Harry Potter and the Rune Stone Path

by TemporalKnight

Summary

10 year old Harry finds a chest left by his mother with books on some of her favorite subjects. Discovering he has a talent for understanding and creating ancient runes sets Harry onto a very different path than anyone had expected. Shortcuts, inventions, and a bit of support go a long way! Pairings: H/Hr/NT/FD/DG.

Notes

This was my first fic and is cross-posted on my other profile at fanfiction.net. While it has some cliches throughout, many are turned on their head and attempted to have been played realistically instead of just for the sake of drama. I hope you enjoy this as much as I enjoyed writing it! One day I will come back to finish edits on this thing.
10 year old Harry Potter was actually glad to be cleaning the attic. It was his last chore of the day and his Uncle Vernon and cousin Dudley were always home by the time he got to the last chore. In the attic they would leave him alone though since Vernon could barely fit up the ladder and Dudley was just way too lazy to climb it. Without worrying about them he didn’t have to watch his back or bite his tongue like usual. Plus it was quiet up here.

Harry had just finished clearing the last corner of cobwebs and dust when he noticed one trunk that almost seemed to have a glow about it. It had been shoved way into the darkest corner of the space on the bottom of a large pile of junk. Curious, Harry moved the items off and leaned in to examine the mystery trunk.

“Was this my mother’s?” Harry whispered, reading the inscription on the nameplate. “Aunt Petunia had said she got rid of everything of Mum’s…” Reaching out Harry reverently opened the trunk never noticing the small flash of light as his thumb popped the latches.

Inside, the trunk was surprisingly empty, consisting of only three small notebooks and a tiny necklace with an embellished “L”, “J” and “H” all entwined around each other. Harry smiled at the necklace assuming it was the initials of his parents and himself. He looped it over his head before opening the first notebook.

“Improvements in Basic Charms. Note to self: show my ideas to Flitwick, he’ll love it. Maybe I can even skip the Mastery program with these.

“I wonder who Flitwick was. That’s a really strange name for someone.” None of the first few pages in that book made much sense. There were tiny diagrams of moving sticks with instructions underneath, phrases in another language crossed out and replaced by shorter ones and tables listing common interactions. Harry shrugged and put the notebook to the side before opening the next one.

“Improvements on Potions Preparations and Brewing. Too bad for Sev, he’d have gone green with envy if he knew I figured this stuff out.

Again, the book might as well have been written in a different language for all the sense it made. There were some utterly hilarious doodles though with a stick figure pouring two cups into a pot and the next figure had the pot exploding with the stick figure’s hat blowing off! Chuckling, Harry picked up the final notebook.

“Runes, Rune Stones and Warding. A Comprehensive Compendium of My Extremely Useful Hobby Which I Suck At. I swear for how complicated these things are I don’t get why they are so relaxing to puzzle over.

Turning the page, Harry snorted. “These are complicated? Compared to those other things this is first grader stuff!” Harry ran his finger over some of the odd symbols. The meaning of the symbols made perfect sense to him; even if he may not have been able to pronounce them. Like “eihwaz”, it looked like his scar and meant something like “protection” but, there were way too many consonants to try saying aloud. He flipped forward a few more pages.
While some of the more complex schemes of intertwining runes towards the back of the notebook made his head hurt a bit, Harry could still mostly follow what the notebook was describing. Unfortunately some of his mother’s notes seemed just straight up wrong and a few of the others looked like they were far more complex than they needed to be but, overall the book was a nice primer for…whatever she had been studying.

“Boy!” Harry jerked upright as Uncle Vernon’s voice resounded from the ladder-well. “Get down here and get dinner ready! If it’s not on the table in fifteen minutes it’s the belt again boy!” There was a brief pause before, “And that attic had been be cleaned as well!”

“It’s finished, Uncle Vernon! I’m coming!” Harry yelled back. He dropped the two incomprehensible books back into his mother’s chest before slamming it closed and making sure his new necklace was well hidden down his shirt. Standing up he clutched the Runes notebook, smiling faintly at one of the few connections with his dead mother. He’d come back for the other books and the chest later when his relatives were gone. No need to risk them burning the last bit of his mother he had left. For now, he’d be content just to read the one book that he could understand. Slipping the book into his pocket, Harry started down the ladder a smile on his face for the first time in years.

Harry had been able to sneak the rest of his mother’s things down into his cupboard a few days ago and had finally finished reading through the notebooks she’d left. He still couldn’t make heads or tails of the Potions or Charms things but he had managed to figure out several facts that completely turned his world inside out.

1. His mother was apparently very smart and enjoyed experimenting. Unfortunately her talents were geared more towards things he couldn’t understand. At least so far.
2. His mother had been ecstatic to be starting a family.
3. He apparently was never supposed to come here. Underlined several times near the back the Runes notebook was:

Make sure James updates the will. *Yesterday was the last straw and Harry is never, ever under ANY circumstances to go to Petunia. Tuni finally managed to burn that bridge. She will NEVER touch my child if I have any say in the matter!*

That by itself was strange enough and cast into doubt quite a bit about what Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had said about his parents since before Harry could remember. It did beg the question though of how exactly he had ended up at Number 4 Privet Drive…

And of course, most importantly of all…Magic was real. Actual magic! Words and spells that could make the impossible happen! Things that flew in the face of physics and natural laws! Potions that could mend bones or cure disease!

Runes that could do practically *anything* in the right combinations.

‘I wonder if I can figure out a rune cluster that would make Dudley lose his appetite. It’d certainly be easier than a charm or something. Or…I could make a cluster to get them all to leave me completely alone.’ Harry’s grin widened as he picked up the rune notes again. He had some studying to get to.
Chapter 1: First Forays

Several weeks later, Harry found himself levering his trunk up onto the Hogwarts’ Express and thinking about his very first friend. Hagrid had been a wonderfully nice man all things considered but, Harry was forced to admit the gentle giant was a rather bad introduction to the magical world. Horrible even. He hadn’t even told Harry how to get onto a seemingly nonexistent platform! Thankfully he had had time to read part of Hogwarts, A History so he knew about the barrier between Platforms 9 and 10 but what if he hadn’t? He might’ve been stuck outside! Harry suppressed a shudder at that nightmare.

On the other hand, Hagrid had gotten him his beautiful owl Hedwig which really made up for absolutely anything and everything. An actual birthday present? That giant of a man had firmly cemented Harry’s loyalty for life. He smiled down at Hedwig who twisted her head and hooted softly at him reaching through the bars to nip his fingers a bit.

“Excuse me, is there anyone sitting over there? Most of the rest of the compartments are full and I’d prefer not to lug this thing any further,” a red-headed young boy about Harry’s age asked pushing into the compartment with a large trunk in tow.

“Sure, seat’s open,” Harry said. “I’m, Harry by the way.”

“Ron Weasley. Have you seen Harry Potter anywhere? I heard he was supposed to be here this year and I wanted to say hi before we reached the school.”

“Err…” Harry ran a hand through his hair but before he could decide whether or not to admit his last name Ron’s eyes widened and he pointed at Harry’s forehead. Harry groaned realizing far too late he’d exposed the stupid, annoying scar.

“Blimey! YOU’RE Harry Potter! Why didn’t you say so? I’m Ron Weasley!”

“Yeah, I know. You already introduced yourself a minute ago.”

“Oh right, well, bloody hell! Harry Potter! So how did you do it? Do you remember it? Did it hurt?”

“I’d really rather not talk about it,” Harry sighed reaching into his pocket and pulling out his mother’s runes notebook. She had been right, it was a fantastic way to relax and studying the runes always helped him tune the world out. Granted the world had previously consisted of Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia and Dudley but the theory was still sound. Right?

“But why not? You’re famous, mate! It’s awesome! What I wouldn’t give to be in your position!” Ron yelled out with a grin almost splitting his face.

Harry just scowled. “You’d rather have your parents dead and live with relatives who hate you? Be my guest. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to read now.”

