidditch room, Seer stopped. He hadn't meant to, but he did. The room knew that he wasn't Harry. If he went in there, Voldemort would know too. The room, however, was willing to cooperate with Seer. The air at the door shimmered briefly in a web-like pattern and Seer
walked through it. He could feel it, like walking into a spider-web. Harry's threads settled onto him, into him. Seer had control now, or he would if that horrible bridge didn't stretch like a leash from his hand to Voldemort's. He could only see the threads for an instant before they faded. He was in the room.

Voldemort knew the instant control was restored to him. Harry's body stood up, spent a moment brushing the leaf-mold from his robes, before setting off once again at a sprint. He could hear his pursuit closer now, but they weren't close enough. He broke through a dense wall of vegetation into the clearing that Seer had shown Harry before, running straight across it. He stopped just on the line of the wards, one foot left inside the grounds to keep from being snapped back to the Great Hall. Just as Snape burst into view behind them, a shadow moved ahead of them.

A tall, cloaked figure stepped forward, lowering its hood in an almost eager manner. Voldemort walked forward one step into the Dementor's grasp, calling out mocking to Snape and the black dog that accompanied him.

"You're too late!" he crowed. "His soul is mine!" Harry's mouth opened, hung slack as the red vapor poured out like blood. Voldemort stayed this time, hovering above the clearing as a cloud, ready to take Harry's body the moment it was empty.

Snape and Sirius fighting waves of despair struggled to approach the foul creature as it lowered its head, latched its sucking mouth onto Harry's lax one. They were too late. Voldemort had left Seer in control in those final moments. Before he had fled, he had gloated. "Now don't worry, Harry. I'm just stepping out for a moment. I'll be right back, as soon as you're gone."

So Seer got to experience real life for the three seconds that it took for the Dementor to lower his head. Groping around in Harry's mind in that final panic, he found the Griffon Blade. He clutched it to himself as the horrific tearing began.

Harry woke up in a cross mood. Something was irritating him and it would not stop. His first thought, before he opened his eyes, was that Dudley was drumming on the stairs. He woke up fully then, and saw the truth. He maneuvered himself out of the flow as fast as he could, knowing that Seer's absence meant that something was very wrong. Instinct drew him at a run to the Quidditch room, where Seer, looking like Harry, stood frozen as a thread, a horrid, rotting, black thread tangled itself around him from the feet up. As he watched, it reached his throat, filled his mouth. He clutched the Griffon Blade to him, but he made no move to use it. The room itself, recognizing the real Harry, withdrew the threads from Seer, casting them back where they belonged. They had been all that held Seer there. With a sucking, rattling sound, the Dementor's thread drew him out and away. Seer was gone.

Harry was filled with a horrible, terrible rage. How dare Voldemort cut parts of him away? This could not be borne. As he retook control of his body, power swept through his flesh. As Snape as Sirius drove the Dementor away from Harry's body with a pair of faltering Patronuses, they saw his skin glint suddenly metallic, a gold-bronze sheen beneath the skin. It was gone in an instant.

Voldemort's red vapor, diving back towards the still form with a triumphant cry, recoiled in rage from his body, repelled by the forces moving within it. Harry swore.

"Damn it, Riddle!"

"Harry!" Sirius cried in shock. "You're all right!"

"No, I'm not," Harry growled. "That Dementor got Seer."

Before Sirius or Snape could ask who Seer was, an unearthly sound filled the clearing. The Dementor stumbled towards them, clutching its chest with its rotting hands. It screamed a second time, obviously in pain. Suddenly, the blade of a sword burst through its robes, coming from where the creatures heart would be, if Dementors had such an organ. A beam of light came from the rent, intense, blue-tinged light that widened as the blade twisted and sliced. With a final shriek, the beast dissolved into tattered cloth and a foul stench. Puffs of vapor fled the scene, emitting small sighs of joy. When they had cleared, silence fell.

"Sirius, be my eyes," Harry muttered, plucking at his godfather's sleeve.

"I would," Sirius answered, stunned. "But I don't believe my own. James?"
"Come now, Black," came Seer's sarcastic voice, unfamiliar to Harry's corporeal ears but instantly recognizable. "When would Prongs have ever been a Ravenclaw?" Harry heard him tap the metal badge, just as he had inside of his head. "You can call me Seer. I'm part of Harry." He stooped down, lifting Harry easily. "I'll explain back at the castle. We're not safe here. There are more Dementors coming, and Death Eaters." He set off at a jog, following the path that they had broken through the brush. The two adults fell behind him, recovering from their shock enough to lob rapid-fire questions at the back of his head. He answered them both politely, but his dislike for Sirius was as obvious as his affection for Snape.

"How do you know there are Death Eaters coming?"

"I Saw them."

"We didn't see anything."

"I didn't see them. I Saw them. There's a difference."

"Who are you, really?"

"I'm Seer. I'm the part of Harry that can See."

"Is this some sick joke? Harry can't see. He's blind."

"You're confusing See and see." When Seer said the two verbs side by side, the difference in emphasis between the two was clearer.

"Oh," said Sirius, subsiding. Snape wasn't done yet.

"If you are part of Harry, what are you doing out here, separate? And why are you so different from him?"

"It's a long story, and I need my breath to run. I'll explain everything when we reach the castle."

Harry remained quiet throughout this exchange because he was feeling overwhelmed. When Seer had touched him, a single thread had regrown between them. Just one, and it was narrow, but through it flowed a tide of sensation. All of Seer's senses flowed into his own, tangling with them. It was an immense effort to sort out his blindness from the verdant field that Seer saw as they left the forest, his numbness from the ache that was beginning to burn in Seer's back and legs. He heard with a slight echo through two pairs of ears. Vertigo was rising in him, threatening his equilibrium and his dignity. He was about to throw up when they stopped. Snape opened the door to the castle and Seer walked in, careful not to jostle Harry now that they were safe. The sharing of sensation went both ways, and he could feel the other boy's distress. He even closed his own eyes, using Harry's hyperacute sense of hearing to steer himself through the corridors. He carried him to the infirmary, where Dumbledore was waiting for them, laying him on the bed that he had vacated only an hour or so before.

"You're cold," muttered Harry as Seer's hands left him. "I'm hot." He was sweating, and his skin felt tight and warm to Madame Pomfrey. She treated the scrapes and scratches that Voldemort had acquired for Harry in his head-long rush through the forest, shuddering at the perfect ring of bruising that surrounded his mouth. It resisted healing, remaining a purpling stain under his skin. By the time she finished examining him, his clothes were soaked with sweat, and he was trembling with ague. He was flushed, heat coming off of him in palpable waves. He began to fight Pomfrey's ministrations, moaning and protesting in fever-induced delirium. He was mumbling incoherently, occasionally, a recognizable word surfacing through the babble.

"Mom.... why..... th Eater..." Then suddenly a whole sentence, delivered in a voice both like and unlike Harry's, filled with worry. "When is Father coming home?" An odd woman's voice came next, choked in what could have been either grief or rage. "He's... He's not, Harry." Back to the voice of the young man. "Which side caught him?" It was a flat, depthless voice, very unlike the Harry that they knew. The woman's voice returned, closer than ever to tears. "It was the Aurors. Black had him Kissed before Albus could get there."

Seer, standing by Harry's bed, blanched to a greenish-white, trembling. "Father..."

"What's going on?" Sirius asked Seer sharply, grabbing his shoulder. His hand passed right through the boy, without even a ghost's tell-tale frigidity. Palpably, Seer was not there. Sirius pulled back with a yell. "What are you?" he growled, standing between Seer and Harry as if to protect the incoherent boy from the strange being that resembled him so much and yet so little.
Seer sighed dully, taking a deep breath, and began to explain what had happened in the forest, and more, who he was. He was a Ravenclaw, so his explanation was as straightforward and logical as such an odd story could be.

"At every decision made, reality divides. This divisions are a kind of... test. If the result works out over the long-term, that decision becomes the dominant reality. The rest wither away, fading back into whatever reality is made of, but some parts, like the people who result from the unsuccessful decision, are recycled, becoming a part of their counterpart. Such a one am I. My reality resulted from a decision that you made, actually, Mr. Black, all the way back on your first day here at Hogwarts. Do you remember, by any chance, knocking Remus Lupin into the water as you crossed the lake?" Sirius nodded hesitantly, and Seer continued. "In my reality, you decided not to do that. Because of that, and the decisions that led from that, you were sorted into Slytherin, Snape here became a Ravenclaw, as he wanted in the first place, and the Marauder's Map that I inherited from my father is signed Moony, Prongs, and Scales. I find it a curse to remember all this, seeing as here, in this reality, my only purpose is to See for Harry when in my reality, I was Harry." The thought seemed to depress him.

"As to why I am out here, talking to all of you, we can thank Voldemort's Dementor for that. When it tried to suck out Harry's soul, it got me instead. I'd Seen it happen, so I knew it could. I armed myself, and before the Dementor could digest my soul, I cut my way out." He shuddered, closing his eyes against remembered horror.

"So," said Sirius slowly. "You're Harry, not Harry, and a part of Harry, all in one, and you escaped from a Dementor, as no one has done before. You still haven't answered my original question. What. Is. Wrong. With. Harry?"

"I don't know," Seer replied. "Some of it must be that he is overwhelmed. Everything that I feel, he feels also. But that doesn't account for the fever." He laid a hand against Harry's temple, and Harry moaned, turning away from it.

"Harry can feel you?" Sirius asked, still distrustful.

"I suspect," Seer replied abstractly, not turning to face him. "That it is because we are still connected. Does that make sense to you?"

Sirius bristled at Seer's condescending tone, but before he could say anything, the infirmary voice burst open. Dominic stood there, leaning against the doorframe as he tried to catch his breath. He had obviously run all of the way to the castle. "Dumbledore," he panted. "Harry's... Harry's in the forest. There's a Dementor!" Then he saw Harry, lying so still in the bed, and he deflated, sagging to his knees in despair. "I'm too late," he moaned. Madame Pomfrey hastened to assure him.

"No, no, Harry's going to be just fine," she said. "We're not entirely sure just how, seeing as he was Kissed, but he's still in possession of his soul. As far as I understand it, we have Seer to thank for that."

Dominic Saw Seer then, standing on the far side of Seer's bed. He started in recognition. "I've Seen you!"

"And I've Seen you," Seer said boredly. "What of it?"

"Not this you." Dominic struggled to explain. "The real you. I Saw... I Saw you born, with Dumbledore and Snape acting as midwives. I Saw you sorted into Ravenclaw. I Saw... I Saw the owl that brought you news of your father's death and your godfather's survival."

"Me?" Sirius asked distractedly, but Seer spoke up contemptuously.

"Of course not," he said, in a tone that was almost, almost a sneer. "She means Uncle Sev."

"Snape?!" Sirius cried in disbelief. "Snivelois?! Your godfather? Not in a million years!"

"No," Seer agreed condescendingly. "Not in a million years, not in a billion. An instant. The time it took you to decide not to rock a boat a second time, not to knock a small, bookish, Gryffindork-to-be into the lake. Oh, I know you, Sirius, scion of the Black Line, as pure-blood as they come and so proud. Eleven years old and already so sure of yourself, so secure in your superiority over anyone of lesser blood. But then, in this reality, as your boat drifted away from Potter and his dripping friend, what was it that Sev told you? Ah, yes. We are more than our traditions. That got you thinking, didn't it? And after you were sorted into Gryffindor, after you had failed your family, they kept you..."
thinking. For the first time in your life, I daresay." Sarcasm made his voice high and strident, but it was his words, not his tone that caused Harry to whimper and shift in his sleep. Seer lowered his voice, but the sarcasm didn't fade.

"In my past, on the other hand, ambition kept you from rocking that boat again. Potters, your mother had always taught you, may be Gryffindor to the core, but they still held a great deal of power and fortune. Those with power were to be courted, not made into enemies. So you traded light jokes with Severus, as if that had been your intention all along in bring the boat so close. And when you donned the Sorting Hat, it saw that act of ambition shining so recently in your mind, and it placed you where you belonged. In Slytherin!" His voice rung scathingly. "Which is why, seven years later, it was such a shock to everyone when you, Slytherin ne'er-do-well, filthiest Beater ever to wear the green and silver, joined the ranks of the aurors to fight the rising Dark Lord while Potter and Snape, Head Boy of Gryffindor and star pupil of Ravenclaw, joined that same Dark Lord as Death Eaters!"

"What?" Black burst out. "Prongs, a Death Eater? You're lying! He would die first!"

"He did die," Seer said softly. "But not first. For fourteen years, his name graced the papers daily in connection with murders, disappearance and torture, Snape's always alongside it. It was almost one word - PotterandSnape. To the wizarding world, they were heartless inhuman Murderers.

"Three people knew differently.

"Albus Dumbledore was, of course, the first on this short list. All of Dad's and Sev's seventh year, he had been planning this venture with them, using a time-turner to conceal their meetings. Originally, Snape alone had been approached, but James would not let the friend whom he loved as a brother face such perils alone. They were to be Dumbledore's spies. T was a simple enough plot. Hardly unusual for two young men from such long-established pure-blood families to rally to Voldemort's cause. They disappeared the night after graduation, reappearing one week later, under the Dark Mark."

"In my reality, as I told you, the Marauder's Map was is signed 'Moony, Prongs, & Scales.' They originally searched out all the hidden passages so that Sev could slip into the Gryffindor Tower after curfew, so they could plot together against the Slytherins." He smiled humorlessly. "Later, they used them to slip unseen into Hogwarts to report to Dumbledore. They lived a life of such danger, walking the narrowest path possible. On the one hand, painful, agonizing death, if Voldemort discovered their duplicity. On the other, if the ministry caught them, they would be interrogated and then Kissed. No trial, not for them. Not even the option of Azkaban." Bitter tears were in his eyes, but they didn't fall. "Of course," he said grimly. "Their crimes were worse than yours, Sirius. Why, only two weeks into their reign of terror, if I may use such a clichéd term, James and Sev brutally murdered Lily Evans in front of her family in their home. Oh, that was a work of Dumbledore's genius. He had tinkered with their wands, you see. An idea of Sev's originally, if his boasts were to be believed. A tiny, unnoticeable shift in the grip, and the intended spell was replaced with an illusion so intricate that not even Voldemort could see its falseness. And one further alteration. The Killing Curse's Effects were replaced with a silent apparition charm, sending the 'victims' to a safe place somewhere far away from England. Some muggle named the place Zion when I was about 12, and the name has stuck since then. Dumbledore never told Dad and Sev exactly where Zion was, but he took them there as often as he dared. You see, it was there that my father married Lily, it was there that I was born and raised until I was old enough to attend Hogwarts, which I did, under the name Jameson Evans. I only ever met my father a dozen times or so, about a week each time he came for my birthday. July 31st, just like yours, Harry." He spoke now in constrained tones to the sleeping boy next to him, ignoring everyone else in the room. "He missed my fifteenth birthday. Aurors had finally caught him and Uncle Sev, somewhere in London. He sent Sev to us the same way my mother had been sent, with the modified Unforgivable, but he was captured." He rounded on Sirius, hate blazing in his eyes. It was the most emotion they had yet seen in him. "By you! You were the chief Auror by then, and you felt so keenly your responsibility towards the eradication of the Dark Arts that you never even interrogated him, as per your orders! If you had, Dumbledore would have arrived in time to save him, to explain everything." All emotion had leached out of his voice, but his fists were clenched, knuckles white, and his posture was ramrod-straight. He visibly
forced himself to relax, continuing with a forced smile that looked more like a death-ritus.
"But that's neither here nor there, is it? Here, now, non of that ever happened. You made the right
choice, in one way, I am a non-entity. What matters is Harry. The fact that I am out here means that
he is less than whole."
"Then get back in him," urged Sirius. He moved to Harry's side, taking his hand possessively and
 glaring at Seer.
"I would if I could," said Seer genuinely. "I am not myself, he is. I'm only a piece, a flawed leftover.
I am, uncomfortable, being alone in this head. I don't have the knowledge to operate this body. I'm
taking this knowledge from Harry, every breath, every heartbeat, every step, and there's nothing I
can do about it. I think that may be what's wrong with him. His body is forgetting what it needs to do
to keep him alive. Listen."
They all listened closely, hearing what Seer had heard. A slight uncertainty to Harry's inhalations, a
perceptible hesitation before his exhalations.
Harry wasn't asleep. Rather, he was focusing inward. He had to concentrate to fill his lungs, to keep
his heart beating. Outside of that, all he could perceive was Seer. Seer's thoughts ran through his
mind, Seer's sight played before his closed, blind eyes, Seer's ears relayed every slightest nuance of
noise. He wanted to follow Seer, join him inside that unbroken, freemoving body, but his own near-
corpse was a barrier keeping him imprisoned within itself. If only...
"Hold him down!" yelled Dominic and Seer in unison just a heartbeat before Harry convulsed into a
seizure. Sirius grabbed him before he could fall to the floor, and Madame Pomfrey rushed over to
help, but there was no need. After that initial, violent spasm, Harry had fallen utterly limp.
"He's not breathing!" Pomfrey cried when Sirius had gotten Harry back onto the bed. "Resucio!
Resucio! It's not working!" She wasted no time in starting the technique that she had used before,
alternating chest compressions with the forced breathing, recruiting Dumbledore once more for the
latter.
Suddenly, Seer shouted again in panic. "No!" he cried desperately, wide eyed in fear. "You have
your own! This is mine!"
Harry drew a deep, wracking breath, startling Dumbledore, to cry out in response, an odd, possessive
anger in his voice. "You're mine!" he cried, his voice coming as if from a distance. "I need you!"
"No!" Seer gasped, his face surprised in sudden realization. "I can't go back! I can't go back to being
a cog! I, I, I want my own life!" He shut his mouth with a snap, stunned by his own words. "I want
my own life."
He had only a moment to dwell on this new self-knowledge before Harry attacked. Not physically:
his body stay limp in Sirius's arms, eyes tight shut, pulse and breath dangerously slow. He was
attacking Seer mentally, trying his damndest to invade the healthy, whole body that he inhabited. It
hadn't even been an entirely conscious attack. Harry had suddenly had to have that body, and damn
the cost. Seer clamped his hands to his ears, falling to his knees.
"No!" he cried once more, in a choked, horrible voice. "I created this myself! Don't take it from me,
it's all I have!" His agony was written plain on his face, a sharp edge of a sob in his voice, and
Dumbledore could watch no longer.
"Comacophany!" he shouted, firing the powerful stunning spell once more at Harry. It knocked him
back, tipping over the bed in a flash of orange lightning. Seer's face cleared instantly, relaxing into
the smooth lines of sleep, and he tipped slowly sideways. Reflexively, Dominic tried to catch him
before his head hit the stone floor, but the insubstantial boy passed through his hands, his head
bouncing solidly on the floor. The impact woke him, and he pushed himself groggily to his feet. He
avoided looking at Harry, fidgeting nervously.
"I have to go," he said, turned on his heel, and left the infirmary, slamming the door behind him.
Those left behind looked at one another in befuddlement, confusion, and some fear. Silence reigned
for a long time, until Harry awoke. He began crying, soft, self-conscious sounds as he turned his face
away from the others. Dumbledore glanced at Snape and Sirius, and they took the hint, standing
ostentatiously and leaving the room. Dominic and the headmaster followed, closing the door behind
them. Madame Pomfrey, in an unusual show of sensitivity, retired to her office, leaving Harry alone
in the ward. When his tears had run their course, he lay there, staring blindly towards the rafters.

"Nimue?" He spoke the name aloud, unable to retreat inside of his head to where he had last seen her. Thinking about it, he hadn't seen, heard, or felt her since Seer appeared. Be that as it may, she answered him now, a soundless voice that resonated in the small bones behind his ears.

*Yes, Harry?*

"Where have you been?"

*Wandering.* She had never sounded so catlike. Her tone spoke of secrets that she would not tell. Harry was too enervated to delve. He had only one question.

"What am I, ancestress?"

"You are what you are meant to be. Your family's last son, Heron James Potter ap Logress, intended of the Prophecy of the Wood. And I've been waiting for you to ask."

"Why?"

"So I could tell you?" A cryptic answer. Harry let the subject drop, lapsing into a natural sleep every bit as deep as the spelled one from which he had woken only a short time before.

When Harry woke up again, Seer was sitting at the foot of his bed, eyes closed, lines of pain etched deep into his face. Harry could hear him running his fingers down the length of the Griffon Blade, which lay naked across his lap. "Harry," he said without opening his eyes. "Neville and Colin are dead."

Harry didn't say anything, merely closed his own eyes, but inside he was reeling with shock. "How?" he began to ask, but then he remembered. Voldemort, running through the corridors of the castle wearing his body, firing green, silent death from his wand. There had been more than two.

"Who else?"


Harry drew in a hiss of breath through his teeth. "Now I've killed them both," he said morosely, referring to the two Diggory siblings. Seer patted his knee awkwardly.

"No, Voldemort killed them both. It's not your fault." His voice quieted to a whisper. "It's not our fault."

"He used me both times. It is my fault. If I were gone, dead, Kissed, whatever, I wouldn't be here for him to use." A rage seeped into his voice, ringing from the very stones of the ward.

Seer stood, stepping back. He knew what his next words would provoke Harry to do. This, above all else, was Seer's purpose, a purpose that he only now knew. His voice was low, grave, and firm as he said, "If Voldemort were dead, he couldn't use you to hurt people, to kill." He proffered the Griffon Blade, which he still held, hilt first. Harry didn't need to see it, just closed his hand around it, accepting it. The stones beneath Seer's feet hummed briefly, a warning note that startled everyone in the castle. He let his fingers linger a moment on the winged crosspiece. "He could use anyone."

"Where is he?" Harry asked. He already knew Seer's answer.

"He's coming."

Chapter: 52

(I know it takes me forever to update now. I offer you all my most sincere apologies, but there isn’t really anything I can do to speed myself up. Work, school, all that lovely stuff, and, oh! A life.

*grin* Kidding, kidding, of course fics are my life. My biggest delayer right now is a fic that I’m co-writing with my newest roommate. We call ourselves anthropuppy, and we write, at the moment, Harry Potter/Stargate SG-1 crossovers. Go and read us. We like to think that we’re good. Plus lots of whumping. *grin* You may have noticed by now that I like that type of stuff. That said, read, relish, and review, in that order.)
10 minutes later, Harry was in his chair, waiting implacably before the great doors. He was alone there. Dumbledore and the others had gone to protect the students, confined within their dormitories. They had tried to get Harry to join them or to let them fight with him, but pulses of irresistible energy had swept them away from him, sealing them inside the castle and him out. Not even Dumbledore could force his way through them. Seer stood above Harry, on the parapet above the doors, and he was the first to see Voldemort approach.

The Dark Lord was also alone. He rode a thestral, guiding it with one hand. His other rode on the hilt of a sword that swung from his hip. Harry’s blind eyes narrowed as he heard the other wizard approach. He was the first to speak.

“Why have you come here, Riddle?” He urged his chair down the steps to meet Riddle on the cobbled path. They stopped about ten paces apart.

“To kill you.” Riddle’s answer was delivered in a coldly laughing voice.

“You can’t kill me here, Riddle, you know that. Hogwarts protects me.” As Harry spoke, he felt her at his back, supporting him, loving him and protecting him in her embrace. He smiled. He knew who she was now.

“I’d like to see that pile of moldering stone stop a sword,” Voldemort taunted, dismounting and drawing his blade. It sang sweetly as he swung it through the air, Harry’s only warning of the sudden attack. He raised the Griffon Blade to block just in time to keep the other sword from biting deep into the side of his neck. Something inside of him stirred to the clash of steel on steel. A skilled strength flowed into his arm, letting him turn Voldemort’s next thrust aside easily, following it with one of his own. With an angered cry, Voldemort danced back, returning with a two-handed swipe that Harry parried easily.

“Don’t do this, brother!” cried a deep voice suddenly, resonating both from Harry’s throat and the Griffon Blade. Voldemort paused a moment, shocked, and Harry pressed that advantage. In one swift move, his sword had wrapped around Voldemort’s, tearing it from his grasp. It landed with a ringing clang on the stone steps behind Harry.

Harry showed no mercy to his unarmed opponent. His chair dove forward, the sword aimed unerringly at Voldemort’s heart. The tip hit his chest, and rebounded. The deeper voice cried out in pain, and so did Harry as a wave of force flooded him from the sword, throwing him backwards. He struck the great doors with a crash, his chair shattering into splinters from the impact. Half-conscious, he slide to the stone steps, slumped against the doors. The sword lay far out of his reach. Dazed, he didn’t hear Voldemort’s approach until the man laughed, standing over him.

“Next time, boy, get a sword you can use.” Unable to defend himself, Harry heard the ring of steel against stone as Voldemort picked up his own blade, weighing it in his hand. Behind Harry, the doors were trying to open, to bring him back inside and protect him, but Voldemort grabbed him first. He grabbed him once more by the throat, lifting him clear of the steps. Behind him, Harry could hear a pounding at the walls of magic that sealed the castle. Voldemort laughed.

“I’m so glad that you’re going to see this, Albus,” he taunted, tightening his fist around Harry’s throat. “I’ll kill your precious Boy-Who-Lived here, right in front of your eyes, and then the rest of your weakening flock, one by one while you watch. I’m sure that Severus, my favorite traitor standing there behind you, would be glad to curry favor with me by doing the honours.” He turned his attention back to Harry, who was beginning to black out in Voldemort’s choke-hold. “But first, this one dies.”
He thrust the sword into Harry’s stomach. Harry gasped as Voldemort’s grip suddenly loosened. He couldn’t feel the sword through him, but Seer, watching from above, could, and Harry felt it burn in his guts, felt it grate past the bones of his spine and out through his back. The castle behind him screamed as Voldemort released his throat, leaving him supported only by the blade impaling him. With a violent wrench, Voldemort jerked the blade upwards, slicing into his chest. As he crossed the line where sensation started, what Harry felt doubled, echoed through Seer’s sharing of it. The unearthly sharp blade severed ribs and breastbone, finally slicing through Harry’s collar-bone and leaving his body. He fell to the ground, watching himself die through Seer’s eyes. He saw his breathing stop, saw his heart stop pumping blood out of his body. He saw his corpse, and Voldemort gloating over it. He watched through Seer’s eyes, but now they were his eyes. He looked at the body he now wore. Long, whole limbs, standing tall, high above the broken toy that Voldemort was crowing over below. “I’m sorry, Seer,” he whispered. No one answered.

On the steps below, Voldemort picked up Harry’s body. The long gash gaped obscenely, still seeping blood. “Your hero, Albus!” He had to shout to be heard, for the stones of the castle still grieved. Suddenly, the parapet that Harry was standing on shuddered, coming apart beneath his feet. Unable to cry out, he fell into a dark cavity, lit only by a thin slit of a window, through which he could watch the happenings below. The castle was throwing stones at Voldemort, tearing its facade apart in an attempt to drive him away from Harry’s corpse. He backed off, still laughing, and dragging Harry’s body with him. Exultantly, he threw his head back and his arm up, his face in an expression of rapture that was terrible to see. The spell was a victory cry.

“Morsemordre Fulmen!”

A blot of green lightning roared up from his wand, lighting the wards with fiery trails as it passed through them, exploding like a rocket high in the sky above. Leering down at Hogwarts was the Dark Mark, Voldemort’s emblem of a snake-eating skull, but an addition to it stole the heart from all those of magical blood who saw it. The grinning death’s-head now bore a lightning bolt emblazoned across its forehead.

(By the way, that was a short chapter. Sorry. ;P)

Chapter: 53

(This is the real update. I have the chapter finished now, and another coming as soon as I can.)

(Just so you know, fulmen is Latin for Lightning, I think. Please, no flames if I’m wrong. It sounds cool anyway.

Also, sorry once more for the delay. I hope to have one, maybe two more chapters up in short order. They’re written, but I haven’t had time to type and upload them. My most profound apologies to all of my loyal readers and reviewers.)

Chapter 53

Harry watched as the castle released Dumbledore, Dominic, and the other teachers. Dumbledore was crying freely, a sight that shook Harry to the core, as he tried to chase Voldemort. He didn’t have a chance. Still Dragging Harry’s flopping corpse, Voldemort summoned his thestral-mount, swung up adroitly into its saddle, and raced away at a gallop, still laughing. It took a very long time for him to get out of earshot.
Harry pounded at the walls of the room he was in, screaming to Dumbledore and the others that he was still alive, still here, but no one could hear him. The depth of Dumbledore’s grief took Harry’s breath away as the old man was led back inside at a tottering pace by Sirius, who looked too stunned to cry, and by Snape, who looked too livid. Dominic, following them, stopped on the steps, looking at the great pool of blood that had fonted out of Harry. It was already beginning to dry. He looked up at the sky, and Harry saw him slip into a light trance, the state so familiar from their lessons.

“Killed four times, by family, life, friends, and foe, he shall yet live to learn.” Dominic blinked, hope suddenly in his eyes, and then he ducked his head and followed the others inside, out of Harry’s sight.

Delivering a final, frustrated blow to the wall in front of him, Harry turned to examine the room in which he was held. It was dark and small, with a low ceiling, its only feature the one, narrow window. There was no door. Suddenly a bit claustrophobic, he began to run his hands over the walls, looking for a chink, a crack, a niche, anything. His fingers found rock, mortar, more rock, then cloth and flesh as a young man appeared through the wall with silent suddenness.

“You must be Harry,” he said straight off, offering Harry his hand. “I’m Erik Hufflepuff. It’s an honor to meet you.”

Harry just looked at the man, not taking his hand. “Why can’t they hear me?” he said, pointing to the window. Infuriatingly, the man just shrugged.

“I don’t know why she does what she does. I’ve never seen her like this before,” he said. A certain quality of confusion in his voice convinced Harry that he was telling the truth. And of something else.

“She’s Hogwarts, isn’t she?” Harry voiced the certainty that had come to him on the steps, a few minutes and a life ago. The man, Erik, nodded, smiling fondly as one hand reached back to caress the stone.

“Aye, she is.” He cocked his head, listening to something that Harry couldn’t hear. “She wants you to meet her. Follow me.” He turned, melting back into the wall. Before Harry could protest, a tunnel formed itself there, leading off into darkness. Cautiously, Harry followed it, feeling each step in the absence of light, feeling strangely more at ease in the dark. He still felt very awkward in the new body, so long accustomed was he to immobility, but he managed well enough. It wasn’t a long walk before the tunnel widened out into a large, echoing space. Not a glimmer of light existed, but steps echoed across the room. Tentatively, Harry continued to follow. Under his feet, the floor sloped softly downward. Finally, his leading foot splashed into water. Ripples of violet-tinged light spread out from the disturbance, bouncing off a far shore to criss-cross with themselves, multiplying until they lit the entire room.

The pool of incandescent water was surrounded by tall, gracefully fluted columns of some smooth, slate-blue stone. The columns combined with the light from below made Harry uneasy, but her presence was strong here. He walked forward, deeper into the water, feeling the floor change to fine sand beneath his feet. The water swirled in gentle currents around his legs, pushing him insistently first one way, then the other. In the water, he could feel magic; powerful spells, ancient, benign, and slow. The air was thin with the electric tang of it.

He was hip-deep when he saw her. In front of him, a large, flat shape, like an altar, loomed beneath the surface, and she lay upon it, seeming asleep. Harry reached out to touch her, but a warning sound stayed his hand. He looked up to see Erik standing on the surface of the water, the light-ripples passing unaffected beneath his sandaled feet. For the first time, Harry noticed the great, ornately wrought axe that hung from the man’s hip. He had seen it before, inside his own head.
“Don’t touch her,” he said, not unkindly. “She’ll wake to you when she’s ready.”

“Do you guard her?” Harry asked politely. Erik nodded.

“I do, as all Hufflepuffs have since we were charged with her care. We watch her, and we maintain her.”

“Are you a descendant of Helga Hufflepuff, then?” Erik’s answer was another nod.

“Yes, just as you are descended from Gryffindor, cousin.” A look of old sadness set into the young man’s face. “We are the last two heirs. There will be no more.”

“What about Voldemort?” Harry asked, confused. “I thought he was Slytherin’s heir.”

“He was,” agreed Eric gravely. “Until he betrayed his blood by slaying an heir of Gryffindor. Twice, now, he has made that betrayal.”

“Oh,” said Harry softly, running his hand across his chest. He could still feel that sharp blade crunching upwards through his ribs, cutting his heart in half. “Why couldn’t I kill him?”

Erik sighed. “There is an ancient pact between Slytherin and Gryffindor. The Griffon Blade cannot harm a Slytherin, any Slytherin, just as Man’s Mercy, the Slytherin weapon, will not harm any Gryffindor.”

“The sword spoke, when Voldemort and I were fighting. That was Godric Gryffindor, wasn’t it?”

“It is possible. Our ancestors, the Founders, left themselves behind in many things. They loved this school, and she loved them.”

“I still do.” The new voice made Harry spin around. Behind him, the woman who was Hogwarts was sitting up on her plinth, watching him with unguarded love in her face. “I love everything that’s left of them. That includes you, Heron, and of course you, Erik.” She laughed, extending a languid hand up to the Hufflepuff heir and pulling him down beside her. He sat behind her, and she leaned against him, running her fingers through his hair. They fit together like lovers, yet there was nothing to make Harry uncomfortable in either of their faces.

“How can I not?” she continued. “They are my children, just as surely as I am their creation. Before them, I was a scattered, disparate consciousness. I was hundred things; homes, businesses, shops, and yes, a school, but I wasn’t whole, didn’t know who I was until I was Hogwarts.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “You existed before you were a school? But I thought the Founders built Hogwarts, er, built you.”

“They did, after a fashion,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “See for yourself what I was, Heron.” She dipped her hand into the clear water, coming up with a crystal ball, which she held out to Harry. It was his own; there was the tiny lightning bolt in the glass.

“I can’t See,” Harry said flatly. “I’ve lost Seer.”

“No, you haven’t,” she laughed. “You’ve just taken him back inside of you, where he was before. You can’t lose him anymore than he could lose you. You will always draw yourself to yourself. Take the ball, Heron. See for yourself.”

Gravely, Harry took the ball from her hand. It tingled in his grip, and he could see tiny flashes of lightning crawling along the inside of the glass. He wrapped his hands around it, feeling the ice form
on his hands as he let himself fall into the trance that he had learned from Dominic. A vision engulfed him with relieving swiftness, meeting him with a rush of warm air, so fierce that he had to shut his eyes against it. He felt as though he were falling from a great height. Shielding his eyes with a hand, he opened them.

(Ah, feels good to finish another chapter. Maybe now ya’ll could review, eh?)

Chapter: 54

(I am going to take some startling liberties with Arthurian Legends. Don’t kill me, please. As King Arthur and co. never were copyrighted, I don’t have to write a disclaimer for them! I could say that they were mine, if I wanted to, and I can do whatever I wished with or to them. (Wait, don’t you do that anyway?) Shh. Read and Review, pretty, pretty please?)

Chapter 54

He was falling, it turned out, and yet he wasn’t. At the same time, he could see both the pillared room where Erik and Hogwarts watched him patiently, and he could see his vision.

What he saw below him, growing slowly as he fell towards it, was a small town perched on a cliff above a wild lake. Narrow, cobbled streets connected buildings of dressed stone and rough wood alike. They were bakeries and smithies, cobbler’s and seamstresses, tailors and banks. All the industries of an early medieval town. The place was thriving, its inhabitants bustling in all walks of life. Harry got closer and closer, until he found himself walking the streets. Here, he was a ghost. Nobody saw him, no one moved aside to make room for him on the crowded street. He passed through them, more insubstantial than wisping smoke. He felt them as a pressure, a shape of slightly firmer air, but to his eyes and ears, they were real. He listened to a pair of young flower-sellers gossip happily as he followed them up the main thoroughfare, held to a walk by the sheer press of the crowd.

“I saw Malcolm the Ferrier looking to court the Widow Abernathy in the market yesterday, I did,” said the first in a carrying whisper.

The other one shrieked happily. “You didn’t?”

“By my maidenhead I did. And her man only dead a fortnight.”

“Well, did she smile on him?”

Harry never did discover if the Widow Abernathy appreciated the attentions of Malcolm the Ferrier, for a bright sounding of trumpets silenced the two gossips, along with everyone else in the throng. The multitudes on the road parted as though cut with a knife, leaving Harry alone in a wide avenue, face to face with an oncoming phalanx of huge black horses.

At the head of the formation, two men rode side by side on identical black chargers. The men were as different as their horses were alike. The man on the right was a tall youth, red-headed and blue-eyes beneath a crowning cirque of wrought gold. His cloths were as plain as those of his men, simple linen under his wool cloak, but he wore them regally. He was, without question, a king.

The man at his side was old, older even than Dumbledore. He rode hunched over his pommel, his hands shaking palsily on the reins, but his green eyes were preternaturally sharp as they peered out
from his hood. His cloak was the creamy grey of unwashed wool, but the hem of his robe that showed beneath is was a rich, lovely purple velvet. His glance darted around, bright with ferret-like suspicion. Just visible under his hood and dark, grizzled hair was another cirque, a silver twin to the golden one on the other man’s brow.

The column’s process was slow. The knights, for so the other men were, laughed and talked among one another with the casual intimacy of comrades-in-arms. They were all, Harry noted, older than the boy-king who rode at their head.

“Merlin,” the boy-king said, smiling speculatively. “Are you ill, or are you merely out of sorts because Nimue your wife is too near to birthing to come to your bed?”

Merlin snorted ill-temperedly. “Mind your thoughts and your tongue, whelp. I am too old to be ruled by my lady’s bed.”

“Oh, of course, mentor,” the boy said, his eyes innocently scanning the skies.

“Don’t be childish, Arthur,” chided Merlin, harsh affection in his voice. “We have a Watcher present.” Suddenly, Harry realized that the old wizard was looking straight at him. The green eyes burned, seeming to pin him in place.

“Y- You can see me?” Harry stammered.

“Obviously, Watcher. Know you not who I am? I am Taliesin Hawkborn, called Merlin, Wizard-King of Logress, and this is Sir Arthur Pendragon...” He paused, smiling sardonically. “Called Wart, Warrior-King of Britain.”

Harry gaped a moment, then, prompted by some obscure inner instinct, he bowed formally. “My name is Heron James Potter ap Logress.” It was the first time he had ever used the full name that Nimue had bestowed upon him, and it felt awkward on his tongue.

Merlin pulled sharply on his reins, startled, and the horse reader before Arthur could grab its halter, pulling it back down to all four hooves. Merlin took no notice of any of this.

“Ap Logress?” His tone was dangerously low and interrogative. “Do you lie to me?” A look of suspicion crossed his face. “From where do you Watch us, lad? Who sent you?”

“I’m a Seer,” Harry explained. “From the future. The year 2001.”

“Ah.” The old man settled back in his saddle. “Are you of my line, then, or his?” He gestured towards Arthur, who, while he could plainly see nothing of Harry, was just as plainly used to the spectacle of his mentor carrying on a conversation with thin air.

“Yours, er, Your Majesty,” Harry answered with awkward deferentiality.

A tender look entered Merlin’s eyes, and lifted his head to look past Harry, up the avenue. “Ours,” he whispered.

Harry turned to follow his gaze, and gasped. Vivid against the cloudy sky stood a fortressed castle, built of the dark stone so familiar to Harry. It was the Great Hall of Hogwarts, looking very small without the rest of the sprawling academy. The stone, new-cut, glistened in what sun managed to break through the clouds, and the new-planed wood of the great double doors was bright behind the two women who stood in front of them, one bright, one dark.

“Our ladies await us, Merlin,” said Arthur, letting his horse dance forward impatiently. “You may be
immune, but I am a young man, and it has been more than a month since I last held my lady’s hand and... mphm?” He let the statement taper off into a suggestive sound, arching an eyebrow. “And the Lady Nimue looks too near her time to be out and about, does she not?”

Merlin’s brow furrowed. “You are right, boy. She should not be out of bed.” He urged his horse forward at a trot, and Harry had to run to keep up.

A page held Merlin's horse steady as he hastily dismounted and climbed the long bank of steps up to the two women. “Nimue,” he said fondly to the darker one, taking her hands in his. “I have missed your company, my lady wife, but is it wise for you to be on your feet?” He ran one hand over her vastly swollen stomach. “Your time is so near.”