Ron’s mouth dropped open and he just sputtered for a few seconds. Harry caught the boy’s face turning slightly red before he leaned down over his notes. He’d already been able to correct some of his mum’s mistakes, add a few new notes and he even had a few ideas on some entirely new clusters. With a bit of luck he’d be able to figure out how to finish one of the simpler ones before the end of month. Two months tops. The carving sets from the shop in Diagon Alley had had...
everything he needed to get started. Convincing Hagrid that he’d wanted something two years
early (why Ancient Runes only started Third Year he couldn’t figure out; it wasn’t like it was
complicated) had been difficult until Harry had pulled the ‘I want to be closer to my mum’ card.
Hagrid had melted like putty after that.

Thankfully Ron stayed quiet for a few hours for the most part...Harry could hear him grumbling
under his breath every so often. It was a bit annoying but he still left Harry to his work. By the
time the food trolley rolled around Harry had finished the current cluster he’d been studying and
felt a bit bad about earlier. It wasn’t Ron’s fault the magical world in general seemed to idolize
him. He bought a few extra snacks from the woman as a peace offering.

“Here, you want some? I got a bit too much I think.”

“Really? You don’t want it?” Ron started to reach for the Chocolate Frogs but his hand froze
midway.

“Sure. Go ahead.”

“Thanks!” Ron lunged forward and grabbed two handfuls of food before ripping some of the
wrappers off and stuffing them in his mouth. “You want a sandwich?” Ron asked with his mouth
full of little cakes. “Mum made them for me. They’re good but they’re not sweets.”

“Sure, thanks,” Harry shrugged trying hard to hide the gleam in his eyes. That one sandwich had
more meat than Harry had been allowed all week! No way was he going to turn that down. Sweet
delicious ham...

The door to the compartment popped open and a set of twins came holding some sweets in their
arms. From the red hair and freckles it was obvious they were related to Ron. “Hey, Ronnikins,
need any chocolate?”

“Got some. Thanks.”

“Sure you don’t need more, o brother of ours?” Harry shuddered at the grin on the second twin – it
was almost the exact same grin he got when he managed to get something over on Dudley. No
way were those chocolates safe to eat!

“I’m good guys.”

“Damn. Well guess we’ll just have to go and find some other firsties eh, George?”

“Guess so, Fred.”

“What about this firstie?”

“Nah, he’s nice and quiet-like. I don’t reckon it’s a good idea to prank the quiet ones. At least not
before the first week.” George winked at Harry.

“I appreciate that,” Harry said with a laugh. “I’m Harry by the way.”

“George, and my esteemed brother here is Fred.” Both twins bowed low with grand flourishes
somehow avoiding dropping any of their candy. “You wouldn’t happen to be Harry Potter by any
chance would you?”

Stifling a sigh, Harry nodded. At least these two were polite about it.
“Well, ’twas a pleasure meeting you, Harrykins! Welcome to Hogwarts and I hope you’ll consider joining us in Gryffindor. We can guarantee less pranks if follow us to our grand house!” Fred said as he and his brother backed out.

“Well, that was actually the tamest response I’ve gotten to my name in the past month!’ Harry thought grinning. The tact gene may have skipped their brother but the twins were pretty cool.

Ron grumbled before pulling out a rat and trying to feed it a piece of toffee. It was probably a good thing the rat was uninterested. It’d likely send the poor thing to the great sewer in the sky.

“Uh, Ron…why do you have a rat?”

“This is Scabbers. He’s my pet. Been in the family for ages. Percy had him years ago.” Ron scowled down at the rat. “He’s really lazy though and kind of boring. Want to see a spell? Fred and George gave me one that’s supposed to turn him yellow!” he said leaning over for his wand.

“Okay,” Harry shrugged. It would be awesome to see some actual magic but...if the twins had given it the spell? Harry was not going to be holding his breath for this one.

As Ron pulled out his wand the compartment door opened again and this time a girl with bushy brown hair and a nervous looking boy entered. “Have either of you noticed a toad around here? Neville’s has escaped.”

“No,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “Have you tried asking any of the upper years? They might have a spell to help search.”

“No, we haven’t but that’s a good idea. Oh are going to do a spell? I’ve tried some of the simpler ones myself already and haven’t had any issues at all. Come on then, what are going to do?” The girl plopped down on the seat next to Harry and stared at Ron.

“Um, well okay. **Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow, Turn this stupid, fat rat yellow!**” A small bang came from the end of Ron’s wand but nothing happened to Scabbers.

Harry groaned and covered his face with his palm. Before he could say anything the girl beat him to it. “Are you sure that’s actually a spell? It certainly didn’t seem like one did it? I suppose it could’ve been a sort of ritual but those tend to have a complicated set of diagrams drawn out before the incantation is started at least according to my research. Most normal spells seem to be in Latin, though I’ve read other countries use spells in different base languages which imply there is quite a bit more to the spell itself than simple motions and words which I assume we’ll be learning all about when we get to Arithmancy and advanced spell theory. Here watch, your glasses are broken, yes? Sit still!” The girl brought her wand out pointed it between his eyes. Harry froze but before he could say anything she uttered a short phrase – in something that was probably Latin from her earlier comments – and the tape that held the bridge of his glasses together spun off while the plastic stitched itself back into one full piece.

Forgetting his quick lapse, Harry took his glasses off and stared at his brand new pair with his mouth slightly agape. ‘What’s more impressive, that she managed to finish that speech on a single breath or that she fixed my glasses before we even got to school?’ he thought slipping them back on and turning to the girl.

“Wow, thanks! The tape was getting a little annoying. I haven’t read most of the spells yet, I’ve been looking at…other things.” He shifted a bit trying to discreetly cover his mother’s notebook.

“You’re welcome,” she said, sitting up straighter as a wide grin spilled across her face. “I’m
Hermione. Hermione Granger.”

“Harry. Nice to meet you.”

“Yes, well Neville and I should really be off. Trevor’s still missing after all.”

“Do you guys want help?” Harry asked.

“No thank you, I think we’ll just go and ask one of the prefects for their help.”

After Hermione and Neville walked out Ron turned to Harry with his face red and his tone angry.

“That’s not a reason to not help someone find their pet,” Harry frowned. Ron’s tone reminded him too much of Dudley at the moment. “Besides she was right. That spell obviously wasn’t real. You said your brothers gave it to you right? I’ve known them for less than five minutes and I can already tell you they seem like the type to do that for a laugh.”

“Well yeah, they would,” Ron grumbled and leaned back slipping Scabbers into his pocket again. Harry shook his head feeling sorry for the ugly little thing. The way the rat was squeaking and squirming made Harry think of Boba Fett being dragged down into the Sarlacc.

The door to the compartment slammed open one more time and a blond haired boy with two stocky bodyguards stood outside. Harry just sighed. This one he remembered from the robes store. “So rumor has it that Harry Potter is in this compartment.” The blond turned to Harry and smiled upon seeing the scar through his hair. “Ah so it’s true.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m Draco Malfoy. It’s a good thing I came to find you. My father has told me all about the Weasley brood and a man of your status certainly shouldn’t be forced to hang around with the wrong sort like them.” He stuck out his hand completely missing Harry’s narrowed eyes.

“Mr. Malfoy, we’ve met before and not only was I apparently insignificant enough to not remember but, you also managed to insult one of my first friends back then. Had you been a bit nicer now I’d be willing to let you try again but, again the first thing you do is insult who I’m with. Congratulations, you’ve just proven yourself as stuck up as my relatives.” Harry scowled and continued in a low voice that practically left ice on the windows, “I deal with the Dursleys enough at home; the last thing I need is to deal with them here too. I’d appreciate being left alone.”

Malfoy’s eyes widened and his hand stayed extended for a moment before he sneered and pulled back like Harry had struck him. “When my father hears about this you’ll regret spurning House Malfoy!”

“Am I supposed to know who your father is?” Harry scoffed with a low laugh. “Obviously I don’t so, that’s really not much of a threat now is it?”

Malfoy just snarled and turned around slamming the compartment door behind him.

After they had finally reached Hogwarts the Sorting Ceremony began and Harry had his first view of the Sorting Hat. And the endless possibilities such a thing implied! How had the Hat been created? Were there Thought runes embedded within it? Or maybe Perspective runes? Obviously some variant of a Perception rune was stitched into the lining somewhere. Cloth was likely a horrible magical conductor though so how had they made it permanent? Could he make anything permanent with the right combination? Could he make anything sentient? Could he make his own familiar out of a runic construct? No that was stupid, he already had Hedwig and she’d get
jealous. What about etching runes into something else though? Maybe tattoos?

“…Potter…Harry Potter?”

“Huh?” Harry shook his head before turning to the tall, severe looking Professor McGonagall frowning at him. “Oh, right.” He grimaced and walked forward to the stool with the Hat.

Ah, Mr. Potter. Quite a lot of possibilities there for my creation eh?

Harry flinched at the voice in his head and quickly glanced around but couldn’t see anything besides the inner brim of the Sorting Hat. “Um, is this the Hat?” he whispered quietly.

Oh yes, that I am. Heldric Rowzar if you want to be technical, but most simply refer to me as: Hat. Please don’t use Flopsy. I truly wish I had arms to smack the Headmaster whenever he insists on that foolish term. And just so you know, my creation was centered more around charms and enchantments instead of runes. Most people aren’t quite at your level regarding those and the Founders preferred not to play with something that had the potential to blow them up when there were easier ways.

“Oh. Would my way have worked?”

Oh I have no doubt! I imagine it would take years to get right, but there is certainly more than one way to trim a mandrake, eh! Now, now where to put you, where to put you…hmm…I haven’t had this many problems since your mother and then your cousin you know!

“My cousin!?”

Oh not that one. No, no, she’s only very distantly related, something like a fifth cousin once removed. ‘Cousin’ was simpler than the full description. I settled on Hufflepuff for her in the end but that’s really the only House not particularly suited for you. I think you’d do well in Slytherin however! Though in the past few weeks it appears that your interests and talents have shifted quite a bit, eh? Runes are certainly a fun specialty and Ravenclaw would lead the way to great things for your future. However I do see the burning desire to charge forward regardless of any consequences or obstacles. That is truly a trait Godric would admire. So many choices, so many choices!

“Ravenclaw was the one for people who liked to read and study right?”

Well I wouldn’t have boiled it down quite so much but, yes, that is more or less correct.

“And Slytherin was for crafty and ambitious people?”

Generally, though purebloods that don’t have many other stronger defining traits tend to go there as well.

“And Gryffindor is for the reckless?”

The Hat gave a rolling laugh in Harry’s head. Oh I do like you, Mr. Potter! Don’t let poor Minerva hear you say that!

“Um, do I get a say in this? Where did Hermione and Neville go? Ron has brothers here right? They’re in Gryffindor right?”

All the current Weasleys, Mr. Longbottom and Miss Granger are all in Gryffindor. But I really think you’d fit in better with the Ravenclaws. This thirst for knowledge and experimentation is
perfectly in line with dear Rowena’s legacy.

“I’d prefer to go with them please. Neville looks like he could use a friend and Hermione actually seemed interesting from the train – even if she was a little bossy. The twins didn’t even really question me about my scar…I’d really prefer to be with them. Please?”

Well if you’re sure…better be – GRYFFINDOR! The Hat finished with a loud shout to the rest of the room. Harry smiled and, with a whispered thanks, took the head-covering off before hurrying over to the cheering table to sit down across from the people he’d met a few hours ago.

Several hours later Harry was sitting on a couch near the fire in the Gryffindor common room. The Welcoming Feast had ended with some time left before curfew so Harry had switched out his mother’s notes for the third year Ancient Runes text and curled up to start his research. He smiled faintly as he searched through the textbook trying to find one of the missing components to complete his primer sequence.

“Harry, why are reading? Let’s play chess!” Ron said striding up with a small board cradled in his arms.

“Sorry, I can’t. I’m kinda busy, Ron.”

“What could possibly be more interesting than chess? We don’t even have homework yet!” Harry glanced up and almost fell over from the horror crossing Ron’s face. His mouth was open and his face had gone white with his hands just hanging limp by his sides. It looked like someone had told him to eat Scabbers alive! Harry shook his head quickly deciding he was never going to study with the other boy.

“I’m looking for an Extinguisher. The current configuration is a bit too explosive when all I want is a fancy light show. An Extinguisher should damp the reaction before it combusts.” Harry responded glancing up. Ron’s expression of utter confusion was priceless. Hermione however, seemed worried as she walked over to the boys.

“An extinguisher? Muggle tech doesn’t work at Hogwarts. It says so in Hogwarts, A History. I imagine an extinguisher might work as it doesn’t have any electronic components but still I highly doubt you’ll find one lying around the grounds.”

Harry shook his head. “I know that tech doesn’t work. I read that part in Hogwarts, A History too.” Hermione’s face morphed from confusion, to shock, and finally to amazement before he’d even started his next sentence. “But I don’t mean a fire extinguisher. I mean a rune for extinguishing. My mum never wrote that one down. I’m hoping it’s in one of the first two course books because I didn’t have enough money on me to buy the fifth-seventh year curriculum ones. It seems like it should be pretty basic though so I’m guessing she just didn’t see the need to write it down.”


“Yeeaaaah…” he said slowly. Was that supposed to be odd? Wouldn’t it make sense to read a book about the history of the school you were about to attend?

“I – I – Wait! Did you say you’re researching runes?” she demanded. Harry just nodded. “That’s incredibly advanced. We don’t start runes until Third Year!”
“Blimey, mate! Why the bloody hell are looking at stuff two years ahead?!” Harry was starting to get seriously worried that if Ron’s eyes widened any further they would fall out of his skull.

“Because it’s interesting?” He really didn’t understand why people kept making such a big deal out of this. It wasn’t rocket science! It was just a language, a set of power symbols and a series of interactions!

Ron just grumbled and walked away shaking his head as if in a daze, his chess set hanging limply from his hand. Hermione frowned but also wandered off frantically muttering about being so far behind. Harry shrugged and was about to go back to his research when Neville sat down beside him. “You know, they are right, Harry. Runes can be pretty dangerous if you’re not careful. My Gran said my dad once almost blew up the house because he etched one wrong.” Neville shook his head and drooped a bit lower. “I’d probably actually blow up the house if I ever tried it.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Neville,” Harry said with a soft smile and a pat on the other boy’s shoulder. “They really aren’t that difficult. If you ever want help with them let me know.”

“I will. But I think I’ll wait until we actually get to that class,” Neville smiled shyly and moved off to the dorms.

Harry’s first two months at Hogwarts had practically flown by. He was enjoying most of the classes except Potions and History of Magic. History was good for a short nap though and when he wasn’t tired it was the perfect opportunity to work on improving his developing clusters. The Extinguisher hadn’t quite worked out but he figured weaving in a Soften rune to the scheme should offset the effect enough to make his Extravagance Rune Show impressive but harmless. It would be perfect for Dudley!

It had taken Harry less than a week to realize that he didn’t have the same luck with any of the other magical topics that he did with runes. It was a bit disappointing that he hadn’t seemed to inherit his mum’s skill in Charms or Potions. At least he could at least partially blame the latter on Snape.

The first Potions lesson was…well getting run over by a lorry would probably have been more fun. Snape’s first few questions were trick ones to see if Harry had read the year’s textbook. From cover to cover. And memorized it. When he – somehow – managed to get those few right Snape had moved on to more complicated questions – things from the 4th and 5th Year curriculums according to Hermione later on. Harry still managed to get those questions right thanks to remembering some things from his mother’s notebook. Snape then proceeded to take points off for being “insufferably superior” and “reading dangerously far ahead”. When Harry had had the audacity to actually ask why stirring clockwise vs. counter-clockwise made such a huge difference Snape had vanished his potion since “obviously if you cannot grasp such a simple concept than there’s no point in seeing the horrific results of your work.” When Harry afterward tried to stay quiet and avoid eye contact Snape picked on Neville instead, leaning over the boy’s shoulder and degrading him for his shaking hands and fumbling of ingredients. By the time the class had ended Harry had been sorely tempted to set off his defective Extravagance Rune Show in the man’s cauldron.