“I’m fine, husband,” said Nimue. She wasn’t precisely the same woman that Harry had met in the labyrinths of Voldemort’s mind. This past version of her seemed smaller, and looked marginally more human, with ears where they should be and hands that lacked claws, but her eyes were the same; that depthless, shifting shade of amber gold around slit pupils, almost luminescent on the cloud-lit day. That inhuman, unnerving gaze found Harry, held him in place. “We are Watched.”

“I know, dear,” Merlin said reassuringly. “He means us no harm. He is a See, of our line.” His voice expressed a hopeful joy, his hand still splayed against her stomach, as if he wished already to hold the child within. Children. It struck Harry suddenly that she seemed small, too small to bear the four Founders as a bulge beneath her silk gown.

Moved again by instinct, Harry knelt before the woman. He knew that, here and now, he held the power to change the world. Why, he could keep Merlin from separating the magical world from the mundane. He was about to open his mouth, to offer warning counsel, but Nimue stopped him.

*The past is not yours to alter, Seer,* said her voice sternly inside his head while the Nimue standing in front of him waited patiently for him to speak, her head cocked to one side like a cat. So what he said instead was, “It is my honour to meet you, Ancestress.”

Her smile showed a hint of fangs as she nodded to him in acknowledgement. “The honour is mine, child. What brings you, or at least your Sight, to us?”

“I came to see a beginning, my Lady,” Harry said deferentially, his tongue falling into the strange formality of speech with an ease that surprised him.

“A beginning? A beginning of what, pray tell?” asked Merlin, standing now beside Nimue, his arm protectively around her waist. It was unnerving to have that pair of gazes on him, green and gold, both so intense that they seemed to hold him in place. He was aware of other activity around him; of the blond woman gathering Arthur into her arms for a heated kiss, off the riotous homecoming of the soldier-knights, and of the waves crashing gently against the cliffs below, and also of Hogwarts and Eric watching him patiently from that pillared pool where his real self lay, but all that was real in the world were those four lambent eyes.

“H- Hogwarts,” he stammered, still on his knee on the sun-warmed stone steps.

(I know it’s been a very long time since my last update, and all I can say is that I’m sorry. On the
upside, this is kind of a long chapter, I think. You know, this has been a very odd month. I’ll tell you all about it in an A/N at the bottom of the page, on the off chance that any of you are interested.)

Chapter 55

Merlin’s face showed nothing but perplexity. “Hogwarts? What is that?”

Nimue’s eyes narrowed, though, in recognition. “It will be? You speak truly? And it starts here?”

Harry shook his head. “No, my lady. It starts here.” He reached forward to touch her belly, to indicate the four lives within. Merlin made a startled sound and darted his hand forward to grab Harry’s wrist, stopping him before he could touch her. Harry was mildly surprised when the man succeeded. To everyone else in this vision, he was insubstantial. It made sense, though. If Merlin could see him when the rest could not, why would he not be able to touch him? What was really surprising, however, was the way the older wizard recoiled from the contact.

“C- c- cold,” he stuttered, clutching his right hand with his left. As Harry watched, the dark bloom of frostbite spread across the pale skin of Merlin’s fingers and palm. “What is this?” he demanded angrily.

“I don’t know, Sir,” Harry replied apologetically. “I’m sorry.”

Merlin wasn’t listening. His features had suddenly gone rigid, his eyes staring into the distance as ice spread from his hand up his arm, over his entire body. Only his eyes remained free of it, unblinking and vivid. Harry recognized a Seer’s trance in the unfocused intensity of their gaze. The ice cracked, but didn’t fall, as he opened his mouth. A hollow, echoing voice emerged, speaking in the measured tone of a vision.

“As a Phoenix rises, born from death, so shall he.

Killed four times over in the space of a circle, by family, friends, life, and foe,

He shall yet live to learn.

Of four, he is heir to two, and bound to a third from youth.

Of Gules, the First, the line is unbroken, of one, and one, and one, on to now.

One branch spreads off, ending in the Black-Barred Son, known as White.

Of Azure, the Second, the line is gone, forgotten in scholarly irony.

Of Vert, the Third, the line is betrayed by its own heir, untrue to its liege.

Vert forfeits to Gules, under duress.

Of Juane, the Fourth, its line remains extant, building a legacy long built.

Juane cedes its strength to Gules.

Gules, Azure, Vert, and Juane; Four houses, but only one Heir.

The Heir shall find the Lady.
The Lady shall find the Son.

The Son has found the Heir.

In Seeking, the Heir shall reveal all to those who once knew, and who need to know again.

The Two Worlds shall once more be one,

With the Golden City and the School that it is at its center.

All shall be brought about by the Heir,

With the Lady and the Black-Barred Son to guide him.”

Slowly, Merlin’s mouth closed, and he came out of his trance with a blank, weary expression. He blinked a few times, looking surprised. “Did I See? I, I, I don’t remember.” He looked stunned, and distinctly flustered. Nimue laid a placating hand on his shoulder, calming him.

“No, love,” she murmured. “You spoke a prophecy.” She cupped one hand in front of her, and a small, crystal orb formed in it, filled with a swirling, leaden smoke. She blew at it, a quick gust of air, and it sped of into the distance, flying faster than a Firebolt across the lake and away. “I’ve sent it to a safe place.”

“I would have liked to hear it, first,” growled Merlin, a little cross, but Nimue just laughed lightly. “It wasn’t for you, husband, nor for this time. Am I right, Watcher?”

“Yes, my Lady,” Harry agreed respectfully. “I think that it is why I’m here, to hear that.” This was true. Now that he had heard it, he felt a slight tug, a pulling from his own time and his own body. “I’m sorry, but I must leave.” With their smiling farewells, he surrendered to the sensation, falling upwards, returning the way he had come to the pillared pool.

“Welcome back,” said Hogwarts placidly.

“Thank-” Harry stopped, confused. He couldn’t move. A thick skin of ice coated him and the water around him, paralyzing him effectively. “What?”

A glance of concern creased Hogwarts’ brow. “What’s wrong, Heron?”

Harry struggled against the ice, unable to break away from it. “I, I can’t move. The ice is holding me!”

Erik looked at Harry as though he were talking nonsense. “What ice, Harry? You’re in free water.”

“No, I’m frozen here!” Harry was beginning to panic. “Can’t you see it?”

“There’s nothing to see,” insisted Hogwarts. “There’s nothing there.”

Harry didn’t answer her. The ice was thinning visibly, melting away as he watched. He shuddered once, hard, and the remnants fell away in a shower of diamond fragments.

“Oh!” exclaimed Hogwarts, startled. “I see it now!”

Erik plucked a floating shard from the water, examining it critically even as it melted away in his palm. “This isn’t ice. Well, not precisely. It’s not frozen water, is what I mean. I think...” He looked up at Harry, showing him what he now held in his palm. “Do you recognize this?”
Peering at it, Harry did recognize it. Erik was right. It wasn’t water. It was a small bubble of the strange liquid-light that he saw whenever he used his crystal ball. It shimmered in the Hufflepuff’s palm like a drop of mercury, scarcely touching his skin at all. Looking closer at it, Harry realized that it actually wasn’t touching Erik’s palm, but rather, hovering just above it.


Erik suddenly looked alarmed. “This is Sight?” He thrust the bubble out to Harry. “Take it, take it quick!”

Harry took it, starting a little when the bubble soaked directly into his hand. “What’s wrong?”

Erik looked up from scrubbing vigorously at his palm, where a faint red rash was already visible. “Sight’s a Ravenclaw attribute. I’m a Hufflepuff. I guess, you could say that I am allergic, just as I would be to your Griffon Blade, Harry, or to Slytherin’s Dagger. You would react just like this if you tried to wield my axe. We’re exclusive creatures, we heirs. Bred to our talents, our duties, and our Houses, unable to determine our own fates. You have a little more freedom than the rest of us, Harry, being Heir to two houses specifically, and the whole of Hogwarts as well.”

Harry thought about this, rubbing his hand where the drop had melted into him. “What’s Man’s Mercy?” Erik had named it before, connected to Slytherin. The mention of a Slytherin dagger reminded him.

“Oh, Man’s Mercy is the name of Salazar Slytherin’s dagger. It’s a nasty piece of work, to be sure. An assassin’s dirk about this long,” Erik held his hands approximately 16 inches apart. “And wavy. Beautiful metalwork, the hilt is scaled like a snake, with the blade as its tail. I’ve never actually seen it, myself. It hasn’t been in Hogwarts since Salazar left with it, all those years ago, but I’ve seen illustrations of it. Very, very nice.” He smiled, a little self-consciously. “Helga made the hilt. She made the hilt of the Griffon Blade too, you were very good at that sort of thing. She did it muggle-style too, for the most part. Carved a form, poured a mold, only used magic for the fine finishing.” He was obviously proud of his ancestress. “That’s what we do, we Hufflepuffs. We make things.”

“And you do a wonderful job,” laughed Hogwarts, ruffling Erik’s hair. “After all, you built me.” She gestured expansively, encompassing all of the castle around them.

Erik looked at Harry. “Well, not me, specifically. I didn’t build any of her, but I’ve maintained her for the last 19 years, ever since my appointment as Hufflepuff. My predecessor, well, my mother, Erin, built some parts. Greenhouse Three, for instance, and the North Tower. The most ambitious contribution that I ever made was the repair of the Great Hall after, well, after your demonstration of power a few months ago. I had to replace the entire floor, and the Slytherin table was irreparable.

Harry scuffed his foot against the sandy bottom of the pool in discomfort. I’m sorry about that, you know.”

“No need,” said Eric affably. “In fact, I found the power that you expended in that burst quite useful. The residue was enough to reinforce the wards considerably, and to renew the charm in the ceiling of the Great Hall, a chore that I had been putting off for too long. And, in all truth, Filch had been neglecting the floor for so long that it was easier to replace the stones than to clean them.”

Surprised, Harry laughed. “Really? The way he goes on, you’d think that he personally licked every stone clean after each meal.”

“He only cleans when he has to, or when someone is watching that he can complain to.” Erik smiled slyly. “If only he knew that someone was always watching.”
“He doesn’t know that you’re here, in the walls?”

“No one knows.” Erik’s face sobered. “Not even Dumbledore. The house-elves, I think, suspect that I’m here. It’s hard to hide anything from them, but they won’t tell. In all honesty, I think I’m half-myth even to them. They leave me things from time to time, almost like offerings. Food usually, but sometimes tools and books. Very useful, House-elves.”

“Why do you hide yourself?” asked Harry quizzically. “I mean, wouldn’t it be better if you, you know, could get some help from time to time? Maintaining the entire school by yourself must be hard work.”

Erik shrugged. “Hogwarts keeps her secrets. I’m one of them. It’s not for me to question why.”

Harry turned to Hogwarts, but she merely smiled enigmatically and shook her head.

Sensing that he wasn’t going to get an answer on this, Harry changed the subject. “I Saw Merlin, just a minute ago. Merlin, and Nimue, King Arthur, and…” His voice petered out as he realized something. “Camelot!” He faced Hogwarts excitedly. “You were Camelot! The Golden City from the prophecy was Camelot! No wonder modern historians and scientists can’t find it! Muggles can’t come near here, and it’s been completely disguised even if they could!” Harry was very excited. A small, un-athletic child, he had spent much of his free time before Hogwarts reading, and the Arthurian legends had long been a favorite of his. “That means it was real, all of it! The Knights of the Round table, Avalon, Excalibur—” He was interrupted by a deep, resounding note, so deep that it was felt, rather than heard. “What was that?”

Erik stepped back up to the surface of the water, his hand on the hilt of his axe and his face set in wary lines. “I don’t know. Retreat, my Lady, while I go and see what could reach us here. Harry, stay here.”

Harry stood up. “No. I’m coming with you.”

He expected resistance, but Erik merely shrugged. “As you wish,” was all he said, and then he set off at a jog into the surrounding darkness. Harry followed him, but met with a blank wall. “Hey!” he shouted in frustration, pounding his fists against the wall. The surface gave, and, surprised, Harry pressed it harder. His hand sank into the wall as if it were a gel only slightly thicker than water. He pressed farther, and met still with nothing solid, though his eyes told him that the wall was impassive stone. Suddenly, a hand grabbed his, and Erik’s face emerged only inches from his own. “Are you coming, or not?” he hissed impatiently, and pulled Harry into the wall.

Harry uttered a sound of surprise, then stopped, surprised to find that he could draw breath. Around him, the stone had faded away to a transparent shadow, softly lit from no source that he could see. He looked back, and could see the pool, where Nimue had retreated back below the water’s surface, only a shadow lying on her plinth. Looking around, he found that he could also see the Great Hall below his feet, filled now with people. He could see Dumbledore, spine stiffly held, facing the whole of the student body, speaking to them, but he could not hear him. Ahead of him, Erik was hurrying on. “Wait!” Harry called, running to follow him. “I need to go down there!” He pointed below him. “My friends have to know that I’m not dead.”

“Not now, there is no time,” Erik said impatiently, not stopping. “I have to learn what it was that reached us there. That is a protected place.”

Unable to do anything else, Harry continued to follow Erik through the walls and ceilings of the school. It seemed an endless labyrinth, yet Erik never hesitated in his path. He knew where he was going to find the source of that sound.
Down in the Great Hall, Dumbledore had called the students to the Great Hall, to tell them the news. It had taken him some time to get himself under control, but now his voice was steady as he addressed the students. Too steady, in fact. Even to his own ears it sounded lifeless and empty.

“As you know, Lord Voldemort has returned, and as you also know, he has been possessing Harry Potter against his will for the past several days. Today, Lord Voldemort came to our very gates. Harry Potter faced him, in single combat.” His voice cracked, and he looked down at his hands. “I was unable... unable to help him, or to protect him in any way. Harry was defeated. He is dead.”

The Hall was deafeningly silent for a moment, but then, like a starting engine, the crowd burst into an uproar of disbelief, fear, and anger. Ron, Ginny, the Twins, and Hermione sat, ashen faced and in shock, at the Gryffindor table. Dominic approached them, weaving through the crowd. He sat next to them, and the six of them sat in silence, tears running freely down their faces.

“Dead?” Hermione said finally, the word sounding choked and painful. She turned to Ron, burying her face in his shoulder. He held her as she sobbed, but he didn’t seem to see her. He just stared blankly in front of him, his eyes wide and unseeing. The twins, gaining control of themselves, were trying to comfort Ginny, holding her between them and patting her back as she cried.

Dominic pulled his crystal ball out of his coat, not using it to See, merely holding it for comfort. He soon put it back, though, finding the memories that came with it too painful. “He can’t be dead.” He straightened, blinking to clear his eyes, and took up his crystal ball once more. This time, he looked into it, fighting through his grief to See back just a few hours. He forced himself to watch Harry’s fatal duel, but the final blow could not be denied. Harry had been cleaved nearly in half. Still, Dominic could not shake the feeling that what he saw was wrong, as wrong as all the other times he had seen Harry’s death. So he watched it again, and again, from different angles each time. Nothing changed. He saw Harry fall, dead before his body hit the ground. Looking around inside the vision, he saw Seer’s fall, saw Harry’s shade disappear in a hail of stones as Hogwarts attacked Voldemort in rage. It was that which convinced him, in the end. If Seer was dead, Harry must be as well. “No...” Dominic whispered.

“My sympathies,” said a voice behind them, a voice made unfamiliar by true regret and an uncharacteristic lack of cynicism. Ron turned to find Snape standing behind him, wearing an expression of deep remorse. “I want, I want to tell you that I am very sorry for your loss.” He seemed to be almost stuttering. “I know... how it feels to lose a brother.” His face closed suddenly and he stalked off, retreating back to the Staff table with alacrity.

“Amazing. Sympathy from Snape.” Sirius’s humor sounded forced as he approached, Remus along with him. “Now there’s someth-“ Remus’s elbow cut him short with a jab to the ribs.

“I’m so sorry, Ron,” Remus said softly. “All of you. I know how important Harry was.”

Hermione looked up at him, wiping her nose. “Is. He’s still important to us, even if he’s...” She couldn’t say the word. “Gone.”

“I know, Hermione.” Remus’s voice was uneven. “James is still important to me, too, and Lily.”

“Oh, God,” Hermione gasped. “It’s the same. Voldemort killed them all.”

After what seemed like an eternity of walking and climbing through walls like a pair of rats, Harry found himself following Erik out through the wall next to the Great Doors. Harry’s sword still lay there on the stone steps, untouched and only a few feet away from the churned earth of his duel and the dried pool of his own blood.
“The sound came from here,” said Erik, looking around them as though he expected to be attacked.

“Well, there’s nothing here,” said Harry. “Just my sword, and...” He gestured mutely to the blood.

Erik replaced his axe in its halberd across his back, still looking around. “What could have caused a sound like that? And no one in the Great Hall looked like they had heard anything out of the ordinary.”

Harry walked over and picked up his sword, turning it idly in his hands. “You know, this is a beautiful sword. I wonder if Excalibur-“ He was interrupted once again by the deep, bone-reaching note. It emanated from the sword itself, a wave of sound like a sonic boom.

“That’s it,” Erik said excitedly. “It was the sword.”

“Excalibur,” Harry said experimentally. Again, the wave of sound came forth. “And that’s what caused it, but what does it mean?”

Erik shrugged. “How should I know? It’s your sword.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Harry wrapped his fingers fondly around the hilt, enjoying how it felt as though the sword were an extension of his arm, rather than an accessory to it. His voice dropped an octave, became sly, raspy, and furtive. “My prrescioussss.” He laughed, explaining to Erik, who looked at him in quizzical alarm. “That’s a line from a muggle movie. It’s about a ring, but it felt fitting here.”

“All right,” said Erik skeptically, squinting up at the sky. “You know, I haven’t been outside in years. I don’t like it out here.” He laughed self-consciously. “I suppose you could call me agoraphobic. At any rate, I’m going back inside. Do you wish to come with me, or rejoin your friends? You know they mourn for you.”

“I know,” Harry said gravely. “I’ll go to them.” Smiling dutifully, he sheathed his sword carefully through his belt, and faced the doors, squaring his shoulders. “Won’t they be surprised?”

Erik smiled, melting back into the wall, as Harry mounted the steps. With effort, Harry managed to pull one of the heavy doors open just wide enough to slip in. He crossed the entry hall and opened the door to the Great Hall, slipping in unnoticed in the on-going uproar. Intimidated by the commotion, all of it on his behalf, Harry just stood there in the doorway for long minutes. Then a Hufflepuff second year noticed him. She looked at him quizzically for a moment, trying to recognize him, then turned away.

“She doesn’t recognize me,” Harry murmured to himself. It made some sense, now that he thought about it. Seer had only looked vaguely like Harry, having been taller, unscarred, and blue-eyed, not to mention uncrippled and in possession of all of his limbs, and Harry now resided in Seer’s erstwhile body.

With that in mind, Harry pushed forward through the crowd, aiming for the Gryffindor table where he could see his friends supporting one another in their grief. His heart ached for having been the cause of this, encouraging him to reach them faster.

He stopped just a few paces behind them, hesitating now for some unknowable reason. But in that brief pause, Sirius turned around, tear-stained eyes half-open. Seeing Harry, they widened incredulously, then Sirius leapt up from his seat with a cry.

“James!” he shouted, tripping over the bench in his haste to reach his friend. Everyone nearby turned to look as Sirius reached out to embrace him, then recoiled, disappointment in his face as he got a good look at Harry. “No, it’s just that half-thing, Seer. Aren’t you?” he spat accusingly.
Harry’s face crumpled sadly. “You don’t recognize me at all, do you? It’s me. Harry.” His voice was pleading as he looked one by one at each of his friends. “I’m in Seer’s body, but it’s me. Ron, Hermione, you believe me, right?”

No one answered him. Silence was spreading in a pool around them, as those nearby became aware of what was going on at the Gryffindor table. “Ron,” Harry said, reaching out in desperation to his best friend. “Do you remember when we flew your dad’s Ford Anglia to Hogwarts? Remember that we ate a whole bag of toffees and then wished that we had something to drink? Remember last summer, when we played Blind Man’s Bluff at your grandmother’s house in the States? Remember when we used my invisibility cloak to visit the Mirror of Erised, and you saw yourself as Head Boy? It’s me, Ron, I swear it’s me. Harry Potter. I’m alive, I’m here. Please, please, just believe me!” He was almost crying. He wanted so badly for his friends to believe him, to know that he was alive, so they would stop mourning him.

Ron just looked at him. They were all just staring at him. Finally, it was Dominic who broke the silence. “It’s him. It’s Harry.” His certainty was obvious, and he stood up on the bench to shout over the crowd. “Harry’s alive! He’s here!” He reached down, pulled Harry up beside him.

“Dumbledore!” he shouted, his voice vibrant with joy. “Harry’s alive!”

At the staff table, Dumbledore looked up at Dominic’s shout and saw Harry. His face transformed, incredible relief lifting years off his face. “Harry!” With an agility he had never shown before, the old wizard jumped from his seat and down from the dais, leaping up onto the Gryffindor table and running to Harry, whirling him around in a gleeful embrace. “Harry, my boy, you’re alive!”

(So, a happy ending to the chapter. There y’all go.

Now, about my very odd month. To start with, every single plan I had made for the rest of this year has been drastically changed, from a simple visit from my best friend (cancelled by very cold temperatures), to the road trip I had planned for this November/December (cancelled by an over-liquidation of my assets.). Also, I’m now not going back to school until January 5th, and not back to University ‘til April or March. Far from being good news for you, my fans, what this means is that I’m going to remain working until just before Christmas, which means further that I am going to continue living on that computer-less island that I love so very much. (sdn)

On a further note, after a summer filled with a veritable storm of heat-waves, I am now freezing to death on the side of a mountain on an island in the middle of the Salish Sea. Highs are in the 40s, lows in the low 20s. In layman’s terms, it’s cold. Very cold. Some of my older readers will remember what happened to Harry the last time I was this cold. Be afraid. Be slightly afraid.

On yet another further note, I was attacked by a stellar jay on Thursday. I was cleaning one of the honeymoon suites in my hotel when I heard a skritching sound in the little garden patch just outside the door. Looking out, I saw said jay scratching holes in the dirt. Mildly amused but busy, I continued working and forgot about the odd behavior of the bird. A while later, a task sent me out of the suite to fetch some supplies, but no sooner had I set foot outside the door when a dark blue fury enveloped my head, beating me loudly about the ears and clawing at my face. It was the damned jay! Fortunately, it missed my eyes, but it was a near thing. Today, 6 days later, I still bear the scratches, less than an inch from my left eye on my temple, and even closer on the lower lid. Truly, a harrowing experience, but most people seem to find my account of it entertaining. To add to the oddity of the experience, that jay or another perched outside of the windows of my next two rooms and screeched imprecations at me. Alfred Hitchcock seemed to haunt me, that Halloween-eve.

But oddest of all I have saved for last. My boss gave me 5 days off. In that generous spirit, I offer you all now the chance to give me a resounding, applaudative review. *grin*)
Knocked breathless by Dumbledore’s enthusiastic embrace, Harry only smiled foolishly. Around them, the mood of the hall had changed dramatically. The pensive tension of the moment before was gone; there were very few faces that weren’t either exultant or relieved.

Harry’s friends and family still sat, staring up at him. Ron’s mouth had fallen open and Hermione was still sniffing, wiping furiously at her teary cheeks.

“Harry?” Ginny whispered tentatively, clinging tightly to Fred’s hand. Harry extricated himself from Dumbledore’s giddy dance and knelt down on the table, reaching out to wipe a tear away with his thumb.

“Yes, Ginny. It’s me.”

The next instant, Harry was knocked back once again as the twins surged up from their seats to tackle him in a joint hug. “Thank Merlin,” exhorted George in a tight whisper. “Mum would have killed us if we’d let you die.” Fred nodded in mute agreement, squeezing Harry tightly.

“Hey, let off, boys,” said Sirius happily, prying Harry from their clutches. “My turn by right of Godfather status.”

It seemed that everyone wanted to touch Harry, to assure themselves of his reality and vitality. Even some of the Slytherins joined in the general celebratory air. A few, however, did not. Crabbe, looking oddly small without Goyle at his side, and a sixth year named Spencer Nott slipped stealthily out of the Great Hall, heading up the stairs to the owlery.

It took Harry over two hours to escape the Hall, almost fleeing to the sanctuary of the Gryffindor Tower. Halfway there, though, near the library, a slight figure stepped out of the shadows to block his path. “I knew you weren’t dead,” said the figure, a slender, straw-haired girl that Harry only half-recognized as a Ravenclaw from his year.

“It’s Laura, right?” he asked tentatively, trying to remember her name. He was abashed when she shook her head, but she didn’t look insulted.

“No, it’s Luna. Luna Lovegood. I was in your Charms class last year.

“Right,” Harry said quickly, remembering. “What did you mean?”

“I knew you weren’t dead,” she repeated.

“How?”

She shrugged eloquently, then turned and disappeared down a side corridor just as Ron and Hermione caught up to Harry.

“Was that Loony Lovegood?” asked Ron, looking down the way she had gone. Harry nodded, already resuming his progress. Hermione chastised Ron gently.
“Don’t call her Loony, Ron. She’s really very smart. Well, of course she is; She’s a Ravenclaw, after all. She’s just a little... odd.”

“A bit ‘Loony,’ you mean,” retorted Ron with a grin. Harry beamed, ridiculously happy to be here, listening to his two best friends bantering. It seemed that all was finally back to normal in his world.

By the time the three of them reached the Gryffindor Common Room, a party was already in the making there, under Fred and George’s enthusiastic leadership. Harry was ushered immediately to a seat of honor before the fire, where he was toasted with gallons of butterbeer.

“How’d you do it, Harry?” asked Fred, handing Harry his own glass.

Harry shook his head ruefully. “Wish I could tell you, mate. I wish I knew. One minute, I was down, blind, and Voldemort was so close in my face I could smell him, and he was cutting me in half, slowly, and then the next I was standing up above it all watching that git drag away a body with my face on it, laughing like a demon. For a moment, you know, I thought I was dead; a ghost, you know, but I didn’t glow or float or walk through walls. I was just in this little room with a window and no door, all by myself.” Harry caught himself, stopping the babbling. He didn’t want to talk about Erik, or Hogwarts, or Merlin yet. Not just yet.

Ron came up then, flushed and grinning. He perched on the back of Fred’s chair. Looking up at him from that angle, Harry felt a flash of deja vu.

“Hey Fred. Can I borrow your wand a minute? Hold still, Ron.” With quick flicks of the borrowed wand, Harry conjured a line of dense gold smoke across Ron’s brow and transfigured his school robes into a white cotton tunic and a red wool cloak. The result was familiar. “I thought so.”

“Thought what?” asked Ron, scowling vaguely and waving the smoke away. “What was that about?”

Harry made an affected sound of distraction. “Oh, you reminded me of someone for a second, is all. It’s nothing.” Harry waved the issue away while grinning inwardly. His friend was a dead ringer for that long-ago king who had ridden at Merlin’s side on a black charger.

Suddenly, the wand Harry had borrowed gave off a loud ‘crack’ and turned into a clockwork mouse. Harry stared at it. “But...? I...”

Fred and Ron both gaped at him. “Cool, Harry,” said Ron in an amazed voice. “How’d you do that? It’s an illusion charm, right?”

“Just a second,” Harry said, waving Ron to be quiet. Moving deliberately, he got up, set the mouse on an end table, and then walked to the far side of the fire. Extending his empty hand towards the toy, Harry concentrated. “Accio!” The mouse flew straight to him without hesitation. Harry stared at it as though it did not belong in his hand.

Hermione spoke up worriedly from her place next to Ron. “You’ve done wandless magic before, Harry, remember?” She looked nervous. “In the hospital wing, after...” She looked down at her hands, which she was wringing in her lap. “After we almost killed you.” Her voice was less than a whisper.

“Hermione,” Harry said, taking her hand. “Were you one of the...” He couldn’t say it, but she nodded her head glumly, then made a startled squeak of surprise as he hugged her fiercely, almost lifting her off her feet. “Thank you!” he murmured fervently in her ear, and then he kissed her warmly on the cheek, ignoring Ron’s indignant sputter. “You didn’t almost kill me, Hermione,” he
assured her earnestly, holding her out at arms length so he could meet her gaze. “You saved me. Given the choice between a little pain at the hands of my friends and a snake in my boot, er, head, I’ll take Crucio any day.” His offhand levity was infectious, and Hermione couldn’t help but laugh a little.

“You mean it?”

“You know I do. After all, I’ve come near death so many times already; what’s one more?”

“How many is it now, anyway, Harry?” asked George jokingly. Harry had to think a minute.

“Let me see. Shot and thrown off a cliff, asphyxiated on a broomstick, that’s two, driven out of my body, three, and cut in half. Four. Did I miss any?”

“No, I think that’s it,” agreed Fred sarcastically. “Four, eh? Most of us only get one, you know.”

“Four,” Harry repeated thoughtfully. “Four! Killed four times in the space of a circle - That means one year, it must - by family, if you could call Vernon family, friends -“ He nodded to Hermione. “Life - Quidditch was my life, or at least I thought it was - and foe, he shall yet live to learn! Well, I’m still alive, and I’m still here in the school. It’s coming true!”

“What are you talking about, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“The prophecy! Merlin’s prophecy! You know, oh, no, you don’t know. I’ll show you. Accio Pensieve!” He caught the stone bowl adroitly, already drawing a strand of thought from his temple. He added it to the swirling fluid and a moment later, the ghostly figure of Merlin spun slowly above the surface, repeating the prophecy from Harry’s vision of the past.

“Wow,” said Ron when Merlin had fallen silent. A voice from behind them answered him.

“‘Wow’ indeed, Ronald,” said Dumbledore, having appeared suddenly in their midst. “That is impressive, Harry. A vision?”

Harry nodded an affirmative. “I Saw it just an hour or so ago. That’s Merlin, Headmaster.” He fiddled with the memory a bit, and the view widened. “And that’s Nimue. They’re my great-great-times-thirty-or-so-grandparents,” he announced proudly, folding his arms across his chest.

“So they are, Harry,” said Dumbledore, bending down to study the small images more closely. “He has your eyes.” He looked up at Harry to confirm the comparison, blinking in surprise when the eyes in question turned out to be not green, but blue. “Well, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know,” Harry said, his smile fading a fraction. “Seer’s eyes are, er, were, whatever. They’re blue.”

Dumbledore looked puzzled about something. “They were green before, right? It’s not just an old man’s senility?”

Harry nodded. “I don’t think you’re much at risk for that, Professor Dumbledore.” He smiled. “A bit mad, but not senile. Anyway, what does it matter what color my eyes are? In case you all haven’t noticed, everything about me is different now. I’m about a head taller, my hair is shorter, and I’m wearing Ravenclaw robes with a prefect badge, for crying out loud. It’s still me, though. You know that much, right?” He wasn’t pleading, not quite, but there was a vague note of uncertainty in his voice. He still felt uneasy in this new body, and he knew that he would remain so until he knew that his friends were comfortable with him as he now was.
“We know, Harry,” said Hermione gently, touching his arm. Suddenly uncomfortable, Harry changed the subject by asking the headmaster about his own wand; he hadn’t seen it since the episode with the dementor.

“I have it in my office,” Dumbledore answered. “I could retrieve it for you if you like.”


“You remember what I said, Harry, about the rules of magic?”

“Don’t worry,” answered Harry, nodding. “I know. ‘With Great Power comes Great Responsibility.’ I’m not going to do anything I’m not supposed to.” His voice expressed only the slightest of regrets. “I’ll even use my wand, if you want me to.”

Dumbledore nodded, smiling with relief. “It’s not that wandless magic is wrong, Harry. You’ve seen me use it on occasion. It is only that it is unnerving to see such strength in one so young. First your Sight, and then that demonstration in the Great Hall, and now this.” He made a gesture that somehow seemed to encompass both Harry’s return from the dead and his wandless magic. “I’ve never seen a youth with your power and potential, Harry, and I only know of two wizards alive whose abilities even approach yours. Myself, and Tom Riddle.”

“How did I know you were going to say that?” Harry asked in gentle sarcasm.

From there, the conversation fell into humor and friendly jibes. Relieved and happy himself, Dumbledore left the Gryffindors to their party. It was very late, or else very early, before Harry and Ron stumbled down the house-elf passage to their room.

“You know,” Harry said as Ron tried to remember the password (Quaffle). “I feel a little guilty about keeping this room, now that I’m, you know, better. I mean, we don’t really need it anymore, do we?”

“No,” answered Ron blithely, “but if no one says anything about it, I’m hardly about to make a stir, eh?” He grinned a trifle drunkenly, finally getting the door opened. Harry looked around the room with interested, curious to know what it actually looked like. It was less colorful than he had imagined it; save for the red and gold of the boy’s Gryffindor gear and the garish orange of Ron’s Chudley Cannons posters, the room was mostly grey stone, interrupted only by a few dusty old tapestries and a carpet just this side of threadbare. It was a homely, cozy room all the same.

The window above Harry’s bed was shut and shuttered, so he climbed up onto his canopy to open it. The view was disappointing. Less than three feet away, the curved wall of a tower rose. Harry made a sound of disappointment, drawing Ron’s attention. The red-head laughed.

“Oh, don’t worry, Harry. That’s only there Mondays through Thursdays. Week-ends, we can see the Forest, and one end of the Quidditch field. And on every third Tuesday, we can see the lake.” Ron turned back to his trunk, which he was rooting through. “I don’t know if you want to see these, Harry, but now that you can...” He held up a sheaf of papers, mostly newsprint from what Harry could see.

“What are they?” he asked, climbing down.

“Just some newspaper clippings,” Ron answered with a poorly-done air of nonchalance. “Mostly about you, some about You-Know-Who. You don’t have to look at them, but I saved them, just in case. If you want to.”

Harry took the bundle from Ron, flipping through it stiffly. Pictures of himself smiled, frowned, or
grimaced from every page. He lingered on a picture from the trial. It was a color picture, clipped from the front page of the Daily Prophet, and it showed the whole courtroom. Harry was struck by how drawn and thin he looked, how frail in his wheelchair. Flipping farther, he found a picture of himself in his bed at St. Mungo’s, wearing only his shorts. He vaguely remembered having heard a camera during the examination that Fudge had insisted upon, and he felt a flush of shame. The picture showed everything: the scars from his fall down the Dover cliff were still red with fresh healing, and his stumps were raw-looking. Harry studied the picture gravely, hardly aware of Ron, who was watching him reservedly.

“You okay?” Ron asked. Harry looked up, frowning faintly.

“How could he have done it?” he asked rhetorically. “I know he never liked me, but he raised me. If he hated me so much, why did he bother taking care of me for all those years? Why didn’t he just abandon me, or leave me at an orphanage somewhere?” His voice cracked slightly, but his face was set.

Ron shrugged. “Who knows? He was mad, Harry. Raving.”

Harry snorted. “Well, if he wasn’t then, he is now. He’s been in Azkaban what now, six months? Seven?”

“Right,” agreed Ron. “Serves him right. I still can’t believe that you didn’t have him Kissed, though.”

“It would have been too good for him,” Harry said firmly, putting aside the papers and standing up. “Hey, do you want to go flying? I need the practice.”

Ron agreed eagerly, and the two all but ran down to the Quidditch pitch, retrieving their brooms from the broom shed. Harry stopped a moment to look at his Starstone. It was as gorgeous as he had envisioned it inside of his head, a deceivingly delicate construction of faintly blue glass shot through with a whirlwind of quicksilver flecks and a brush of straw, straight and pale as beams of moonlight. The modifications allowing for his disabilities looked natural, as though all brooms should have their like, but Harry found that they were removable without too much difficulty. He smiled at the optimism that must have made Dumbledore ask for that allowance. “It’s beautiful,” he murmured, running his hands down its length.

“It’s more beautiful in the air,” quipped Ron, already hovering on his Firebolt. Harry laughed, mounted up, and sped off into the sky. They flew a couple of wide, looping laps around the pitch and then settled into a game of catch, using Ron’s knotted tie as a miniature Quaffle.

“So,” Ron asked after an interval of near-silence. “Are you going to rejoin the team?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, a little out of breath from a steep dive to catch a dropped throw. “Wouldn’t really be fair to Dennis, would it? I heard he played great in the match against Ravenclaw.”

“Yeah, he’s okay,” Ron agreed reluctantly. The fact that he didn’t immediately assure Harry of his superiority was telling. Harry knew that Dennis was good: he had chosen him at tryouts, after all. Training him had been a manifestation of one of Harry’s first Seeings, unconscious though it may have been. It had been a sore point at the time, but resentment had long-since faded in the face of greater worries.

“I might come back,” Harry said reflectively. “But just as reserve Seeker. I need some more practice, anyway. I’ve gotten a little out of shape.” He smirked. “Well, Seer doesn’t strike me as the sort to be
a Quidditch player.”

*I wasn’t,* said a small voice inside Harry’s head. Harry jerked in surprise, pulling his broom into an awkward flip. Ron shot him a quizzical glance.

“Seer,” Harry explained. “I hadn’t heard him since I took his body, but he just told me that he wasn’t a Quidditch player.”

“No surprise there,” said Ron. “I mean, he was a Ravenclaw, wasn’t he? The game’s not exactly a big priority in that house.”

“I don’t know about that,” countered Harry. “Cho’s a Ravenclaw, and she’s really into Quidditch.”

“Yeah, well, you get a few odd ones in every house. Just look at Hermione. If you ask me, I think the Hat’s getting old. Sorting a few people wrong, you know?”

Harry half-nodded, remembering his own Sorting. “I know what you mean.”

“Well, come on.” Ron beckoned with his head. “I’ll race you, three times around the pitch and finish line’s the tall goal post.” With a laugh, Harry lined up with his friend, and burst into speed at his shout. It began as a close race, and then Ron began to pull slowly ahead, his whole form bent low and intent over his broom. In a surge of competitive spirit, Harry urged his broom faster and faster, just as he had in the match against Hufflepuff at the beginning of the season. He soon felt the faint vibration that meant he had reached the limits of his broomstick, but he ignored it, continuing to push himself forward. Deep inside of himself, he felt a barrier of some sort gave, and the air parted before him. He blazed forward, leaving Ron behind in an instant. In moments, he was going so fast that the first turn made him slow down to make it without slamming into the stands. The speed and the exertion was rapidly robbing him of strength. A loud boom shook the air as Harry kept going faster. Ron was a blur as he lapped him once, then again, and then he crossed the finish line with a barrel roll, struggling to stop.

Too quickly, one of the towers of the stands loomed in front of him. He threw his body back, pulling the broom into a climbing spiral that took him higher than the castle in a heartbeat. Finally conquering his momentum, Harry sat hovering just below the level of the clouds, looking down at the lights of the castle.

Up here, the air was so cold that it hurt his throat, but the beauty of the scene made up for it. The sun was nearly up, and the horizon was the insubstantial grey of false dawn that suggested that the sun was just out of sight, that it would rise any second. Harry climbed a little higher, trying to see it, but just before he entered the cloud layer, he encountered a barrier. It shimmered faintly rainbow when he touched it, purple and the color of old gold dominating the display. Harry was confused a moment, but then he recognized the pattern. He had seen it when the Dementor reeled against the wards in its death throes. Apparently, the wards extended to cover the castle as well. What was not apparent was why they weren’t letting him pass through, like they had on the ground. Thinking about it, though, Harry conceded that it made a little sense. It wouldn’t do to have a team of Quidditch players, all mounted on broomsticks, burst through the cloud layer in front of a low-flying airplane.

Succumbing to the frigidity of the altitude, Harry dove back down to rejoin Ron. “No fair,” protested the red-head. “How’d you do that?”

“I don’t know,” Harry answered, shaking his head. He was panting for air, out of breath and aching. “But I can’t do it very often. I feel like I just ran a marathon.”

“You went so high I couldn’t see you. I was about to go tell Dumbledore that your broom had run away with you. Not that a Starstone would, you know.” Ron’s voice was a little accusing, as if
Harry had meant to show him up so badly.

“I didn’t meant to leave you in the dust like that,” Harry said softly, apologizing. “I was just racing, and, well, that happened.”

Ron didn’t answer. Rather, he was looking past Harry with a look of distasteful surprise on his face. “What’s he doing here?”