When one’s teacher took every opportunity to insult and degrade you there was little point in putting forth any effort. Harry had agreed in principle that learning Potions was important though so…on the weekend after that first class he had grabbed Neville, commandeered an unused classroom and set about teaching the coursework to each other. Harry had invited Ron as well but
the red head just laughed hysterically at doing any extra work. Within a few weeks Neville and Harry had made excellent progress and Harry always cackled like a madman when thinking of the end of term exams and how they was going to show the bigoted teacher exactly what they could do!

Transfiguration and Charms were topics that, while interesting as hell, seemed to be a huge waste of energy. Something that he finally decided to bring up during the lesson on Halloween.

“Professor, why use a charm for this when a rune would be just as easy and more permanent?” Harry asked while most of the rest of the class was attempting to get their feather levitating.

“Well it would be quite difficult to etch a rune onto a feather, Mr. Potter,” Professor Flitwick responded with a chuckle. “Besides, runes are far too advanced for a first year course.”

“Well yeah, you can’t etch the rune on the feather but still it seems silly to try and memorize such a precise wand movement when I can just draw and link the rune to it in a few seconds instead. Here, watch.” Harry shifted his feather over to the side and inked a quick Flight rune onto his paper before adding a small Synchronization rune and a Feather rune entwined within. Less than thirty seconds after he started, Harry touched his wand to the paper and energized the cluster. Harry smirked as his feather floated off the desk and hovered neatly in the air for about five seconds.

Then the parchment with his cluster burned to ash.

Scowling, Harry glared down at the parchment. “Stupid paper. Horrible conductor. I should’ve torn a strip from my robes instead. That would’ve lasted at least a minute.” He sighed as the feather floated back down in front of him. “Well it made my point at least right?” Looking up at Professor Flitwick Harry’s eyes widened a bit and he jerked back slightly in his seat. The little man’s eyes were bulging out of his skull, his mouth was hanging open, his hand was clenched so tightly on his wand it had gone white and his entire body seemed stiff as a board. Harry had seen that expression enough from his relatives. The Freak had shown his true colors yet again.

Frantically blinking Harry desperately started to mentally draw and recite the most complicated runes he could think of. He would not cry in class. He had stopped crying years ago. It was not going to happen!

“Mr. Potter, how…how did you…?” Before Professor Flitwick could finish his thought, from several seats down Hermione loudly corrected Ron’s pronunciation and her feather soared into the air. “Five points to Gryffindor for excellent spellwork, Miss Granger,” the Professor commented without even taking his eyes off Harry. He opened his mouth to try again before Seamus Finnegan’s feather literally exploded in his face. Professor Flitwick shook his head and moved off to make certain the boy was alright.

Harry slowly exhaled and stopped his mental exercises. ‘I should’ve known not to ask questions. I’ll just do the clusters on my own and study the normal things with everyone else for now.’

The bell signaling the end of class sounded and Harry grabbed his bag walking out with Neville and Ron before Professor Flitwick could try to stop him. He was not going to let the Freak come out again. Not here. Not with people who knew and liked his parents. Not with someone his mum had liked.

“She’s mental! Mental, I tell you!” Ron prattled on beside Harry and Harry just nodded not bothering to listen. “Levi-OH-sa not Levi-oh-SAH! She’s such a bossy little know-it-all! Why can’t she just mind her own business for once?! I’m not surprised she has no friends. No one’s ever going to be able to stand her!”
Hermione pushed past Harry’s shoulder and the sound of sniffling broke through his reverie. “Hermione?” She practically sprinted down the corridor and disappeared before Harry could do more than extend a hand in her direction. Frowning he turned to Ron. “What did you say to her?”

“Weren’t you listening? I just said the truth! It’s not my fault if she heard me.”

“That was really mean, Ron,” Neville said quietly from his other side. “She was just trying to help you. And she was right.”

“She should mind her own business!” Ron’s face had gone as red as his hair. “I didn’t ask for her help and I didn’t need it! She’s too bossy. She thinks she knows everything just because she’s the best in class and because she turns in double the homework that we do. She wants to go and cry about it, well serves her right. Maybe now she’ll stop making the rest of us look bad!”

Harry froze. The rest of his classmates flowed around him and a few steps later Ron and Neville turned back to look at him stopped in the middle of the corridor. Harry’s hands clenched and his teeth ground together. “You,” he stepped forward and his mouth curled into a snarl, as he jabbed a finger accusingly in the redhead’s chest not even realizing he was still holding his wand. Or that it was glowing. “You want her to make herself dumber just so she doesn’t look better than lazy idiots like you.” Harry’s voice was like ice. Neville hurriedly took a few steps away from Ron and worriedly tried to get his wand out though he seemed nervous about which boy he should be pointing it at. “You’re jealous that she’s better than you. That she understands the subject while you can’t even be bothered to try. How dare you! Dudley was bad enough! I can’t do anything about him yet but, I can do something about you!” Harry thrust his hand forward not even realizing his wand was in it. “You stay the hell away from, Hermione! And stay the hell away from me too!”

“Wha – ” Ron sputtered backing away from Harry. He tripped over his robes and landed on his butt on the floor. “Harry – ”

“Shut up, Ronald! I don’t like bullies and that’s all you are. You’re just like Dudley! Stay away from us!” Harry turned on his heel and scanned the small crowd that had formed nearby as the rest of the class had gathered to view the rising chaos. “Lavender! Did you see where she went?”

The girl’s eyes widened, afraid to be in his sights, and she quickly shook her head. “Um, no, but she usually goes into the second floor bathroom to cry. She should be out by the end of the feast though…”

“If you see her before I do tell her to stay away from Ron and that I want to talk to her,” Harry’s voice had dropped back down to a normal volume and he had stopped breathing heavily. Lavender nodded and the crowd slowly started to mill away towards the Great Hall, the show apparently over.

“You coming, Neville?” Harry asked as he walked off.

Neville jerked and stared at Harry. “Yeah. Coming.” He sent a baleful glare at Ron who was still staring up from the floor before hurrying after his friend.

Harry had kept watching the doors to the Great Hall during the entire feast. Halloween was turning into a right awful day. Flitwick was still casting glances at him from the staff table. Everyone was celebrating his parents’ death. He’d thrown aside one of his few friends. Hermione still hadn’t shown up. What the hell else could happen to make this day worse?
“Troll! There’s a troll in the dungeons!” Professor Quirrell yelled as he ran into the room and barely even reaching the center of the room before fainting.

‘Note to self: never ever tempt fate. Even in my head. She obviously hates me – or at minimum – loves to play around with me, all the while cackling madly in the background.’

The Great Hall exploded into chaos as the professors called for the Houses to follow their prefects back to the dorm rooms. As they left the room, Harry scowled and shifted to the back of the crowd. Neville noticed his friend slowing down and leaned over to whisper, “Harry, what’s going on?”

“Hermione doesn’t know about the troll, Nev. What if she’s still in the bathroom?”

“Shouldn’t we tell the prefects?” he suggested with a slight quaver.

“They’re busy with everyone else. Come on, it’s only a few corridors over. We can get there faster if we just go ourselves. The troll isn’t even supposed to up here anyway. I don’t want Hermione to get into trouble for something Ron did!”

Harry saw Neville’s face drain of color and gave a sad smile. “It’s okay, Nev. I’ll go get her and we’ll meet you guys up in the Common Room.” He turned to run away from the staircase but Neville grabbed his arm.

“No – no. I’m coming too. I may not be much help but, I’m not letting you go alone and I don’t want Hermione to get in trouble either.” Harry smiled back in reply and the two sprinted off.