Harry turned to follow Ron’s gaze, and was shocked to see Draco Malfoy flying lazily towards them on his own broomstick. The blond ex-Slytherin smirked as he pulled up to a neat stop near the boys, his formal robes swirling around him. “Good morning, Potter.”

“What are you doing here, Malfoy?” Harry snapped. “Spying for Voldemort, are you?”

“Of course not,” said Malfoy casually, brushing dismissively at his sleeve. “Don’t be ridiculous. Father is here, paying a visit to Dumbledore, and I came along for a bit of fun.”

“You shouldn’t have come,” growled Harry. Resentment that had faded over time flared back up again. Malfoy had tried to kill him, and had gotten off with a pittance. “Anyway, shouldn’t you be at Durmstrang now?”

“None of your business, Potter. You don’t need to know the politics behind this visit.” Malfoy was smug to a point beyond bearing. “And what’s that you’re wearing, Weasley? Cast-offs from a theater troop?”

Ron looked down at himself. He was still wearing the tunic and cloak that Harry had transfigured. Scowling slightly, he transfigured them back into his school robes.

“Hardly better,” Malfoy drawled. “I mean, now that your family finally has money, why do you still wear rags like that? Do you like being the shame of wizards everywhere?”

Ron lunged forward, trying to attack Malfoy, but Harry held him back. “That’s what he wants, Ron. Don’t let him goad you.”

“No, Weasley, of course you shouldn’t let me guide your actions. That’s what Potter’s here for.” Malfoy turned a lazy circle on his broom. “After all, the Golden Boy rules this place, doesn’t he? Even Dumbledore jumps through hoops for you.” He sneered openly. “And soon, unless my father has anything to say about it, and you should know that he most definitely does, you’ll have the new Minister of Magic in your pocket as well.”

“What are you talking about, Malfoy?” Harry was confused.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Really, Potter, how blind are you? With Cornelius Fudge dead, a new Minister of Magic is needed. Campaigning begins next week. Dumbledore accepted a candidacy from the Phoenica party, and his only real opponent is Mary Martinelli from the Draconis party. Oh, there are other candidates running, but no one really with a chance. I mean, there’s a centaur running. Honestly, the day a non-human takes office, Voldemort’ll sit down to tea with that Muggle queen, what’s her name?”

“Elizabeth,” Harry said automatically. His head was spinning. He had known, peripherally, that there were politics in the wizarding world just like in the muggle one, but he had never really stopped to consider it. “Dumbledore’s running for Minister? I thought he turned it down once already.”

Draco grimaced. “Now, apparently, he thinks he can do more good there. He just wants a bigger licence to meddle, I’m sure. Next thing you know, he’ll have muggles in ministry positions, and he’ll
be trying to teach them magic.” He snorted. “My father, of course, supports Martinelli. Aside from having been a classmate and a fellow Slytherin, she has a very sensible attitude towards muggles and muggle-borns.”

“She hasn’t got a chance,” scowled Ron. “No one but a Slytherin would vote for a Slytherin. Dumbledore has this in the bag.”

Draco didn’t answer, merely smiled archly and floated gently down to the field, where Lucius Malfoy stood at the foot of the stands.

“Harry,” Ron whispered urgently. “He wasn’t surprised to see you alive, in a different body.”

“I know,” Harry whispered back, glaring at Malfoy’s back. “Someone told him. That means his father know too, and if Malfoy Sr. knows, I’d bet my life that Voldemort knows.”

Chapter 57

(I’m sorry for this chapter and the last. They’re kind of a recap/regroup segment, letting me gather my wits and my notes before Harry’s next calamity. Also, life sucks right now, so I can’t really focus on BBH the way I’d like to. *Grumbles something about frozen pipes and floods of freezing water under the carpet, ruined desks and crazy little Mexican ladies.* It’s a long story, and, if I ever have time, I’ll explain it in my makeshift livejournal at BBH’s Yahoo group, the link to which can be found on my author page. (A shameless plug: two more members and we’ll have a hundred. Please?) Oh. And I refuse to write anything approximating a French accent. That is all.)

Chapter 57

Harry and Ron hovered above the Malfoys, not wanting to get too close, but wanting even less to leave them unsupervised on the grounds. Lucius looked up at Harry, smiling blandly. “Ah, Harry. Our favorite revenant. Congratulations are in order. Twice now, you have earned the title ‘Boy-Who-Lived.’ Your parents would be proud.”

“You got the news awfully fast,” Harry said coldly, staying high enough to be out of reach.

“It pays to be well-informed,” Lucius replied. “I heard about it last night.”

“And have you told your master yet?” Harry’s tone was icy as he looked down on the Death Eater. Draco looked about to claim insult, but Lucius just chuckled, shaking his head.

“You know nothing, boy.” He flared his cloak dramatically and strode off toward the gates.

“Watch yourself, Potter,” smirked Draco, before dismounting and following his father.

“Watch yourself, Potter,” repeated Ron in a slurred, mocking voice. “Should we follow them?” Harry nodded, and they drifted slowly after the pair. Neither Malfoy looked back, but neither were they insensible of their escort.

“Hey,” whispered Harry, nudging Ron. “Look. Over there.” Ron followed Harry’s gaze and saw what he had seen. In the shadow of the stands, Snape was watching the Malfoys pass, a look of disdain on his face. And farther down the track, a black dog glared from under a thick bush. They were making sure that the two blond men left without incident.
Once the pair was gone, Harry landed near Sirius, who transformed back into a man, standing up. “What did Mr. Malfoy want to talk to the Headmaster about?” Harry asked. Sirius scowled.

“He made vague threats and promises, and he made it absolutely certain that Dumbledore knew who would and would not be voting for him. He also told Dumbledore that if he tried to keep your resurrection a secret, like he did your rescue this last summer, that he would be put in the very worst possible light when the truth was revealed by the Draconises.” Sirius snorted disapprovingly. “I hate politics.”

“What are the Draconis Party and the Pheonica Party?” Harry asked as Snape came up to join them. Ron looked like he would rather be going back into the castle, but he stayed with Harry.

“Snape would be more qualified to answer that one, Harry,” said Sirius grudgingly. “When I went into Azkaban, the Pheonica was just a minority party. You know, the kind that gets maybe 2 percent of the votes. But now it’s a major force, especially since Dumbledore began to support it, which, if I remember right, was right after Fudge was elected.”

“What party was Fudge from?” Harry asked curiously.

“Centauris,” answered Sirius. “It was the biggest political power until about that whole issue with not being able to catch, well, me.” He grinned unabashedly.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Black,” murmured Snape. “It was the business with the Dementors attacking innocent students that sent the Centauris out of the popular vote. Fickle, if you ask me.” A hint of a smile teased at the corner of his mouth. “I, of course, was obligated to withdraw my support after a debacle like that.”

“Now who’s flattering himself?” growled Sirius, rolling his eyes. Snape only arched an eyebrow in reply. “So, Harry, are you interested in politics?”

“A little,” Harry confessed. “I’d just never thought of them before. So, they’re like the Conservative and the Labor Parties, right?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Snape said while Sirius shrugged. “I take it those are muggle terms?”

“Er, yeah,” Harry answered. “To be honest, though, I don’t know anything about muggle politics, either.”

“You should keep it that way,” urged Sirius jokingly. “Politics are a nasty business, magic or not. Bunch of sharks, if you ask me, all of them your friends until they taste blood in the water.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, I have to agree with Black.” Snape’s lip curled. “This election in particular is going to be turbulent, for these are troubled times. I don’t doubt that a meeting of the Confederacy will be called very soon. I expect at least one faction to call for Dumbledore not to run, on grounds that he is too valuable here, protecting the children. I myself would like that, but I know that the alternative, Martinelli as Minister, would mean disaster.”

“Malfoy said she was a Slytherin,” blurted Ron. “Is she a Death Eater?”

Snape looked at him sternly. “No. Not all Slytherins are Death Eaters, Mr. Weasley. In fact, she was an Auror during Voldemort’s last rise. That’s what she’s basing her campaign on now; that she knows what it’s like to fight the Dark Lord. But she is even more of a traditionalist than Fudge was. The type who believes firmly in pureblood superiority, and is willing to make absolutely no allowance for muggle concerns.”
“I believe the word she used was “subhuman issues,’ ” pointed out Sirius seriously. “The woman’s a bigoted racist, and she’s completely intolerant of non-humans. If she were Minister of Magic, we’d lose a few students, not to mention a teacher or two. That Chaser of yours, for example. She was one of the Confederacy members that made it so hard for Tristan to get a wand.”

“The Confederacy?” Harry asked. It sounded slightly familiar, but he couldn’t quite place it.

“The International Confederacy of Wizards,” clarified Sirius. “It’s the ruling body of thewizarding world. Ministers of Magic in each country answer to them, as well as to the governments of that nation. That’s part of why there was so much tension between Fudge and Dumbledore. You see, no disrespect to the dead, but Fudge never swung an appointment to the Confederacy.”

Harry thought he was beginning to understand the structure of wizarding politics. “Then, won’t Dumbledore be taking a step down, going from a member of the Confederacy to Minister of Magic?”

“Not really. As a Confederacy member, he is only one vote among nearly a thousand. He has a little more personal jurisdiction as Minister. And he doesn’t have to give up his seat anyway, if he can handle the extra work.” Sirius sounded confident that Dumbledore could handle anything, up to and including ruling the world.

“So, who’s going to be Headmaster?” Ron asked bluntly, unsure whether to sound enthusiastic or anxious.

“It hasn’t been decided yet,” said Snape stiffly. “All the house heads are being considered for the post.”

“Even you?” Ron looked horrified, and Harry stifled a grin. The year before, he would have shared Ron’s trepidation. Snape as Headmaster? Gryffindor would spend the next ten years in negative house points. But he had learned a little more about the man over the summer, and no longer feared him. He was a little more fair now. A little.

“Yes, Mr. Weasley,” Snape said drily. “Even I am being considered, but I would not choose to be Headmaster, even if it meant that I could persecute hapless Gryffindors to my heart’s content.” The corner of his mouth twitched up in what might have been a smile in anyone else. Harry gaped. Snape had just made a joke. “I dislike that sort of responsibility, and will happily leave it to Minerva or one of the others, should they be elected.” He sighed. “Although, putting this school into the hands of yet another Gryffindor does leave something to be desired.”

Ron stared, unused to Snape’s sense of humor. Harry smiled, and spoke. “So, is Dumbledore at least going to stay for the rest of the year?”

“Oh, yes,” Sirius assured him. “While campaigning begins next week, the election won’t be until next autumn. It takes a long time to replace a Minister.”

“Speaking of long times,” interrupted Ron. “It has been a long time since I ate anything other than butterbeer and party snacks. Breakfast should be soon, right?” His stomach rumbled and underscored his comment, and Harry and Sirius laughed. The small group headed back up to the castle, to breakfast.

That night, Harry dreamed. He dreamed that he was warm, wrapped safely in his mother’s womb. He was just a mote; barely a person but definitely a human life. Forces danced around him and through him, but he paid them no heed.

Then the dream diverged. One part of his mind continued floating blissfully in the warm darkness,
but the other stepped back as the embryo’s future spun out before him, shining and enticing. Like watching a reel of film, Harry watched the birth of Grant, which was what the mother, a witch, would name the embryo. He watched him grow, saw his first accidental magic when his father, a large, powerfully built muggle, hit his mother when Grant was only two. Harry felt the surge of angry fear as the small child threw the man across the room, putting him into a coma that would eventually kill him. Harry went with him to a foster home at age three, after his stepfather hit his mother so hard that she was left a witling, and he went with him to Hogwarts when he was old enough, was sorted into Hufflepuff with him, graduated with him. In that dream, Harry raced through nearly 20 years with that boy. Then, the part of him that remained an embryo was rudely awoken by a flash of cold, deadly, green light filtering through the mother’s body. Harry woke up to the darkness of his room.

“Good morning, Seer,” said a familiar silky voice. Mystoffelees stretched in her spot at the foot of his bed, barely visible as a pale shadow in the predawn gloom. “Sweet dreams?” Harry glared at her. “Don’t blame the familiar,” she remarked archly, washing herself with a pale pink tongue. “You See it, not me.”

“I know,” bit off Harry sharply. “I just hate it, Seeing futures that will never happen, just because Voldemort is an evil git!”

The cat looked up, straight at him, surprising him with the ludicracy of her crossed eyes a trait of her breed. “I know, Harry. I do wish I could lighten part of your burden.” Her voice held an uncommon note of earnestness, but Harry was still too worked up from his dream to take note.

“Well, if you can’t help me with this, than what good is a familiar anyway! What’s the point of a talking, sarcastic cat?”

Myst bowed her head sadly. “We record your visions, so that they are not lost. Before you came into your gift, I was an ordinary cat, with a life of two decades at most to look forward to, but your first Seeing called me into service. Now I am a familiar, and I cannot die until every future that you have seen comes to pass, and every vision that you have lives on in my memory. That is what a familiar is for.”

Harry softened, and reached to scratch her ears. She leaned into the caress, purring. “I’m sorry, Myst,” he murmured. “That must be an onus on you too.”

“Not so much,” she said softly. “You see, I am not human, and I don’t share human concerns. I am not a callous cat, but I do not suffer for these humans as you do. I can maintain a level of indifference that would be impossible for a human, or even for a dog. That’s why all Seer’s familiars are cats. We can bear more human misery than you can.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, rubbing his cheek against her flank as she lay down on his pillow. “You know, it does make it easier, knowing that someone shares this with me.”

“I thought it might,” she purred, her catty smugness coming once again to the fore. “Now go back to sleep. The day does not start for hours yet, Grant is in no danger until tomorrow night, and we are both creatures needing rest, you and I. But if I could ask a boon?”

“What?” Harry asked sleepily, already retreating into a safe world of dreams free of visions.

“Try not to See too far ahead. I should not like to witness the end of the world.”

The next morning, Harry woke up groggy and ill-rested, but he had had no more prophetic dreams. He got up and dressed in silence, letting Ron sleep, and went to find the Headmaster, hoping to save
two lives. He wandered through the awakening castle in search of Dumbledore, but he was nowhere to be found. In the Great Hall, where a few early risers were eating breakfast, Harry found Professor McGonagall.

“Professor,” he said, approaching her at the teacher’s table. She set down her book to listen to him. “Do you know where Headmaster Dumbledore is?”

“He is in a meeting with a potential supporter from the French Ministry. He will be occupied until late tonight, Harry. Is it important?”

“Yes,” Harry said emphatically. “I had another vision; Voldemort is going to kill a pregnant woman tomorrow night, unless we can stop him.” Those nearby stopped eating and conversing to stare at Harry, but he ignored them. “Please. I’ve had to see too many people die in my dreams. Grant Richards and his mother, Michelle Richards, don’t have to die too. Just, could you please tell Dumbledore for me?” He wasn’t pleading, but he needed her to take him seriously. For once, he had Seen the future in time to change it, if only he could reach Dumbledore.

“Calm down, Harry,” said McGonagall, standing and ushering him out of the hall. Harry felt the eyes of the other students on him until she shut the door, leaving them alone in the entrance hall. “Now, tell me what you Saw. Dumbledore is busy, but I can make other plans to protect these people.”

Harry took a deep breath, ordering his dream in his mind. Awake, he remembered more than he had dreamed. “There’s a witch, named Michelle Richards. Her husband is a muggle, Vern Richards. She’s pregnant with their son. Voldemort is going to show up at their house in Torbay, tomorrow night, at 6:49, with 7 Death Eaters. He, He’s killing muggle-borns and half-bloods as fast as he can find them.” Harry shivered with cold. “Two hundred and sixty-five as of this morning.”

Minerva looked pained. “Can you tell me their address, Harry? The quicker we can find them, the better chance we have.”

“I’ll try.” Harry closed his eyes, trying to bring back details from the dream. As if he were standing there, he saw a blank-faced apartment building on the waterfront. “65 Marlin Way, apartment number 12. It’s on the first floor. Be careful. The father is . . . not a nice man. He doesn’t like magic.”

McGonagall’s mouth tightened. “I wish that was less of a common occurrence in mixed marriages. I’ll make sure that they’re all taken somewhere safe.” Her eyes narrowed with concern. “Two hundred and sixty-five, Harry? Have you had to witness them all?”

“No,” Harry said, slightly ashamed at the relief that he felt. “I only See the ones that will cause future deaths.” He shrugged in angry resignation. “Arriana Merchant was one of the first deaths I Saw, her and her family, and more than one hundred people will be dead eventually because of those six murders. And then I Saw the Morning and Rand Thebes die, and if they hadn’t died, the father would have invented something that could have saved thousands of lives, and now Grant’s death would prevent his father’s death, but if his father lives, he’ll kill three people in a bank robbery . . .” His eyes widened. “He’s going to rob the bank where Arriana’s father worked before he died!” The sheer quantity of tangles of the web of futures stunned Harry for a moment. “It’s so complex. All those lives, they weave together in my mind.” He made a futile gesture with his hands, unable to articulate the sheer complication of the futures that he could See. McGonagall sighed.

“How far did you get in your lessons with Mr. Deegan?” she asked.

Harry shrugged. “We got through the theory of Seeing, and I made my own crystal ball, but practical
lessons were a little hard, seeing as how I’m a wizard and Mr. Deegan isn’t. I’m not sure what he is, really. I mean, he can See, and he’s really, really good at it, but he can’t do any other magic at all. He couldn’t even get my wand to spark. His brother’s a bit odd too, but at least he can do normal magic.”

“So there wasn’t much he could teach you?”

“No, no.” Harry backtracked. “He taught me a lot, about controlling what I See, and remembering little details from a vision, and not letting it overwhelm me, but his Seeing and my Seeing were two different things, so some things I could do, he couldn’t, and some things I couldn’t do, he could. For instance, he can’t make a working crystal ball, or put his memories into a Pensieve. And even though he lives in Hogsmead, he’d never seen Hogwarts until Madame Trelawney and I brought him here to talk to Dumbledore.”

McGonagall’s brow furrowed in thought. “He sounds almost like a muggle, except for his Sight. Oh well, I’ll meet him another time. If you’ll please excuse me, Harry, I am going to arrange for the Richards to be placed in protective custody.” With that, she strode off, leaving Harry to himself. He was not alone for long, however. A minute or so later, Dobby popped up beside him.

“Harry Potter, Headmaster Dumbledore is sending Dobby to find you, to bring you to him. Follow Dobby?”

Harry, though puzzled, let the house-elf pull him along. “I thought Dumbledore was meeting with the French Ministry.”

Dobby nodded. “Yes, Headmaster is meeting with very important men, but they want to be meeting with Harry Potter too.” Dobby led Harry to a corridor on the seventh floor, stopping near an ugly tapestry of a rather lumpish-looking wizard being beaten over the head by a trio of trolls armed with clubs. A plaque below the tapestry named the wizard as Barnabas the Barmy.

Facing the blank wall opposite the tapestry, Dobby knocked twice. Dumbledore opened a door almost immediately. “Oh, good.” He stepped out of the room, closing the now perfectly visible door behind him. “Just a second Harry, before we go in. First, I want you to know that I do not like using you like this, as a political pawn, and I will avoid it all possible, but the French Minister is accusing me of having exaggerated the tales of your death and return, and he demands proof. Will you please come in, and explain to him what happened?”

“Uh, sure,” Harry agreed. Dumbledore smiled apologetically, and reopened the door, ushering Harry through. In the room, which was an office-like room that Harry had never seen before, with six comfortable-looking chairs around a table covered with scrolls and books, were three men and a woman, all dressed in robes that resembled business suits and with a slightly formal air. Dumbledore introduced them.

“Harry, this is Jean-Paul Archard, the Minster of Magic from France, and his aides. Gentlemen and lady, this is Harry Potter.”

Minister Archard reared back like the chief mourner at a funeral confronted with a tasteless joke. “What is this?” he demanded of Dumbledore in a thick accent. “I am not a provincial, to not know the face of the Boy-Who-Lived. Why do you present me with this, this shoddy imposter? He does not even have la cicatrice! The famous scar! Really, Albus, if you have truly lost the boy, you could at least have come up with a better fakey than this. I am insulted.”

“Minister Archard,” said Dumbledore placatingly, indicating that Harry sit in the empty chair. “I assure you, this is Harry Potter, as he himself will tell you in a moment. The circumstances of his
revival brought about a few changes in him, as I warned you. His appearance is only the most obvious of them. Harry, if you would please explain to them?”

Harry took a breath, but before he could speak, one of the Minister’s aides spoke up diffidently. “If I might offer a suggestion, could the boy perhaps be put under Veritaserum? Then there would be no doubt as to the truth.”

“Yes,” agreed Archard, with a faint note of hostility to his voice. “Then we will know if any deception is planned here.”

Dumbledore looked stern, and about to refuse, but Harry plucked at his sleeve. “It’s okay with me, Headmaster,” he said clearly. “I don’t mind.”

Dumbledore sighed. “If you think it necessary.” He summoned a vial of the truth serum from a shelf, and Harry willingly drank the tiniest sip. He felt its effects immediately, a tingling, refreshing taste in the back of his mouth. And then he began to tell what had happened once again. He described, for what felt like the tenth time, but was really the second, the creation of Seer’s body, his own death on Voldemort’s sword, and his transfer into the other body. Archard looked as though he would rather disbelieve him, but the presence of Veritaserum made that impossible.

“So here I am,” Harry concluded. “I’m still me, no different, but in a different body. Think of it as a benign form of possession, if you will, for this body is as much mine as the original one was, just in a different reality.”

“In that case,” said Archard, the last traces of sullenness fading from his voice. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Potter. I apologize for my incredulity, but in this age, one can never be too cautious. I meant no offense.”

“None taken,” Harry answered politely, shaking the man’s proffered hand. “I wouldn’t believe it either, if I hadn’t lived it.” He smiled at the near-pun. “Well, you know what I mean.”

“Thank you, Harry,” smiled Dumbledore. “Now, Minister Archard, if I may, can we get down to business? I wanted to discuss the terms for your support of my candidacy.”

“Ah, yes,” said Archard. “I, like you, would like to see an era of greater cooperation between different Ministries. This tradition of distrust has to end, Albus. When threats like Le Sans-Nom arise, improved communication would be invaluable. For example, I mean no disrespect to the deceased, but Fudge’s policy of secrecy in his law-enforcement played no small part in his own death. We knew then that Le Sans-Nom had a camp in Calais, only a short distance from London, yet he had set a precedent of non-communication. If those lines had been more open, your Aurors would have known of the Death Eaters right on their borders, and might have prevented that attack on Her Majesty’s Theater. Fudge might still be alive today, if he had been less close-minded.”

Dumbledore sighed sadly, closing his eyes. “It is an unfortunate fact that wizarding society, as a whole, is distrustful of any outside contact. We are so used to hiding, to concealing every aspect of ourselves, that it has infected every facet of our society. It will be a difficult habit to overcome, no doubt, but overcome it we must. Any culture that does not adapt is doomed to stagnate and fail.”

“I agree with what you say, Dumbledore,” said the Frenchman. “But you must know that what you propose may be impossible. Our two nations have long been rivals, even if on the surface all is amicable. As you said, secrecy is a custom long-cherished by wizards, with both good reason and bad. If you are too ambitious with your changes, the people will be nervous to vote for you.”

“Ambition and change are what I am known for,” answered Dumbledore. “For instance, for the first
time in Hogwarts history, I have both an inhuman professor and no less than four students of various species. They are all living examples that differences can be surmounted. Those who nominated me already know about me ‘revolutionary’ tendencies. I believe that that will work for my candidacy, rather than against it.” Dumbledore smiled. “Believe me, Minister, if you support me, it will do no harm to your own reputation, even if I lose, and if I win, I believe it no conceit to say that it will be of great benefit to you.”

“I don’t doubt that,” agreed Archard. “My main concern is, as it should be, Le Sans-Nom. It is no secret that he seems to focus a great deal of anger on the two of you.” He nodded to both Dumbledore and Harry. “He has killed very few people in my country, compared to yours. There are those that believe that, if I ally myself with you, he will turn more attention to France, in retaliation or simply to draw your attention.”

Dumbledore sighed again, shuffling through a stack of parchments and sliding what looked to Harry like a map out of the stack. He perused it a second before nodding and handing it to the Minister. “This is a record of Voldemort’s attacks over the last year. Two hundred and fifty-four attacks in Britain, seven in Ireland, and four in France, but not one in the United States, even though they have been openly allied with me since early last year. I don’t think that Voldemort’s choices of targets have anything to do with me, or with Harry.”

Harry, who had been sitting very quietly, unsure why he was being allowed to sit in on this meeting now that he had said his piece, had to speak up now. “He’s choosing muggleborns and half-bloods, Sir. Every single death I’ve Seen has been one of those, or the family of one. Just this morning I Saw him kill a witch pregnant by a muggle father.”

Jean-Paul Archard stared at him. “What do you mean? Are you present when Voldemort murders these people?”

“No,” Harry hastened to explain. “I’m a Seer. I See Voldemort in my dreams, and I See his victims. They’re all connected to muggles.”

“Well,” said Archard, settling back into his chair. “That explains a few things. As you may know, there is less mixing between magical and non-magical citizens in my country. Fewer muggle-borns, by far. Very well, I think I will throw my lot in with yours, financially and politically.” He stood up, extending his hand. “You can count on my support, Albus.”

Dumbledore smiled and stood up also, shaking the other man’s hand. “Thank you, Minister Archard. Your help will be invaluable. Now, do you want to iron out the details now?”

“No, I’m sorry,” answered Archard. “I have an appointment with my Department of Mysteries in an hour. I’ll send a spokesperson along tomorrow, if that is convenient for you.”

“That will be just fine. Thank you for your time.” Dumbledore showed the Minister to a fireplace in the room, and he and his aides were gone in a moment. “So, Harry, thank you for your help. Things were not going well, not to put too fine a point on it.”

“Glad I could help,” Harry answered, smiling. “So, if you do win, are you going to keep your place on the Confederacy?”

Dumbledore looked a little surprised. “I didn’t know you had an interest in politics, Harry. But I haven’t decided yet, no. There are a lot of factors to consider. Whether or not I have the time is one. I know many overworked politicians make use of a time-turner, but too much of that sort of thing is undesirable. Too much of folding time back on yourself, over and over again, well, let me say only that it is not healthful.”
Harry nodded, remembering how tired Hermione had been during their Third year, when she relied on a time-turner to get to more classes than there were hours in the day. “So, how exactly is the Confederacy organized? Does each country have a certain number of representatives, or what?” Harry found himself intensely curious about the government that he was and would be subject to. “Is it one member for every so many wizards, or is it the same for every country?”

Dumbledore looked at him with an odd expression, but sat in the seat next to Harry, ready to explain. “Professor Binns ought to have taught you some of this in your History of Magic classes, but I’ll understand if you didn’t retain much of it. It is rather dull, and he certainly makes no attempt to liven it up a bit. So, to it then. The Confederacy was created around six hundred years ago, after a prolonged, bloody war between wizards of various nations. It’s no coincidence that its creation coincides with the end of the so-called muggle Dark Ages and the beginnings of their Renaissance. Under its original charter, each nation is allowed three representatives, and an additional one for every ten thousand population. Wizarding population, not total. Britain, before you ask, has six representatives. Charter representatives, like myself, Matthias McKenzie, and Eown Abernathy, have slightly, just slightly more influence than population representatives, but the difference is so slight that it only makes a difference when votes are tied, which, unfortunately, happens quite often. It’s very difficult to get a large quantity of wizards to agree on anything.

“Inside the Confederacy, there are divisions and committees much like there are in the Ministry. I am currently heading the Council of nonhuman policies. I took that post because I am trying to induce a more tolerant attitude toward people like Remus and young Tristan. It’s slow work, but I do feel that I have made some progress.” He said, shaking his head. “At least in the Confederacy. The British Ministry is another matter. If I hadn’t intervened, Tristan would never have gotten his wand. An activist in the Ministry named Dolores Umbridge was about to push a policy through that would have made it impossible. She and her supporters wanted to create a registry of non- or half-humans, much like the one for Animagi, complete with identifying marks and everything.” Dumbledore made a sound of scorn. “I imagine Bane would have had something to say about that, if she ever came here trying to get the centaurs to participate in such a demeaning census.

“But I’ve gotten off the topic. For the most part, the Confederacy allows the various Ministries a certain amount of autonomy. We respect the hierarchies of authority, to an extent. From time to time, we are forced to step in, when a leader gets out of hand, or a people rise up in riots. It’s been a very long time since the Confederacy met as a whole; that’s only required to stop a war from beginning, or to stop one already begun, or, occasionally, to address a single, serious threat.”

“Like Voldemort,” Harry offered.

“Not yet,” answered Dumbledore. “But it is inevitable. He killed a Minister of Magic, and he’s attacked us here, in what was supposed to be the safest stronghold in Europe. He is no longer ignorable, and that, I believe, will prove to be his downfall. He has attracted too much attention to himself, rather than staying in the shadows.”

That reminded Harry of a detail that had been bugging him. “How did Voldemort get here?” he asked. “Shouldn’t the wards have held him out?”

“They should have,” answered Dumbledore. “My theory is that the wards recognized his link to you, the link that was letting him possess you, and let him through. I’ve strengthened them since, and it shouldn’t happen again.”

“Good.” Harry nodded in relief.

“I should have thought of it earlier,” Dumbledore added morosely. “Lives wouldn’t have been lost.”
Harry had been through this argument with himself, so he said nothing. He knew that no matter how many times he or anyone else assured Dumbledore that the deaths weren’t his fault, it wouldn’t do any good until he convinced himself. He didn’t say anything when Dumbledore changed the subject. “So, Harry, do you have anything else you would like to know?”

“Er, yes. How are Confederacy members appointed? Is it by election?”

“Population representatives are elected by the citizens that they’re representing, and Charter representatives are elected by the members of the Confederacy. Occasionally, one is arbitrarily appointed by the Governance, but that happens only in the most unusual circumstances.”

“What’s the Governance?” Harry asked.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you much about them. Not only is that information not available to the general public, but they’re so secretive that even I don’t know much about them. They’re something like the Unspeakables in the Ministry. To tell the truth, the person at this school who might know the most about them is Luna Lovegood, a Ravenclaw fourth year. Her father is the editor of a small newspaper, The Quibbler, that investigates conspiracies and myths. Most people think that the Governance falls into one of those categories. All I can really tell you about them is that they provide what organization exists in the Confederacy. They tally votes, regulate debates, that sort of task.”

“So they have a lot of power,” Harry said. Dumbledore nodded.

“No one knows precisely how much, but they are sworn by magical oath to be utterly and completely impartial. That is an vow that they cannot break; it is impossible.”

“I’m not precisely sure. All I know is that it is unnerving to interact with a member of the Governance. They are... very cold. It’s as if they were Kissed, but left with their wits intact.”

Harry grimaced. “Eerie.”

“But effective. They have kept order in the Confederacy for centuries. Without them, I can think of at least three altercations in the last decade alone that would have meant internal war, which, it is needless to say, would have been catastrophic.”

“Of course,” murmured Harry. “I can understand that.”

At that point, a knock sounded on the door, and McGonagall came in. “Albus, there’s an owl, waiting for you in your office.” She looked disapproving. “It’s from Candidate Martinelli, and it’s marked urgent.”

Dumbledore stood up, straightening his robes. “I’m sorry, Harry, but I have to go address this matter.” He looked as though he would rather not. “We’ll talk again soon, if you have anymore questions.” The two professors left the room.

Harry followed more slowly, wandering through the halls rather than heading anywhere in specific. Everyone else was in class, so he met no one. Eventually he found himself standing just inside the Great Doors. He put his hand to the latch, meaning to open it and go outside, but something held him back. He strengthened his resolve and went outside.

His blood was gone, the steps scrubbed relentlessly clean. It was an overcast day, chill and with the threat of snow in the air. Harry didn’t stay long before he began to shiver, and went back inside. He made his way back up to his room, where he sat in a chair beside the fire and looked out over the Forbidden Forest. The sea of branches swayed to and fro in the rising wind, which Harry could hear even through the stone walls. Like the wind, his thoughts tossed and turned in his mind. Politics,
mortality, and morality all roiled together in his mind until he could think of nothing else. Suddenly, a voice intruded into his introspection.

*Stop it,* said Nimue’s familiar voice inside of his head. Harry jumped, startled.

“Where have you been?” he said aloud. She laughed.

*Where could I go?*

“Where’s your body?” Harry asked in a moment of curiosity. He could feel her shrug.

*If I knew, I would return to it. I know where I left it, but that doesn’t mean that it’s still there. All I do know is that it’s south of here. At least, what’s left of it is south of here. It might have been destroyed by now. It has been more than forty years, after all.* Her voice betrayed no care for that possibility. Harry, on the other hand, was slightly concerned.

“If it was destroyed, does that mean that you’ll have to live in my head for the rest of my life?” He didn’t object to her presence, but he would rather have his head to himself, if he could help it. “I’ll try to find it. Where did you leave it?”

She made a considering sound. *I think I remember seeking help, when I first felt him invading my mind. I was in London, I remember that much. I was on my way to the Ministry. I remember... St. Mungo’s. I went to St. Mungo’s to find help, and that’s the last thing I remember before I woke up in Thomas’s mind.*

“So,” said Harry, standing up and beginning to pace the room. “Maybe your body is still there, at St. Mungo’s. They’re rather well defended, aren’t they? I doubt that Voldemort could have taken you from there without making the news. Also, I just don’t think that he would have left the hospital standing, and it’s obviously still there.”

*Hmm. You may be right, Heron. Would you be willing to go and check?* She sounded almost eager under her typical air of feline poise. *Could we go right now?*

“I’d have to ask,” Harry answered, already heading downstairs. “After Voldemort’s attack, I don’t know if they’d let me out of the castle, or even if she’d let me out.” He headed for Dumbledore’s office, but when he got to where the gargoyle out to have been, all he found was a blank wall. He searched around, in case he had gone one corridor too far or too short, but the Headmaster’s office was nowhere to be found. Before he couldn’t work up a panic, though, Professor Snape stepped out of a wall. “If you are looking for the Headmaster,” he said. “He’s busy with Ministry business, and can’t be disturbed.”

“But I wanted to ask him if I could go to London, to look for Nimue’s body. She thinks she left it in St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies.”

“As much as I would like to support your disregard for school rules, Mr. Potter,” Snape answered crossly, closing his eyes in a bid for patience. “I will have to ask you to let that wait until the next Hogsmead weekend, two weeks from now. Then, I’m sure we can arrange an escort for you so you can get... whoever she is out of your head. God knows, you must have more than you can handle just listening to your own thoughts. If, that is, you have any.” He stormed off with a foul glare on his face.

*Whoa,* Harry said to Nimue as Snape cursed a statue out of his way with a vicious snarl. *What did I say?*

*I think he’s had some bad news,* Nimue speculated. *Maybe we should wait.* She sounded very
“Yeah,” Harry answered, talking aloud. “Maybe we’d better.”

“Who’re you talking to, Harry?” asked Dennis Creevy, coming up behind him. “Oh, sorry if I startled you.”

Harry spun around. “Oh, hi, Dennis. How’s it going?”

Dennis shrugged. “It’s okay. I mean, Quidditch is great, but you were a better captain than George is. He kind of favors Fred, Ron, and Tristan when he’s planning plays. Especially Fred.” He lowered his voice, as though he didn’t want anyone to hear his betrayal. “So, are you coming back?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t think so, Dennis. I’m not really any good any more. I’m very out of practice.”

Dennis looked at him as if he were mad. “You? Out of practice? Impossible!”

Harry laughed a little. “That’s flattering, Dennis, but it’s true. This body’s actually never played a game of Quidditch.”

“Well, how do you know you’re no good, then? Come on, at least come to practice with us this afternoon. It’s a full-team practice.”

“All right,” acquiesced Harry, with only a token show of reluctance. He ignored Nimue’s mental growl of irritation as he went off with Dennis to lunch.

Practice that afternoon was an exercise in frustration for Harry. Although he could again summon the incredible speed that he had found the day before, he still could not control his broom at that velocity. As Fred joked, they could use him as a Bludger, but as a player, it was impractical.

His Seeker skills were little better. His reflexes were slower than they had been, and his sight, while good enough that he no longer needed glasses except to read, no longer found the golden spark of the Snitch as easily. He laughed it off, not letting himself grieve. “The way I see it, I’m alive. Everything else is a bonus.”

“That’s the way to think,” cheered Lee Jordan, thumping him on the back. Harry left the field, not wanting to keep watching, even though Dennis Seeking was a pleasure to watch. The kid was good, very good. Harry took a sort of bittersweet pride in that. He had helped to form a champion.

By the time they got back up to the castle, Nimue was fuming in his head. *What is it?* he asked her silently. For a long moment, she thought she wasn’t going to answer him, but then she spoke up a spitting, snarling voice. *Well, at least you’re alive.*

*What do you mean?* he asked, confused. *You’re alive, too. We’ll find your body soon, and then everything’ll be fine.*

*Oh, will it? You don’t seem to be in a big hurry to find my body. You’d rather play that bloody game, or chat with your friends. I have lived for almost half a century as a ghost in the workings of first Thomas’s mind, and now yours. You humans, you have no idea how subtle torture can be, yet you are so good at it.*

“Torture?” Harry forgot to speak the words in his mind alone, startling a passing second year. “What are you talking about?”
*You cannot keep your thoughts focused longer than your next breath!* she hissed. *Your mind is turbulent and utterly without order. It is an ordeal, being caught in here with no escape.*

*That’s hardly my fault,* Harry protested silently. *I’m only human, no matter what you are. Would you rather have stayed behind with Voldemort?*

*Of course not,* she spat back. *Thomas was insane, and therefore worse than you. But that doesn’t change the fact that if I have to remain much longer inside human minds, I will lose my own! Let me share with you what I feel!* He could feel her open the book inside his mind.

“NO! Stop!” he cried aloud as the pain began. He could feel her writing in it, spiky, foreign writing burning in his mind. “Stop it, please.” He fell to his knees, unaware of the other students crowding around him. His entire attention was taken by the new sensations growing in his mind as Nimue wrote part of her own life into his mind. First came discomfort, a strange restlessness that somehow made him face south, as if ease could be found only in that direction. Next came a sensation that Harry recognized, the eerie feeling of a missing limb. It was a stinging, prickling sensation that crawled across his skin, making it feel as though he had been immersed in water too hot to stand.

Then came the impatience. It was consuming, an inhuman intolerance that sent him back to his feet, made him walk away from the anxious crowd. He was hungry, or thirsty, or deprived of something that should have been his. He didn’t care what barriers there were, only that he should have it, that it was his right.

*See, now you feel what I’ve felt for ages,* purred Nimue. He could feel her satisfaction. *Now take me there.*

Harry felt a flash of irritation that someone else should order him around. After all, wasn’t he his own youkai? That gave him a start. “I’m human,” he said aloud, trying to remind himself of the fact, but he kept walking. This was a very odd sensation. He was in control of himself, he was making his own decisions, but it was a different part of him making the choices than normal. He felt a coldness enter his mind, a reasonable indifference to everything that did not directly concern him and an impulsive response to everything that did. At the same time, a heat blossomed in him, bringing with it a long-standing fury at captivity. The stone walls of the castle became intolerable. “I’ve got to get out of here,” he muttered. The urge to flee to freedom was so imperative that he couldn’t fight it. He ran, looking for an escape, but he was in an inside corridor of the castle, with no doors or windows leading to the outside. So he ran on, always heading south through the labyrinthian castle.

Eventually, he reached a small courtyard that opened to the grounds. Waiting there were Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape, blocking his path. He growled at them, but was forced to stop.

“Where are you going, Harry?” asked Dumbledore firmly. Harry rolled his eyes in impatience.

“I am going to find Nimue’s body,” he answered insolently. How dare they keep him away from what he wanted to do?

Dumbledore looked concerned as he stepped forward to put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I don’t think it best, Harry, that you leave the school right now. If you like, I can send someone to search for her body, but I’m afraid I cannot allow you to leave. Maybe when things have settled down a little, but not quite yet.”

Casually, Harry brushed Dumbledore’s hand away. “I don’t really care,” he said coldly. “I want to find it, now. And what are you going to do to stop me?”
Dumbledore looked into Harry eyes, his face serious. “Nimue. Don’t make Harry do these things. This isn’t like him.”