Harry’s opinion of Neville jumped up several notches seeing the boy would actually stand up for himself and others when push came to shove.

As they got closer to the bathroom an awful smell drifted toward them. “Neville, do trolls smell?”

“Yeah…” Neville’s face had reached nearly pure white.

“Maybe we should’ve gotten a prefect…”

They twisted around the last turn just in time to see a twelve foot tall troll amble through the door to the bathroom, a giant club half as big dragging in its wake. Harry’s face joined Neville’s in color loss. “That’s the girls’ bathroom…” A scream rang through the air from the room the troll had entered.

“Hermione!” Both boys shouted and sprinted straight through the door.

In front of them the troll was standing and raising its club. Hermione was crouched on the floor among broken toilets and stall doors. Harry didn’t think; he just immediately jumped onto the troll’s back and grabbed its head trying to twist it away from Hermione and back towards the door.

“Neville! Distract it! Hermione, run!”

Hermione didn’t run. She stayed frozen and whimpering in the corner of the room. Neville stayed frozen for a moment too before he snapped out it. He grabbed his wand and tried to shout out a spell but only a weak red light came out that bounced harmlessly off the troll’s skin. The troll’s club swiped out and Neville jumped back. He managed to avoid getting hit but his wand wasn’t so lucky. As the boy fell back, his wand got caught by the edge of the club and snapped right in half.

It had bought enough time though. Harry, one hand wrapped around the troll’s neck, the other digging through his pack, triumphantly raised his arm clutching his incomplete *Extravagance Rune*
Thrusting his hand around the troll’s head, Harry activated the rune stone and thrust it into the troll’s open mouth. He dropped off the back of the troll and rolled away just as a dull bang sounded through the bathroom. Covering his head, Harry felt himself splattered with something sticky and smelly as a second later there was a great crash when the troll fell to the floor, its loincloth passing so close that it brushed against Harry’s arm.

Slowly, Harry lowered his arms and scanned the room. Neville was sitting on the floor staring dumbly. Hermione was still crouched in the corner but with her mouth wide open. Next to Harry, on the floor was the troll. Most of the top of its head was missing. Steaming meat chunks squelched down the wall of the bathroom and dripped off the ceiling

Without the *Extinguisher* and *Soften* runes weaved into the cluster, the *Extravagance Rune Show* was still rather explosive.

“Umm…” Anything else Harry was going to say was cut off as a blurry, bushy, brown bullet slammed into his chest nearly knocking him over. Hermione’s arms wrapped around him and her head buried into his chest. Harry froze; this was the first hug he could ever remember receiving.

“Hermione? Are you okay?” Cautiously Harry reached a hand out and patted her head. A small nod was the only answer he got as the girl’s arms tightened around his chest and he felt his stomach get wet. She was sobbing right through his shirt. “Neville? You good?”

“I’m okay. I broke my wand but, I’m okay. Did you blow off its head?” Neville’s voice was strained – like he couldn’t decide between whether to cry or laugh. Harry commiserated.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think I did.”

“Did you mean to do that?”

“Um, maybe? I knew it would explode. I didn’t mean to kill it but…I didn’t know what else to do. Did I kill it?”

“Mr. Potter? Mr. Longbottom? Miss Granger?” Professor McGonagall’s shocked voice sounded into the small bathroom. “Is that…? How…? Are…are you three hurt?” she finally managed to say.

“We’re okay, Professor. Neville’s wand got broken though.”

“How did this…” The teacher abruptly cut off as a piece of brain from the ceiling dropped an inch in front of her face.

“What the blazes?” Professor Flitwick squeaked as he came around the older woman. “What happened to its head?”

“Obviously it smacked itself with an errant swing,” Snape drawled swishing in behind the other two.

“No it didn’t, Sir,” Neville said softly from the floor, still staring at the troll. He shook his head, stood up, grabbed his broken wand and moved to stand with Harry and Hermione. “Harry killed it, Sir.”

“Impossible!” Snape sneered.

“Mr. Potter? Perhaps you should explain what just happened,” Professor McGonagall could barely tear her eyes from the troll’s twitching remains long enough to glance at the trio of students.
“Hermione didn’t know about the troll because she had been in the bathroom, Professor. Neville and I ran to get her but the troll was already here. It was trying to kill Hermione so Neville distracted it while I fed it my activated Extravagance Rune Show.” Harry looked down and grimaced. “I didn’t mean to kill it,” he continued softly. “I designed the Extravagance Rune Show to emit a lot of bright lights and sounds to scare my cousin if he started in on me but I had to base it off of some of the Thunder and Explosion runes to get the cluster to work. An Extinguisher rune stopped the whole thing completely so I took it out. I knew adding in a Soften rune in conjunction with the Extinguisher would get it to work perfectly, but I only figured that out this morning and haven’t had enough time to etch it in with the others. I knew the cluster was still pretty explosive and that’s why I kept it in my bag. I didn’t want anyone playing around with it while it was still dangerous…I didn’t really mean to kill the troll. I just didn’t know what else to do…” Harry trailed off.

Hermione gave him one more squeeze and finally let go. She turned to the gathered staff that had been joined by Professor Babbling at some point. “Please don’t punish, Harry or Neville. They were only here because of me. I should be the one punished. It was going to kill me and they only did want they could to help. I’m the one who deserves punishment,” she pleaded. The tears threatened to fall again and Harry reached out and squeezed her hand.

“Mr. Potter,” Professor Babbling said with a note of awe evident in her voice, “do you mean to tell me that you designed an entire rune cluster fully understanding the interweaves, chained reactions and inherent complexities of the completed scheme without even fully finishing the etchings?” Harry nodded still looking at the floor. “100 points to Gryffindor for ingenuity, brilliance and having the foresight to keep a potential hazard from others. 25 points from Gryffindor for carrying a potential hazard on your person around others.” At the massive point awards Harry jerked his head up catching a huge smile on the woman’s face. Snape on the other hand was turning cherry red.

“And 50 points to Gryffindor to you both for immediately coming to the aid of classmate in trouble and triumphing over incredible odds,” Professor Flitwick commented as he poked at the troll’s body. Snape’s mouth clenched so tightly Harry was amazed his teeth didn’t shatter. “This is amazing. Mr. Potter that was quite brilliant thinking. You would do exceptionally well in the dueling circuit I think. If you are ever interested let me know. Oh and 15 points from each of you for not informing a prefect or teacher that Miss Granger was missing.” At the massive point awards Harry stared in shock at the small man. After his comments in class earlier Flitwick was praising him? That was...wow.

“POTTER!” Snape had apparently finally regained his voice. He was practically spitting and his face was so red Harry wondered for a moment whether the man was about to pass out. “DETENTION! Dangerous, forbidden magical constructs are prohibited!” Harry just nodded; for once that was actually a totally warranted punishment.

Professor Babbling scowled at Snape. “Runic clusters are not forbidden magical constructs! They require care yes, but if they were ‘forbidden magical constructs’ then you might as well arrest me and the entirety of my NEWTS class, Severus!”

“Mr. Potter, you will serve that detention with me,” Professor McGonagall glared at Snape before turning to Harry and the others with a far softer look. “We will discuss carrying around a potential hazard at that time. As disappointed as I am that you did not come to one of your seniors, I do understand that the troll was not initially reported as being in this section of the castle.” She paused before continuing softly, “I have never lost one of my lions before and I am extremely glad that, because of your actions, I do not have need to revise that statement. I am very proud of all three of you.” Three sets of jaws dropped open before snapping closed again. “Now, run along back to the Common Room and get yourselves cleaned up. Mr. Longbottom, I will contact your
grandmother to arrange a date over the weekend for you to acquire a new wand.”

The three students nodded and started to leave the bathroom. “Potter?” Professor Babbling said with a smile. “Whenever you get a chance stop by to see me. Nothing urgent. I think I can help you though if you’d like.” It was all Harry could do not to gape at the woman as pride surged through him. He damped it down a bit and nodding, proceeded to follow his friends out.

Harry, Hermione and Neville trooped through the portrait hole and into a crowded Common Room. “There you are!” Percy Weasley immediately yelled out. “Where have you three been? The troll – ”


“The Professors already know,” Neville commented. “Excuse us, but we smell horrible and I really need to go and lie down.”

“Hermione, you okay?” Harry asked before she could sprint away again.

“I’m fine, Harry. Thank you,” she hugged him once more and turned to go up the stairs to her dorm. “See you tomorrow?” she finished in a quiet, questioning voice.

“Yeah,” Harry said, giving her his warmest smile possible. “Definitely.”

As Harry walked to the showers he chuckled slightly. For Halloween, this day actually hadn’t really ended too badly.
Chapter 2: Prodigies, Parents and Philosopher’s Stones

After the Troll Incident the students had practically been climbing over themselves to get Harry to explain in *vivid* detail just how he had managed to kill a 12 foot mountain troll. The attention had nearly sent him into hiding and he’d taken to spending as much time in the Common Room as possible over the next week. The good thing about that was he got to talk quite a bit with Hermione and Neville. Neville’s Gran had berated the boy pretty harshly about breaking his father’s wand, but she had apparently switched gears and couldn’t seem to stop praising him when he finally managed to explain what happened. She had swept into the Common Room and proceeded to give Harry and Hermione a bear hug thanking them for “bringing her Neville’s lion to the surface”. Hermione just blushed and replied that she hadn’t really done anything at all while Harry nodded and flashed a thumbs up to the beat red Neville.

Hermione on the other hand, barely left his side anymore. Something he was quickly growing to like. He had initially come to think of Ron as a friend but it took barely two days of spending time with Hermione to realize how an actual friend acted. Hermione never insulted his research and she listened when he tried to explain what he was looking for. She helped him with his homework and showed him why his wand movements were wrong. She apparently liked to hug him too – something which always sent a very odd warm feeling through him. He knew about hugs academically speaking of course but…well, the reality of them was much better, he thought with a blush.

Ron had taken to grumbling every time one of the trio passed him and he scuttled out of the way if Harry even so much as turned in his direction. Not quickly enough to hide the glares or mutterings, but fast enough for Harry not to have to repeat his warning about staying away from the group. Fred and George on the other hand tried grilling Harry on some of his experiments and whether or not he was intending to go farther. Harry had just stared dumbfounded when they showed him some of their own plans for incredibly intricate pranks that they couldn’t seem to finish setting up yet. He’d promised them he’d think of a few rune clusters that might be able to combine or simplify aspects of the job as long as they promised to tone down any pranks on First Years in general, regardless of House.

It took Harry nearly a week before the furor had died down enough that he could make the time to talk with Professor Babbling. He was practically bouncing in anticipation as he walked up to her office with a huge grin on his face.

“Ah, Harry, come in, come in!” Babbling said sliding a few pieces of paper off to the side of her desk and waving him forward. Harry plopped down in one of the seats as the teacher came around and hopped up onto her desk. “So, let’s see what we’ve got to work with, shall we?” She clapped her hands together with a smile. “Check out this table over here. Can you tell me what these runes are?”

Harry peered at the runes and snorted. “Well that’s *Protection*, that’s *Synchronization*, there’s *Light*, that’s *Quiet*, that’s –”

“Okay, okay! That’s obviously far too easy! How about this one?” Babbling gave her wand a flick and the table of prime runes was replaced by one filled with clusters.

“It’s still pretty easy, Professor. That cluster would ignite a small fire but immediately snuff itself out once the item it was etched on burnt up. That one should resize clothes. That one there looks
like it’s designed to work in a set of four to set up a sort of barrier but it…has a flaw here that would burn it out less than a minute after activation.”

“Really? What flaw?” her voice was carefully neutral and Harry grinned slightly, enjoying the test.

“Well Absorption is upside down and entwined with Protection. It should be integrated into Power because then it can use any spells that impact it to reinforce itself instead.”

“Huh, I hadn’t thought of that,” Babbling leaned down to squint at the cluster. “Integrated into Power you say? I intentionally flipped it upside down yes, but I’ve never seen this cluster drawn with Absorption twined with Power. That should work though. Hell it might just double or triple the damage the barrier could take…”

“Actually it should be a near exponential increase. The most dangerous part would be the first few spells because it would be pretty weak at first but once the first few add to the strength of the barrier it would keep getting stronger and stronger,” Harry said taking mental notes to work on improving this at some point. Four anchor points was just inefficient. There had to be a way to get it down to just one central rune stone cluster.

“Well Merlin’s uncle…” Babbling laughed and turned back to Harry shaking her head. “I’ve heard of Rune Savants before but never imagined I’d actually meet one. I had figured you were just another prodigy like me.”

Harry tore himself away from the cluster and squinted at the easy going young woman. “Rune Savant, ma’am?”

“It’s a term for people who read and understand runes instinctively. Like a language. Muggles tend to use the term a bit differently. They say someone is an ‘idiot savant’. A person who has difficulties with nearly all aspects of life except for one in which they are basically at Merlin levels. For magicals, we use it to describe someone whose magic functions to give them insight and understanding into one particular subject but who has no extra specialties or difficulties outside the norm.

“Most of us have to study, memorize and work for years just to get the basic concept inherent here. I’m a prodigy, I work with runes at a much quicker and higher level than most, so it’s been easier for me, but I do still have to work at it. People like you, Harry, can simply look at rune or a cluster and see intrinsically what the point is as well as how they integrate into the rest of the structure. It’s an incredibly rare skill and if you end up going into cursebreaking or warding,” she shrugged, “you’d probably be able to skip nearly ten years worth of training not to mention always being in constant demand. Of course you don’t have to use your skills like that but it’s a good option for the future. For now, I just wanted you to know about it. Oh,” she gave a small scowl, “and stop with the ma’am thing. Hell I’m only 19. I’m closer to your age then most of my colleagues here! I’d prefer Babble, Babbling or Shiva in private, but if that’s uncomfortable for you then just stick with Professor.”

“Shiva?” Harry asked furrowing his brow. The others made sense, but Shiva didn’t seem to fit the pattern.

She smiled ruefully. “My first name’s Bathsheda, which is frankly just awful. Sheda is somewhat close to Shiva though and…well I kinda-sorta almost blew myself up twice in my Second Year.” She shrugged. “Shiva is a Hindu goddess of destruction. It stuck.”

“Err, isn’t it a little inappropriate to call your teacher by their nickname?” Harry asked tilting his
Probably,” Babbling said with a one armed shrug. “But like I said, I’m closer to your age then I am to any of the other Professors. I was hired right out of school and I’ve only been teaching for a year. I can still get away with stuff like that – especially since Dumbledore really doesn’t seem to care much. If he did he’d have to come down on Severus too and that’s certainly never going to happen.” She glowered for a moment before continuing in a softer voice. “I told you, Harry, I’m a prodigy and while I was careful as a kid, I still nearly killed myself twice before my 14th birthday. From what I understand you grew up Muggle so they’ll never be able to understand or help you with your experiments. I’d like to do that, even if only so that you have a sounding board to avoid hurting yourself. You can call me whatever you want but I want to make sure you don’t go through the same shit that I had to. Especially since you’re likely going to have it worse and be a lot more proactive with your meddling. I just liked it and was really good at it. You quite literally speak the language.”

“Here,” she flicked her wand and four books zoomed out of a drawer to land with a thump in a pile next to her. “You can borrow these for a few months but I’ll need them back by the end of the year. These books have some of the more advanced methods and I’ve bookmarked the rarer prime runes that you won’t see so often in other literature. This is stuff I usually give to my O.W.L. students so don’t be intimidated if it’s a little advanced or confusing at points. I can give you some private lessons as well though I do recommend that you take at least this first year to just poke around on your own. You know, see what you like both in rune terms and more other magical subjects. My door is always open, Harry. Don’t be afraid to come and ask for help or advice. About anything.”