Harry stared coolly back at him. “No one is making me do anything, Albus. For once, I am making choices for my own good. Right now, my own good requires getting Nimue out of my head and into her own, so that is exactly what I am going to do. Now, are you going to step aside, or am I going to have to take matters even further into my own hands?” He flashed a tight, sarcastic smile at the trio, and made as if to push past them. Dumbledore drew his wand.

“Harry, please don’t make me stop you.”

Harry stopped, leaning forward with a smirk to speak in a clearly audible whisper to Dumbledore. “Don’t embarrass yourself. We both know you couldn’t stop me if I don’t decide to let you.”

McGonagall gaped at Harry, speechless with shock. Snape made an inarticulate sound that could have been either astonishment or fury, but Harry paid neither of them any attention. “If you are all finished,” he said lightly. “I have other places to be. Good day, Professors. I ought to be back... well, when I want to be back.” Flippantly, he waved an irreverent good-bye, before vanishing.

An ear-splitting crack rent the quiet day, followed by a moment of deafening silence. The three professors looked at each other in dismayed disbelief, until the thunder started. It was a sharp thunder that seem to roll on and on, while the very air crackled as if from a sudden surge of electricity. The atmosphere began to glow with a rich, golden glow, a thick, viscous shimmer that intensified until they could hardly see one another through it. The thunder mounted, shaking the castle from its foundations to the tallest spire, and then the real show started.

Balls of golden, crackling energy formed everywhere around the school, ranging from the size of a fist to larger than a Quaffle, and all of them streaming towards the courtyard where Dumbledore stood, dumbstruck. They surrounded him, placing themselves into a sphere around him, streamers of purple lightning dancing over the surface. Then a bolt of the lightning lanced inwards, striking Dumbledore squarely in the center of the chest. It lifted him off the ground as the energy from the sphere raced in on him as a wave from every side. His arms floated out from his body as he was supported by a halo of increasingly intense light. Before McGonagall and Snape had time to react, however, all of the light vanished, flowing somehow into Dumbledore like water. He settled slowly back to the ground, stumbling to keep his feet, wide-eyed and panting. “No,” he moaned, looking at those around him with a desperate expression on his face. “The wards.”

(Happy Thanksgiving, y’all. (If, that is, you celebrate it) Oh, and please, go to my yahoo site (link is in my profile) and check out my new BBH art. It rocks. Oh, and as always, Read and Review. :))

Chapter: 58

Chapter 58

“The wards?” McGonagall’s voice was faint, and her face pale. “What’s happened to them?” she asked, but she already knew. There was a change in the air. A certain tautness was gone from the atmosphere, and with it some of the vitality of the castle. Dumbledore swayed on his feet, his face ashen and horrified.

“They’re gone,” he said, his voice hardly more than a breath. “All gone.” Abruptly, he sat down on
the ground with a thump, his robes billowing up around him. Power was playing over and through him in waves of golden light, and he shook his head dazedly. Snape, white-faced and wide-eyed, stepped forward to help him up, but before he could touch him, an arc of that golden energy leapt out, striking Snape in the hand. He jerked back with a cry, cradling a sizzling burn. “Stay away,” cautioned Dumbledore, struggling to his feet. He seemed very bewildered, and kept shaking his head as if to clear it. “What is this?” he asked, wearing an expression composed equally of awe and apprehension as he watched the light display flashing across his arms.

McGonagall stepped as close as she dared, examining the energy. “I think, I think it’s the wards, Albus. Or, at least the magic from them. It had to go somewhere, after all.” She faltered as Dumbledore wavered again, blinking owlishly. “Are you alright?” Concern made her voice shrill.

“No,” Dumbledore muttered. “I don’t think so.” His eyes rolled up into his head, and he collapsed completely onto the grass, unconscious.

“Albus,” cried out McGonagall, stricken. She reached out for him, but thought better of it, and levitated him from the ground. Her wand shook, and she had to concentrate a moment to steady the spell before setting off for the hospital wing at a run, Snape at her heels. “Poppy!” she yelled, as soon as she came within earshot. “Poppy, come quickly! It’s Albus!”

Madame Pomfrey ran out of her office, blanching when she saw the Headmaster. “What’s happened?” Even in her shock, she guided McGonagall to place him on a bed. Snape answered her question, his voice shaky.

“The wards collapsed, and all I can think is that the power backlashed, for lack of a better word, backlashed into him. It burnt me when I touched him.” He extended his scorched hand, which he had wrapped in a corner of his robe. “Be careful, Poppy.”

The medi-witch spared his hand a glance, but her attention was on the Headmaster. Every time she attempted to touch him, the energy would lash out towards her, as if it were going to attack. She couldn’t get within a foot of him. The bedclothes under him soon began to singe from the heat of the energies at play, and a smell of burning cloth pervaded the room. “Get him off there!” cried Snape, levitating the man up again, just before the sheets burst into flame.

“What are we going to do?” asked McGonagall, wringing her hands in a state of near-panic. “Can you help him, Poppy?”

Pomfrey pressed her lips together in a frown. “No. This just isn’t a medical problem. It’s magic. As near as I can tell, all of the magic from the wards recoiled into him, and he just couldn’t absorb it all. It’s just too much for any one person, even him.” She shook her hand, sucking the thumb, where an errant bolt had struck and left a small blister.

Before anyone could answer her, Dumbledore groaned and opened his eyes slowly. “Harry,” he croaked. “Where’s Harry?”

McGonagall answered him, surprised. “He’s gone, Albus. We don’t know where he went. He’s apparated away, breaking the wards.”

“Send Dobby.” Dumbledore’s voice was weak, but within it, Snape and McGonagall could hear a timbre of power, a resonance reminiscent of the roar of a lightning strike. Violet sparks crackled within his tired eyes. “He’ll... find him.” He shook his head once more, noticing for the first time that he was hovering several feet above the ground. “I can stand, Severus.”

Reluctantly, Severus set Dumbledore back onto the floor. The moment his feet touched the ground,
an unnoticed pulse ran out through the flagstones away from them in all directions. “Albus,” Snape said, restraining himself from reaching out. “What do you want Harry for? I should think that right now your priority would be the resurrection of the wards. Until you do, the students here are not safe. You-Know-Who could return at any time, you know.”

“I am aware of that, Severus,” said Dumbledore, strengthening and steadying himself. “But I do believe that Harry is the only person who can rebuild the wards. I know that I cannot. Perhaps with help. I could do it, but it would take far too long, and it would drain every teacher in this school.”

Snape looked aghast. “Potter is that powerful?” Dumbledore nodded sagely. “And then some, Severus. He has just managed to destroy a magical artifact that has taken more than a millennium and a half to build, the efforts of nearly a hundred of the most powerful witches and wizards in Britain, and he did it on a whim, with no preparation or help. And more than that—” Dumbledore’s eyes widened fractionally as he realized something. “He controlled it! He channeled the power into me, so it wouldn’t burst forth when it was released.”

“How did he get so strong?” asked McGonagall. “I mean, he was never anything like a squib, but he was never the best of students either. I would certainly never have credited him with this level of ability. To break the wards...”

“I know, Minerva,” said Dumbledore tiredly. He seemed to be a little more in control of himself now, but power still danced in a frantic nimbus around him, not allowing anyone near him. “But now he is this powerful, and we need him back here fast, before our lack of wards is noticed by dark forces, or by the muggles.”

Snape’s eyes widened. “That’s right! Without the wards, we are exposed to the muggles. The entire Secrecy Act is compromised!”

“Compromised?” squeaked Madame Pomfrey. “It’s been blown to bits! The muggles can’t not see a great big castle just appear in the middle of nowhere!”

Dumbledore grimaced. “Dobby!” he called. Only a moment later, the house-elf appeared. “What is you wanting, Dumbledore Sir?” he said, bowing deferentially.

“I would like you to go and find Harry Potter for us, Dobby, and bring him back here. We need him here as quickly as possible. This is very urgent, Dobby, please use all haste.” Dumbledore knelt to be face to face with the elf. “We are all in danger until you bring Harry back to us.”

“I understands, Sir,” nodded Dobby. Without waiting, he snapped his small fingers and dissolved into mist, racing out of the room and away.

Harry apparated straight into the center of the waiting room at St. Mungo’s hospital, startling everyone there into panicked confusion. “You, you can’t apparate in here!” sputtered a abdominous orderly. “There are wards!”

“Really?” asked Harry absently before dismissing the man from his attention, striding forward to the front desk. “You,” he said to the nurse sitting there. “Can you tell me about a young woman who came in here about...” He tilted his head, listening to Nimue within. “One billion, three hundred and eighty-eight million, five hundred and thirty-five thousand and three hundred and sixteen seconds ago. Well, that’s not very helpful, Nimue. How many years is that?” He listened again, ignoring the confused, slightly frightened glances of those around him. “Forty-four years, give or few. Not terribly human-looking, having a little problem with being possessed.” He leaned on the desk, drumming his fingers impatiently. “She might still be here, hm?” He raised an eyebrow, smiling toothily. His smile faded slightly when the frightened nurse merely sat there, staring at him with
wide, unblinking eyes. “Look for her!” he yelled, dumping a stack of scrolls onto her from a shelf. “She was here! There will be a record!”

Still not taking her eyes off of him, the nurse began climbing out from under the scrolls. “It, it’ll be in the old files,” she stammered, getting to her feet. An older voice stopped her from going any farther.

“No, she won’t,” said an older doctor, taking his gloves off as he came out from a back room. “I’m Dr. Morgant. How may I help you, young man?” He extended his hand to Harry, acting perfectly as if the boy had done nothing untoward. His smile returning, Harry shook his hand.

“I’m looking for Nimue,” he said simply. “Is she here?”

“You say she was a non-human, being possessed?” Harry nodded. “And was she a rather cat-like young woman, with furred ears and fangs?” Harry nodded again. “Then she was here.”

Harry did a double-take. “Was?”

Dr. Morgant shook his head solemnly. “Come with me. We’ll talk in my office.”

In the doctor’s office, Morgant gestured Harry to a chair. Harry sat across it, with one leg dangling over an arm. “So,” he repeated. “Was?”

“She was,” confirmed Morgant. “But she is not here now. She was in our terminal ward for more than forty years, but her family claimed her about a year ago. No, a little more. It was just a week or so before the World Cup came to Britain.”

Nimue seethed inside Harry’s head. *Impossible! You and the other heirs are all the family I have left, and we would know if one of you had done it.*

“Who?” Harry asked simply, narrowing his eyes. Morgant looked for a moment as though he wasn’t going to tell, but then he relented.

“It was done discreetly, because it is not our policy to release patients without proof of kinship, but there were... mitigating circumstances. Mr. Malfoy donated a very large sum of money to our hospital, in exchange for one soulless woman.

Harry gaped at the man. “Malfoy?! You gave her to Lucius Malfoy?!” His fists balled on the arms of the chair as he sat upright. “How could you do that?”

“You have to understand, young man,” said Morgant calmly. “A lot of good came from that money. We were able to hire a new curse specialist, and a lot of new equipment. Many lives have been saved which would otherwise have been lost.”

Harry rolled his eyes, blowing a lock of hair away from them. “You gave Nimue to Lucius Malfoy. Great.” He disapparated before the doctor could say another word, leaving behind only a breeze as air rushed to fill the space that he had occupied. Dr. Morgant sat still for a moment, blinking dismayedly, before he got up and left his office to go and help quell the pandemonium that Harry’s arrival had caused.

All Harry had to go on now was the tenuous attachment to her body that Nimue had written into his book. It pulled him gently south still, so he headed south. He appeared in a green field surrounded by tall hedges, where a small herd of thestrals grazed. Beyond the hedges, atop a nearby hill, stood an imposing manor, dark against early evening’s sky. Harry apparated to the front steps of the manor. They were decorated with carved marble serpents, and the great oak doors were carved with intricate scenes of snakes and dragons. There was no question as to who lived here.
Harry didn’t bother to knock. With a wave of his wand, he threw the doors open with a resounding crash. A house-elf stared at him from the ornate entrance hall, blinking its enormous eyes before running away as fast as it could, screaming shrilly. Harry watched it go, amused, and waited for the master of the house to show himself.

“What are you doing here?” Draco’s voice came from the top of a marble staircase to the side of the room. Harry pointedly ignored him as he came down the stairs at a run, stopping only a foot or so away from Harry.

“Where’s your father?” Harry said, still not looking at Draco. His gaze wandered disinterestedly over the large room. “He has something of ours, and we want it back.” Only then did he turn to face the pale boy, smiling roguishly at him. “Run and tell him we’ve come, would you?”

Draco stared down at Harry, speechless with furied shock. His mouth worked, but no sound came out. Before he could gather his wits again, Lucius Malfoy appeared from his study at the far end of the hall. “Potter,” he said, sounding surprised. “Do you make a habit of breaking into other people’s homes?”

“You should know why I’m here, Lucius,” drawled Harry. “Give me Nimue’s body and I’ll leave.” His manner was mild, but with a confidence that made it almost threatening.

Lucius looked politely confused. “I don’t believe I know what you mean, Potter. We have nothing like that here. I certainly know no one with that name. Do you, Draco?”

Harry looked very amused. “Do not lie to me, Malfoy. Or-” His face broke into a delighted smile. “Did your master not trust you with that information? Imagine, he had you donate all that money to St. Mungo’s, and he never even told you why. Why, it’s almost as if you’re a complete non-entity, isn’t it?” His voice turned slightly stern. “She’s here somewhere, Malfoy, I know it. I can feel her. Now, how many non-human women can you have hidden around here? I gather that they’re pretty unusual.”

Recognition dawned in Lucius’ face He quelled it immediately, but Harry had already seen it. “Ah ha,” Harry said, gleefully. “So you do know what I’m talking about. Well, what are you waiting for? Bring her to me.” His voice was imperious, echoing off the marble of the room. The Malfoy’s looked apoplectic with rage.

“Who do you think you are, boy, ordering me around?” hissed Lucius, his hand on his wand. “This is my manor, I give the orders here.”

“Expelliarmus,” said Harry lazily, not even bothering with his own wand. He caught Lucius’ neatly, putting it in his own pocket with the same motion. “You were saying?”

Lucius glowered. “All you want is the girl, you say?” he said between clenched teeth. Harry nodded. “And then I’ll leave.”

“Fine!” he spat. “Come along, then.” In a swirl of fine robes, Lucius Malfoy stalked off towards a nearly concealed door under one of the staircases. Draco shot glares of pure hatred at Harry as they both followed his father into an ill-lit spiral stair which led downwards.

The stair was a long one, and any light from the door had long since vanished by the time they reached its bottom. Harry had conjured a ball of light on the end of one finger, smiling at the looks of nervousness this magic caused on his guides’ faces. With a flick, he sent it ahead of them to light the way. At the bottom of the stairs, corridors led off in every direction, only some of them lit by
guttering torches. The air was thick with a dusty, ancient smell eddied around them by a sporadic breeze, interspersed with the sweet stench of decay and the heady, dangerous scents of some of the more obscure potions ingredients. Malfoy hesitated a second, then set off decisively down one of the darkest corridors, looking back to see if Harry was still following. He wasn’t.

“You’ll have to do better than that, Lucius,” called Harry. He sent a larger ball of light speeding down that hall, past Lucius. It illuminated a dead-end only a few steps beyond a ceiling of barbaric-looking spikes, waiting to come crashing down at the slightest signal and crush an unwary intruder. Harry closed his eyes briefly, concentrating on the tenuous contact with Nimue’s body. He turned, opened his eyes, and walked forward into a passage with no light at all. Cursing under his breath, Lucius Malfoy hurried to catch up.

Harry walked confidently forward, not needing light to find his way to a heavy door sunk into the stone wall. “Alohomora,” he whispered, blowing the spell past a measure of resistance, and the door swung open silently. The room within was small, with a low ceiling and its only furnishing was an open box, coffin-like, with hay covering the bottom thinly. In this lay a young woman.

She did not look much like the Nimue that Harry had found in Voldemort’s head. she looked perhaps twenty years old, and was pretty in a slender, long-limbed sort of way. Her hair spread around her in the box as a chrome cloud, so pure a shade of silver that it reflected a dazzling display of light from Harry’s illuminated finger, and paler than her skin, still lightly tanned after nearly half a century spent indoors. Her cat-like ears were pressed flat against her head, and her mouth was slightly open in sleep, exposing her fangs.

Harry could fell Nimue’s impatience to be back in her own body. *What do I do?* Harry asked, kneeling down beside her body.

“Just touch me,* she answered, sounding breathlessly eager. *No, wait!* she exclaimed just before he could comply. *Just a moment!* He felt a flash of pain as she once again opened his book, then an internal rearrangement as she erased what she had written therein. He felt a sudden flush of shame and fear as the foreign influence receded. *Okay, now,* she said. He reached forward, as ready as she, and clasped the body’s wrist.

A burst of silver light filled the chamber like a silent explosion as Nimue opened her eyes. Harry’s head felt suddenly empty and lighter. All he could see for a long moment were those golden eyes, set in that pale gold face. Then she blinked, and laughed, and he came back to himself. “Lady,” he said, bowing slightly.

“Heron,” she replied, inclining her head in formal response. Then she looked beyond him, at the Malfoys who were standing in the door behind Harry. “Lucius Malfoy. I believe-”

Before she could finish, a loud clap sounded in the small room, and Dobby coalesced in their midst. “Harry Potter,” he said, his voice shrill with relief. “Headmaster Dumbledore is needing you to come back, right away.” He looked askance at the Malfoys, who were looking at him with a profound dislike, and shut his mouth before saying anything more.

Harry remembered then what he had done to get away from Hogwarts, and he paled, but he kept his wits enough to say nothing about Hogwarts’ broken wards in front of the Death Eaters. “We’ll come, Dobby.” Before Nimue could say anything, he grabbed her hand, and the three of them dissapparated, leaving a stunned Draco and Lucius in the cell-like room.
In the midst of his apparation, Harry felt a jolt. It ran through him, feeling as though his bones were being carved into splinters. The next moment, his back hit a solid, too-solid surface. It was a smooth, dark floor, carved in a circle around him with intricate runes and diagrams. For a moment, up was left and right was down, and the disorientation nearly made Harry vomit, but then equilibrium reinserted itself and up became up again. He stood up, looking around, but it was so dark beyond the circle that nothing could be seen.

He realized suddenly that he was alone. He spun frantically around, looking for Nimue and Dobby, but they were nowhere to be seen. When he had left Malfoy Manor, he remembered, they had both been behind him. Remembering his initial confusion, he looked down. There, trapped in the black glass that was the floor, were his two companions. They were both frozen in position, as if they were still arranged on either side of Harry. “No!” he cried out, falling to scabble vainly at the floor, trying to dig them free. The floor offered no purchase whatsoever.

“They’re fine,” said a voice from the darkness. Harry jerked upright, casting about wildly in the dark for the source. It sounded strangely familiar, but he couldn’t place it. “And they’ll be fine. I just wanted to have a chance to meet you alone, before he pits us against one another.” The owner of the voice appeared as a shadow just outside the circle. All Harry could make out was a short, thin figure in an all-encompassing cloak. Two small green eyes gleamed from beneath the hood, but they were oddly placed. If the speaker were human, those eyes would be low on his left cheek, just above his jaw-line.

“Who are you?” Harry asked, trying to make out more details in the stygian gloom. The other laughed, and again the sound was intimately strange. “No one at all, Harry. Merely one who has no wish to fight you, but will, all the same. And more,” said the other slyly, drawing just a little nearer. “I will win.” Now, Harry could make out dimly the curve of a smile beneath the hood, and a face strangely disfigured, as though a fungus had stained one side of it with pale splotches and dark lines. The eyes were invisible in the shadows, but Harry knew that the other was watching him intently, as if memorizing his features. Suddenly, it reached out a hand, touching Harry’s fingers fleetingly. “This is yours,” he whispered, and then withdrew. Harry felt a tingle pass up his arm, into his tongue and his eyes, but it did him no harm.

“If you don’t want to fight me,” Harry asked. “Why fight me?”

“I told you,” said the other, his voice humorless now. “I am no one.” He took a step backward, disappearing once more into the darkness. The light faded with him, and then the floor beneath Harry’s feet vanished. With a sound like breaking glass, his interrupted apparation resumed.

Back at Hogwarts, the professors were taking what measures they could to make the school less vulnerable. In the half an hour that had passed since Harry’s departure, all the students had been gathered in the Hospital Wing, and McGonagall and Snape had set up as many wards as they could around that limited space. Dumbledore was too occupied with containing the power that still lashed out at anyone who came too near to help them. He had barricaded himself in his office, not wanting to burn anyone else. Madame Pomfrey had proved unable to heal the burn on Severus’ hand, which still smoldered under a soaking wet poultice and her most powerful pain-killing charm.

Ron and Hermione accosted their head of house. “Where is Harry, Professor?” demanded Hermione after she and Ron had searched the hall. “Shouldn’t he be here too?”

McGonagall looked pained. “He is gone, Miss Granger. He apparated out of the castle about half an
hour ago.”

“But you can’t--” Hermione’s eyes grew wide as she made the connection. “Harry broke the wards! But why?” She looked astounded and appalled that he would do such a thing.

McGonagall sighed. “He was not himself. That other mind, Nimue, was influencing him somehow. He went to find her body.”

Hermione thought a moment, and then she gasped in realization. Harry had told her and Ron some things about the other inhabitant of his head, but she was only now putting two and two together. “I think I know where Harry’s gone, professor. Can I please just go up to the library? Just for a moment?”

McGonagall shook her head. “I’m afraid not, Miss Granger. It’s just not safe outside of this room, without the wards. The Headmaster believes that it will not be long before He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named discovers the missing wards.” She bit off her words, looking as though she felt she should not have told such dire fears to students. “At any rate, Dobby is searching for Harry now, and he should be bringing him back soon.” McGonagall smiled a smile that was obviously meant to be reassuring, but it looked too forced to be very comforting.

“Well, that’s alright, then,” interjected Ron. “I mean, Dobby’s found Harry before, hasn’t he? I just hope he finds him in better shape this time.”

“Well,” countered Hermione reluctantly. “He might not want to be found this time. After what he did, I mean, he’s going to be in a lot of trouble.”

McGonagall looked about to respond, but she was interrupted by an ear-shattering crack, like an immense sheet of breaking glass. Harry and Dobby appeared in the center of the Hospital Wing, and clasped in Harry’s hand was the wrist of a young woman, slender, tall, and remarkable-looking, with hair the color of mercury and midnight-furred cat-ears. She looked around the packed room with a detached interest, her eyes distant and pre-occupied.

McGonagall’s face showed a twist of irritation as she felt the temporary defenses shudder and fall in reaction to the intrusion.

“Harry,” she exclaimed with more asperity than she had planned. She was about to chastise him for his actions, but then she saw his face, and she stopped. Regret was naked in his eyes, and a trace of fear was there too. Harry knew what he had done, and he knew full well that there would be consequences.

“I’m so sorry,” he breathed, letting his hands fall to his sides. He looked around him, examining the faces in the room. “Where is Dumbledore?”

“Stay here, Nimue,” he said to the girl, directing her towards an unoccupied corner between a privacy screen and the wall. “Don’t do anything,” he said to her with a voice half-pleading and half-commanding. Nimue looked amused at his audacity, but she obeyed him. He nodded grimly in greeting to Ron and Hermione, and then left the wing. Hermione looked at Ron, and whispered, “Did you see his eyes? They were green again!”

The gargoyle at the foot of Dumbledore’s office did not wait for Harry to give the password, instead stepping aside with a near-bow to let Harry pass. As he ascended the moving spiral staircase, he could feel the power of Dumbledore above him. Tiny flares of lightning danced along the rail and up the center post, urging him upwards into the office.
Dumbledore was sitting hunched in a chair before his desk, his hands gripping the arms of his chair so tightly that his knuckles were white. A storm of power was playing around his office, bolts of electricity emanating from him and lashing all around the room. “Harry,” he said once Harry had arrived. “I need your help.” His voice quavered with exhaustion. Half an hour of the effort to control this excess of power had depleted him completely; he looked gaunt and burnt out. Harry, unafraid of the lightning, approached him.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said, mostly to himself. Dumbledore looked at him with blood-shot eyes, concern evident in them. “You have to,” he croaked, looking almost frightened. Harry shook his head, on the verge of tears. “I can’t,” he whispered. “But I can learn. Hogwarts can teach me.”

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He hadn’t long to wait. Presently, a breeze beckoned him from a blank stretch of wall, and he followed it, stepping through solid stone to find himself once more in that columned room, at the shores of Hogwarts’ pool. Erik sat cross-legged on the surface of the water, polishing the blade of his axe with a handful of sand from the bottom. “She’s not here,” he said crossly, not looking up. You made it unsafe for her here, so I had to send her away. For the first time ever, I have had to send her out of herself.”

“I’m sorry,” said Harry abjectly, wading out to stand before him. “You know I never would have done if I’d been thinking properly. Nimue-“

“Yes, I know what Nimue did,” interrupted Erik. “She has always been impetuous. It is the nature of her kind. Demons are like that.”

“Demon?” Harry said, recoiling slightly in surprise. Erik laughed a little. “Not like you’re thinking. That’s merely the closest translation of youkai.”

“Youkai,” Harry repeated. “That’s what she wrote in my book. ‘I am youkai,’ and ‘I need myself.’ So, she’s a youkai? What is that?”

Erik sighed, setting his axe aside. It floated on the water, not producing any ripples. “Youkai are a Japanese race of creatures. They’re nearly extinct these days, except perhaps for the kitsune, the fox-youkai, but they’re so adept at concealing themselves that no one really knows how many of them there are. There are a few left of other varieties, but they are very reclusive and widely scattered. As far as I know, Nimue is the last of the neko-youkai, cat-demons. Nimue shares quite a few attributes with cats, not the least of with is her over-large ego and her occasional inability to think of anyone other than herself. But she is not why you are here. You wanted help.” Erik stood up, picking his axe up tenderly. “So, this is help.” He extended the axe, handle-first to Harry. “It’s yours. It’s name is Brock’s axe, or Builder, and that’s what it’s for. You now have all of them.”

Harry took the axe reverently, running his hands along the long, carved, ornamental handle. A bronze pommel on each end of the shaft was cast in the form of a badger’s head, and the blade itself was a delicate steel lattice that boasted a hair-fine edge. It looked too frail to be an axe, yet it undeniably was. “Thank you,” he murmured to Erik, and the man bowed respectfully.

“Now there is only one,” he said cryptically.

“I have all of what?” Harry said, remembering Erik’s words. “All of the houses, and all of the weapons,” was Erik’s answer. “You may not have found them all yet, but they are all yours. Born to one, in the body of another, a third given, taken, and returned, and given the fourth freely.”

Harry thought. “I was born a Gryffindor, this is a Ravenclaw’s body, and you just gave me
Hufflepuff, but what of the third? It must have been Slytherin.”

“Look,” said Erik simply, gesturing at the reflective surface of the water. Harry did, examined his reflection. “My eyes!” he exclaimed. “My eyes are green again!” He furrowed his brow. “I got green eyes from Slytherin? But I got them from my mother, Lily. They run in her family.”

“Green eyes did run in your mother’s family, true, but that is not where you got yours. You were born with blue eyes, Harry. Only on Halloween, the night you survived Voldemort’s attack, did they turn green. Look closer.”

Harry did so, leaning so close that his nose dipped into the water. Staring back at him were his own eyes, blue irises all but hidden beneath two green serpents, infinitely tiny, coiled around his wide pupils. He pulled back with an oath. “Have they always been like that?”

“Not quite,” said Erik calmly. “Only in this pool could you see them as they really are, like that. To all the rest of the world, they’re merely as green as a fresh-pickled toad.” He smirked as Harry rolled his eyes. “Now, don’t you have work to do?” he said, stern again. “I should like very much to be able to bring my Hogwarts back to herself.” Harry didn’t need reminded again. Without even waiting to answer him, he turned and ran back to Dumbledore’s office.

Dumbledore was losing the battle for control. His office was a wreck, many of his mechanical contraptions melted from lightning strikes and every shard of glass broken. Harry came out of the wall right in front of him, but Dumbledore scarcely noticed. His eyes were full of purple lightning now, and as Harry watched, another bolt burst from him to blast a hole near the edge of a portrait on the wall, sending the rudely woken occupant running to the next frame.

Dumbledore!” he said, shaking the man. The headmaster seemed to come slightly to his senses, focusing on Harry. “Help me,” he repeated, his voice raw and rich with the resonance of power.

“I will,” Harry answered softly. He stepped back, into the center of the room, and raised the axe. “Setarebreveremoda!” he cried, waving it in an arc above his head. It was the dome charm that he had used earlier in the year to play Quidditch, strengthened now both by the magic in the room and Hufflepuff’s axe. Now, he knew that the rest of the castle was safe in case he or Dumbledore lost control, for what he was about to attempt was difficult. He moved back to Dumbledore’s side, touching his arm. “Let go,” he whispered.

Dumbledore sighed in relief, slumping forward. The lightning escalated as he lost consciousness, filled the room entirely with the crackle and tang of pure energy. Harry, standing at the center of it, raised his arms again. “Red for Binding!” he shouted into the storm. “Blue to let me See, Green for Shaping, Yellow makes it Be!” A flash of light, so bright that the lighting of the wards’ power looked like streamers of shadows, filled the room, and when it faded, both Harry and Dumbledore lay senseless on the floor.

Dumbledore awoke slowly inside a strange room. It was very much like his office, lined with gleaming contraptions and well-worn books, but it was most certainly not the same room. A door opened in a blank wall, and Harry walked in, but it was a much changed Harry. Short, as he had been before Voldemort killed him, he was dwarfed by an enormous pair of red-gold wings growing from his shoulders. His eyes whirled green with silver streaks, looking strangely as if they contained snakes coiled to strike, and a second pair of eyes, blue with bronze, hour-glass-shaped pupils had opened on his temples. Sparks, yellow and brilliant black, danced along his hands, which rested open at his sides.

“Where are we?” Dumbledore asked. Harry looked around with mild interest.

“In your mind, I think. Yes. The power’s right through there.” Harry pointed behind Dumbledore, to
a door that hadn’t been there a moment before. “You have to open the door; I may not.”

Dumbledore went to the door, and it opened at a touch from his hand. Beyond was a room filled with a liquid, dancing light. The floor sloped downward from all sides to a well at the center, walled about six feet round with blocks of a milky white quartz. The light came from there. Dumbledore walked to its edge, and looked into it.

The well was full to the brim with liquid light; so full, in fact, that the fluid swelled above rim, trembled there with surface tension a moment, and splashed over the edge onto the floor. It did so with rhythmic regularity, as if disturbed by the beating of some great subterranean heart. Inside the well, beneath the surface, colors swirled in an almost hypnotic fashion. At the top, a million shades of blue spun in a sedate, complex pattern, perhaps a hundred feet deep. But below, below was a purple maelstrom. Every shade imaginable of lavender, violet, or lilac and so many more hues spun there, deep in the well, shot here and there with threads of every color that ever existed, as well as a few that probably didn’t, and illuminated by shocks of gold energy.

“You see,” Harry said, suddenly at Dumbledore’s shoulder. “See how your power struggles to contain the power from the wards, and look there, at the verge, where purple and blue are indistinguishable from each other. That is your own power, which you have put into the wards over the years. I will leave you that power, all of your power, when I take the rest.” He stepped forward, up onto the rim of the narrow well. Dumbledore looked up at him skeptically, for there was no way that those immense wings, so large that Harry could not keep their ends from trailing on th floor, eight feet behind him, and more than twice his height, would allow him to dive in. But Harry merely smiled, and flared his wings out, filling the room, before he mantled them around himself, concealing him entirely from view, and then they vanished, leaving Harry standing on the well wall, clad only in a pair of trousers. A pair of incredible wings were tattooed on his slender back, every shade of red and gold, each feather as glossy as if it were real. With no more preamble, he dove in, stroking cleanly downwards through the color, deeper and deeper.

Through some trick of light, Dumbledore’ power seemed to eddy away from Harry, leaving a skin of perfectly clear water around his body. A hundred feet down, he slowed and stopped to hover just an arm’s length above the purple energy, which roiled and writhed below him like a captive storm. He smiled again, basking for a moment in the sheer power of it. He could feel it, like the warmth from a fire or the light from a star. Then, he reached out tentatively with one hand, and lightly touched just the surface of the power. It stilled instantly, as if startled. Harry at once began swimming upwards for all he was worth. Below him, the purple surface receded, drawing downwards. Dumbledore could feel a thrumming in the floor, an incredible tension of something about to happen.

When Harry broke the surface, his speed was such that he leapt out of the liquid to his waist. At the height of his lunge, he convulsed, his back arching impossibly as the wings burst once more from his shoulders. One strong beat pulled him free of the water, and he hovered above it, waiting for something to happen. He shot Dumbledore a look, remembering that he was there. “Stay back,” he warned. He shut his eyes tight, all four.

The rumbling increased, and presently the whole room was shaking so badly that Dumbledore, who had retreated to the door frame, had to brace himself against the wall to keep his feet. Suddenly, with a thunderous roar, the purple magic burst from the well in a twisting tower, like a waterspout. It engulfed Harry, who opened his arms to receive it gladly, throwing back his head in rapture and agony as the brightness of the power erased him from Dumbledore’s view. Above the thunder of the magic, Dumbledore could hear Harry scream, but whether in ecstasy or torture, he could not tell. It seemed like a long time before his vision returned, and even then he could only see a faint outline, still hovering above the well. Long moments later, the light faded entirely into the boy. Harry, exhausted-looking and limp, slowly landed on the floor beside the well. It seemed for a moment that
he would fall, but he caught himself, shaking his head and standing straight. His skin gleamed now with a remnant of the brilliant violet light, and an undertone patina of rich, ancient gold that must have been Harry’s own magic. He looked metallic, as if he were wearing a skin-tight suit of armor. What struck Dumbledore the most, however, was his face. There was a look of hunger there so intense that Dumbledore fancied he could feel an echo of that sheer desire. Harry wanted badly to keep this power for himself, but also in his face was a maturity that had never been there before. He knew his responsibility.

He looked blankly at Dumbledore for a second, as if he had forgotten that he was there. “I guess we should go,” he said. He cast a beckoning hand towards the headmaster, and suddenly they were both back on the floor in Dumbledore’s office. Harry rolled onto his back and lay for a moment looking up passively at the ceiling. He no longer had wings, and his eyes were as they had been; green, and limited to two in number. Only his skin betrayed the forces that moved within him now. The metallic gleam was still there, the violet of the wards and his own antique gold shining through the thin envelope of skin, crossed here and there by sparks of the four colors; red danced everywhere, blue and green flashed across his eyes, and yellow outlined his hands. Slowly, he became aware that Dumbledore was watching him.

“You know,” Harry quipped, slowly getting to his feet. “This isn’t as easy as you made it look.” He felt rather as though he were overflowing, as if what was inside of him might all spill out at the slightest tip. Moving slowly, he picked up the axe from where it had lain beside him. “I need to be higher,” he said simply. Taking down the ward he had placed on the office, Harry summoned his Starstone from his dormitory and disapparated.
(I’ll be taking rather extraordinary liberties with Scottish geography in this chapter. Please ignore the multitudinous inaccuracies. I have no research materials other than my memory and my Boss, who lived in South London.)

(Also, a few small changes have been made in Chapter 57. Nothing big, just ironing out a few logistical errors. So you don’t have to go back and re-read it for such a small thing, I’ll include the edited sentence right here. “Under its original charter, each nation is allowed three Charter representatives, plus an additional representative for every thousand members of the population. Wizarding population, not total. Britain, before you ask, has nine representatives in all.” See, I just fixed some numbers.)

Chapter 60

He reappeared some hundred feet above the tallest tower of the castle, buffeted by the bitter winds of January. The air was crystal clear, and so cold that it burnt the breathing throat. Nonetheless, a crowd of three or four dozen people had gathered outside the castle gates. Harry groaned as he saw muggle cars and clothing, and gritted his teeth in frustration when he recognized television cameras and a small fleet of news vans. There were even a pair of helicopters circling, each of them bristling with cameras, all trained on him. There would be no hiding now, no way to modify that many memories. Resolutely deciding to ignore them, despite the occupants shouting questions over the wind, Harry turned to his task.

To start, he drew the magic of the wards into a thread within himself, as thin a rope as he could force it into. He was sure of what he had to do; the knowledge was there, in him somehow. Whenever he felt unsure of the next action, all he had to do was touch the axe, and he knew again. He fed the power into the axe, and it flowed there easily enough, but the next step was a little harder. Concentrating on the flow and patterns of the magic, he wove it through the lattice of the blade into a shining, radiantly invisible net. The magic had lain long in its shape as the wards, and so it helped him, remembering the intricacies of the form that it had held for centuries. His greatest task, as he began to ply the net out of the axe, was to restrain it, to keep it from snapping back too fast, for that could have disastrous results. He held it firm and separate in his mind as he wielded the axe in concert with his own magic to build a frail-seeming skeleton to support the weaving, and then he was ready. He cast the net out like a fisherman, one bent on protecting the fish, rather than capturing them, and then watched with a weary satisfaction as the violet slid smoothly, firmly over that gilded frame, from the apex, where he floated, all the way down to the ground, in a perfect circle precisely one mile in radius. The wards were reset.

A sudden cessation of sound reminded Harry of the helicopters. With that much magic back in play, the muggle machinery ceased to function, and the two choppers listed in the air, and began to fall. “Wingardium Leviosa!” Harry shouted, whipping out his wand and catching them both. He strained to hold them, so drained by the setting of the wards that the simple spell, one of the first that he had ever learned, came hard, so hard that he dropped one of them. Fortunately, it was only a dozen feet or so off the ground. Its occupants got a hard jolt, but nothing more. Summoning his reserves, he set the last one safely down and landed himself on the roof of a tower of the castle. He could still see the cameras, and it was obvious that they were all directed at him. He couldn’t blame them. After all, to a muggle, a boy flying on a broomstick above a castle that had just appeared out of nowhere was unusual in the extreme, certainly newsworthy.
When he felt a little more capable, he pointed his wand at his ears. "Echolosquery," he muttered, and he could hear what the news people were saying.

"Here we are on the shores of Loch Ness," one anchor was saying into a large microphone. "Where something phenomenal has occurred. For those of you who are just joining us, a castle, that's right, a castle, has just appeared here on a bluff overlooking the northern shore. That was half an hour ago. There has been a new development. A boy, who looks to be about 15 or 16 years old, appeared just a few minutes ago high in the air above the castle, riding what appears to be a broomstick! If I weren't watching it with my own eyes, I would never have believed it, folks! The boy hovered above the castle for several minutes, performing some sort of... ritual with what appeared to be a sort of ceremonial axe. We witnessed faint flashes of purple and golden light, and then two helicopters, our own traffic copter and one from another station, simultaneously malfunctioned. They began to fall, but then the boy drew what can only be described as a wand from his clothes, shouted something, and stopped the helicopters in midair! I don't know what's going on, but it is something that has never been seen before. Both the copters are on the ground now, and- Hey! My microphone’s not working! Are we still on the air?"

Pandemonium ensued in the reporter’s ranks as every piece of equipment shut down. It had taken longer, because they were farther from the epicenter of the wards, but the effect was no less complete. Rested now, Harry took to the air once more, floating almost lazily down to the muggles. They surged up to meet him as he landed, useless equipment quickly abandoned in favor of notepads and pencils as they surrounded him at a slight distance, careful of the axe which he still held in his hand. "Young man," one of the ones in the lead, a carefully coifed young woman, called out. "Can you tell us anything about what has happened here? Where did this castle come from?"

"What’s happened to the Urquhart ruins?" asked another.

"What’s your name, boy?" asked a third. Harry held up his hands, stilling the clamor.

"My name is Harry Potter," he said calmly, resignedly. "Welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." He looked over his shoulder, up the hill to the castle. "I might get in trouble for this, but I guess you ought to follow me. If Headmaster Dumbledore has recovered yet, he can explain some more things for you." He was still holding his broom, but he decided not to disturb them any more, and walked up the hill, answering a few questions but ignoring most of them. "Yes, I did say witchcraft. No, I don’t practice witchcraft, I’m a wizard. No, I don’t mean Satanism, it’s magic, nothing else. Yes, this is a school, didn’t I say that? Yes, for children. Just a minute, and Headmaster Dumbledore will be able to explain everything." I hope, he added silently.

He reached the Great Doors with some trepidation, for McGonagall was standing there, looking stern.

"What is the meaning of this, Mister Potter?" she said strictly, looking askance at the mass of muggles on the steps. Silence fell as her disapproving gaze roved across the crowd. A reporter near the back of the crowd swallowed audibly, and Harry smiled. "They’re here to meet Headmaster Dumbledore," he declared loudly. More softly and more gravely, he continued. "We can’t just erase their memories, Professor. They’ve already broadcast images of the school all across Britain. Everyone knows we’re here now, we may as well give them some answers."

McGonagall sniffed. "Headmaster Dumbledore is still indisposed, Mr. Potter." She let her face soften a little into a look of concern, but her eyes accused Harry. "He’s in the Hospital Wing."

Harry’s eyes widened, and he pushed past her into the castle, leaving her to deal with the press. He ran up to the wing, pushing through the press of the student body leaving, now that the wards were replaced. When he finally got to the infirmary, only Nimue, Ron, and Hermione were still in there
with Madame Pomfrey and Dumbledore, who lay still and pale in a bed. Harry hurried to his side. “Will he be alright?” he asked Pomfrey anxiously. She nodded slowly.

“Ho ought to be. He’s just worn himself out. If he gets plenty of rest, he should be up and around in a week or so. But I’ll have the world’s own time keeping him in bed, I’m sure.” She smiled down fondly at the Headmaster. “Thinks he’s invincible, this one.”

Harry stepped back, shaken. Dumbledore in the hospital, for a whole week. It was inconceivable. A moment later, Ron and Hermione closed around him, pulling him into a corner, one the opposite side of the room from where Nimue stood at a window, staring down at the grounds and completely indifferent to everything inside the room.

“What happened in Dumbledore’s office?” Hermione whispered. “The whole castle shook!”

“I did it,” Harry said numbly. “I took the power of the wards from Dumbledore, and then I rebuilt the wards.”

“You did it by yourself?” Hermione gasped. “We thought, well, we thought that you and Dumbledore would do it together. How did you know what to do?”

“The axe told me,” Harry explained, showing them Hufflepuff’s axe.

“Wow,” breathed Ron. “Where did you get that?”

So Harry explained, in a limited sort of way, about and Erik Hufflepuff. He didn’t talk about Hogwarts; he wanted to tell Dumbledore about her first, if he told anyone at all. Hermione thought that it explained a lot, to have a person living in the castle whose sole duty was to fix everything that broke or wore out. “I mean,” she said. “I’ll bet he’s had to repair the dungeon at least every other week. We hear so many explosions from the sixth and seventh year classes, but we never see any damage, do we?”

“More explosions since Fred and George reached sixth year,” added Ron. Harry and Hermione both nodded. Harry smiled a little.

“What was it like?” Hermione asked wistfully. “Being that powerful, and creating something so big?”

“Oh, it was incredible,” Harry said with excitement. “I felt as though I had wings, and I could see everything! The way the air moved around me, the paths that the clouds would take, where a wind was about to spring up. As if I’ve lived all my life in a fog, and for once, I was up above it.” He smiled. “There’s still a little of it left. I’ve still got some of the ward’s magic.”

“Oh no,” Hermione said suddenly, her eyes wide. “With the wards gone, the muggles could see the castle, couldn’t they?”

“They did,” Harry said regretfully. “They still do. I didn’t re-erect the anti-muggle parts of the wards, because it was too late. There were news reporters at the gates, with cameras and helicopters and everything. I left them at the Doors with Professor McGonagall.”

“Muggles in Hogwarts?” Ron sounded shocked.

“It’s never happened before!” gasped Hermione. “Well, except for one time, when Armando Dippet was Headmaster, but that was the brother of one of the professors and he was in rather a lot of trouble, but—“
"I’ve read Hogwarts; A History, Hermione," said Harry, smiling. “I know.”

“Muggles used to live all over this place,” said Nimue, startling the three. “Before it was Hogwarts. Back when I lived here. This was a city then, almost 1600 years ago. Such a beautiful place.” Her eyes went distant, and she turned back to the window.

Hermione looked about to question Harry, but then Dumbledore coughed. He was awake. The three rushed to his side. “Are you alright?” asked Harry concernedly. He was worried that he had taken too much from Dumbledore, although he had tried to be careful not to. Dumbledore smiled, and patted his hand paternally.

“I’ll be fine, Harry. From the empty room, may I take it that you succeeded?” He looked around him, but he didn’t see Nimue, as she was still standing at her window, in the shadow of a partition. Harry nodded.

“But I was too late. The muggles saw the whole castle. They’re here, downstairs with Professor McGonagall. I told them that you would explain everything.”

Dumbledore sat up, ignoring Pomfrey’s protests. “Than you ought to bring them up here, I should think. Madame Pomfrey isn’t about to let me stand up, let alone leave the infirmary, but I can explain things just as well from here.”

Harry nodded, and ran from the Hospital Wing. He slowed to a walk just before reaching the stairs that led to the Entrance Hall, for he could hear McGonagall speaking to the muggles below. He entered the room, politely interrupting her. “Professor McGonagall? Dumbledore is ready to see the reporters now.” He looked at the press. “If you would follow me?” He led them through the school, amused at how they all gawked and craned to see the suits of armor and the moving portraits, or the staircases that swung from one landing to another.

One particularly bold anchor-man even applauded when Peeves made an appearance, despite the fact that he showered them all with live mice before making a series of extremely rude gestures and flying off upside down. “Who, er, what was that?” asked the man, pushing to the fore of the group.

“That was Peeves, our resident poltergeist,” explain Harry, turning around and walking backward, like a tour guide in a museum. “That was very well-behaved, for him. I met him when he was throwing walking sticks at me, way back when I was a first year. The only one who can control him at all is the Bloody Baron. He’s the Slytherin Ghost,” he added, seeing the man about to ask another question. He asked one anyway.

“There are ghosts here?”

“Oh, dozens,” Harry assured him. “There’s Nearly-Headless Nick, the Gryffindor Ghost, the Fat Friar in Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw’s Grey Lady. Those are the ones we see most, but there’s also Moaning Myrtle, who haunts a girl’s toilet on the first floor. Most of them are kind of reclusive, really. We don’t see them very often during the school year.” As he was speaking, he led them onto a staircase in the main well, and it began to move. Several of the muggles screamed, clutching at the wide marble rail, but no one fell off, and when the stair stilled at its new landing, they continued on their way.

The anchor man had another question. “What are Slytherin, Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw? Are they professors here?”

Harry laughed. “No. The school is divided into four Houses, each with about 70 students, and the Houses are named after the Founders of the School, Godric Gryffindor, Salazar Slytherin, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Helga Hufflepuff. They lived about 1400 years ago, and they built this castle, more
or less. I’m in Gryffindor House, by the way. Fifth year.” He turned back around to face forward, for they had reached the infirmary. “Now,” he said, raising his hands to stop the group. “Headmaster Dumbledore is recovering from a recent trauma,” he said quietly, making sure that they could all hear him. “But he has agreed to see you. Please, try not to get him too excited, and if he gets too tired, we may have to ask you to leave. Now-“

A voice from inside the room interrupted Harry, making him start guiltily. “Oh, come now, Harry, I’m not so bad as all that. Bring them in.”

Fighting back a smile, Harry opened the door and ushered the group in. Dumbledore was sitting up in his bed, and more color had returned to his face. Nimue had vanished, but Madame Pomfrey was bustling about at the other end of the ward, but she kept shooting disapproving glances at the visitors. Dumbledore put on his half-moon spectacles, observing the assemblage. “I assume that these are the muggle reporters, Harry?” he said benignly. Harry nodded, grinning. “Well, then,” Dumbledore continued. “As Harry here has no doubt told you, my name is Albus Dumbledore, and I am Headmaster here at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I have a load of other titles as well, but most of them are either honorary or ludicrous, so I won’t bore you with them. I apologize for not being able to meet you in a more dignified manner, but a recent occurrence, the same event which allowed you to see us, has left me mostly indisposed until just a few minutes ago. Ordinarily, this castle is protected and concealed by an ancient and intricate system of magical wards. But they failed today, obviously.” He flashed an amused glance at Harry, who blushed, embarrassed, and ducked his head. “And that is how it is that you are here, the first muggles to set foot in Hogwarts in seventy years, and the first who are not related to students or professors. I imagine that you all have many questions; now is the time to post them.”

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the bold one who had asked about Peeves and the ghosts stepped forward. “My name is Alan Michaelmas, and I’m a staff-writer for the London Times. If I may, sir, what are ‘muggles?’ We’ve been called that several times today, and I would like some clarification.”

“Ah. A simple question to start out with.” Dumbledore nodded. “Muggle is a name that we, meaning wizards and witches, use to refer to people with no magical ability. It is a benign term, not offensive or condescending in normal use.”

“Now, you say ‘magical ability,’ do you mean magic, wands and rabbits out of hats and curses, that sort of magic?” Alan sounded skeptical, even with everything he had already seen. Dumbledore just chuckled.

“Oh, my, yes, and so much more. Here at this school, we have five separate kinds of magic in our curriculum, and other schools teach a few more or less, depending on what they deem appropriate.”

“Could we perhaps, see a demonstration?”

“Of course!” Dumbledore beamed, and he rummaged on the table next to his bed, coming up at last with his wand. “Now, what would you like to see?” He flicked his wand towards a potted plant on the windowsill. “Wingardium Leviosa!” The little plant hovered a few inches, than Dumbledore set it down. “That’s one of the very first charms that we teach are students, but perhaps you are not convinced? Accio.” He summoned Alan’s notebook to his lap, and then banished it back into the reporter’s hands. “Those are charms,” he clarified. “Only one kind of magic. Years ago, I taught Transfiguration here. It’s a little more impressive.” Without a word of warning, he transformed the bed next to him into a water buffalo and back. “As you can see, that takes a little more training. We start students very slow in Transfiguration, turning matchsticks into needles and turnips into tops, that sort of thing. What are you up to in class now, Harry, switching spells?”

“No,” Harry said, shaking his head. “That was last year. We’re vanishing mice now.”
“Ah, right,” Dumbledore said. “Vanishing spells. Vanquisi!” He aimed his wand at the bed that had so recently been a buffalo, and it disappeared without a trace. “As you can see, very easy with inanimate objects, less so with animals, and the more complex the animal, the more difficult.”

“We started on worms,” offered Harry. “Then we went to snails, and when we’d all gotten that right, we moved on to mice. By next year, if we do well, Professor McGonagall will start letting us practice on one another.” He smiled at the consternation this caused.

“But where do they go?” sputtered the woman who had asked Harry his name out on the lawn by the gates.

“Home,” Dumbledore answered simply. “To whereever they think of as home. When the students are a little better, they’ll begin choosing a destination. This is all a prelude to their seventh year, when they will learn apparation, the ability to transport themselves instantly from one location to another. Rather dangerous, that, but absolutely invaluable.” He cut his eyes sideways at Harry, who looked solemn now. “Oh, come now, Harry, no one blames you. Cheer up.” He turned back to the muggles. “Another type that we teach is Prognostication. We teach that in three divisions; Astronomy, telling the future through the movements of the stars; Arithmancy, which uses math and formulae for the same result, and Divination, which is a sort of general collection of different types of fortune-telling. Harry here is particularly good at that, perhaps he could show you?”

Wishing slightly that Dumbledore had not brought him up again, Harry produced his crystal ball and entered a light trance, while focusing on the reporters. Dimly, he heard gasps as the familiar ice, coating his hands and fingers with delicate lace. First, he turned his Sight on Alan, for he was the most prominent. “Mr. Michealmas, you were born in Bath, in 1972. You had three dogs while you were growing up, Bairn, Moran, and Sisiphus. Hmm,” Harry said as he tracked down a side-line of Alan’s thread. “You go to a dentist named William Granger?”

He looked up, smiling. “What a coincidence. His daughter, Hermione, is one of my best friends.”

Alan was gaping at Harry. “How, how did you know all that?”

Harry grinned, wagging the crystal ball toward him. “It’s all in here. All of you. Do you want to know what you’ll wear tomorrow, or perhaps what you’re going to eat for dinner? I’d offer to tell you when you are going to die, but most people prefer not to know that.”

“That’s quite enough, Harry,” murmured Dumbledore amusedly. “Now, that’s three. Let’s see. Ah, potions. Very different from any other kind of magic. I never understood them very well, although I am quite willing to use them, so long as the person who made them knows what he is doing. Our own potions teacher, Professor Severus Snape, is among the best in Britain, if not the world. He made most of those.” With a sweep of his arm, Dumbledore indicated the shelves upon shelves of varicolored bottles that held her healing potions. “There’s no end to what you can make a potion for, so long as you have the right ingredients.

“And then there is dueling magic. Attacks and shields, hexes, jinxes, and counterjinxes. And, of course, the Dark Arts. We don’t teach that here, but we teach our students enough about it to defend themselves. These are dark times in the wizarding world, after all.”

“How so?” asked another news agent, one who had not yet spoken. “Are you at war?”

“In a way,” Dumbledore agreed solemnly. “Not against one another, no, there hasn’t been a war between wizards for centuries, not since the formation of the International Confederacy of Wizards. What we face now is a single, powerful threat. His name is Lord Voldemort, and he is evil.”

“Now, that’s a strong word,” said Alan, who seemed inclined to be confrontational. “What has he
“He murders,” Dumbledore said simply. “By the hundreds. You may remember a string of attacks on small village, fourteen years ago. Uffington, Isle-on-Thames, Leoch. There were more. The entire village, destroyed each time. I think that the explanation your parliament gave was terrorist attacks?”

“I remember those,” Alan said. “No group ever came forward to claim responsibility. And the attacks in the States, year before last. Was that Lord Voldemort as well?”

“No, no,” deferred Dumbledore placatingly. “You have your own evils, and I’m not saying that ours is worse than yours. Only more immediate.”

“You say that 2000 people dead in a single attack doesn’t qualify as immediate?”

No, no,” insisted Dumbledore again, still calm, although Alan was apparently agitated. “But only a few days ago, Voldemort was here, right where that young lady, yes you, is standing right now, possessing young Harry Potter here. And a day later, he nearly killed the boy on our own front steps. So when I say immediate, I only mean that he is a very personal threat to us here at Hogwarts.”

“My arch-enemy, you might say,” Harry quipped, smiling rakishly. A few of the reporters looked over at him, but most stayed fixed on Dumbledore and Alan.

“So,” Alan was saying. “What is it that determines whether a person can do magic or not? Is it genetics or upbringing?”

“We’re really not sure what it is that makes one person a wizard and another a muggle. The tendency does run in families, to be sure, but you also find sports, a very powerful witch or wizard in a family that has been all muggle for generations. The opposite is also true. Occasionally, a non-magical person will be born into a wizard family, but that is rather more rare. Those people we call squibs.”

“So, any child could be born with these talents? And he or she would be eligible to attend this school, regardless of any consideration other than ability?”

“Of course,” Dumbledore said. “It is our duty to provide an education for anyone who is in need of it.”

At that moment, an owl flew in through the open window, alighting on Dumbledore’s bedside table. “Just a moment, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, turning to take the letter off of the owl’s leg while they watched in amazement and curiosity. He scanned it quickly, and frowned slightly. “Harry,” he said, looking up. “Could you go and fetch Professors McGonagall and Snape for me? I shall need her to go to London with me, at once, and I shall be leaving Snape in charge here.” He stood up slowly, moving like a very old man, but with determination. He waved off Pomfrey’s fussing, saying, “I have to go, Poppy. A Council has been called, and I must attend immediately. Ladies, gentlemen,” he said apologetically to the press. “I’m very sorry, but urgent business has called me away. I’ll send Harry show you out, and Professor Flitwick will meet you in the Entrance Hall. He will help you move your vehicles far enough outside the wards for them to work. Harry, after you’ve seen them out, you’re to go back to the Gryffindor Tower, and stay there. I suspect that I shall have to send for you at some point, so please arrange to stay near the fire, if you would.” He picked up his cloak from the back of a chair, swirled it around his shoulders, and left the room at a jog, catching McGonagall at the door and taking her away with them. Harry could hear him yelling instructions to Snape, who had been right behind McGonagall, and then he was gone, leaving a stunned silence in the Hospital Wing.

Deprived of Dumbledore, the reporters rounded on Harry as he began to herd them downstairs.
“What is this council that the headmaster has to attend?”

“What was this castle hidden in the first place?”

“Are those muggles?” This last comment was shouted in a disdainful, accusatory voice from a side corridor. Blaise Zabini and a few other Slytherins stood there, glaring at Harry. “What did you let them in here for?”

“Shut it, Blaise,” Harry said shortly, shooting the androgynous Slytherin a warning glare. Blaise did not shut it.

“You can’t talk to me like that! I’m a prefect,” Blaise sputtered. Harry laughed drily.

“And I’m the Boy-Who-Lived. Who cares. Just leave off, Blaise. Yes, they’re muggles. And as for why I let them in, well, when Dumbledore gets back, he can tell you. Now go to class, or wherever it is that you’re supposed to be.”

With a final glare, Blaise and his cronies slunk off towards the dungeons. Harry apologized to the reporters. “I’m sorry about that. They were from Slytherin, and students from that house have a tendency to believe in magical superiority. They believe in pure blood, meaning an all-wizard heritage, but that’s just foolish. There simply aren’t enough of us. We have to marry muggles, or we’d either become disgustingly inbred, or simply die out.”

“How many of you are there?” was, predictably enough, the next question. Harry stopped for a moment to think. “About six thousand, I think, in Britain. I haven’t a clue about the rest of the world.”

They had reached the doors, and Professor Flitwick met them there. Harry introduced them, and laughed at the scepticism that the muggles showed when the tiny wizard told them he would need only Harry to help him move six vans, a Volkswagen bus, and two helicopters nearly half a mile. He laughed harder at the looks of open-mouthed shock on their faces when he levitated both helicopters at once and neatly placed them on the opposite side of the lake, all the while sitting on the pedestal of a statue of a boar that stood by the front steps. Flitwick, moving one vehicle at a time, looked at him reprovingly.

“That power isn’t yours to play with, Mr. Potter,” he squeaked in as stern a voice as he could manage.

“Oh, it is now,” Harry countered. “We can’t exactly hide anymore, so I didn’t see any reason to put the concealing charms back up with the rest of the wards.” Harry levitated a handful of snow into his hand, and packed it into a snowball. The day was frigid, but beautiful. The air was crisp, and down here on the ground it was absolutely still. Only the people moved in that world of white and grey. It was a beautiful day. The power that still showed occasionally through Harry’s skin warmed him, and he saw everything around him with more clarity than ever before. Yet despite his smiling and joking, Harry was terrified. He had single-handedly destroyed the Statute of Secrecy. He had broken wizarding law, and he had done so flagrantly and knowing full well what he was doing. When he was in second year, he had been threatened with expulsion when a house elf used magic in front of his aunt and uncle, who already knew that magic existed, even though they disapproved of it. What would the Ministry do to him now that he had exposed them all?
Chapter 61

Harry tracked down Nimue in an empty room in the East Tower. He had discovered that he could still feel her, a faint, residual connection. “What were you thinking?” he shouted, while she stood with her back to him, staring out the window just like she had in the Hospital Wing. “Why do you think that you having your body was more important than the safety of everyone in this school? Voldemort could have come back, and the students would have been defenseless!”

“I’m not the one who apparated through the ward, Heron,” she said softly, not turning to face him. “All I did was let you know a little about who I am and what I feel.”

“But you changed who I was, and what I felt!” Harry answered angrily. “What gave you the right to do that? I thought you said that your kind obeyed the rules.”

“There are no rules to cover things like that,” she said, smiling and closing her eyes. “For a situation that has happened so rarely throughout history, who would set rules? I only have to obey rules that exist.”

Harry closed his own eyes, making an effort to calm down. “What gave you the right?” he repeated slowly. “You seem like a rational, logical being; did you even stop to think that what you were doing was wrong?”

“‘Wrong’ is not a concept I am familiar with,” Nimue answered, her voice rippling with amusement. “‘Right,’ and ‘wrong,’ those are human concepts, relative and subjective. I live by what is lawful and what is not, Heron. Set down in black and white. If the powers that be decried that what I have done to you is unacceptable, than I would not do it again. But I would not regret having done it already.” She stretched out her hands, or were they paws, sheathing and unsheathing her claws. “After all,” she purred, flinging her hair over her shoulder to look at him. “I did get what I wanted.” She looked remarkable like a teenage girl, Harry thought distractedly. In his head and in Voldemort’s, she had appeared ageless, in the distant past she had looked about 30, but out here in the real world, she appeared to be exactly seventeen. “Even if it’s not quite as I left it.”

Harry couldn’t say anything more; he just glared at her. She rolled her eyes. “It will all be alright, Heron,” she said soothingly. “This may be for the better at any rate. Or do you not remember what you Saw, so long ago when you Watched my love return to me from a battle against the Saxons? You saw muggles and wizards living together openly. I admit, there were difficulties. Prejudice and envy is common to the human race, but it was good, I think.”

“I know,” Harry said, still irate. “But that was ages ago. Things are different now. There are more of them now, but our numbers haven’t increased at all. And I think people are more paranoid now.”

The cat-woman shrugged. “That could be. I don’t know much of what has happened in the last half-century, and I’ve never paid much attention at all to the muggle world. They go to war far too often for my tastes.”

“Exactly,” Harry snapped. “They fight among themselves, over differences real or not. They fight over oil, and money! What do you think they’ll do about an entire race of people who can do something that they can’t do?”

“Such high-minded words,” she tutted, raising an eyebrow. “Do you distance yourself so much from the muggles? Remember, for more than half of your life, you’ve lived as one of them. Do you think you might be judging them all by the standard that your uncle set?” Her words, quietly spoken, cut
deep. “Don’t you think that’s a little unfair? How would you like to be judged by Draco Malfoy’s standard, or by Thomas’? You see, this is what the biggest problem is going to be now. Too long has the world been divided into us and them. It’s going to be very hard to change that, but it must be done. You can do it, Harry, you and Dumbledore. Don’t you see? That’s what the end of Merlin’s prophecy meant. The Two Worlds shall once more be one... All shall be brought about by the Heir, with the Lady and the Black-Barred Son to guide him.”

“What does that mean?” Harry asked. “The Black-Barred Son?”

“That’s a term from heraldry,” Nimue said professorially. “In old coats of arms, a son who was acknowledged but not, shall I say, legitimate, was given his father’s coat of arms, but with a black bar across it, informing all who see it that he is an acknowledged bastard.”

Harry thought about the prophecy for a moment. It was as fresh in his mind as if it were on paper in front of his eyes. “Of Gules, the First, the line is unbroken, of one, and one, and one, on to now. One branch spreads off, ending in the Black-Barred Son, known as White. What does gules mean?”

“Nimue smiled indulgently, like a teacher whose favorite student was being particularly bright. “It means red, in the old language. And azure, of course, is blue, vert means green, and juane means yellow. Does that help?”

Harry closed his eyes to concentrate better, working it out. “The four Houses, then. So, that means that Dumbledore is descended from Gryffindor, too, but he wasn’t born to married parents? That means he’s related to me!”

Nimue nodded, smiling in her odd, cat-like way, mouth open to reveal the neat row of small, serrated teeth. “He is, in fact, your great-great-great-great uncle, and, oddly enough, the only uncle you’ve ever had related to you by blood. The Potter line was rather well known for having only a single son born in each generation, and there has never been a Potter daughter. Just a long, long line of men. The prophecy is right, Harry. For all the grandeur of its roots, your family tree has but a single branch. Albus.”

“Does he know?” Harry asked. “He’s never mentioned anything like that to me.”

“No, I shouldn’t think so. His father, your great-great-great-great grandfather, was rather ashamed of his by-blow, and did his best to cover it up. He was honourable about it, he settled on young Albus and his mother a very respectable pension and made certain that the boy got the best of education, but all under the terms that Albus never know who his father was. His mother remarried soon after, I think, and the issue was laid to rest.”

“Should I tell him?”

“That’s up to you.” Nimue turned away, back to her window. “I’m hardly qualified to advise you on matters of human relationships.”

“What? Aren’t you supposed to guide me? If I’m the Heir, than you’re the Lady, obviously.”

“Albus will be your guide, Heron. As I was his. I am merely here to offer what aid I have.”

“Harry?” It was Fred’s voice, coming up from a landing below. Harry turned to see if he was coming, and when he turned back, Nimue was gone.

“Damn.” Harry kicked a wall as Fred came into the tower-top room.

“What’s wrong, Harry?” he asked. Harry sighed.
“Everything. Did you want something, Fred?”

“Er, there’s a message for you, in Dumbledore’s office. We were supposed to find you and tell you to come immediately.”

Harry sighed again. “Let’s go, then.”

Snape was waiting for Harry in the Headmaster’s office. “What’s this about?” Harry began to ask, but an unfamiliar voice interrupted him. “Mr. Potter, am I right?” Three heads floated in the fireplace; Dumbledore, an old wizard with a curly beard in patches of black and grey, and a witch with square-rim spectacles and a clear, quiet gaze that reminded Harry of Hedwig. It was the woman who had spoken.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said smilingly. “This is Borus Figg, of Northern Ireland, and Tara Malcolm, of Scotland. They are my fellow British charter representatives in the Council.”

“Er, hello,” said Harry nervously. “Am I, er, am I in trouble?”

“Oh yes,” said Borus cheerfully. “Rather a lot, I should think.” Harry quailed, but the man went on. “You have a talent for that, I hear. Thanks to you, the existence of the wizarding world is all over the muggle news, all over the world.”

“Oh, stop it, Borus,” chided the witch gently. “You’re scaring him. You’re not going to be punished, Harry. Albus has explained that you were under the influence of this... Nimue, that was the name, right?” She looked to Dumbledore, who nodded an affirmation. “Nimue, who didn’t leave you much choice in the matter. Do I have the story right?”

Harry nodded. It wasn’t exactly correct, but if that was what they believed, he wasn’t about to correct them and get himself into more trouble. Dumbledore smiled at Harry, and winked, and Harry smiled back. Tara continued. “Why we’ve called you, Mr. Potter, is because Professor Dumbledore has told us of your feat in resurrecting the Hogwarts wards. You understand how significant that is?” Tara looked querying, but Harry couldn’t find approval or disapproval in her face. He nodded mutely, and she inclined her head in response.

“Well,” Borus said, startling Harry a little with his brash cheeriness. “You know that there are some people here who would like to hear how you did this from your own lips. Would you come and tell us all the details?”


“That’s right, boy. Don’t worry. We don’t bite. Well, not literally, at any rate.”

Harry looked at Dumbledore, who smiled encouragingly. “Come on, Harry,” he urged, gently. “There are people here who you ought to meet, and who ought to meet you.”

Slightly reassured, Harry stuttered an agreement. “Great,” chuckled Borus. “We’ll go now, and you can Floo straight here. ICWS Council Chamber One. We’ll see you in a minute, then.” With a pop, all three heads vanished from the grate.

“Well, get going,” prompted Snape crossly when Harry hesitated for a moment. “You can’t keep them waiting. Go.”

Hiding his nerves behind humour, Harry made a salute to the Head of Slytherin. “See you later then, Snape,” he said, taking a pinch of Floo Powder from an enamel box on the mantle and tossing it into the flames. They flared up emerald green and Harry, steeling himself, stepped through.
ICWS Council Chamber One proved to be a hall vaster than any Harry had ever seen before. An absolutely enormous amphitheatre with layer upon tier of boxes arrayed around a raised central dais. Flags and insignia marked each box, identifying the occupying representatives in a riot of colors and patterns. Trying to take it all in, it took Harry a moment to notice the three people in front of him. Dumbledore, Borus, and Tara stood there, and Borus reached out to shake his hand. “Well-met, Mr. Potter,” he said jovially. “Wonderful to have you here, of course, especially under such fortunate circumstances.” His eyes crinkled with gently sarcasm. Dumbledore rolled his own eyes in good humour.

“Come along, Harry,” he said, putting a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “The Council is waiting for you.”

The four of them, Harry and the three Council members, wended their way down past the row after row of boxes. Harry was uncomfortably aware of conversations halted; action stilling as all eyes gravitated towards him. By the time Dumbledore guided him into a box on the lowest tier decorated with British colors, the entire hall was silent. An unobtrusive wizard who looked rather like a clerk pulled out a chair for Harry, and they all sat down.

On the central stage, a dozen or so venerable-looking witches and wizards sat at an imposing high bench, looking rather like a panel of judges. One of them, the youngest-looking, sat slightly apart at one end, looking down at a book that he was reading in his lap. The rest looked rather foreboding, dressed in ornate black robes with expressions ranging from stern to indifferent. Harry felt rather intimidated, seated as he was straight in front of them. He felt all those gazes as a frightening weight, and he would have hidden beneath his chair if he dared.

The silence in the room stretched out until one of the wizards on the dais stood up and cleared his throat. “This is a new thing,” he said in a ringing, reaching voice that filled the hall. “This meeting of magical and non-magical powers. The International Council of Wizards is proud to welcome the leaders of Britain, Ireland, Canada, The United States, France, Russia, Japan, China—” The list went on and on, but eventually the speaker took a breath. “We also extend our welcome to those members present of the muggle press.” Slightly startled, Harry looked up and behind him, to where a balcony ringed half the arena. In between the flying cameras and Quik-Quotes Quills, Harry could see a number of notebooks and pencils. The speaker went on. “I must apologize for the inconvenience. Under other circumstances, we would null the wards surrounding this building so that your technology would function, but recent events make that too much of a security risk, I am told. So.

“The reason we are all here is plain. For centuries, the magical world has concealed itself from the mundane, with co-operation from certain branches of your governments. But earlier today, certain events made that secret impossible to keep any longer.” Harry’s face burned and he tried harder to make himself inconspicuous, to no avail. He could everyone staring at him, but the speaker didn’t pause. “This accident, which some might consider regrettable, I believe to have been inevitable and perhaps even beneficial. I speak for many here when I say that it is high time we abandoned our shadows and joined the world at large. Harry Potter, will you please stand?”

Feeling very much as though he’d rather sink into the ground, Harry came to his feet. Wizard cameras flashed from all over the balcony.

“Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived and fifth year student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” intoned the speaker. “Is more or less responsible for our exposure. While we accept that he was under the influence of an unknown force, we credit him for bringing down the wards of Hogwarts, including its concealment wards. For this, and for his repeated efforts against the Dark Lord Voldemort, it is now my pleasure to award him the Order of Merlin, Third Class. Come up here, young man.”
The crowd burst into vocal debate as Harry forced himself to mount the stairs up to the dais. The speaker had to fire of a round of sparks for silence so he could continue. “Harry Potter, for services rendered for your country and for this leadership, we award you the Order of Merlin, Third Class, and the title of Squire.” He tapped Harry on both shoulders with his wand, and an ornate medal blossomed on the front of his school robes, opposite his Gryffindor crest. “This is the decision of the Head Council, and as such is beyond contestation.” He gazed evenly out over Harry’s head into the parts of the hall that had voiced the loudest protestation. “Thank you, Mr. Potter.” For once, the man smiled, and Harry went back to sit down, his knees slightly weak on the stairs.

“No, I’m sure that many of you have questions. The entire Council has been assembled, and I’m sure that between all of us, we can answer all of you.”

The first person to pose a question was an American reporter from the balcony and the question he had asked was one that Harry himself had asked Hagrid, way back before his first year. “Why have you, as a people, kept this secret at all?”

A wizard on the dais left of the speaker answered him. “You’ll find that answer easily enough looking into your own history. There is deep distrust on our part that you have ever changed. We were protecting ourselves.” Murmurs of dissent rose up all over the amphitheatre, but then someone shouted out another question. Harry recognized Alan Michealmas. “What, precisely, is magic? Why is it an ability limited to some and not others?”

At a gesture from the dais, Dumbledore stood to answer. “A very good question, Mr. Michealmas. Quite frankly, no-one knows exactly what magic is. All we know is a few things that it is not. It is not, for example, power given by an outside source in exchange for something, nor is it energy drawn from the world around us. It does not require sacrifice of any sort, nor can one acquire a talent for it through any amount of study or machination. Quite simply, one is born with the ability, or one is not. The closest comparison I can make is that it is genetic, but that’s not always true either.

“Those who have it posses an inner reservoir of magic. Training allows one to control more precisely the tapping of that reservoir, to tap more of it, or even, in exceptional cases—” He shot a brief glance at Harry. “All of it.”

The questions went on for hours, and Harry began to see certain trends. There were clear factions among the Council. Wizard-factions were either pleased, furious, or reserved, while muggles seemed to be amused or even indifferent to the fact that wizards existed, but absolutely incensed that their leaders had known and kept it a secret.

Well after midnight, the speaker stood up again, calling for silence. “I think, ladies and gentlemen, that a recess is in order. We will reconvene in three hours, at half-past five. In the meantime, could the Muggle Integration Tribunal please meet in the Gamma Conference Room? And Squire Potter too, if you please? Three hours, ladies and gentlemen.”

With a great, ponderous rumble, the arena slowly got to its feet. Dumbledore led Harry through the crowd to an ornate door on the uppermost tier, and through it. Th sheer noise almost knocked Harry back. The building from which he had just emerged fronted a huge courtyard, and this was packed with a seething mass of people. Huge placards and hand-made signs floated over the crowd. “OBLIVIATE THEM ALL!” proclaimed one in flashing violet letters while another said merely “Remember Salem.” Still others had messages like “Wands are Weapons,” and “Muggles Murder.”

When the crowd spotted Harry and Dumbledore, and immense outcry rose up from the wizards present. Some people were cheering, but it seemed to Harry that the majority was shouting angrily. Harry spotted a placard saying “The Boy-Who-Screwed-Up!” and another saying “Thanks, Potter!” in a script that somehow managed to convey biting sarcasm.
“Ignore them, Harry,” Dumbledore started to say, but before he could finish the sentence, a half-rotten potato smashed bruisingly into Harry’s cheekbone. As he stood there, stunned, a variety of produce, much of it magical in nature, pelted down on him, thrown by the crowd. An egg threw stinging shards of orange shell into his eyes. That was the final blow.

Rage, delicious, liberating rage swept through him, swept aside fear, swept aside Dumbledore’s hand on his shoulder. He stepped forward, drawing his wand. “Impedimenta!” At his shout, all the produce currently in the air stopped dead, right in front of him. He brushed past the wall of half-rotted fruits and vegetables, letting them drop behind him. He raised his hands, and amazingly, the crowd at his feet fell silent.

“I will not apologize for what I have done,” he said, his voice carrying surprisingly. He realized that Dumbledore has cast a Sonorous charm on him. “I regret having broken our law, but the result, that I do not regret.” He spread his arms to include the entire mob. “You here who are witches and wizards, you know who I am. I am Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. In my life, I have fought Voldemort—” Half the crowd flinched. “Yes, I can say it. Voldemort. Tom Marvolo Riddle. I have fought him seven times. I’ve won battles against him and I’ve lost, but I am still here. I still stand before you. I say these things not to boast, but so everyone knows who I am.

“I was raised not knowing that. I was raised by muggles, as many young witches and wizards are. Our worlds are not so separate. For instance, one of the reporters here now attends a dentist whose daughter is the best student at Hogwarts, not to mention my best friend. I myself went to muggle school until I was ten. I did housework, I cooked, and I hoped to be a fisherman or a writer when I grew up, or both.

“There are fewer than 100,000 of us in all the world. If it weren’t for the abilities that you have already seen us demonstrate, you would disregard us as an insignificant cult or sect. But, because you see us as a possible threat, or maybe just because we can do something that you can’t, you are gathered here to admonish us for an existance that we have held virtually unchanged for more than a thousand years.

“We have much to offer one another. Wizards, while I am the first to admit that we have our faults, have not waged war amongst ourselves in centuries. Instead, we have an all-encompassing system of government to settle any conflicts before they reach such a stage, while still allowing nations near-complete autonomy. But to be honest, we are stagnating. Our culture is so deeply rooted in anachronistic tradition that we cannot see anything else. This, this forced mingling could be for both our benefits if only we can all, each and every one of us, keep an open mind!”

Suddenly breathless, Harry stopped. The crowd was silent. Had he failed? He had just begun speaking, with no real aim or plan in his mind, just a cool fury. Then, slowly, one man near the steps began to clap. That was all it took. In seconds, the entire mob was cheering and clapping, placards forgotten. Harry stepped backwards, almost slipping on the forgotten food.

“Rash, Harry, very rash,” murmured Dumbledore, but he was smiling. Harry just looked at his feet.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said. “It just made me so mad. They were all being so stupid. Acting like the Dursleys and the Malfoys.”

“It is human nature, Harry, to form into exclusive groups, and to ostracize or even dehumanize everyone else. It takes rather a great degree of enlightenment to overcome that tendency.”

“They used to burn witches,” Harry muttered. Dumbledore scowled gently.

“Only certain groups,” he qualified. “Just like the Death Eaters torture muggles. No real difference
there; atrocity on both sides. But they don’t burn witches anymore, do they?”

Harry looked up into Dumbledore’s eyes, which were level and cool. “Are you saying that muggles are better than we are?”

The Headmaster sighed. “‘Better’ is a relative term, Harry. They certainly make more of an effort to be tolerant, they are more progressive, and on the average they may even be smarter. They are certainly more inventive.”

“Come on, Albus,” urged a witch from a side door on the wide stairs. “We can’t start without you.”

Dumbledore swept over to follow her, Harry tagging along at his heels. The room he found himself in was a medium-sized conference room, plain and bare with only a wide, paper-strewn table ringed with comfortable chairs and a tea trolley in the corner. Seven people were already seated, debating energetically over something. They stopped when Dumbledore sat down at the head of the table. Harry perched gingerly in the only remaining chair, at the foot opposite Dumbledore.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, we planned for this.” Dumbledore was beaming. As Harry looked around, he noticed that no-one here looked upset or put out. They all seemed rather pleased, in fact, with the day’s events. “Many of us,” Dumbledore continued. “Have hoped for it. We now have opportunities that have never before been available to us.”

“Aye,” said an old wizard with white hair and a red beard. “We can finally get rid of that list of ‘proscribed muggle artifacts.’” He grimaced and rolled his eyes. “I’ll be able to get out my old Westminster carpet again.”

“And I’ll be able to plant my bonsai Whomping Willow in my front garden. It doesn’t do very well potted, you know,” said a rather attractive witch in blue-mottled dress robes. “It’s been really quite irritating living in the middle of the city. Having to keep the secret at all hours.”

“Don’t get too excited,” muttered a wizard in a dark cloak with his hood up. Only a long, crooked nose showed from its depths. “It’ll take ages for all the old laws to change. I bet that you and Mr. Potter here will be getting Ministry reprimands for that little display out there.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Somehow, I doubt it, Mr. Syr. I do think that the Ministry rather has its hands full at the moment with more important issues.”

“I’m sure they do,” said the pretty witch primly. “And so do we, so let’s get to work, shall we? We’ve only got about two and a half hours to get all of our plans up and running. I already sent that proposal for charmed keys to allow muggles into magically accessed places like Diagon Alley and Hogwarts to Councilman Elmist. He said he’d get back to me by tomorrow morning. Should I ask him to be faster?”

“No, tomorrow’s fine,” Dumbledore said, flicking through a thick sheaf of parchments. “Mr. Keys. Have you sent out the proposals for the Reverse-Obliviation plan yet?”

“Er, yes,” answered a rather nervous-looking wizard, nearly dropping a scone as he shuffled through a heaping mound of scrolls on the desk in front of him. He sprayed crumbs as he checked a list. “Um, I sent copies to Stone, Ichir, Korsov, Iolia, and Cambridge, and Carmen said he’d make sure it got to that New Zealand representative whose name I can’t pronounce. Only Stone’s got back to me so far, but he says he’ll back it if we support his bid for Minister of Magic in Canada when he’s old enough. We can promise that easily; that’s not for almost ten years. He’d be a good Minister now, by all accounts, except that it’d take too much time from his schoolwork. He wants to graduate first, and study law for a bit.”
“Wonderful. I’ve met Stone; I’d support him anyway. Make sure the rest get back to us by morning. Offer them incentives if you have to; this is an important issue for us to sponsor muggle/magical trust. We have to have this approved before the Full Disclosure is released. When is that taking place, Syr?”