Harry stared at Babbling in wonder and reverently ran a hand over the books she had given him. “I…I…thanks, Professor…”

“No problem, Harry,” she smiled down at him and hopped off the desk, “I may not be a savant but I do understand somewhat how it feels. And I really enjoy Ancient Runes. It’s not a subject too many find entertaining so it’s always fun to chat about them with those who do. And it’s even rarer to find people who actively experiment with new clusters. For now, just remember to be extremely careful with energizing anything that you are unsure about. Don’t get overconfident and reckless.”

“Yes…Shiva” Harry said hesitantly. He started to head out clutching his new books.

“Oh, and, Harry? Don’t give out all your secrets, even to me. You could probably make quite a comfy living off of marketing some of your future inventions.”

Harry walked out his head spinning. An adult could be…helpful. And supportive. That was…that was just…Harry shook his head, narrowed his eyes again, and kept walking. Better not to think about it. If adults could be helpful…then something was very rotten in Surrey.

Before dropping his new books off Harry stopped in to speak with Professor Flitwick. He could feel sweat start to bead on his back as he sat down in the office. “Hello, Professor. Before I say anything else I wanted to apologize for what happened in class last week.”

Flitwick’s brow furrowed before he let out a small chuckle. “Oh the rune shortcut? Don’t apologize for that, Mr. Potter. I was simply rather stunned. I didn’t even realize you could do something like that!”

“Oh,” Harry clutched his books a bit tighter to his chest.
“I see Bathsheba managed to tie you down long enough to give you some extra material. Keep up the excellent work, Harry, and please, if you ever need any assistance or advice let me know and I’ll be glad to help in any way I can. Your mother was quite the charms mistress and while I know you seem to be following a different path I’m sure that some charm work could help your research at some point! At least, I certainly hope so,” Flitwick said with a wide grin.

Harry finally smiled and let himself relax. “I’ll be sure to consult with you if I need it, Professor. Professor Babbling offered her help as well.”

“Yes, I imagine she would. We don’t usually get two rune prodigies in such short order!”

“Err, she said I was actually a savant, Sir...”

“Oh even better!” Flitwick practically squealed. He almost seemed to be vibrating. “I for one greatly look forward to what you come up with, Mr. Potter!”

“Well,” Harry said blushing and rubbing the back of his neck, “for the moment I’m trying not to get too complicated. Also Hermione is helping me with some of the Charms stuff I’ve had issues with so I probably don’t really need to come ask about any of that either.”

“Excellent, Miss Granger should be a prime tutor.”

“Professor, you mentioned my mum...I have a notebook of hers that she’d left saying you might be interested in. If you wanted to take a look...”

“I’d be delighted to,” the man gave a sad smile. “I am so sorry about their passing.”

“Did you know them well, Sir?” Harry asked quietly.

“Your mother, yes. Your father, not so much. We got along well enough and I always had a good laugh at the pranks he and his friends pulled, but your mother was my star student. She was always trying to keep young James in line and she complained to me quite often during her workup to Mastery classes later on about his antics.”

“Do you know if she ever changed her mind about my Aunt Petunia?”

“What do you mean, Mr. Potter?”

“Well one of her notes seemed very, very clear that my Aunt was to stay far away from me. Since I’m living with them I’m just curious about what happened.”

“I’m afraid she never mentioned that to me. We didn’t have much chance to talk though, after you were born. I know that Minerva, uh, Professor McGonagall that is, visited a few times afterwards. You could try asking her.”

“I will, Sir. Thanks,” Harry said.

“Now, about that Dueling Circuit,” Flitwick clapped his hands together and a wide grin split his face. “Would you be interested? It centers more on wands than runes unfortunately though if the incident a few days ago is any indication your basic tactical sense is more than keen enough to take you far.”

Harry bit his lip. He could do runes. Runes were easy. Coming up with defensive or offensive ones shouldn’t really be much of an issue with a bit of time. But...he wasn’t anything special with spells. Hermione or Neville or even Lavender could probably beat him with basic spells. “This is
still all pretty new to me, Professor. Perhaps I could just get a few spells from you throughout the year and then we can talk more about it next year?"

Flitwick sighed. “Damn, well can’t blame a man for trying,” he chuckled. “One year I’ll be able to claim that I trained the youngest World Champion, just you watch!” Harry laughed at that. “Of course, Mr. Potter, I’ll gladly teach some of the more basic spells and we can speak again about competitions whenever you feel more comfortable.”

“Thanks, Professor.”

“Not at all, not at all,” he said. “Now I believe it is nearly time for your detention so I won’t keep you any longer. Let’s have our first lesson say next Wednesday evening?”

“Sounds good, Sir. Can I bring Neville and Hermione as well?”

“Certainly.” Flitwick’s grin widened as he laughed again. “Who knows, maybe one of them will be interested in the Dueling Circuit...youngest Champion here I come!”

Harry walked into Professor McGonagall’s classroom with a nervous shuffle. “Hello, Professor.”

“Mr. Potter. Take a seat,” McGonagall finished grading the paper in front of her before directing her attention towards Harry. “Mr. Potter, let me preface this by saying that I am extremely glad none of you were injured last week. Thank you very much for going after Miss Granger. In the future however, should – Merlin forbid – another emergency comes up, please make every effort to inform the staff or the Prefects that there is an issue.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Now...” McGonagall’s pleading expression turned into a glare that made Harry wilt. “Just what were you thinking?! Keeping an item so volatile inside your pack!?! You could’ve been killed!”

“But, ma’am it wasn’t volatile,” he said, “it wouldn’t do anything unless activated and it couldn’t be activated except by sending power directly into the Primer rune.”

“And if a stray spell from a classmate had hit it during class? Or while walking down the corridor?”

Harry’s mouth went dry and his eyes widened. “I-I hadn’t thought about that...” Images of smoking Harry-chunks raining over the hallway flashed through his mind.

McGonagall sighed and rubbed her forehead. “Mr. Potter, I appreciate you attempting to keep others safe by not leaving the rune cluster lying around but you need better precautions than simply chucking dangerous items into your pack. I will not go so far as to forbid you from experimenting. Merlin knows how well that ever works out,” she muttered. “But, I will insist that you either leave your experiments locked in your trunk if unfinished or carried in a spell resistant lockbox.” Harry nodded. “I trust you’ve learned from this incident?” He nodded again. “Very well then. I see no reason to forbid you from playing in the upcoming Quidditch game,” McGonagall finished with the hint of a smile.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Harry said. “I was really looking forward to that.”

“I expect you to win, Mr. Potter. I want that trophy.” Harry just nodded again with a small smile finally cracking his face. “Now, you should get some homework done while I continue with these essays.”
“Um, Professor?” McGonagall lifted an eyebrow at him. “Professor Flitwick said that you had met with my parents a few times after they were born...”

“Ah.” McGonagall sighed and leaned back into her chair. “Yes, I did meet them occasionally. Your father was one of my best students despite his lackadaisical manner. After they entered hiding he had asked me to assist with improving his Transfiguration techniques for efficient use in battle. I was unable to see them often but it was more than most.”

Harry smiled. How different things could’ve been if not for a madman. “Do you know why my mum changed her mind about my Aunt Petunia?”

“What do you mean, Mr. Potter?”

“I found this a few months ago,” he said handing over the runes notebook and flipped to the page with Lily’s note to never let him go to the Dursleys. “The date was a few months before I was born and there’s nothing in that or any of the other notebooks I found about her forgiving my Aunt so I was just curious about what changed. I figure they had to have updated the will again after this at some point since I ended up with Aunt Petunia after all.”

McGonagall’s frown deepened as she read and reread the little note. “Damn you Albus,” she muttered barely loud enough for Harry to hear. Looking back up at Harry, McGonagall sighed. “I was unaware that the Potters’ had wills, Harry. None were ever executed after their passing. I do not know the full specifics regarding this, Harry. I can tell you that I was present for the incident that likely caused this entry. From what I remember, the dates do seem to line up. I am...not sure you would wish to hear this. It is not pleasant and it does not paint your...relatives in a decent light.”