The hooded man didn’t need to check any notes. “Parts of it are public now; the full text will be finished by next Thursday, published no later than mid-March.”

Dumbledore grimaced. “That’s too long. Are there any quicker means?”

“Headmaster?” Harry tentatively raised his hand, wanting to make a contribution. Dumbledore smiled and nodded to him. “Well, you could use the Internet. It’d be available all over the world, instantly. You’d just need to get it typed up, and then you could upload it. It might not even cost very much.” Then he had to explain the Internet, but he could tell that the wizards were genuinely considering his idea.

“Bright kid you have there, Albus,” said Syr gruffly.

“I’ve always thought so,” Dumbledore replied in a voice so paternal that Harry almost told him right there. Runs in the family, Uncle Albus. But now wasn’t the time. He held his tongue, and Dumbledore continued. “Now, I know we’ve never made any progress on this before, but one can hope. Mr. Miggs, have you had any luck with your technological-compatibility charm?”

Mr. Miggs, a lanky wizard with glasses who was seated to Harry’s left started guiltily and looked up. Harry could see that he had been toying with a disassembled cell-phone under the edge of the table. Looking distracted, he brushed long hair out of his eyes. “Oh? Um, no. No luck. As far as I can tell, can’t be done. Muggle technology, especially electronics, just isn’t compatible with a magic-intensive atmosphere.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I had wished to be able to offer the press a chance to tour Hogwarts. Oh well, it doesn’t matter. Lady Acome, who owes us votes?”

A tall, oriental-looking witch smiled with a hint of tooth that reminded Harry of Nimue before checking a list written in a spiky foreign hand. She spoke in a delicately accented voice. “Young Master Stone already owes s one vote, for your support of his bill for increased funding for potions research. The Spanish delegates owe us two, from last year’s trade conflict. Russia owes us one, but they won’t tell us why, and China has agreed not to vote against our interests. Bulgaria and France will most likely follow your example, Albus, and Romania will vote against Argentina, who will vote against you.”

“Hmm.” Dumbledore hummed in thought. “That will help, but it might not be enough to force the issue. We know a lot of people aren’t going to want to admit to the muggles that we’ve been erasing their memories for centuries.”

“What about Mr. Potter?” Harry jerked, startled by Mr. Miggs. The tinkering wizard was looking at him through his thick glasses. “I mean, uh, he’s pretty famous, right? His support will count for a lot. Maybe we could even get him to speak for us?”

“Um, no?” was Harry’s first response. Him, get up in front of all those world leaders and tell them what he wanted them to do? Then he remembered his speech outside. How good it had felt to have all those people listening to his every word, and the elation he had felt when they appeared to agree with him. He would do a lot of things to feel that way again. “What would I have to do?”

“That’s the spirit, mate,” said Red-Beard. “That’s a good idea, Miggs. Whether they praise or blame
young Mr. Potter for this whole debacle, his visibility is so high that they’ll listen to whatever he has
to say. His youth will work for us too, I should think.”

Dumbledore, Harry thought, looked rather satisfied. “What you would have to do is present the issue
before the Council. Not today; these are delicate issues, and we want to resolve them without the
muggles present. Not even the muggle leaders know about our Obliviation policies yet. Some time
next week is most likely. The issue is that we want to reverse all the Obliviations that have been
performed on muggles. We can, as long as a standard Obliviate was used. It isn’t a complex charm,
but it will take time.”

“Ah.” Harry understood. “And you’d like to announce this as your intent before the muggles learn
that we’ve been mucking about in their heads all this time. A, er, what’s the word. A retroactive
apology.”

“Got it in one, boy,” chuckled Syr.

“So, Harry will do that.” Dumbledore made a notation. “What else do we have?”

“Well, we need to make muggle studies a required part of our curriculums,” said the pretty witch.
“You’ve been trying to get that for ages, haven’t you Albus?”

“Yes, but the School Board has always stood firm, Mrs. Randall. But I should think that under the
new circumstances, they just might see things my way.”

Harry groaned inwardly. Muggle Studies had always sounded like a dull class, no matter how much
Hermione liked it. Dumbledore chuckled at the look on his face. “It won’t be required for muggle-
raised students. The issue here is educating wizards about muggles. The better the education, the
fewer opportunities are presented for illogical prejudices to form.

An idea occurred to Harry. “That works both ways. Why don’t we offer courses about wizards for
muggles?”

“Yes, that’s what the Full Disclosure is, in a matter of speaking,” countered Syr.

“Yes, but how much can you really learn about our world from a document? It’s going to be dead
dull.” Harry spoke with more and more confidence as the idea solidified in his mind. “Wouldn’t it be
to really show them? Let them participate in Hogwarts classes. Even though they can’t actually
learn any magic, that way they’ll be seeing everything they way we see it. They’ll be right in the
middle of wizarding life, as students. That’s how I learned it, it works.”

“An innovative proposal, Squire Potter,” said a new voice. The seventh wizard present, the only one
who hadn’t yet spoken, looked up and Harry recognized him. It was the silent wizard who had sat
apart on the central dais. “Expand on it.”

“Er, okay.” Harry felt rather exposed now. “At first, at least, it would be awkward putting muggles
directly into the Houses. You would get some resentment, because the Houses are so competitive. A
losing House might blame its muggle students. And you can’t get rid of the inter-house competition
for the same reason. That’s important to students; it seals us together as a team. So... create a new
house, a fifth house for them! Give them a schedule just like ours, paired with another house so they
can see magic in action while learning the theory. For instance, they could have Transfiguration with
the Ravenclaws, Potions with the Gryffindors, see? Rotate them with the other houses so they see all
kinds of wizards. Except, maybe not the Slytherins,” he added as an afterthought. “You know, for
their safety.”
“They could even have a Quidditch team!” interjected Miggs excitedly, scribbling frantically on a blank scroll. “Brooms could be charmed to fly with non-magical riders. It would be wonderful public relations.”

“What about a reversal?” offered Keys. “Send wizard children to muggle schools until they’re ten. Muggle-borns and half-bloods are already raised that way, and studies show that they have slight advantages in classes like potions and Arithmancy, as well as improved study skills, concentration, and are better adjusted socially.”

“What about muggle secondary schools?” asked Dumbledore. “Would an exchange program among older students be useful?”

“Maybe on a limited basis,” Harry said, considering. “That’s back to the resentment issue again.”

“Well, Squire Potter, it sounds like you’ve put a lot of thought into this. Why don’t we make this your project? Can you have a proposal put together in two hours?” The seventh wizard looked at Harry speculatively. “I’ll try and get you an early space on the docket. Be ready to counter some pretty strong opposition. I’ll lend you an intern and see you after the recess.” He drew his chair back and stood up. “Good day, witches, wizards.” With an elegant swish of his cloak, he left.

“Who was that?” Harry asked quietly.

“Councilman Ra’en,” said Miggs. “Representative of... Well, where is he from? Does anyone know? Albus?”

“You know, I’m not sure,” admitted Dumbledore, his brow knitted in concentration. “He’s been a fixture in the Council longer than I have. He has a lot of influence, but I can’t think of which nation he represents.”

The door opened behind Dumbledore with a thunk, and a young man blew in, propelled by some invisible force. “Is Squire Potter here?” Councilman Ra’en sent me here to help him with a proposal?” The man, who looked about Fred and George’s age, made it sound like a question as he looked around the small room.

“Um, I’m over here,” said Harry, raising his hand. “But I don’t really know how to write a proposal. I just had an idea.”

“That’s okay,” said the intern. “I’m here to help you with all that. My name’s Paul, by the way. Paul Roberts.”

“Harry, you and Paul can use that chamber over there. Can we get a progress report in an hour?” Dumbledore directed Harry to a door that had just appeared in the corner.

Harry, ignoring that butterflies that were have a chainsaw carving contest in his stomach, got up and led the way into the smaller room, which boasted a large desk, two office chairs, and an overstuffed bookshelf. He turned to Paul. “So, what do we do first?”

Paul grinned wryly, pulled a stack of books from the shelves and dumped them on the desk. “Homework.”

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An hour later, Harry had a complete proposal down on paper. Paul had proved to be an invaluable help, adept with research and language. He helped Harry wrestle his fledgling ideas into a sixty-inch document of legal language and persuasive arguments. Harry looked at the pristine scroll proudly.

“That was easier than I thought it would be,” he said, grinning broadly. Paul looked over at him with a small smile. He was replacing all the books that they had used back into the bookshelf.

“I’m glad you think so,” the intern said. “So you like politics?”

“I think so,” mused Harry. “I understand it, I can see how it works, and why. And yeah, I like it. Do you think I could be an intern?”

Paul looked up at him. “Well, usually, a Council member notices your studies, and then he invites you to an internship under him. Councilman Ra’en was impressed with my research into archetypal debates and he approached my dean on my behalf. But why would you want to be an intern? You could probably be a representative, with elections coming up. It’s common knowledge that Figg is retiring, so there’s even a Charter position open.”

Harry was taken aback. “I couldn’t be a member,” he stuttered. “I’m only fifteen. I’m just a kid.”

“So?” Paul scoffed. “Didn’t anyone tell you about Will Stone? The Canadian Rep? He’s only twelve! Age isn’t an issue in there. It’s all about ability. And this proposal proves that you have at least some talent.”

“Really?” Harry’s expression turned thoughtful. What an idea. Recently, he had begun to toy with the idea of a political career, but he had thought of it as a different future, after Hogwarts and perhaps a half-dozen years or so of University.

“So,” said Paul, conspiratorially this time. “Did you really throw two helicopters across the Hogwarts lake.”

“Not really,” said Harry, grinning. “I set them down nice and neatly in a sheep paddock.”

“That must have been brilliant,” the young man chuckled. “I bet you could.” Paul was interrupted by a knock at the door. Dumbledore stuck his head in.

“Have you had much progress yet, boys?” he said amiably, then he saw the scroll in Harry’s hand. His eyebrows climbed in surprise. “Finished already?”

“Yes,” Harry said, holding it up. “why didn’t anyone tell me this stuff was so cool?” Paul rolled his eyes. Harry saw him. “Go ahead and laugh. You like it too, else you wouldn’t be here.”
“Wonderful, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Now, do you know what you have to do next?”

“Yes,” Harry said firmly. “I need to send copies to any Council members who might be sympathetic and rally support for my idea.” He was mostly parroting what Paul had told him, but it was sound advice. Dumbledore nodded.

“Good. Now, Paul can show you the copy and memo charms, and you’ll send them to all the representatives we named earlier, and to, hmm, let’s see.” He looked upward in momentary thought. “And to Laos, Pitcairn, and Egypt. That ought to be enough for now.” He left, going back to his other duties. Harry yawned suddenly.

“What time is it?”

Paul checked his watch. “Well, my watch says noon, so it’s, what, 4:00am here. You’ve been up all night.

“Feels like it,” Harry agreed, rubbing his eyes. “So, let’s get back to work.” He held out the scroll. “Show me how to copy this.”

“Here, the Replicity Charm is easy.” Paul pulled his wand out from over his ear, where he kept it, and preformed a tiny twist-twitch movement. “Replicitius.” Suddenly, there were two scrolls in Harry’s hand, identical. “If you make the twitch part bigger, you get more copies. Now you try it.”

Harry drew his own wand. “Replicitius.” He meant to make three copies, and made the twist correspondingly large, but in a pale flash of light, more than a score appeared. Paul blinked. “Well. We only need a few more. Can you make just six?”

A little defensively, Harry made the movement as small as he could. Nine more copies appeared. “Close enough. Now, lay one copy flat, tap it twice, like this, and tell it where you want it to go.” Paul demonstrated with the first copy. “Memorandium Shizu Natoya.” The scroll folded itself with swift creases into a tidy paper airplane. With a small flash, gold letters emblazoned themselves along the edges of the wings. “I.C.W.S, Harry Potter (Aide: Muggle Integration Tribunal) to Shizu Natoya (Citizen Representative, Japan).” Finished, the paper plane taxied across the desk and took off into the air, where it hovered by the door.

“Don’t let it out just yet,” cautioned Paul. “Let’s get the rest of these charmed first, so they all go out at once. Less chance of one of your opponents getting hold of it, that way.”

Harry nodded and took the next one. “Memorandium Will Stone.” With Paul supplying the names from a scroll, it only took about five minutes to address the rest, leaving only the original and two extra still rolled up on the desk. Harry gathered these, and then opened the door, letting the paper flock out into the larger conference room, where they once again glided silently to wait by the outside door.

“Did you remember to send one to Councilman Ra’en?” asked Mr. Syr, still faceless inside his hood. Harry blinked. He had forgotten. Fortunately, it was the work of a moment to charm one of the extra scrolls and send them all on their way. He collapsed back into his chair, smiling sleepily.


Syr was right. Less than fifteen minutes after the proposal had gone out, a reply sailed in. Its wings said “Inter-Summit Memo: Novinha Biblio (Charter Representative, Spain) to Harry Potter (Aide: Muggle Integration Society). It landed on the table in front of Harry.
“Well, open it, Harry,” urged Lady Acome. “Let’s hear what Spain has to say.”

Wishing intently that everyone wasn’t watching him so intently, Harry unfolded the plane and scanned the brief note it contained. “I don’t believe it,” he said, his excitement mounting. “She says that Spain thinks my idea has ‘sound and excellent merit,’ and that they’ll vote for it. My idea has merit!”


By now, four more replies had arrived, jostling for space in front of him. While he was reading those, the rest arrived. A few required responses, and Harry tended to those in short order. He was elated. Everyone seemed to like his plan. It would happen.

“Don’t be too optimistic,” cautioned Keys soberly. “There will be opposition. I expect that Cuba and a few of the smaller countries in Meso-America and Eastern Europe will argue. They won’t want to have to dedicate so much more funding to education. These changes won’t come cheap. Do you think Antarctica will oppose?” he asked, turning to Mrs. Randall.

“Why would they? It won’t effect them whichever way it goes. There simply are no muggle children there. But they tend to vote following the States’ example, and we can’t predict which way they’ll go. Have you contacted any of the American representatives, Harry?”

“No,” Harry said, unrolling a new copy of his proposal. “I’ll send them a copy.”

“Send it to Allen Bayshore,” Dumbledore offered. “He’s the new Headmaster of the Northwest Islands Academy of Magic, and he’s quite open-minded. Of the American representatives, he’s your best chance to sway the rest. But hurry. We have to be back in Council in half an hour.”

Harry dispatched the new copy of his proposal, and set to answer the last of his memos. Only ten minutes before the recess was scheduled to end, a plane arrived from the American representatives. Harry read it aloud. “They say they’ll vote for me, if I promise to make a visit to some of their school’s next year to speak to their advanced Defensive Magic students about resisting possession. How did they find out about that?”

“I’m sorry Harry, that would be my fault,” Dumbledore said calmly. “I’m afraid I spoke to the Council about the past week’s events, as part of explaining yesterday morning.”

“It’s all right,” Harry said, waving it off. “I’ll do it.” He wrote a note to that effect, sent it off, and gathered up his notes and scrolls. A moment later, a bell tolled the end of the recess. Together, the Tribunal picked up important papers and moved back into Council Chamber One, where they split up to rejoin their countries’ other representatives. Harry and Dumbledore returned to Britain’s box in the front tier, and Paul begged off to attend to other responsibilities.

The same speaker as before greeted the returning leaders. “I hope you have all had a chance to rest.” An amused ripple ran through the assemblage. “I know for some of you, it has been a very long night. Earlier, we answered the questions and concerns of many of you. Now, we are going to hear proposals from several groups and act on them or not, as the Council decides. First on the docket, we have Councilman Will Stone, Charter representative of Canada, speaking on behalf of the North American Trade Treateise.”

Abruptly, the Council chamber spun around Harry. He looked around in alarm, but no-one else seemed alarmed by it, except of course the muggles. In a moment, the room ceased to spin. Now the dais no longer stood at the center. It had moved off into the first tier, its former place usurped by a box decorated in Canadian red and white. Harry almost laughed when Will Stone stepped to the
front. The Canadian representative was tiny; he didn’t look twelve. In fact, he barely looked eight. But there was no trace of childishness in the level gaze that he swept across the room.

“Thank you,” he said when silence had restored itself. “As I’m sure most of you know, I have brought up the issue of farming rights before, but new developments have presented new opportunities. I would like the Council’s support to enter into negotiations with non-magical corporations in Canada for land use. As I’ve told you before, there is very little farmland owned by magical interests in my country. Along with trade restrictions, this has led to occasional food shortages.” He went on in this vein for some time, speaking very seriously about an issue that was obviously important. While the subject matter bored Harry, he was fascinated to Stone’s dedication to it. He couldn’t imagine having understood such an issue at twelve, let alone have cared enough to take action on it.

Too soon, Stone’s presentation ended. Because it was a domestic issue, with no real ramifications on the world stage, no-one spoke up in opposition and it went straight to a vote. A respectable majority improved the negotiations, and Stone sat down in satisfaction as his box spun back to its place in the second tier. The speaker resumed his place at the center of the room.

“Now the Council will hear Squire Potter, representing the Muggle Integration Tribunal with an interesting educational proposal.” Again the room spun, and when it settled, Harry found himself at its center. All eyes were on him.

He felt very young as he stood up and stepped around the table to the podium that had grown up from the floor. He looked nervously down at his notes. “We face a grave dilemma never before presented to our ancestors. We have before us an opportunity, an incredible opportunity to better ourselves by collaboration, but our histories stand in our way. We both bring rich histories made poor by prejudice. Prejudice against people different. It is a hard habit to overcome once formed. The best way to arm against prejudice is a thorough and accurate education for both sides. I ask the Council’s patience to allow me to use Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as a testing ground for my proposal.”

Falling more securely into the flow of his own idea, Harry explained his visions of a fifth Hogwarts house, of muggles studying theory while seeing witches and wizards learn new spells. He included the possible advantages of putting wizard children into muggle primary schools and of student exchanges with muggle secondary schools. He expanded all of his ideas, supporting them with details that he and Paul had come up with in their research, and even a few that came to him while he spoke. When, at last, he was done, he found himself sweating and trembling. He hadn’t felt this nervous since he had stood in front of the Great Hall, waiting to be Sorted.

Opposition soon presented itself in the form of Peter Amercing, a Cyprian citizen representative. “But Mr. Potter,” he said in a richly accented voice. “These will be very expensive changes to make. It’s all well and good for Hogwarts, which is, as we all know, financially self-sufficient. Our schools already account for a disproportionate percent of our national budget. We can hardly expect to invest more in an experimental curriculum.”

“You can hardly afford not to,” Harry countered. “any country that does implement this ‘experimental curriculum’ will be in a better position to trade with the newly opened muggle market, which will of course lead to potentially lucrative trade relationships. Can your country afford to be left behind?”

There was little more argument. The vote was called, and while it wasn’t a unanimous victory, it was sufficient. Harry’s proposal would be policy.

“Congratulations, Harry,” said Dumbledore, patting him on the back once he had returned to his seat.
Harry smiled slightly, feeling a little ill. He had changed the world, both a lot and a little. It remained to be seen whether for better or worse. All the same, a warm feeling began to suffuse through him.

Hours later, the Council adjourned. Harry emerged blinking from the chamber into the still-crowded courtyard. The sun was high overhead, past noon, and the mob, while still present, was noticeably depleted. Stepping to the edge of the wide steps, out of the flow of traffic, Harry yawned hugely and stretched.

“You think you’re tired?” said a voice behind Harry. He looked around to see Councilman Stone standing behind him, shading his eyes owlishly and slinging a worn backpack over his shoulder. For the first time, Harry noticed that Stone was wearing blue school robes of an unfamiliar cut with a badge depicting some sort of whale in blue and purple on his shoulder. “I have class in two hours. Potions.” He grimaced. “Nice to meet you, by the way. I’m Will Stone.” He stuck out a hand. Harry shook it.

“Harry Potter,” he said, though he was sure the other boy knew it. “This stuff’s something else, isn’t it? Thanks for your support, by the way. I appreciate it.”

“My privilege,” answered Stone casually. “I look forward to having you speak at my school.”

“What school do you go to?” Harry asked.

“I go to Northwest Islands Academy of Magic. It’s in the states, but really, the islands are kind of a grey area as far as borders are concerned. They wouldn’t stay put when the maps were being drawn up. We call them Amerinadian. I’m a North Tower, by the way,” he added proudly, tapping the whale badge.

The name twigged in Harry’s mind, bringing back something from Tall Ships. “Do you know a girl named Beth? I can’t remember her last name.”

“Yeah, I do,” said Stone. “Beth Huffington. Tallish blond girl, sails a lot? She’s a South Tower, ninth year. Five years ahead of me. She told us she’s met you, but she’s always telling stories. Lives a fictional life, that one. So it was true?”

“It’s the truth,” Harry said, nodding. “My adopted family, the Weasleys, took me to Tall Ships in Seattle for my birthday. I didn’t know what she looked like, though, being sort of, well, blind at the time.” He realized something that had been bothering him for a while. “Do you know why people don’t seem to notice that I’m not really the same person that I was before? I mean, the French Minister almost didn’t believe that I was me, but no-one here has even looked twice.”

“Oh. Well, you came kind of late. Dumbledore spent some time early yesterday explaining everything that has happened at Hogwarts in the past week or so. Facing down He-Who one-on-one with a sword? Absolutely awesome.” For once, Storm looked like a child as he grinned wildly in admiration. Harry had to laugh.


“Well, yeah, but at least it did some good. Not only are you alive, you’re stronger than ever before, and no longer blind, paralyzed, or maimed. That’s got to count for at least partial credit.”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way,” Harry admitted. “Maybe I should challenge Voldemort more often. And, incidentally, He-Who?” He raised his eyebrows at the abbreviated name.

Stone shrugged. “I’m twelve. I don’t have the attention span to remember a name as long as “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.” He waggled his eyebrows at his own sarcasm.
“I’m not the Boy-Who, am I?” Harry asked, chuckling.


“Gee, thanks,” said Harry wryly. Stone shrugged shamelessly.

“Harry,” called Dumbledore from the foot of the steps. “Harry, come along. We need to get going. I have a Portkey.”

Harry grimaced, but didn’t argue, even when the horribly familiar hook grabbed him behind the navel and took him to Hogwarts. They arrived in Dumbledore’s office, where McGonagall was waiting. Belatedly, Harry remembered that she had left with the Headmaster, but he hadn’t seen her anywhere on the Council grounds. She must have come back at about the same time Harry left.

“Owls have been flying all over the castle,” she said sternly without preamble. “I had to cancel classes because of the constant interruptions.”

“All well and good, Minerva,” said Dumbledore calmly. “I have an announcement to make to the school. Harry came up with a most excellent proposal, and I intend for Hogwarts to be the first to implement it.” His eyes sparked with enthusiasm. “a fifth house, Minerva, to educate muggles about us, and us abut muggles. It was voted into policy this morning and we shall be the first. What an incredible chance!” Harry was a bit startled by Dumbledore’s eagerness. That he was responsible for it was a good feeling.

“We’ll start preparations for it right away, of course, and we can open the new house by this September. Harry’s in charge of the developmental committee, so he and I-”

“I’m what?” Harry interrupted, surprised. Dumbledore looked at him, eyebrows arched.

“It was your proposal, Harry. You’re responsible for seeing the resultant policy succeed. I won’t lie to you, it will be a lot of work, especially at first. You need to assemble a team within the Council and work out all the details.”

“Oh right. I knew that,” Harry temporized, wincing cheerfully.

“Good,” Dumbledore answered. “Now, as I was saying, Harry and I will work together to iron out the wrinkles. I think we ought to have a demonstration, maybe a week-long orientation for parents of prospective students. Mid-March, perhaps? No, it’ll need to be earlier. I want them to learn as much as possible about us, so that when the Full Disclosure comes out, they can vouch for its honesty. And we can break them in more gently to ideas that they’ll have trouble becoming accustomed to, such as werewolves and curses. We want them to trust us with their children; we don’t want them getting the wrong ideas.”

“Better make sure all the students know their flame-freezing charms,” Harry said. Fatigue was beginning to make him sarcastic. He hadn’t had a proper sleep in several days, and it was beginning to tell. But his body didn’t feel tired. Somehow, he knew he could still run all the stairs in the castle, if he had to. He could probably do it carrying Neville. But he was tired inside. His mind wandered towards his room in Gryffindor Tower, where he could practically feel his thick comforter and pillows.

“Well, all of that can wait,” Dumbledore said observantly. “Harry, I would like you to be present at dinner, but until then, perhaps you would like to sleep?”

Harry sighed in gratitude. “Thank you. I’ll see you at dinner, then.” He excused himself politely and all but ran from the office.
The Gryffindor Common Room was crowded. Harry slipped in as subtly as he could, not wanting to have to answer a million questions. He was almost successful; only three or four people accosted him on his way to the boys’ stairs. Halfway up them, however, he ran into Fred and George.

“Harry!” George cried in ostentatious delight, grabbing his arm. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“We’ve been worried for you,” Fred echoed, putting his other arm into a firm grip. “We thought you’d been kidnapped by the Governance. Come on.” They frog-marched Harry between them through the Fifth year’s dorm and to Harry and Ron’s door. Ron opened the door for them, and his face lit up when he spotted Harry bracketed between the twins.

“When did you get back?”

“About fifteen minutes ago,” Harry answered as Fred and George pushed him past Ron and into the room, where they steered him into an armchair by the fire.

“Now,” George said, flopping into the opposite chair.

“You’re going to tell us everything,” finished Fred, falling gracefuuly to sprawl on the rug at his twin’s feet. Before Harry could say anything, however, a knock sounded on the door. Ron let Hermione in, and they both came and sat on the wide hearth.

“So, Harry,” said Ron avidly. “We hear you’ve been up to stuff in the Council. Muggles in Hogwarts?”

“How’d you hear about it so fast?” Harry asked. He was too tired; his mind was not working logically.

“Lee Jordan has a wizarding wireless,” Hermione explained patiently. “Everyone’s been listening as often as they can since yesterday. Professor McGonagall had to cancel classes, because no-one could concentrate.” Her eyes widened, as if this was an unheard-of event. “We didn’t hear your speech yesterday morning, but WWN’s been replaying bits of it ever since. You sounded great,” she added with a smile. “Very mature.”

“I think I ought to be offended,” Harry replied mildly. Fred and George guffawed.

“Sounded like an insult to me. Do you concur, Gred?”

“Indeed I do concur, Feorge. You should apologize, Hermione.”

“Imagine! Calling a Potter-Weasley ‘mature’.”

“You might as well have called him ‘Percy.’”

“Or ‘Hermione.’”

“Oops.” They flashed identical grins. Hermione barely spared them a withering glance.

“Well, I think it’s a wonderful idea. Putting muggles here in Hogwarts will, at the very least, teach wizards to be more tolerant.”

“That’s the least of it, Hermione.” Harry leaned back and closed his eyes. His mind wandered. “Did you know that one of the Canadian representatives is only twelve? Very nice kid. I’ve promised to support him when he runs for Minister.” He waved his hand airily in the air. “I hope I’ll be old enough to vote by then.”
“So, what do you do in Council?” Ron asked interestedly. Harry opened his eyes and examined the ceiling.

“Well, my stationary says ‘Harry Potter - Aide: Muggle Integration Tribunal.’”

“It doesn’t say Squire Potter?” George asked slyly.

“You heard about that too?” Harry sighed, closing his eyes again. “Order of Merlin, Third Class. For breaking half our laws and changing the world. I can’t quite get my head around it.”

“Well, I think you deserve it,” pointed out Hermione. “The segregation was silly. Muggles aren’t as stupid and bigoted as everyone thinks; they can handle a little diversity.”

Harry’s eyes popped open to stare at Hermione. “Are you daft, Hermione? You grew up with muggles. Didn’t you learn any of their history? Compared to some muggles, the Death Eaters are unbiased and accepting. With education and a lot of luck, they’ll be able to accept wizards, but what about werewolves like Professor Lupin? What about giants? Or centaurs or house-elves? We’re not just revealing one new group of people with special talents, we’re showing them almost a dozen new species of sentient creatures in a world that they thought they ruled. And it’s my job figuring out how to do it.” Another wave of exhaustion hit him, making him snappish. “As if I don’t have enough to worry about. Voldemort’s almost certainly going to come and try to kill me again sooner or later. Probably sooner. I still haven’t figured out what’s going on with this body. I haven’t been hungry, thirsty, or physically tired since I entered it. And I have to do something about Nimue, and I still don’t know who that . . . other was.” He told them briefly about his interrupted apparation returning from Malfoy Manor and about the intimately foreign presence that had met him there. “And so, I still have to fight him, and I don’t even know why, or who he even is,” he finished quietly, and then he yawned hugely.

“I thought you said you weren’t tired,” said Ron observantly. His eyes held worry for his friend, at it almost managed to hide something darker. Harry was too sleepy to notice. He felt drunk with it.

“My body’s not, but my mind feels like the batteries are dying. I’ve been awake for days, under a lot of stress. I need to—” He spoke slower and slower, until he stopped mid-sentence. His head rolled back against the back of the chair, his eyes half-open.

“Harry? Harry?!” Ron reached out to shake him, but Hermione stopped him.

“Leave him,” she whispered. “I think he’s asleep.”

“His mind’s asleep, not his body. I don’t think that body really can sleep. Remember what Seer said? About how he was having to learn how to do things like breathe? What if he never taught the body how to hunger, or sleep? But it’s Harry’s mind, and he does need sleep, so he just fell asleep. Look.” She snapped her fingers in front of Harry’s eyes. He blinked, but when she waved her hand, his eyes didn’t track it. “See, he’s just sleeping.”

“Well, it’s creepy.” Ron peered closely into Harry’s face.

“Cool trick, though,” remarked Fred. George nodded.

“We should let him get some sleep. See you guys at dinner then.” The twins left on tiptoe, and Hermione soon followed, leaving Ron alone to watch over his sleeping brother.

(Author’s note: The politics in this are determined by the rather educated practice of throwing
colored darts at a spinning globe. Any resemblance to actual political situations is more or less coincidental. Only an idiot would read more into this piece of fiction than that. And I know that no one who has read this far is an idiot.

Chapter: 63

(This chapter might be confusing. Please tell me, and ask any questions. I’ll answer reviews in my livejournal, the link is on my profile page.)

Chapter 63

As Harry slept, he dreamed. He found himself once more in an emptied Hogwarts, alone. He wandered aimlessly, almost enjoying the freedom of thoughtlessness. He meandered his way from the towers to the dungeons and back, not always bothering with things like door, corridors, or stairs. The castle lay completely open to him. Then, when he was passing through the Charms classroom, a fine tremor ran through the stones and him. Grieving for the loss of his peace, he turned and ran towards the source.

A handful of strides brought him to the foot of Dumbledore’s stairs. The gargoyle there lay in pieces, and as he stood trying to grasp the implications, spiders coated the rubble in a dusty layer of webs. Slowly, dreading, Harry stepped over the mess and climbed up the unmoving stairs.

Dumbledore’s office lay in ruins. His gleaming gadgets were scattered, melted and twisted into unrecognizable lumps. Fawkes’ tarnished perch lay abandoned in a heap of spilt ashes. Books and empty portraits lay everywhere on the floor, burnt and torn as if by some cataclysmic explosion, and Dumbledore’s pensieve rested in shattered pieces under its cabinet, its contents long since evaporated.

A light rain fell in on the ruin through a gaping hole in the ceiling. Haltingly, Harry picked his way through the dust-covered detritus and climbed an askew bookshelf to the gap. He stepped out onto what was left of the tower’s slate roof.

Desolation stretched around him. Hogwarts’ beautiful grounds were a rocky expanse of mud. Half of the Forbidden Forest was a bog of burnt tree trunks half-sunk in mire. Harry couldn’t see a trace of Hagrid’s hut at its perimeter. In the distance, Harry could see the roof-tops of Hogsmead. No smoke rose from the chimneys there, and despite the gathering dust, no lights shone in the streets.

Swallowing over the ache in his throat, Harry looked down at the castle itself, sprawled below his feet. Holes pocked the slate roofs like bomb craters, letting the rain into dorms, classrooms, and even the Great Hall itself, where half the roof was gone and Harry could see that a final meal had rotted to greasy dust on tarnished gold plates. Harry closed his eyes and opened them again. Nothing had changed. “Is this my fault?” he whispered. The omnipresent wind stole his words away, flinging them towards the Astronomy Tower, which stood only half its proud height. At its foot, he saw an abandoned tank laying on its side in a spell-blasted crater, half-full of water.

He left. He stepped off the edge of the tower. He meant to fall, but instead he walked across the rain away from the war-ravaged school. The faded clouds broke to the south, so he headed in that direction. The sky was silent, even more so than the empty ground below. He followed the twisted train tracks to London. The sky was so clear there in that golden evening light. Not a building was standing. The glorious colours of the incipient sunset reflected fiery off the Thames and played
across the miles of rubble. Wandering again, Harry found Knockturn Alley, exposed now for all to see, a gaping chasm where Gringotts had once stood, and the site where the Ministry had been, now a glassy-walled crater. The Dark Mark burned weakly, fitfully over the pit, though no-one remained either to fear it or to rally to it.

As the sun set and darkness fell, only a few stars came out, and they cast no light. No light existed. To the southeast, even the glow of Paris over the horizon was absent. It was as if the world had vanished from beneath Harry’s feet. Relying on an inner compass, Harry turned and trudged back to the roof of Dumbledore’s ruined office. He stood there in silence until an orange sunrise cast long blue shadows behind every brick and stone, and then he stepped off again and fell.

Cold arms caught him. Erik Hufflepuff set Harry on his feet in the columned room. At their bare feet, Hogwarts’ pool lay dry, a crust of desiccated algae coating the sand and the round wooden table at its center. On the table, a tattered shroud covered a wasted figure in dusty folds. Harry cried out at the sight, falling to his knees.

“Harry, wake up,” King Arthur said insistently, shaking him. “Wake up.”

Harry sat up with a gasp, startling Ron. While he had slept and dreamed, someone had moved him to his poster bed and Hermione and the Twins had left. Mystoffolees sat awake on a chair by the fire, and Ron stood by his bed, which was soaking wet with melting ice. Harry shivered. “Is it morning?” he asked slowly. The windows betrayed nothing but darkness.

“No, dinnertime,” Ron said. “Dumbledore said for you to meet him in his office.”

The memory of Dumbledore’s dream-office came back with a rush, and Harry blanched. He clutched his head, moaning softly.”Oh, it’s all my fault.” The dead countryside flashed across his eyes. The Hogwarts Express, derailed in a deep ravine.

“What is it?” Ron asked, instantly concerned. He knew what the ice around Harry meant. “What did you See?”

Harry met Myst’s eyes across the room. “Gone,” she whispered in horror. “All of it. Everyone, gone” Her fur rose in a crest of fury and she bared her small fangs. “I told you not to see the end of the world!” she spat in an unfamiliar language, and turned and ran from the room.

Harry hung his head. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, grateful that Ron hadn’t heard the bit about the end of the world. He looked horrified enough as it was. Harry got up and retrieved his crystal ball from its place on his shelf. He held it gingerly, as if afraid of it. “I’ll go and see Dumbledore,” he said reluctantly. “But I won’t be at dinner. I’m going to Dominic’s.”

“We’ll wait up for you,” Ron said. Harry looked at him. The darker thing was there again in his gaze. Harry saw it now. There was jealousy, a little, but the greatest part was grief.

“When I get back, Ron, I promise. I’ll tell you everything when I get back.”

“It used to be the three of us, Harry,” Ron said solemnly. “Always you at the end, but me and Hermione right behind you, helping you. But now you’ve left us behind.”

Harry’s chest hurt. “No-one can help me,” he murmured and left as fast as he could.

His meeting with Dumbledore was brief and tense. Before he was even in through the office door, Dumbledore caught him into a hug. “Miggs did it!” he cried ecstatically. “He figured out how to overcome the magical atmosphere for muggle technology. We’ll have to have the muggle press here tonight, cameras and all, when I—“
Brusquely, Harry interrupted the Headmaster, who’s ebullient mood clashed violently with Harry’s own anxious depression. He told him about his vision, but he couldn’t tell him when or why such a catastrophe would occur, other than ‘soon.’ “I have to go to Mr. Deegan,” he said adamantly. “I think he’ll be able to help me see more details.”

He fled the castle before Dumbledore could respond or stop him, sprinting down the long road to Hogsmead. He took comfort from the lights of the village as he ran around its perimeter, but his senses were hyper-alert, always questing for something wrong. He was as tense as ever when he rapped frantically at Dominic’s door. The Seer answered immediately, characteristically unsurprised to see Harry at his door. “Come in,” he said resignedly. “Let’s see if we can figure this out.” Harry followed him into the house, relieved not to have to recount his vision again.

In Dominic’s cozy study, with Spark washing himself placidly on the desk and pipe-smoke drifting lazily across the ceiling, Harry began to feel a measure of peace return to him.

“And all I know about when this war will happen is ‘soon.’ I need to find more details if I’m supposed to prevent all of this. I don’t even know who was fighting who. Were we fighting the muggles? Were they helping us defend ourselves against Voldemort? Was there some other attacker I don’t know about yet? I just need to know more.”

Dominic nodded. “I’ll help you if I can. Use your ball to find the vision again.

Harry held his crystal ball firmly, and Dominic put his hands outside Harry’s. Harry led them both into the iridescent flow of Sight and along his own braided strand back into his dream. Now Dominic walked along the rain at his side, viewing the dead countryside and destroyed city.

Hogwarts stood like an open wound upon its muddy grounds. Exploring, Harry found an unexploded shell marked ‘RAF’ lodged in the wall of the Gryffindor Tower, and Dominic found the Dark Mark inscribed into the Great Doors. The scars of magic were everywhere, but there were no answers.

“Let’s go back farther,” whispered Dominic, as loathe as Harry to disturb the silence of the dead school. Harry nodded mutely and reached back into the vision. They stood still as time raced backwards around them, years, then months, then weeks at a time. The lake receded back into its shores, the Forest burnt itself into leafy green-ness, and then suddenly the castle burst into activity. An army of black-robed figures swept backwards across the castle, resurrecting legions, both wizard and muggle, with flashes of green light. The Dark Mark fell from the sky and the opposing forces resumed their backwards battles. Fallen fighters on both sides rose as wands and guns alike fired in reverse. Abruptly, in response to some hidden signal, the muggle forces retreated in a charge and the army of wizards reformed a formidable line on the castle steps.

A leader sorted out on each side. Harry didn’t recognize the green-robed witch who shouted loud nonsense at the muggle general while he shouted back. Accusations were unmade, and the thick dirty clouds rolled away south, taking with them a rain of ash and debris. The muggles backed out of their orderly formations and the wizards disappeared from the steps, some merely vanishing, others backing into the castle. Harry and Dominic followed them.

Inside was chaos. A missing ceiling and empty window-frames let daylight out of the Great Hall where bruised students worked frantically backwards carrying bodies from a long line of white-shrouded pallets along the Hufflepuff table to re-bury them in the rubble that replaced the High Table and most of the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables. Harry tried not to see the smashed half-moon spectacles near his feet.

Dominic directed his attention to one body before stones covered it up. It was the British Prime
Minister. Harry’s heart sunk as he saw more. Presidents and kings were obscured by the fallen ceiling. Some stones still tried fitfully to reflect the sky above, which went from midnight velvet to gold to rose to mackerel-blue as the sun set.

With an odd rumble, the ceiling levitated itself back up into its proper place. The dead people, wizards and muggles alike, rose from the floor and resumed their places at the tables, and resumed their interrupted meals, eating food onto golden plates and drinking pumpkin juice into silver goblets. A thousand floating candles re-lit in a sudden breeze. The disaster was over, or rather, it had not yet begun. Harry stopped the scene.

“This is three days before the start of my original vision,” he said flatly. No less than six muggle leaders sat at the High Table with Dumbledore and the other professors. A number of muggle reporters and cameramen ringed the hall. Harry walked over to them, puzzled. Then his face cleared.

“That’s right. Dumbledore said Miggs had fixed it so muggle stuff would work.” That, at least, was a bit of good luck.

At one end of the High Table sat the green-robed witch that he had seen at the fore-front of Hogwarts’ army. She had an open, clear face, but something in her eyes spoke of obscurity and secrets. Harry walked up onto the teachers’ dias to stand at her shoulder. A scattering of notes and memos cluttered the table around her plate, which was scarcely touched. All of the notes were addressed to Candidate Martinelli. Harry looked at the woman with new evaluation.

So this was the other candidate for Minister of Magic.

Dominic walked up to Harry, his face worried. “Do you see it?” he asked, his eyes darting all over the place.

“See what?” Harry straightened, alert. He didn’t see anything unusual, other than the iridescent inherent to a Seeing, but Dominic’s eyes didn’t settle.

“It’s just barely grey,” Dominic said, still casting about for a source. “Someone here just made an important decision.”

Harry looked around. “Maybe one of the leaders?”

Dominic shook his head. “No, I think it’s over here.” He moved towards the fore-most rank of cameramen and then stood before a single man. Harry joined him.

Where most of the cameras bore brightly colored logos of different networks, this man carried a completely black camera on his shoulder. He had a forgettable face, and was dressed plainly by muggle standards. Harry’s breath caught behind his teeth. The man’s sleeve had fallen back, baring his forearm and the Dark Mark tattooed into the crook of his elbow.

“A Death Eater!” Harry hissed. His hand went to his wand at his side before he remembered that this was not real, but he couldn’t relax. A Death Eater in Hogwarts. It was offensive to him.

“Where are you?” Dominic asked, looking around. Harry looked up at him, then looked towards the Gryffindor Table. Hermione and the Weasleys sat in their customary places near the middle, but Harry wasn’t there. He was nowhere in the hall. Needing to find out, he opened the under-reality of the Sight and found his own thread in the appropriate time frame. It was whole, and in close proximity with another familiar line. “I’m okay,” he said, relieved. “I’m with you.” A second later, realization dawned and drained all the colour from his face. “This is happening right now.” He could See what was about to happen. The Death Eater’s black camera contained a sort of spelled bomb. The recently rebuilt wards would fall, the ceiling would collapse, and everyone under it would be killed, including Dumbledore and some of the most important people in the world. Immediate
accusations would be made, flamed on by Voldemort’s influence of encouraging paranoia, and war would be the result, with Hogwarts as the epicenter. That it was a school for children would make no difference in the fury following the multiple assassinations. After three days of reaction, it would be too late for reason.

With a gasp, Harry broke loose from the vision. Dominic surfaced a moment later, breathing heavily. His hands fell to his lap. Harry was already on his feet, wrapping his crystal ball hurriedly in its pouch. “I’ve got to get back,” he said impatiently, heading for the door. Dominic was sitting very still. “What is it?” Harry asked, eager to be on his way. The Seer looked up at him, his eyes full of wonder. He drew his hands out from under the level of the desk. They held a long black staff, lightly laced with vision-ice.

“This is yours,” Dominic said in an awed voice. “The Grey Lady gave it to me, to give to you.” He smiled shakily.

Harry took it, examining it curiously. It wasn’t black, now that he had it in his hands, but rather a darkest velvet blue. An intricate feather pattern was etched into its entire length, inlaid with a dark, tarnished bronze that shimmered faintly in the light. It was oddly shaped for a staff. It tapered to a flared point on either end, and thickened to a flattened sort of grip which seemed to mold itself to his hand. He held it out in front of him, feeling the incredible balance and flexibility in the artifact. “Not a staff,” he murmured. Moving slowly, as if time did not exist, he raised his wand to his scar and drew out a single, shining gold strand of thought, longer than any he had before. He looped one end around the foot of it, and then steadied that end against his own foot while he bent it to receive the other end of the strand. The bronze sheen increased, intensified as the bow assumed its true form.

In a rush, urgency returned to Harry. The bow sang in his hand as he bid a hasty goodbye to Dominic and Spark and ran out the door. He sprinted through the young darkness around the village and up the steep road to the castle. Despite his anxiety, he found himself marveling at the endurance of his body. He had just run more than a mile, and after less than fifteen minutes rest at Dominic’s house, he was running that same distance uphill. Still, there was no fatigue in his body. It was impossible, yet there he was.

As he flew up the road, an increasing sense of dread gathered in his mind. He chanced a glance over his shoulder, south along the road. His eyes widened when he saw the stars close above the horizon disappear one by one, blotted out in the sky. Grimacing, he put his head down and ran on, faster then before.

At last he gained the castle grounds. Feeling he might need them, he summoned the Griffon Blade and Hufflepuff’s axe from his room. He was glad he’d left the window open as they sailed into his hands. He spent the barest moment slinging the bow over his shoulder and hanging the axe from his belt. The sword he kept bare in his hands as he ran through the doors and into the Great Hall.

Hundreds of eyes swivelled to him as the doors crashed open. Harry paid them no mind, glaring wildly around the room for the black camera. He bared his teeth in frustration as he didn’t see it in the shifting mass of reporters. Abruptly, a horribly familiar metallic click caught his ear. He swung his attention to the rank of men standing right in front of him. They were dressed in dark suits, all rather similar, and they all had guns, held obviously ready if not actively aimed at him. “Please, young man, drop your weapons,” said an serious-faced man at one end of the line.

Harry lowered the blade, but didn’t release it. He felt a little stupid. Of course, with this many important people in one place the muggles would have brought there own security. He should have realized that. Letting the point drop to the floor, Harry looked above the guards’ heads to where Dumbledore was standing at the High Table. “Headmaster,” he called out. “I’ve had another vision. I
need to speak with you, please?” He didn’t want to tip his hand so soon, for of causing the Death Eater to set his disaster off early. He still had ten minutes, maybe a little longer if luck was on his side. He breathed a gusty sigh of relief when Dumbledore asked no questions, merely nodded graciously and came down from the dias.

Looking wary, the guards let Harry past them to meet Dumbledore halfway up the aisle between the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor Tables. They bent their heads together, and Harry spoke swiftly.

“There’s a Death Eater here, in disguise as a muggle cameraman with an all-black camera. He’s got a bomb with some sort of spell to take down the wards. He’s going to kill a lot of people.” His whispers were urgent and his eyes always moving, still searching for the black camera. Suddenly he stillled. A breath later, he looked away, but he had seen it. In the shadow of a ribbed column, his face half-hidden by a slouchy hat, stood the faux-cameraman. As subtly as he could, Harry pointed him out to Dumbledore.

With a swift movement like a striking lion, the Headmaster straightened to his full imposing height and whipped out his wand to full-arm’s length. The crowd of reporters scrambled back to be out of harm’s way, but the Death Eater was pinned in place by that cold blue gaze.

For a moment, the Death Eater looked fearful, but then his face relaxed into a chillingly familiar smile. The whole face shifted, going from being perfectly inconspicuous to being boyish, utterly familiar, and evil. Harry Potter’s own face grinned, his face twisted by a horrific tattoo of a skull with a snake slithering out of its grinning mouth. The Mark covered the entire right side of his face, so that the lightning bolt above his right eye bisected the skull’s forehead. The muggle clothes had vanished as well, and it wore an open robe over the trousers that Harry had worn when he went out to face down Voldemort with a sword. Horribly visible across the pale chest was a mortal gash that stretched from his waist across its heart and out of its shoulder. It had been coarsely stitched together with thick, unevenly-spun red string, and the edges were a gangrenous greenish-black. Harry put a hand to his own whole chest, feeling the memory of Voldemort’s sword.

“Well, Harry,” said the other. The snake on its cheek blinked its glowing green eyes and flicked its narrow tongue out to taste a bloodless gash on the other’s jaw. It held out its arms, one of them a ghostly silver to above the elbow that shone through the robe, inviting Harry to look. “What do you think?” Its voice was deeper, wetter, as if the lungs were rotting, but the words were clear. Its tone reminded Harry of Tom Riddle’s mocking voice echoing in the Chamber of Secrets. “I ought to say something cliched, like how I’m here to get revenge on you for leaving me for dead, but I think we can skip that. I am dead, after all. Rotting flesh and spells and ink.” The other shrugged eloquently, bonelessly, waving a silver hand.

Harry stared at it, aghast. Voldemort had resurrected his cast-off, crippled body into this atrocity. So this was the presence who had introduced himself after affair in Malfoy Manor. “So are you still no-one?” he asked, stalling for time to think.

The other clapped its hands, such as they were. “So you remember me. I didn’t know if you would. It’s very hard to plant a memory into an apparating mind.” Its smile turned sad. “But I am still no-one, and I still have to fight you.” It plucked fretfully at the red twine holding it together. “My master commands me. I am to fight you and win, or . . .” At a loss for words, it shrugged again. “There is no other option.” It pulled his robe back and drew a long pale dagger from a silver sheath at its hip. Without another word, it lunged at Harry, black-and-white eyes unnervingly blank. Harry barely had time to get his sword up to block the peremptory lunge. Before he could follow up with an attack of his own, a gunshot rang out in the silent hall.

The other jerked, startled. A neat hole had appeared just below its left cheekbone. It squeezed the
white-pupiled eyes shut for a moment, shook its head slightly, then grinned widely. A bullet was held lightly between its straight teeth. It spat it out in the direction of the gunman, who looked petrified. “Did you miss that part about me being dead? It’s pretty hard to be any deader.”

Harry’s only warning was a flicker of the other’s eyes before it lunged once more. Harry was better prepared this time, and he managed once more to avoid being gutted. He struck back, and sparks flew from the conflict of steel on silver-chased steel. Harry stepped backwards, hoping to reap the advantages of his longer reach and sword, but the other followed him closely, his knife always searching for an opening. They circled each other, ignoring all else.

“I never knew you were suicidal, Harry,” taunted the other as Harry slashed towards its neck. It parried the blow, locking Harry’s blade against its own. They wrestled together, body to body, each trying to get the upper hand.

Up that close to the other, Harry had to swallow to keep his stomach. He could smell the other; a slightly sweet stench of dry decay and blood, and its skin was too soft against his own. Sensing distraction, the dangerous corpse twisted away, slashing Harry across the left shoulder. It broke no skin, but the force was such that Harry’s arm went numb. Harry gasped and gritted his teeth, but his other hand only gripped the blade more tightly. He struck back, aiming for the other’s neck. His blow was parried, and he only managed to slice slightly into its ear. No blood fell, but the snake tattoo hissed, showing its fangs. The other smiled and attacked again.

Harry dodged and delivered a straight-armed thrust under the other’s raised arm. Through some coincidence of angles, his blade slipped into the gash that had originally killed him. With an audible snick, the red thread parted on the Griffon Blade’s sharp edge. The other froze, its own blade only a breath away from Harry’s neck.

With a sound like wet scales, the red strand dissolved, unthreading itself from the dead flesh. The other stood, muscles locked in place, eyes open to their fullest. Only once the thread had vanished into dark brown dust did it collapse. Its silver arm and foot vanished like wind-lost smoke and the long wound gaped open slightly, exposing blackened bone-ends and necrotic flesh. The smell worsened.

“Oh,” said the other at last. Something gurgled in its throat as he spoke and a foul fluid seeped out of its mouth and chest. “Didn’t tell me that could . . . happen,” it gasped slowly. It looked up at Harry, its irises a narrowing ring of white set into tarry matte black. “Thank you,” it mouthed, and the white vanished like a popped bubble.

Harry stood back, finally registering that dead silence reigned in the hall. He stooped to close the other’s black eyes and to pick up his dropped dagger. When he rose again, the sudden noise nearly deafened him as a milieu of cameras was suddenly thrust into his face.

“Who was that?” shouted a newsman in his ear as his cameraman angled to get a good shot of the other’s tattooed face. Harry answered truthfully. “Me.” A clamor rose, demanding explanation, but Dumbledore strode through the crowd, rescuing Harry.

“If you please,” he said loudly. Slowly, the mob hushed. He gestured to Harry’s dead body at his feet. “Who this young man is will require a great deal of explanation. Allow me to say first that he was here as an assassin, sent by Lord Voldemort. To judge by his actions, his orders were to kill Harry and then—” Dumbledore warily picked up the cast-aside black camera. “And then to detonate this bomb in order to kill me and as many of our distinguished guests as possible in the hopes of starting a war.”

The inevitable furor arose, but Dumbledore merely waited until the room was quiet again. “The
assassin is a magical construct called a revenant. I explained yesterday before open Council that Harry Potter here was killed by Lord Voldemort, and through a rare chance, his consciousness was transferred into a body created only the day before by an aspect of his subconsciousness named Seer. Voldemort fled, taking the corpse. Apparently, he reanimated the remains and imbued it with some sort of life for precisely this purpose.”

Harry knelt by the body, brushing the dark hair away from the lightning bolt scar. It felt feverishly warm under his touch, and something twitched under the pallid skin. Harry jerked back, his hand flying to the hilt of his sword. “Stand back!” he yelled. He watched warily as the skull tattoo smirked indolently on the other’s skin. It twisted to look at Harry, licking its absent lips with its snake tongue. “Did you think that I would not plan for such a possibility, child?” it hissed stridently in Voldemort’s Parsletongue. “If you won’t die by your own hand, you’ll die with the rest of them!” The skull’s mouth opened impossibly wide and a string of unintelligible syllables issued. The device in Dumbledore’s hands began to shriek, and the castle around it began to resonate with the high tone. As all the wizards around the device began to collapse, spheres of purple light gathered around Harry, pummeling him with bolts of gold lightning. They protected him somewhat from the sound that had even Dumbledore on his knees. Accompanied by a final high shriek, the last of the ward’s energy vanished into Harry.

He looked around in a panic. Everyone with magic had been totally incapacitated. The muggles looked around, confused and frightened. Desperately, Harry wrenched the device from Dumbledore’s hands. Slightly unsteady on his feet from the overwhelming energy that raced through his veins and skin, he tried to run from the hall, but before he could make it more than a handful of steps, the bomb exploded. A soundless shockwave threw him through the air and over the High Table. His impact into the wall was cushioned by the thick tapestry of Hogwarts’ crest that hung there, and he landed on his feet.

A moment of silence stretched unbearably. Then a new sound chilled Harry. With a creaking of huge timbers and a grinding of stone, the spelled ceiling sagged. Casting a frenzied look at Dumbledore, unconscious at his feet, Harry frantically cast a net of his own magic into the air to catch the falling tons of stone. The sheet weight staggered him. The slate roof above the gothic stone arches weighed many, many times more than two helicopters, and it longed to succumb to gravity, flattening him and everyone else in the hall. The muggles stopped their scramble for escape to stare at him. He made a heroic picture, his arms upstretched, casting a golden web of power to support the falling tons.

“Get out of here!” Harry gritted out, his jaw rigid with effort. Some obeyed immediately, but most began dragging or carrying stunned students and professors out of danger. They kept at it, even with a few stones escaped Harry’s ever-more tenuous grip and crashed to the floor among them, spraying shards. Fortunately, no-one was hit and before long, the endangered area was clear. Harry still couldn’t let go, however. The whole weight of the roof was posed directly above him.

“I need Dumbledore’s help!” he shouted, hoping someone would hear. His whole body was burning with the strain, and his eyes and mouth were dry.

“He’s still out!” yelled a man from the door.

“Wake him up!” Harry snapped back. A whole arch slipped loose, smashing heavily onto the near end of the Ravenclaw Table, crushing it to splinters and flipping it end over end. Harry flinched, and the whole mess sagged even lower. It was less than a foot above Harry’s head now, and he felt as if he were physically holding it back with his bare hands. He tried to edge out from under the looming mass, but another buttress fell, blocking his path. He couldn’t spare the effort to climb over it. He was trapped.
“Harry!” It was Professor Snape. He was leaning heavily on an anchorman and a long welt decorated his face, but he was standing and he had his wand out. Harry would have slumped in relief if uncountable tons of rock weren’t poised above his head.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” he said, coughing a little on the dust that choked the air. He breathed a sigh of relief when the Potions Master merely nodded and cast Wingardium Leviosa on a massive slab of slate. He struggled to ease it down to the ground, but Harry could feel the lightening of his own load, just enough that he could free a measure of his magic to rearrange the stones directly above him, shunting them off to the side so that he stood below a clear shaft open to the stars. “Get back, Professor,” he warned. “I’m going to let go.” Snape didn’t protest. He and his human crutch ran for the shelter of the doorway.

As soon as Harry saw them safe, he steeled himself. With a wrench and a sigh, he released all of it. Half the ceiling of the Great Hall fell around him with a thundering crash and an up-pouring of dust. Flying chips and shards stung Harry, but he had arranged the mass right; no large pieces landed on him. A moment later, the room was still.

As the dust cleared, Harry shook his shoulders straight. His muscles trembled with fatigue and he staggered, but he managed slowly to climb over the wreckage. Some of the pieces were as big as Hagrid’s hut. Others still tried to show the sky above, a clear night of stars.

“Are you injured?” Snape asked, approaching Harry. He shook his head.

“Is Dumbledore okay?”

“I am fine, Harry.” Leaning on a pale sixth year, Dumbledore entered the room. “Everyone is fine, thanks to you. Once more, your Sight has proved invaluable.”

Harry demurred, turning aside the praise. He didn’t want it. He had spotted a bare foot under the edge of a car-sized section of ceiling arch. “I think I committed suicide.” His humour fell flat.

Dumbledore followed his gaze.

“No,” he said softly. “If you can’t think of it as simple self-defense, then regard it as amputation. Destroying a diseased part to save the whole.”

Harry sighed, and picked up his sword from where he had dropped it by the body. Tiredly, he levitated the mortared stone off of the other, not looking at the pathetic remains. “I don’t think it’s a threat anymore.”

Dumbledore stepped to Harry’s side. In supportive silence, he undid the broach at his throat and made his fine formal cloak into a funeral shroud by dropping it over the body. “We’ll accord the body every respect, Harry,” he said, putting his hand on Harry’s shoulder. Harry didn’t answer right away, just stood there looking at it.

“So that’s what I look like dead,” he said after a long silence. There was no way of knowing how to feel. It had been so different the other time he had killed someone. His hand twitched, remembering the grate of this very sword punching through Voldemort’s throat in that black void. It had felt somehow surreal that time as if, deep down, he had known that it was only false. This was real. There was blood on his hands and gore on his blade and he stank as badly as the cadaver. Its skin had gone the pale dead shade of a cave-dwelling fish and the tarnished white of the tattooed skull almost faded into the background pallor. Only the snake still held any colour, and it was dead. The small green eyes had gone flat black, like the other’s.

Harry sat down on a segment of broken statue, letting his sword and the dagger drop to the floor. He
thought morbidly of his parent’s death. Voldemort had killed them cleanly, painlessly. Humanely. Harry picked at the blood drying beneath his fingernails. Who was the better murderer? He shook his head to dislodge such thoughts. He was no murderer, and Voldemort was not a humane killer. They both had blood on their hands, but there was no way that they were the same. The thought brought some little comfort.

“Bury him,” he said finally. “Next to my parents. Put my name on the stone.” Dumbledore nodded, and Harry stood and walked away. He joined the crowd in the Entrance Hall. Reporters surged once more around him, but he ignored them. His gaze sought out Ron and Hermione near the hourglasses that recorded house points. He watched them sitting together for a moment, holding back. Ron was holding Hermione, who was still trembling with reaction. Fred was nearby, hovering between a pale Ginny and a still-unconscious George. Harry watched them all, his erstwhile family. They seemed younger than he could ever remember being.

Delaying, Harry looked around the Hall with an observant eye. Some witches and wizards hadn’t woken up yet, but the worst injuries that he saw were bruises and scratches. The row of white-shrouded pallets from his vision was nowhere to be seen. Dumbledore was alive and well, and no one at all had died. Voldemort’s attempt to start a war of mutual destruction had failed. Harry knew he would make another, but for the moment, he allowed himself to relax. He painted a relieved smile firmly on his face and went to join his friends.

Chapter: 64

(AN: Ooh, I’m so sorry that this chapter took so long. First, I want to apologize to anyone who was confused by my lj post of 3/25. That’s a snippet, well, rather a big snippet, that takes place at the end of this chapter. I’m house-sitting at my grandmere’s house this week, and I didn’t have any disks or my USB stick and I wanted to get that last bit typed up. There’s a wee bit of swearing in this chapter, one word really, and some reactionary stuff. It’s really a very, very long chapter for me.)

Chapter 64

It took hours for the immediate waves from the assassination attempt to die down. Within minutes of the event, a dozen helicopters, each already equipped with Miggs’ new technology-compatibility charm, had set down on the Quidditch pitch to whisk the muggle leaders away to safer premises, and an investigation had been set under way. Patiently, Harry answered every question asked of him. Understandably, the muggle authorities were guardedly skeptical.

“So, you’re telling me that this was some sort of a zombie version of you,” was how a member of the American CIA put it. Harry simply nodded, smiling vaguely. The only real point of contention was when a team of muggle forensic officers arrived with orders to remove the other’s body for autopsy. Harry stood over it and stared coldly at them with his hand on his sword until Dumbledore arrived to politely explain to them that they would do no such thing. “This is Squire Potter’s body,” he reasoned. “And as Squire Potter is plainly still among the living, no autopsy could possibly be necessary.” The scientists argued a bit, but eventually they left Harry alone.

Eventually, Harry slipped away and returned to the Gryffindor Tower. The students had been sent back there hours ago. He looked around for Ron and Hermione before remembering that they would still be in the infirmary with George, who still hadn’t woken up. Madame Pomfrey had said that he would be okay; he wasn’t the only student so affected. Even without the Weasleys, the Common Room was packed, but it fell silent as he stepped through the portrait hole. Space was made for him
by the fire. Ignoring the anxious looks aimed at him, he gratefully collapsed in the chair vacated for
him, shedding weapons in a heap around himself. He snorted quietly to see how many he had
accumulated. There was the Griffon Blade and Hufflepuff’s axe, the richly decorated bow and now
the other’s pale dagger. Harry picked up this last, turning it over in his hands, examining it.

It was serpentine in form, as if a living snake had been made into a weapon. Its diamond-shaped
head served as a pommel, and the handle, about five inches long, was the first length of its body,
round and textured with finely-chased scales. This tapered seamlessly into the waif-thin, lively,
slightly flamberged blade, with no crosspiece or guard at all. This was not a blade for battle, Harry
felt as he balanced it on his fingers. This was a political weapon, made and meant for silent dealings
of advantage. This was an assassin’s dagger.

He closed his hands around the handle, running his fingers up the flat of the blade. The scale pattern
continued there as a shifting pattern of light under the surface of the silver. Tiny serpentine letters
were etched along one gleaming edge. Looking closely, Harry recited the Parseltongue words.
“Man’s Mercy.” He turned it over and read “Salazar Slytherin.” So this was Slytherin’s weapon. He
felt the bruise on his shoulder. It hadn’t cut him. No blood was on the blade.

Resolutely, Harry set the dagger aside and pulled the bow towards him. It still hummed almost
subliminally with the tension of the stretched string of thought. He pulled it a little, feeling the
eagerness in it. The bronze inlay brightened and paled, then faded again as he eased the string back.
This must be Ravenclaw’s weapon. Respectfully, Harry unbent it and coiled the string neatly.
Running his hand once more down the bow, his fingers caught on a small irregularity in the pattern.
There were words there too, hidden in the pattern of plumage. “Paradox” was the name of this bow.
There was no arrow.

Setting the small arsenal aside, Harry leaned back in his chair, enjoying the warmth from the fire and
ignoring the susurrus of whispers surrounding him. His shoulders ached. He was vaguely aware of
all the eyes on him but for the moment, he didn’t care. He might have fallen asleep.

When he woke up, he felt warmer than either the fire or the oddly textured blanket that someone had
lain over him could account for. He recognized the feeling; he had felt it before. It was the skin-
shimmering sensation of excess, and it dispelled his contentment, for it meant that the wards were still
down. He had forgotten to put them back up. He sat up suddenly, startling Ron, who sat in the chair
opposite. Harry was dismayed to see the ill-concealed fear on his adopted brother’s face. The room
was otherwise empty, and dark. “What is it, Ron?”

Ron looked nervous. “Don’t do anything, okay? Dumbledore’s coming.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked. He made to stand up, but only succeeded in stepping on
something that hurt. Not something that hurt his foot, but some unknown new part of himself that
hurt because he had stepped on it. The mild pain ran all the way up the new limb into his shoulder
and neck. His shoulders jerked in response and the odd blanket flipped off his shoulders, flaring
behind him. He gasped as he felt new muscles tense and contract. Not a blanket at all. Wings.

He could feel a joint where none had existed before. He seemed to have a second set of shoulders,
below and inside of the first, and the wings flared from these. His mind seemed to chart the new
paths of nerves and capillaries now, and a wave of new sensation lapped at him. Jerkily, he
straightened one wing out to its full length, which barely managed to miss stubbing against the far
wall. He felt the skin of his back and chest pull oddly. It was a strange sensation. The muscles under
his arms seemed larger as well, and the huge wing was effortless to lift.

The underside was covered in a tawny gold field of feathers, with the pinions and flight feathers
decorated in red. He folded it awkwardly to get a look at the upper surface, where a rich red, almost
a burgundy, predominated on the smooth plumage, broken by graceful chevrons of burnished gold.

He twisted, trying to see his back. The feathers grew smaller and finer as the neared his shoulders, changing to fine auburn fur before they gave way to pale bare skin. His shirt hung in tatters from his waist. He touched the wing gently. The feathers were very sensitive, telling his body of every air current that crossed them.

“I had these when I went into Dumbledore’s mind,” he said, slowly petting the thick feathers. “He saw me with these, and more. I wasn’t human.”

“You aren’t,” said a dark voice. Nimue stepped out of a shadow in the corner of the round room. “How could you be, when you are of my line? You know what I am, and what I am to you. My blood flows in your veins, and you are therefore only mostly human. And if you were any other boy, that would be enough. No one would ever have been able to tell that the blood of a youkai lives in you. In fact, you are more human that the scions of many pureblood families, such as the Malfoys and the House of Black. But you are the Heir. Born to the castle. You are the Heir, you have the weapons and aegis of all four Founders, and you have your own blood on your hands. Your time draws near, Heron.” She looked at him discerningly and drew very close. Harry could see himself reflected in her golden eyes. He could see his own eyes; blue under the coiled green serpents. He brought his hand to his face, and then stopped to look at it too. It was unfamiliar. His fingers were longer, with an extra joint to the ends and heavy, pale yellow claws. Black and yellow sparks danced dimly along them like a swarm of yellow bees.

“One’s missing.” Nimue’s musing voice startled Harry, so preoccupied was he with the changes in himself. She raked him over with her eyes, looking for something. “Where is Rowena’s mark? The wings are Godric’s, the eyes are Salazar’s, and the hands are Helga’s. Rowena shared everything with Salazar, but the blue in your eyes does not come from her.” She smiled. “You probably inherited that from your great-grandfather. So fair, he was sometimes mistaken for a Malfoy.” Her smile faded a little as she saw the bow by Harry’s vacated chair. She leaned down fluidly to pick it up. “You haven’t found the arrow yet. That’s why. Be sure to find it soon, before you have to fight Thomas, for he is more powerful than before, and Paradox is the most powerful of your weapons. Remember that.” She put the bow into Harry’s transformed hands.

“Why is this happening?” Harry asked, flapping his wings slightly, which set the tapestries to billowing, then had to snatch one away from the fire. They were cumbersome, being so large. He folded them tight against his back. They arched higher above his head than his arms could reach and trailed on the floor behind him. Nimue smiled at him, and reached out without warning to pluck on feather from over his shoulder.

“Ouch!” Harry clapped a hand to the offended wing and glared at his youkai ancestress. She merely arched an eyebrow in his direction and ran the soft feather through her fingers, then offered it to him on an extended palm.

“Take it back from me,” she instructed. “But not with your hands. Use your wings. Bind the feather with air, and take it from my hand to yours.” She offered no more explanation than that. Harry looked at her, then concentrated on the feather, grimacing slightly. Ron shifted beside him.

“Where’s Dumbledore?” Harry heard him mumble to himself. It did seem to be taking an awfully long time for the Headmaster to get here, and Harry rather wanted him to meet Nimue. It was only by virtue of circumstance that he had not done so already. In the meantime, however, there was the feather to deal with.

He thought about what he had said, that time in Dumbledore’s lightning-lashed office. “Red for Binding.” His wings shifted a little as he focused, and for just a moment, he could see the tiny
curlicues of air that the movement made. He shifted his wings again, deliberately this time, aiming the curlicues at the feather and willing them to adhere to it. He almost lost his concentration when they obeyed him, forming a sheath of breeze around the plume and lifting it just a fraction above Nimue’s palm before they faded away and it dropped. Grinning, he strengthened the movement. With a gust of air, the feather flew towards him. Triumphanty, he caught it. Nimue smiled.

“Well done.”

Harry looked up at her from the feather clutches in his oddly shaped fist. “Why didn’t you tell me about these? You don’t seem surprised that I have them, so you must have known.”

“I didn’t know you had the weapons until you came in here tonight. I thought I had time to take you aside and warn you of everything to come.” She looked away from his intent gaze. “But in truth, I had no way of knowing precisely how you would evince your ancestry. And so I couldn’t tell you how these would be, and I can’t tell you what will happen to you when you find Rowena’s arrow. Something to do with your Sight, of course. That comes directly from her and from her father.” She sighed a sound that was almost a purr as she took Ron’s vacated chair, her back to the portrait hole. The dying fire left her in shadow. “I do miss him.”

Harry sat down as well and stared into the fire for a moment, then looked down at his hands. He curled them into fists again, adjusting them to accommodate the lengthened fingers, then stretched them out as far as he could. They felt strong, despite their delicate appearance. The fingers were so slender as to be attenuated. The claws looks capable and dangerous at the same time, like a badger’s claws. He tried not to dwell on the small sensations of the snakes shifting in his eyes. He could feel them now, when he sat perfectly still and didn’t blink.

“What does it mean, ‘Green for shaping,’” he asked. “That’s what I said when I took the ward’s power from Dumbledore. ‘Red for Binding, Blue to let me See, Green for Shaping, Yellow makes it Be.’”

Nimue smiled fondly. “Of all of my children, Salazar was the most like me. He took great joy in shaping things to suit his pleasure. He could not create, like Helga, nor fix an item in space and permanence, like Godric, but he could form whatever he wanted from whatever he had. And as he grew older, he found he could do the same with men’s minds. Thoughts and dreams were clay to his clever, manipulative eyes. He and Rowena were the youngest, by minutes only, and that bonded them together. They spent all their time together. She would see a future that she wanted to come to past, and he would twist time itself to realize it for her. It was such a pleasure to see the four of them work together to raise this school.” She sank deeper into her chair, curling her feet under her one at a time. They sat in silence, contemplating the changes wrought by time.

When Dumbledore arrived, he found them thus. Ron looked relieved to see him, and he looked relieved to see Harry. Nimue ignored them all, but Dumbledore didn’t notice her, sunk deep into her shadowed chair as she was. His attention was focused on Harry, who spoke up in greeting.

“I’m not a threat to anyone, Headmaster. I don’t need guarded, or lectured. These changes are because I found all the Founders’ weapons.”

Dumbledore looked concerned. “Why would that have such an effect?”

“Because of who he is Albus, and what he is, and where he is. And maybe even when he is.” Nimue’s voice drifted heavily from her shadowed chair. For a moment, all Harry could see were her eyes, blinking golden and lazy. Then a sensuous form uncoiled itself from the seat and stepped down, four-footed onto the floor. Nimue sat on the rug as a large feline, sleek and dark with blue-silver-black dappling making her coat looks like deep water. She raised a paw to her delicate muzzle
and licked it, her eyes never leaving Dumbledore. “Remember me?”

The Headmaster looked stunned. He reached an abortive hand towards her, then drew it back as if afraid. “Aia?”

She nodded, smiled in a way that showed two chrome fangs. “I’ve missed you, Albus.”

Dumbledore was at a loss for words. “How...? No one...?” he stammered, his eyes wide with shock. Nimue laughed, and it was a friendlier sound than Harry had yet heard from her, the sound a mother might make at her infant’s first words. Amazingly, Dumbledore relaxed slightly, a hopeful grin on his face. “How can this be? You were my imaginary friend, Aia. I’ve never told anyone about you. I’ve not even thought of you in years.”

“Not so imaginary, Albus,” she purred, arching her back against his thigh and caressing his shin with one of her long tails. She had more than a dozen, Harry noticed. “We were great friends once. Do you remember the hole under Farmer Tog’s hedgerow?”

His eyes dimmed with sentiment. “We would hide in there, and you told me stories of the days of King Arthur and Merlin’s court. We’d pretend I was a valiant knight, and you were my noble steed.” He chuckled. “Even though you never let me ride you.”

Harry shared a smile with Ron at the image of a very young Albus Dumbledore; sans glowing white hair, eyebrows, and beard. Surprisingly, the sparkling half-moon glasses lingered. He could imagine a bright, inquisitive youngster with an open, shining face, twinkling blue eyes, and a straight nose just a bit too long. He could even picture the two of them playing together in the green half-light under the leaves, Nimue, or Aia, almost invisible in the leaf-dappled shade.

“You grew too fast,” she countered. Harry gaped as the cat reached up with one splayed paw and ruffled the Headmaster’s white hair. “I let you astride me when you were small enough; you just don’t remember that. But I am getting old, Albus, and my back isn’t as strong as it ought to be.” She shifted elegantly back into the half-human form that Harry knew. “Aia is my child-name, Albus. Now I am called Nimue.”

“So you are Lady Nimue.” Dumbledore was recovering his composure. He turned to Harry, who nodded a confirmation. “The youkai responsible for your actions the other day.” He looked back to Nimue, and she nodded slightly. She showed no surprise when Dumbledore stepped forward to clasp her hand in his. “Thank you, Lady,” he said fervently. “You have my most profound gratitude. In one swift move, you forced an issue that I have been trying to address in Council for more than thirty years, ever since I was appointed to the Council.”

Nimue looked at him with aloof amusement. “Well,” she said at last. “I won’t tell anyone that it was an accident if you don’t.” She laughed at the astonishment on his face. “All I wanted was my body, my life that was stolen from me. I freed Harry from all compulsions other than my rescue, and set him on that course. I had not the gift of foresight that my husband imparted to our descendants. In truth, I had no idea how Harry would carry out my wish. I didn’t care, so long as I was whole again.

“In truth, I think that it was your interference that catalyzed the breaking of Hogwarts’ wards. Harry was all set to walk to London in search of me, but you stood across his way and forced his hand to more drastic measures. Take the credit that is due, Albus. It was as much your doing as mine.” She blinked her slitted eyes and licked her lips, the picture of feline contentment.

Dumbledore seemed to shake himself and his smile turned questioning rather than sentimental. “As grateful as I am, my Lady, I must ask you and Harry some questions. Such as why a student of mine would grow wings and extra knuckles, not to mention the pile of blades on the floor.”
Nimue answered his question with one of her own. “Why have you lived so long, Albus? The reason is the same. Your youkai blood must manifest.”

Dumbledore did a double take. “My youkai blood?”

“Of course.” Nimue tossed her head. “Your heritage claims you, regardless of which side of the sheets you were born on.” Her eyes made her meaning clear.

Harry smiled. “Can I call you Uncle Albus?” Ron gaped at the three of them.

Dumbledore looked back and forth between them. He looked lost. “Mother told me that my father was a muggle soldier who died before I was born. That’s why she remarried when I was so young.” His voice was small and tentative, and Harry felt a pang of regret that they had told him the truth.

Nimue smiled softly as she took his hand. I'm sorry, Albus. Your father was Miles Potter. I wish your mother had told you the truth, but she thought it would be better if you didn’t grow up knowing.” Her voice was so earnest that the Headmaster could do nothing but believe her. Harry stood and offered his own chair, and Dumbledore sat down. After a long moment of introspection, he reached down and absentmindedly picked up the snake-dagger that Harry had taken from the other.

“I’ve seen this before,” he said with an air of ‘getting back to business.’ “Tom Riddle used to show this off when he was a student here, tossing flips with it.”

Nimue nodded. “He got it from his mother. One of his very few inheritances.”

“And now it has come to Harry.” Dumbledore turned it over in his hands, examining the inscriptions. “A strange symmetry to that. What do these say?” he asked, looking to Harry.

Harry took the assassin’s dagger. “Salazar Slytherin,” he read from one side, and turned it over. “And Man’s Mercy. It’s in Parseltongue,” he explained.

“How interesting,” Dumbledore mused, still a little distracted, but trying. “And the axe?”

Harry looked down at the axe and nudged it affectionately with his bare foot. “Erik Hufflepuff gave me that one. I’ll introduce you to him sometime. He called it Brock’s Axe. I used it to re-erect the wards. And that’s Paradox. Rowena Ravenclaw’s bow. I still have to find the arrow that goes with it.”

Dumbledore picked up the bow, turning it over in his hands. “The motif is familiar. There is a clock in my office with a very similar inlay. I’ve always been rather fond of it.” Looking to Harry for permission, he strung it, noting how the bronze brightened almost too brass in response. “It may be identical.”

“Headmaster?” Professor McGonagall leaned in through the portrait hole. “Candidate Martinelli wants to talk to you. Something about a reparations bill.”

Dumbledore sighed heavily, handing Paradox back to Harry. “I’ve spoken to her about this already. I am not even considering presenting such a controversy to the Council.” He stood up and straightened his robes. “I’ll deal with her. Mr. Weasley, it’s very late. Perhaps you ought to be to bed. Harry, you don’t seem tired. Could you and Lady Nimue perhaps come down and help Professor Snape clear our Great Hall?” He shot a meaningful glance between them and Nimue caught it. She laughed trippingly.

“Don’t worry, Albus. If you want the boy to keep an eye on me, just tell him so.”
“Two eyes,” Dumbledore directed Harry with a smile. “As often as you can spare them.” He turned and McGonagall hurried after him as he strode from the Gryffindor Tower. Leisurely, Nimue followed them and Harry, shaking his head followed her. It took a bit of careful maneuvering to get his huge wings out through the portrait hole, but he managed it with only a few bent feathers and a knocked joint.

In the Great Hall, Snape and a Ministry Wizard were examining the rubble, arguing over how to clear it while a few cameramen followed them around despite the potions master’s acid glares. Nimue chose a piece of statuary to sit on. Harry left her there to join the two men.

“The ceiling is in fragments,” Snape was saying with a gritted-teeth sort of patience. “We can’t just reparo it back together.” Harry wormed through the circle of cameras, ignoring how their bearers stared at him and edged away from his wings. He tapped Snape on the shoulder.

“Just get the pieces out of here,” he said quietly. “I know someone who can fix the ceiling.” Feeling confidant, Harry ran back up to the Gryffindor Tower and grabbed Hufflepuff’s axe, banishing the rest up to his room. Concentrating, he walked into the nearest wall, through the stones and into the chamber with the columned pool. Erik was there, as always, playing a flute quietly for himself. Harry stopped a moment to listen. It was a simple, lonely tune. When it wound to a lamenting end, Erik looked up at Harry.

“I won’t bring her back here until I’m sure she’ll be safe,” he said, his eyes faintly accusing. “It’s your responsibility now to make it safe here for her.”

“I know,” Harry said apologetically. “But as long as Voldemort is still out there, he’ll keep trying to get to me. I came to ask your help. I don’t know how to repair the ceiling in the Great Hall. Could you show me? Please?”

Erik’s shoulders stiffened in resistance, but he nodded manfully without a word and led the way through the walls to the large gap above the Great Hall.

From inside the store, the damage was even greater. Hairline cracks and fractures riddled the ceiling all the way to the supporting walls. It was holding, but there was no guarantee that it would continue to do so. Worried about those in his room below, Harry stuck his head out of the rock.

“Oi!” he yelled to get some attention. He ignored the startled muggles and spoke to Snape. “The rest of the ceiling’s pretty precarious, Professor Snape. Get everyone out of there while we come down, and then we’re going to fix it.” Snape nodded and Harry stood up, back inside the ceiling. “Come on.” He gestured to a reluctant Erik, and they wound their way down the inside of a pillar to the Great Hall floor, where they stepped out, startling Snape as he was trying to herd the persistent newsmen out into the entry hall.

“Mr. Potter, how did you do that?” he snapped irritably. Harry just shrugged. The nearest cameraman yelled for him to do it again. With a grin, Harry leaned back against the completely solid pillar and gestured Erik forward.

“This is Erik Hufflepuff,” he said encouragingly. “Heir to Founder Helga Hufflepuff. He maintains the castle.”

Snape looked questioningly at Harry and the young man, but didn’t question them. “You can repair this?” he asked Erik matter-of-factly, gesturing at the massive rent in the ceiling. Erik gave it a final assessing look, then set his shoulders and nodded to Snape.

“I’ll do it, but I’ll need my axe, and Heron’s help.” He looked over his shoulder at Harry. “After, this
will most likely be your responsibility, so learn.”

Harry handed Erik the axe and followed him out to the center of the destruction while Snape finished clearing the room. Above the hole, Harry could see a news helicopter in the first grey light of dawn.

First, Erik tapped several of the largest fallen chunks of mortared stone with the brass pommel of his axe. They shuddered with a low chiming sound and then dissolved into dust which in turn melted into the floor. The whole room trembled as the dissolute mass moved up the walls as a vague bulge. The ceiling groaned and creaked with the restored weight. “Watch closely, Harry,” he said blandly. He held the axe like a staff and rapped the floor with it one, twice, thrice. A pillar of sand rose from the floor beneath his feet and bore him up to arm’s reach of the gap. As Harry looked up at him, Erik took a firmer grip on the pale wood handle and hauled back to make a huge, powerful swing against the still-crumbling edge.

A flash of yellow light accentuated the impact, and a low, gong-like note that seemed to roll on and on. Erik’s axe rebounded smoothly and the stone followed it, growing out from the jagged edge in smooth ripples, like water disturbed in reverse. The leading edge was black. Harry’s hands tingled in reaction, and he flexed his over-long fingers. They itched to work the living stone. Succumbing, he spread his wings. A few beats, clumsy at first, but strengthening as he found a rhythm, carried him up to join Erik on the pillar-scaffold. He plunged his hands wrist-deep into the stone, gripped it firmly, and pulled. As Erik created more, replicating the existing ceiling, Harry shaped it into swirling, improbably arches that defied belief and gravity both. Faintly, as less than a memory, he could see how the stones were supposed to fit together. A greenish outline traced around the edges of his vision, guiding his hands to shape the forms he was creating. As the individual stones formed from the growing mass, he sent a layer of air from his wings to seal around them and hold them in place. He put so much force into it that he knew what he made would be permanent. All of this felt natural, and yet he marveled at it.

Far too soon, Erik laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “We’re finished,” he said simply. The sand pillar flowed smoothly away from under their feet to trickle away into the floor, lowering them down. Harry looked up at their work. For a moment, he could see his intricate reliefs, and then the illusion of the sky flowed back over the gap. It was whole.

Snape cleared his throat, and Harry looked around. The wide door was crowded with cameras and gawkers. Snape stood at the center, staring. Harry looked at his feet self-consciously, then folded his wings as tightly to his shoulders as he could. He hid his hands at his sides, but there was nothing he could do about his cloths. He was still wearing his torn shirt around his waist.

Before Harry could say anything, Headmaster Dumbledore actually shouldered his way through the press of people. His expression of startlement seemed a release for the people around him. The crowd surged into the Great Hall, exclaiming over the re-constructed ceiling and giving Harry and his wings a wide berth. No one bothered to disguise the fact that they were staring beyond a token effort.

“Is that still Harry Potter?” one muggle asked loudly. “What is he?”

Harry winced. “I’m human,” he enunciated clearly, making firm eye contact with the man. “At least, I think I am.” His wings fluttered slightly, and those nearest him edged farther away. “Mostly,” he added honestly. His eyes sought out Nimue over the crowd. She smiled at him from her perch in the shadow of a pillar near the Slytherin Table, which was askew, but intact.

“Than what are those?” the man asked, gesturing to the immense wings with a wary flick of his fingers. Harry recognized him now; he was one of the more vocal reporters who had been at the Council Chambers.
“Well, they’re wings,” Harry said sheepishly. “They’re new, if that makes any difference. I just got
them this morning. And the hands.” He waggled his fingers in view. “And if you’ll come close
enough, my eyes are off too. Snakes, you know.” He widened his eyes invitingly, but the anchorman
stiffly declined to approach him.

“Harry.” Dumbledore had reached him at last. “Harry, are you all right?”

“Of course,” Harry answered, faintly surprised. Why wouldn’t he be okay? “Headmaster
Dumbledore, I’d like you to meet Erik Hufflepuff.” The small man, for Erik was small, now that he
was out in the open, out of the dimly lit insides of the walls, stepped out of his shelter behind Harry’s
wings. He stepped forward and sunk formally to one knee before the Headmaster.

“Headmaster Albus Dumbledore,” he said, looking up into the older wizard’s face. “I ask you to
forgive my trespass in your school all these years. There was no reason for my subterfuge save
tradition and my own phobias.” His eyes were always flickering around him, watching everyone
near him. “I was charged by my predecessors to maintain my secrecy, but not oath-bound to it. This
is your school; we should have revealed ourselves to you long ago. Now, I am the only one, and I
pledge loyalty to you and to all who follow in your position.”

“Get up, young man,” said Dumbledore swiftly. He offered Erik his hand to rise. “This school is not
mine. Say rather that I am hers. We are very similar, you and I, I think. Both of us charged with the
responsibility of her keeping.”

Erik held Dumbledore’s gaze for a long, searching moment, until a small smile escaped him. He
stood on his own, and shook Dumbledore’s proffered hand.

“All very well and good.” The loud muggle interrupted the scene brashly. “But what about this boy?
You’ve told us that you can do magic. Fine, we accept that. We’ve seen your proof. But no one has
told us anything about kids changing into... dark angels or whatever he is now. What has been done
to this boy?”

“Nothing has been done to Harry, Mr. Cheals,” said Dumbledore patiently. “Mr. Potter is...” He
looked over at Harry, his eyes amused. “He is merely displaying some unique symptoms of his
heritage.” In her corner, Nimue snorted eloquently. “Recent happenings have brought certain
properties of his ancestry together with the circumstances of his birth to bring to light very old
secrets.”

“What sort of secrets?” asked the reporter, Cheals. He was almost belligerent, and Harry found
himself beginning to really dislike the man.

“That’s a very long story, Mr. Cheals,” said Dumbledore affably. “And I’m sure you can ask Mr.
Potter about it, as it is his to tell. I’ve heard chapters of it myself, and I assure you, it is an intrigue to
hear.” He half-turned and winked at Harry, who barely kept from laughing out loud.

“It’s as much my story as Heron’s,” purred Nimue. Harry hadn’t even seen her leave her perch, but
now she was at his shoulder. “After all, I am his heritage, his ancestry.”

“Ah yes,” said Dumbledore dryly. “Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce Lady Nimue, Lady
of the Lake. Some of you may recognize her from Arthurian legend. She is Mr. Potter’s paternal
many-times-great grandmother, and an old acquaintance of mine.”

“Lady of the Lake?” Cheals questioned. “What sort of title is that?” His tone was still polite, if still
skeptical.
“It is my title,” Nimue drawled. Her cat ears were flat against her head, but her tone was casual enough. “Young Arthur gave it to me when I brought him Excalibur from the depths of Avalon. Such a dear boy, just Heron’s age then, and already a king. More than a king.”

Cheals did a double take that was almost a scoff. “King Arthur? You mean with Merlin and Lancelot and dragons and all that lot?” He scanned the crowd for reaction, but none was forthcoming. Muggles and wizards alike were intent on the story unfolding in their midst. Nimue merely raised her chin regally and slitted her cat eyes dangerously while smiling and swiveling her ears forward. “Yes,” she said simply, but Harry noticed that her chrome fangs showed more prominently now.

Cheals swallowed visibly, his adams apple bobbing above the blue knot of his tie. “What are you?” he asked.

Nimue shook her hair back over her shoulder royally. “I am a neko-youkai of the Final line. The closest translation into your clumsy language would be a cat-demon.” She paused to savor the reaction to her words. “I was the mother of Merlin’s heirs. My descendants are the last evidence of my kind.” She stared the reporter down, daring him to disbelieve her. He gaped open-mouthed at her, glancing over her shoulder at a man with a large camera with the sigil of an American news station.

“Lady,” he stuttered, cowed by the situation and the golden feline gaze. “Then you aren’t human?”

She laughed musically. “Of course not, child. I may have been young when I met Merlin, but I am still older than this castle, older than London and Paris. I saw Rome in its youth. I saw the death of the Christian Christ when I was very young, barely old enough to leave the lair. I am two thousand, two hundred, and twenty-two years old. It is an auspicious year in my life, and the times have lived up to it.

Cheals blinked. "That's, er, impressive." He glanced back at his cameraman, then to Dumbledore. "Are there any other races of intelligent creatures?" He shot an apprehensive glance at Nimue, who scowled prettily at him.

"Well, yes," said Dumbledore blithely. "There are many intelligent peoples." He stressed the word lightly. "-Other than human. For instance, here at Hogwarts, we have one professor who is a werewolf, another who's mother was a giant, one student who is half-faerie, and another who is velkin and of course Harry. There are also vampires, centaurs, several races of elves, and the velkiry. Goblins, mer-folk, hags, leprechauns, veela, why, the list is a rather long one."

Cheals looked a little stunned, and so did the other muggles in the crowd. Dumbledore looked a little regretful. Harry knew that he had wanted to wait for such revelations until his audience had been better prepared. "All of this was to be covered in future press conferences. I'm sure it's obvious that there is too much information to be given all at once."

Nimue made a small snarl of irritation. "I think that the 'intelligent creatures' will prefer to speak for themselves, when and if we find you intelligent enough to know us." She turned with a flair and pushed past the reporters who could scramble fast enough out of her way. A single lanky tail twitched behind her as she stalked away. Dumbledore glanced at Harry then cut his eyes sideways at the departing youkai. Harry understood, nodded, and began to follow her. Behind him, Harry heard one note-taking reporter ask Dumbledore an earnest question.

"They aren't a danger to us, right?" Harry stumbled to stop before he ran into Nimue, who had halted dead in front of him. Her shoulders were rigid and Harry could practically smell her fury. Unnoticing, the reporter compounded his error. "I mean werewolves? Vampires and demons? These are the monsters of horror stories."
Harry was prepared to intercede between the fuming Nimue and the hapless newsman, but the outburst came from an unsuspected source.

"I am not a monster!" shouted Remus Lupin, who was standing at Snape's side in the circle around Dumbledore. He glared venomously at the man and if Snape's hand hadn't been on his arm, Harry was afraid of what the ex-marauder might do. "Headmaster," Remus said with gritted teeth. "Am I really expected to stand here and listen to these ignorant gits call me 'creature' and 'monster'?"

"Calm down, Remus," said Dumbledore firmly. He was not smiling as he adressed the journalist. "Less than my own lifetime ago, muggles not so different from yourselves looked at men with a different skin color and called them animals. Are you so eager to make again the same mistake? Remus Lupin is an excellent teacher and alumni here at Hogwarts. He is also a werewolf. Tristan McGuinness, is a very good student, star chaser on one of our Quidditch teams, and the son of a faerie. Interspecies discrimination is not tolerated on these premises."

"You can't call me a racist for being a little nervous about standing next to a werewolf," exclaimed the nervous reporter anxiously. He looked out the window, where a nearly full moon shone green, blue, and violet through the stained glass. "Is that full?" he whispered to the man next to him.

With a howl of fury, Remus wrenched free of Snape's grip and lunged past Dumbledore, who grabbed his robes at the last second.

"Remus!" he roared angrily, pulling the werewolf back by his collar. "Have you abandoned all reason!?"

"Moronic, mindless, muggle!" Remus snarled, still trying to reach the reporter who had fallen on his arse trying to run away. Harry leapt past everyone, not knowing if he ran or flew, and threw himself between Remus and his target.

"This is not why we are here!" he screamed over the risen commotion.

"He tried to kill me!" stammered the downed man, pointing a shaking finger past Harry at Remus. "He's some sort of animal!"

Harry despairs at the amount of animosity present. "No, he's not," he started to say, but then he fell as Remus broke free of Dumbledore and shoved past him to punch the man square in the face.

"You fucking freak!" the struck man shouted as he hit back. Harry landed heavily on one wing and as pain flared, so did his fury. Sudden rage swept him to his feet and into the air. Furiously, he kicked Remus and the reporter apart, sending the werewolf sprawling at Dumbledore's feet.

"This is not why we are here!" he thundered. His wings, each as long as a house table, beat forceful gusts into the faces of the onlookers, who all looked up at him with expressions of fear and anger. "Do you even know what you are doing?" His gaze included equally wizards and muggles. "You're all repeating every mistake you've ever made. Have you all forgotten what happened so few hours ago?" He opened a strand of Sight and swept them all in after him. "Do you know what was supposed to happen hear tonight? Lord Voldemort - I will say his name - tried to assassinate our leaders tonight and manipulate us into blaming each other." He sped them forward to see the war begin at the school's very steps, then slid them all across the ashy rain to the ruin that was once London. Standing in that vision of the rubble that had once been King's Cross Station, he looked at their shocked faces. "This is what Voldemort wants. All that stands between this and us is-" He let the vision melt away, leaving them all standing blinking in the torch-lit hall. "Is that we're smarter than that. Prove me right." And quieter. "Prove him wrong."
"Thank you, Harry," said Dumbledore neutrally.

"I'm sorry," Harry said to everyone, folding his wings abashedly. "'Freak' is kind of a personal sore point, My uncle used to call me that, just for being a wizard." He couldn't believe he had just said that; the words had come unbidden.

One of the journalists checked a page in his thick notebook. "Your uncle is Vernon Dursley, right? Would you please tell us where he is? We at Station 9 News have looked into it. All available records tell us that he is serving a life sentence in Trenton Federal Penitentiary, but when we visited for an interview, no one there could find an actual record of him. And no one could tell us even what he was convicted for in the first place."


An eternity later, Dumbledore politely kicked all of the visitors out, saying, "This is a school. My students have classes starting in less than an hour, and none of my teachers have had any sleep. Feel free to contact me with an owl post if you have any questions that need immediate answers. But I do have to ask you to leave now."

Harry didn't stay to see the muggles out. Instead, he escorted Nimue to the room Dumbledore had offered her, a suite adjoining his office.

"I remember this," remarked Nimue as Harry maneuvered his wings up the spiraling staircase. "These were Merlin's quarters, ages ago."

"Oh!" Harry stopped dead. On the wall directly across from the door stood an elaborate clock. Its entire casing was decorated in a dark bird motif. It didn't look out of place, so Harry concluded that it must have been there all along, just a part of the background. Dumbledore's clutter included it, with a teacup hanging from a jutting decoration and a stack of scrolls atop it. Harry started for it, ran his hands over it, examined it. He could feel a tingling in his temples, almost a pain, but he found no arrow. The pattern was an exact match for his bow, but the gently swaying pendulum offered no clues.

"It must be inside," Nimue offered. "Tear it open."

"It's Dumbledore's clock," Harry countered. "I should ask him first."

Nimue blew a sigh of impatience, but she let Harry lead her to her room. He left her there and went back downstairs to help clean up, but he wasn't needed there either. Professor Flitwick had repaired the tables, and Candidate Martinelli was sullenly overseeing the removal of the last of the rubble. The air felt heavy and close against Harry's feathers, and the ward's energy still burned pleasantly in his skin, reminding him of the school's vulnerability. He caught Snape's sleeve as he passed.

"If you see the Headmaster, could you tell him I've gone to re-erect the wards? It won't take long."

Snape nodded, and Harry continued on outside. He stood at the top of the broad entrance steps and looked out over the grounds with fresh appreciation. They gleamed dew-silver in the rising sun. A figure in silhouette picked its way up the path, smoking a pipe as a smaller shadow gamboled around its legs. Harry went down to meet them.

"You look different," was all that Dominic said. Spark stalked around their feet.

"Boss had another vision about you," the cat said reluctantly. Harry looked up at Dominic, who looked apprehensive.
"I Saw you die," he said soberly. Harry considered him for a moment.

"You've Seen me die before," he said at last. "It's never happened."

"I know," Dominic said. Harry thought he sounded almost pitying. "I've accepted that I can't See your future except in lies. That's why I'm so worried. I Saw you die in your sleep, very happy and very old, with your friends and family all with you." He took out his pipe and glared at it, as though it might be to blame.

"There are certain people called Grimens, Harry," he continued once he was satisfied his pipe was drawing satisfactorily. "They're actually quite common. Your friend Hermione is one. Nothing can be Seen about them except for the manner of their deaths. I think you're a Grimen, and the reason I can't See anything accurate about you is that you don't have a death."

Harry laughed, a dry sound. "Wonderful. Because Voldemort is still coming, and it's nice to know at least that I won't die."

His last word was almost drowned out by a blast of icy wing. A voice rode the sudden gust, chill and gloating as it thundered in Harry's ears.

"Believe me, Potter. If you truly can not die, that you will soon truly wish that you could."

(AN/ So, that was probably boring. It was also the beginning of the end. (Gee, that sounds dramatic) Only a few chapters left to go, I might even be done by my birthday. Most reviews are appreciated, unless you're an idiot. Which I doubt, seeing as you've made it through 64 chapters of my occasionally twisted vocabulary. Any pertinent questions will be answered in my livejournal, under the name lady_russell. Feedback frees faster fingers, folks. Oh, and dood gay to all you foonerism spans.)

Chapter: 65

(AN/ My most profound apologies to Mookie. I'm sorry I brought Dominic into my sadistic plot against all heroes. Apologies are also due to J.R.R. Tolkien, because I have borrowed and tortured an already tortured creation of his.

Written draft finished 12:07 am, Thursday, May 27, 2004, typed draft finished 2:00 am same.)

Chapter 65

Harry jerked his head up to look into the wind, where a black cloud was boiling up the hill. Thunder and lightning played across the cloud-face and astride it, as though he was riding an immense steed, was Voldemort. He laughed stridently, his voice like a rising storm. Harry pressed forward to stand in front of Dominic and Spark.

“Go into the castle,” he murmured to them. Dominic looked like he would refuse, but Spark butted his ankles and they began to edge backwards.

“No, I’d really rather they stay,” chuckled Voldemort. He waved his pale wand and a bolt of red light swept the Seer into a crumpled heap at the foot of the steps. Spark hissed in livid terror and fled. The Dark Lord let him go.
With only a furious thought, Harry summoned the Griffon Blade to his hand and leapt into the air. He screamed as he hurtled towards his enemy. “Murderer!”

With a deafening crash, Harry’s bright sword met Voldemort’s blade of shadow. It threw Harry back and upwards, and for a moment he hovered above the roiling black mass of clouds. Suddenly in that dark midst, powerful wings, the equal to Harry’s own, beat and Harry could see the Dark Lord’s mount.

The creature Voldemort rode was immense; a giant, winged, black lion-like beast that seemed made of half-molten lead. Dark fire shone through the cracks in its onyx skin. Voldemort sat above the joint of its graceless wings on a saddle made of jagged iron. The creature turned its beaked face up to Harry and roared. Hell flared deep in its throat.

Harry stood resolute before the monster, trying not to betray the fear he knew he felt. Voldemort laughed at his courage. “Do you like my new pet, Potter? Thank you for the gift. Your corpse and the power left in it were useful. For many things.”

“You’re too late, Tom,” Harry yelled back. “Your plan failed. There will be no war here. We know what you want from us, and we’re smarter than you.”

Voldemort scowled at him, and his beast reared up on its hind legs to swipe at Harry with an eagle’s claw. “All that means is I will have to work a little harder next time, and be assured that there will be a next time once I’ve rid the world of so-called ‘sensible thinkers’ like you and old Albus.” The description was a sneer. “You’ve made it more difficult for me, Potter, but by no means impossible. Evil is always easier than good, war always closer than peace.”

“You won’t get another chance, Tom,” Harry said determinedly. “This is all going to end here.”

“Well, at least that last sentence was correct,” said Voldemort mildly. He shook the chain reins of his steed and shouted aloud a garbled string of syllables and wind. With a demented shriek, the monster flexed powerful legs and threw itself into the sky. Harry backwinged in surprise, then stopped and held his ground. His wings bound the air around him into a shield. The beast’s frenzied swipe rebounded off of it and it screamed again as its scaled claw smoked and scalded.

Harry lunged forward to strike his own blow. He slashed at Voldemort and darted past him, between the beast’s labouring wings. Voldemort’s cry of outrage told him that he had scored a hit and he swiveled in midair to see it for himself. That was a mistake.

The matted tuft on the tip of the beast’s tail caught Harry brutally on the jaw. He tumbled out of the sky, landing hard in the lake. From this height, the water felt like cement. Only his wind-shield saved his wings from being wrenched off.

When he regained his senses, Harry found himself floating on his back, his wings spread bedraggled around him. Waves rocked him violently from the wing beats above him. Only the steed’s flaming nature protected Harry; if it landed in the lake, it would be extinguished.

“You can’t swim forever down there, little lion,” taunted Voldemort. He righted himself in the water, looking up at his enemy. He was only a few yards from shore, and the water beneath him was deep enough that he could touch the ground with little effort. He bent his knees, and launched himself so that he exploded out of the water in a burst of spray. Spreading his wings, he darted out from under the shadow of the beast, skimming away over the storm-tossed surface of the lake, then circling back in a wide arc. Voldemort laughed into the wind.

“You’re foolish, boy,” he crowed, urging his beast forward to meet Harry. Harry dodged its lunge,
spinning upside down so that the beast passed over him. He lashed out and up with his sword, slicing the understructure and the thin membrane of the monster’s wing. It bellowed in furious pain and faltered in its flight, clutching the injured wing to its side. It fell from the sky with a painful shriek, flapping its remaining wing uselessly as it hit the water. There was a colossal up-pouring of sparks and steam, and the creature’s screams climbed to a pitch that made Harry clutch his ears in pain. When the clouds cleared, a grotesque leaden statue stood in the shallows of the lake, all fire gone now from the beast. And rising from the steam, malevolent and furious, was Voldemort. He drew himself up from the roiling water, dripping and glaring up at Harry.

“One weakness!” he screamed up at the boy. Harry felt frozen in the air by the evil wizard’s fury. “A Balgren has one weakness, one single flaw, and you manage to find it on accident! Luck, you bastard!” He fired a bolt of orange magic in Harry’s direction, missing by inches. Harry fumbled his wand out of his pocket and gripped it tightly, thinking as quickly as he could in his panic. The only spells he could think of were Expelliarmus, which hadn’t worked after the Third Task and certainly wouldn’t work now, and Rictusempra. He couldn’t imagine that a tickling charm would be much use against the Dark Lord.

Not knowing what else to do now, he turned and flew as fast as he could for the castle. Abruptly, just when he was about to make the front steps, he heard those horrible six syllables, felt a feather-light touch against his wings, and the world turned green.

A second later, he crashed into the all-too-solid double doors. In the instants that passed as he fell to the ground, he knew that he was dead, but then pain crushed his shoulder where he had hit the door. He couldn’t feel his wings, and feathers filled the air around him, dropping to the ground in a riot of red and gold to cushion his fall.

A breath later, Voldemort stood over him, his face closed and calm. Harry forced himself to hold perfectly still, not breathing, not blinking, not thinking for fear that the enemy would hear it, and a slow smile spread across the face of the monster, exposing a chilling grin of needle-sharp teeth. Harry made himself go completely limp as Voldemort leaned down to grip his hair in one skeletal hand. He barely managed to keep from crying out as his raw wings scraped across the stone steps as Voldemort dragged him. He threw open the doors with a crash, stepping into Hogwarts castle.

“Albus!” Voldemort bellowed. A few students peeked out of the Great Hall, shrieking in panic when they saw who it was. “Albus!” he shouted again. “Come out here, you old fool! Face me, if you dare!” He threw Harry in front of him and he slid across the polished floor, coming to rest in a sprawl at the foot of the staircase. More screams issued from the students in the hall. “Your hero is dead,” taunted Voldemort. He laughed, and the hourglass that recorded Gryffindor’s house points shattered, red sand spreading across the floor like blood.

“You are not welcome here, Tom.” Dumbledore stood calmly at the landing above Harry, his voice mournful and absolutely implacable. Without moving, Harry could see the grief in his Headmaster’s face and how his hands gripped his pale wand with white-knuckled tension, but his voice remained calm. “But I will not let you leave.” Behind Harry, the heavy doors swung quietly shut. “This will end here.” Harry saw him twitch his wand almost imperceptibly. A series of cracking sounds, like a sudden breaking of scores of windows, sounded around them, and then there was silence. Harry’s eyes burned from trying not to blink.

“How ironic,” snorted Voldemort. “Your Golden Boy said the same thing, right after I killed that muggle Seer. And he was right.” He nudged a trailing wingtip with his foot. Harry bit back a scream. “And so are you, Albus. Your involvement in this world ends here. Congratulations on your newfound gift of prophecy.” His voice was smooth and wry and chilling.
“I remember your first year here, Tom,” Dumbledore said gravely. “You were such a promising boy, despite the horrors you’d known. It is unfortunate that you never saw your full potential.”

Voldemort laughed, an ugly sound of disbelief. “My potential? I’ve reached my potential, Albus. I’ve exceeded it. Look at me, you senile old fool!” He spread his arms, grinning madly. “I’m the most powerful wizard who ever lived!”

“There is more to power than might, Tom,” said Dumbledore. His eyes flicked down to Harry, and Harry let one eye twitch in response. Voldemort didn’t see it, and Harry tried not to tense, readying himself as Dumbledore went on. “There is loyalty, and respect rather than terror.” His voice hardened and rose to a biting note of derision, most surprising for coming from the gentle headmaster. “It takes a coward, a weak coward to earn the fear of his fellows and think it respect. And it takes the worst sort of craven, sniveling fool to think that he can win power through ill-gotten force!” His voice was a sharp whip in the silence. Voldemort’s cry of rage rose to match it as he leapt over Harry to attack Voldemort with his bare hands. The instant he was past, Harry scrambled to his feet behind him. He had lost his wand, but the sword of Gryffindor was still in his hand. He swung it at the evil wizard a moment too late, catching only the robe across his back as he advanced on Dumbledore, who was backing up the stairs. Voldemort screamed in frustration as he swung around and saw Harry. “How many times do I have to kill you? Avada Kedavra!”

Harry raised his sword in a futile attempt to block the killing curse before he realized that Voldemort’s wand wasn’t pointed at him. He looked up just as the green light faded from Dumbledore’s face, leaving only a small, surprised smile. A empty heartbeat later, a high keen rent the air as Fawkes landed on Dumbledore’s shoulder just as he began slowly, gracefully to fall. With another scream and a sudden flare of blinding white flame, they both vanished. Harry and Voldemort stared together at the spot where they had been.

Rage took Harry. He wrapped both hands tightly around his sword and drew it up to point levelly at Voldemort’s narrow chest. He lunged forward, but his quarry dodged and struck back with a red bolt from his wand, which destroyed the marble finial by Harry’s elbow. Harry ducked to avoid the flying bits of stone, then rolled to one side to avoid the next hex flung his way.

He and Voldemort circled one another, each watching vigilantly for an opening. Crimson sand and broken glass crunch under their feet, the only sound in the castle. Suddenly, a dark and silver shape launched itself from somewhere high above, snarling and hissing and slamming into Voldemort, bearing him to the ground. Nimue kept the wizard from regaining his footing by the simple expedient of standing over him, one wide paw on his throat, the other on the wrist of his wand hand. The wand skittered away into the rubble. Harry stood back, surprised to see Voldemort so easily subdued. His ancestress growled deep in her throat, baring her platinum fangs. “I would tear you open from craw to crotch if I could, Thomas,” she spat in a low, dangerous voice. “You killed Albus.” There was a grief there that made her sound almost human. “I loved him like my own sons.” Her voice dropped another register and Harry revised his opinion. No human throat could ever have held such emotion. She shook her head, as if trying to clear her eyes. “But I am bound not to spill human blood, nor take human life.” She dropped to a rich whisper, peering up at Harry from under her brows. “But there’s nothign stopping me from holding you down while someone else does it, nor from enjoying the seeing of it. Harry, no one else has suffered as much at the beast’s whim than you. Here is your chance for vengeance. Gut him!” She licked her lips avariciously, making a sound that might, in a smaller cat, have been a purr.

Harry looked at Voldemort, who grimaced impotently on the floor, struggling helplessly against the neko-youkai’s weight. Harry felt a rush of hatred that made him raise his sword, ready to murder the man as he had murdered Harry’s parents, had murdered Cedric, had murdered Breena, had murdered Dominic, had murdered Dumbledore. He set the tip of the sword against Voldemort’s stomach. He
would make this monster beg for death before the end.

Voldemort must have seen it in his eyes, for he smiled, a slow, gentle smile. Harry could almost see the remnants of Tom Riddle’s face behind the snake-like features. “You feel it, don’t you, Harry? The power, the fury, the need. You can already taste my blood. You’ve thirsted for it ever since you learned that it was I who killed your parents.”

His tone, subtly mocking, rather than his words brought Harry back to himself. He blinked, and suddenly the monster before him, the evil warlord who inspired such terror that the world dared not speak his name, was nothing more than a man deformed by his own greed with insanity shining clearly in his eyes.

With a softly murmured spell, Harry summoned Ravenclaw’s bow. He took it reverently in his hands, dropping the sword forgotten to the floor. He touched his wand to his temple and drew out a memory he hadn’t even known was there; a warm memory of his mother’s arms and his father’s laugh, and he strung the bow with deliberate movements. Still moving slowly, as if in a dream, he summoned the arrow from the clock in Dumbledore’s office and nocked it. He drew it cleanly and aimed it, meeting Voldemort’s gaze as he aimed directly between his red eyes. Those eyes widened in a final moment of fear, Harry released, and time unraveled around them.

Harry stood outside a modest townhouse in London, looking up at a fresh-scrubbed sky. Then he looked down at the infant in his arms, a tiny child possessed of little more than a pair of wide brilliant green eyes and a wispy scrap of dark hair, and then he climbed the four steps up to the brass-bound door and lifted the griffon’s-head knocker. He knocked three times, and a moment later, the door swung open to reveal a tall, auburn-haired wizard with a pair of sparkling half-moon spectacles perched on a long, crooked nose. “May I help you?” Albus Dumbledore asked with an expression of polite interest.

“This is Thomas Marvolo Riddle,” Harry said frankly, offering the bundle to the future Headmaster. “He needs a good home, and he deserves a good life. I know he’ll find both with you.”

Peering wonderingly into the tiny face, Albus took the infant into his long hands, holding him capably. He looked up at Harry, noticing for the first time the blood on the young man’s robes, the darkly gleaming bow slung over his shoulder, and the mangled wings that dragged behind him. “Who are you?”

“One who has the most to gain from giving Tom a second chance,” Harry responded simply, then he turned and walked back into time, leaving Albus with his gurgling new charge.

“Well,” said Albus amiably, tickling the infant under his chin and laughing at the baby’s toothlessly delighted smile. “Let us see if we can find you some milk, my boy.”

Chapter: 66
Broken Beyond Healing
Chapter 66, “A New Day.”
07-06-04
Lady Russell Holmes
Harry woke up and yawned, staring up at the crimson hangings of his bed. It was the last day of school. Tomorrow, he would get on the Hogwarts Express and go back to London. His dad would pick him up from the train station and take him and his brother and sister home to Godric’s Hollow. He groaned, remembering that his little sister’s friend Luna Lovegood would be coming with them, to spend the first month of the summer vacation. Two fourteen year-old girls in one house spelled trouble to him. One was bad enough.

He had to wait for Ron Weasley to get out of the shower. Even though they had shared a dorm room for five years now, and known each other longer, he and the redhead had never become close friends. Harry was better friends with Ron’s older twin brothers, Fred and George, who were seventh years. They reminded him of his godfather; scheming, brilliant and completely mischievous. Harry had practically grown up with the Weasleys, who lived in the next town over. The second oldest, Charlie, had played Quidditch with his dad and the third, Michael, had babysat Harry and his siblings when they were small.

At breakfast, Harry sat with the Weasley Twins, chattering eagerly about what they were going to do this summer. The twins wouldn’t be home until next week, after the graduation ceremonies, and they were looking forward to the depleted population of the castle to test some of their newest inventions. They hoped to start a joke shop when they got out of school, and they had a few new tricks that needed trying out.

“We’re hoping that Filch’ll hole up in his office with everyone gone,” said Fred confidently.

“That way, we’ll have free run of the castle,” added George, grinning identically. “But you know, Fred, I do have to get some one on one time in with my girl.” His grin spread, his eyes dancing with innuendo. Harry rolled his eyes. “What, Wingman, jealous?”

Harry snorted, almost choking on his scrambled eggs. “Of you and Calla Lupin? Hardly. She’s practically my cousin. Believe me, if you’d known her as long as I’ve known her, you’d know that she’s as meddling and know-it-all as her father. Don’t get me wrong, Remus is a great guy, but I certainly wouldn’t want to be his son-in-law. My brother Rommy has enough trouble with him as his godfather.”

George scoffed, and turned back to his own breakfast. “Just because you can’t get a girl, you have to be all doom-and-gloom.”

“Hey,” replied Harry in indignation. “For the record, I’ve got a girl.”

“Oh yeah? Who?” challenged Fred and George together in surprise. Harry blushed, and mumbled something that they barely caught.

“Basya Riddle?” they chorused hootingly. “Dumbledore’s granddaughter?” They broke up laughing, clutching each other to stay upright as Harry glared at them. Exasperated, he looked across the room to where the girl in question sat with the other Ravenclaws. The dark-haired young woman caught his gaze, and smiled fondly at him. Harry grinned in response, which only caused the twins to laugh harder. “Oh, leave off,” he said irritably, but his smile remained.

Classes got out early that day, and Harry and his friends met up at the Whomping Willow. Checking to see that no one was looking, Harry changed into his Animagus form of a crow and flew past the belligerent branches to hit the knot that his dad had shown him in his first year at Hogwarts. The tree stilled, and the small group snuck into the tunnel at its roots. The five unregistered Animagi: Harry’s crow, Neville as a puma, the two Weasleys as identical raccoons, Alpha Black’s Labrador, and Rommy’s horse, along with Calla, ran and tumbled down the long path to the Shrieking Shack, laughing and gamboling all the way.
“So, what’s this about you and Basya?” said Rommy once they had all transformed back to their proper selves. Harry’s younger brother was in Ravenclaw and only a year younger than Harry and Neville. Harry glowered at the twins, who shrugged innocently, and changed the subject.

“You know, Pacer,” he said lightly. “I think Mom might be onto us. She was looking for me when I snuck in after the last full moon.”

“Did she catch you?” asked Calla guiltily.

“Do I look maimed?” answered Harry sarcastically. “No, but only thanks to Neville tossing that Filibusters down the dungeon steps. If Dad hadn’t loaned me his old cloak this term, I’d be in hot water. But I know she’s suspicious. She offered to pack for me.” He raised his eyebrows at the improbability of Lily Potter offering to pack up for her teenaged son. “She just wants to snoop through my stuff. Can I give you a few of the less... acceptable things to hold on to for a bit?” He turned to Fred and George. “But I will need them all back,” he stressed.

The twins grinned evilly. “You mean the invisibility cloak?” asked Fred with ill-disguise eagerness.

“And the Map?” said George. Harry nodded.

“Excellent,” they said together. Calla rolled her eyes.

“You’re not going to tell on us just because you’re a prefect, are you, Calla?” asked Fred, wiggling his eyebrows in what he obviously thought was a seductive fashion. The werewolf laughed.

“How could I? I’d be in just as much trouble as you if Professor Potter found out that we were sneaking out here all the time.”

“School’s out, Calla,” groaned Harry, leaning back on the dusty grand piano. “You don’t have to call her ‘Professor Potter’ anymore. I mean, you’re named after her.”

“I’ll call her ‘Aunt Lily’ at home,” chided Calla. “But while we’re at Hogwarts, she’s Professor Potter.”

That night at dinner, Harry ran in late, sliding into his seat next to his brother and his sister, Rose, just before Dumbledore stood up to speak. “Where were you?” Rommy started to ask, but then he saw Basya making her seat as well, straightening her robes with a sappy grin on her face. “Ah.”

“This is the end of yet another year,” said Dumbledore proudly at the front of the Hall, spreading his hands expansively to include the entire hall. “And here we are again, about to be parted. But for now, allow me to make a few happy announcements before you all pay this fine dinner the attention that it so richly deserves. First, I would like to announce something that some of may know already, but indulge a proud father. My son, Thomas Riddle-Dumbledore, has been elected Minister of Magic.” He beamed as the hall applauded. “Thank you, thank you.”

As he clapped, Harry felt a small twinge in his forehead, in the lightning-bolt-shaped scar, legacy of a Quidditch game in his first year. He thought that somebody must have tossed something small at him, but the Weasley Twins were paying attention to Dumbledore as he continued speaking. He sat back in his seat, perfectly content.

That night, however, he dreamed. In his dream, his scar blazed with light, consuming him and taking him to a place both familiar and strange. He wandered the empty halls of Hogwarts, passing empty portraits until he came to a room lined with pictures of... him. One, hung in the center of the room, between a Harry with gleaming, reflective silver eyes and another with pale brown hair on a background of a full moon, attracted him like a magnet. He gasped in shock to see this image of him.
Someone had obviously not liked him, for this Harry was beaten and crippled, blinded and confined to a wheelchair. But behind him stood a shadow of a tall, vital Harry, with vast wings that cupped both boys like a protective shield and eyes that looked as though they could see through time itself.

The blind one stared straight at Harry, smiling slightly. “Who are you?” Harry asked tentatively.

“I am Fighter,” answered the other in a calm voice that was somehow filled with sadness and power.

“Well, you don’t have to fight anymore,” said Harry with the unquestionable certainty that comes so often in dreams. “I’m me now. We’ve won.”

(In case parts of this didn’t make sense, allow me to explain. (And if it did make sense, congratulations and you don’t need to read this slightly long AN)

In the chapter before this, Harry took Voldemort back in time to Tom Riddle’s birth and delivered him to Dumbledore’s doorstep, who then raised Tom as his own son. Therefore, a new reality was created, replacing the old. Tom never became Lord Voldemort, and none of the catastrophes that he caused ever came to occur. Harry’s parents were never killed, which is why he now has a sister (Rose Nymphadora Potter) one year younger and a brother (Romulus ‘Rommy’ Sirius Potter) two years younger than he is. Harry never became the Boy-Who-Lived, so Ron didn’t make friends with him that first day on the train. Harry, raised by his father (who, as we know, is rather a prankster), has more in common with the Weasley twins than Ron. Lily, who never became an auror because, w/o Voldemort, there was no need, is now teaching Charms at Hogwarts, much to the chagrin of Harry and his siblings. James plays Quidditch for England as Chaser and Captain, and led them to victory in the Quidditch Cup in Harry’s fourth year.

Neville’s parents were never tortured by the Lestranges, so he was raised by them rather than his grandmother. As a result, he is much more confident and in better control of his magic, as his parents are both powerful wizards.

Michael Weasley, who is referred to here, is the theorized ‘missing Weasley’ between Charlie and Percy.

Tom Riddle-Dumbledore married as a young man and had a daughter and two sons. Only the daughter Basya was featured in this vignette. (As an interesting side note that does not feature in this story, when Basya and Harry met on the Hogwarts Express before their first year, they had identical haircuts and were mistaken for twins.) He followed in his adopted father’s footsteps as a good, powerful man who is widely trusted and has just been elected Minister of Magic.

Sirius Black never went to prison. He eventually married and his son, Alphard ‘Alpha’ Black (named after Sirius’s uncle) is one of Harry’s best friends, even though he is closer to Rommy’s age.

Remus Lupin also married a werewolf that he met on a research project in Germany. Their daughter, Calla (So named because Remus never forgot his schoolboy crush on Lily Evans, even though he loves his wife, Misha, more than he ever thought possible), is a werewolf as well. Harry’s group is slightly centered around her, and they became animagi for the same reason that the Marauders did back in their schooldays, to accompany her at the full moon.)

Harry’s dream is a reference to both Harry’s dreams in the original reality and Harry’s meeting with Seer, his alternate from another failed reality. It merely means that the original Harry still exists in a small form in the new Harry, just as Seer existed in Harry. I hope that all of this makes sense. Thank you very much for having read this. I appreciate your support over the last year and a half.)
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