“Professor, it’d be rather difficult to paint them in a darker color than I already do,” Harry said, a bit of the ice that Ronald Weasley had experienced creeping into his tone. “Please, tell me.”

“Very well,” McGonagall sagged, looking every bit her age. “I was training with James when your mother returned from speaking with Petunia and her husband. Lily was several weeks pregnant at this point and she was quite distraught. Before I left she told James and myself that Petunia and Vernon had...well they had recommended with rather strong language to terminate the pregnancy.”

“Let me guess, they said something like ‘we don’t need any more freaks in the world like you’ right?” Harry scoffed.

McGonagall’s mouth dropped open. “How could you know something like that?”

“Well they certainly say it to me enough.”

“They-they what?!”

“So if it was that bad, then my mum probably never forgave her before she died. So how the hell did I end up with the Dursleys?” Harry muttered.

“Albus said that it was the safest place for you...” McGonagall stared at the cabinet where she kept her firewhiskey. “I watched them for the evening before; I knew they weren’t very pleasant but surely they wouldn’t have...to a child?”

“You and Dumbledore left me there?!” Harry’s voice drained of all warmth broke through McGonagall’s shock. He stared at her and the breeze through her window picked up, scattering some of the papers on her desk. “Thank you for the talk, Professor. I think I’m just going to study now like you said.”
“No, that’s alright, Harry. I think this Detention has gone on long enough. You may return to your dorm.” Harry silently slipped his mother’s notebook back into his pack and left the room, the breeze dying down behind him. McGonagall stood to pour herself a shot of firewhiskey before turning to shut the window. Only then did she realize that it had been shut the entire time. With a strangled laugh, McGonagall poured herself a second glass of the liquor. “Damn you, Albus.”

Harry dropped down into the couch in the Common Room and immediately took out the books that Shiva had given him. He focused on the runes using the clusters and the prime elements to force the conversation he had just run from to the back of his mind. Runes always calmed him down.

Harry was so engrossed in the book and he didn’t even notice when Hermione sat next to him and laid a hand on his arm. “Harry? Are you alright?”

“Hermione!” Harry said with a small jump. “Jeez, warn a guy when you sneak up on him.”

“Harry...”

“I’m fine, Hermione.” Harry sighed, turning to smile at her. “Thanks for asking though.”

“You’re not fine,” she said barely loud enough for him to hear. “You look like I felt when I ran to that bathroom. Except angrier.”

“Really, I’m okay,” he responded, taking in her doubtful expression. “It’s just Professor McGonagall mentioned some things that got me pretty mad. I have these new runes that Shiva gave me now though so give me like ten minutes and I’ll be right as rain. Okay?”

Hermione’s expression warred between curiosity, concern and hurt. She finally just sighed and hugged him. “Okay. If you decide you want to talk about it just remember, I’m here for you, Harry.”


“I understand.” She gave him a small, watery smile and pulled back from the hug. “Now, who is this ‘Shiva’ person?”

Harry grimaced. “Yeah, I hadn’t meant to call her that here. Shiva is Professor Babbling.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Where in the blazes do you get Shiva from Babbling?”

“Apparently it was her nickname since her Second Year. She said she blew a few things up, including herself. I didn’t really get it, something about a Hindu goddess.”

“Of destruction,” Hermione squinted, “and her first name is Bathshedha which I suppose could be shortened to Sheda which makes it a hop, skip and a jump to Shiva but...” She twisted back to Harry before continuing, “It is not appropriate to call a teacher by her nickname.”

“I know,” Harry held up his hands to ward her off. “It’s only a private thing. She’s only a few years older than us and she made a good argument for it. And...well...I um...it’s just...” Harry’s voice dropped so low that Hermione had to lean in to hear him, “it’s just a lot easier to let her help me and to trust her if I can call her Shiva instead of Professor.”

Hermione sat in silence for a minute. She crossed her arms and studying Harry thinking over the last few minutes and slotting it into her growing picture of her friend. “You can trust her if she’s
your friend rather than an adult?” Hermione finally asked softly. Harry just nodded. She sighed and hugged him again. “Okay. I won’t bring it up again. I do expect you to tell me about where this is coming from in the future though, Harry. And try to make sure to at least refer to her as Babbling when others can hear.”

“Thanks, Hermione,” Harry said giving her a very small smile. “I promise.”

Hermione released him from her hug and opened her own book, settling in to read next to him.

“Well I sure hope that doesn’t happen every time I play a game!” Harry snorted after the Quidditch match had ended. His broom had been jerking around on its own so bad that he’d nearly been bucked off!

“Harry,” Hermione whispered from beside him. The Common Room was still celebrating their win so he had to strain to hear her. “We think you were being cursed.” Neville nodded from his other side.

“What?” Harry stared back and forth between the two of them.

“Neville saw Professor Snape muttering something and staring at you during the match when your broom started to go crazy.”

“You have to maintain eye contact for some persistent jinxes and curses,” Neville said, wringing his hands. “And not many things affect brooms beyond those types. Brooms have to be pretty resistant to that kind of stuff otherwise the professional games would be a joke.”

“So it’s not enough the bastard hates me, he’s actively trying to kill me now too? Just perfect,” Harry glared at the fireplace. He needed his rune notebook. “So why did he stop then? He almost had me, I was starting to lose my grip by the time I finally got control back.”

“Well...” Hermione said blushing while Neville’s face went beat red. “I um...may have set fire to his robes.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open and all thoughts of runes went out of his head. “You...you...you what?”

“I set fire to his robes,” she muttered. “Neville said we had to break his eye contact so we ran over. Neville knocked over Professor Quirrell – who was sitting next to Professor Snape – to try and distract him but I was already casting the Incendio charm.”

Harry goggled at her then at Neville. “You guys – you guys are amazing!” Hermione snapped her head up and stared at him and Neville went started shuffling a bit. “Neville, you knocked over a teacher to help me! And, Hermione! You set another’s robes on fire! You guys are the best friends someone could ask for!” Harry laughed out loud and pulled them both into a quick hug.

“Well, um, you’re welcome?” Hermione whimpered. She really didn’t feel like she should be praised for attacking a teacher. It was so wrong!

“No problem, Harry,” Neville said with a deep breath. “We look out for each other, right?”

“Yeah. We do,” Harry beamed at his two friends. “So do you think this was in retaliation for hearing about Nicolas Flamel and the three headed dog from Hagrid the other night?”

“How would Professor Snape even know that Hagrid mentioned that? I mean – completely
discounting the fact that we don’t even know who that Flamel man is – and that I would think the dragon egg Hagrid is hiding would be a far more important detail from overhearing that conversation – I can’t see why Professor Snape would try to kill you over hearing about a name.”

“Remember to breath, Hermione,” Harry said with a laugh. “And this is Hagrid we’re talking about. I love the man, but we all know he can’t keep secrets for more than five minutes.”

“Yeah, Hermione, I’m with Harry on this one,” Neville said. “Hagrid’s nice but he’s not a – how did Gran put it – not a ‘player of the game’. And what are we going to do about that dragon anyway? It’s going to hatch soon and then it’s going to grow up and then it’s either going to eat him or eat one of us!”

“I don’t suppose we can convince him to get rid of it, can we?” Hermione commented flopping back into her seat. “That man seriously needs someone to explain what the word dangerous mean. Honestly, three headed dogs, pet dragons, what’s next? Giant man eating spiders?”

“I actually could see the dog being cute,” Harry said. The others turned to stare at him. “What? If the thing wasn’t snarling and trying to eat me but was just slobbering on me and wagging its tail it could be cute.”

“It could squash you under its paw like a bug.” Neville said with his face completely blank.

“It could tear you literally into thirds.” Hermione added.

“Well I was just saying,” Harry grumbled. “Fang’s cute.”

“Fang is not the size of a small house,” Hermione commented dryly.

“Moving on!” Harry said holding his hands up in surrender. “Didn’t the twins say their one of their brothers worked with dragons? Could we ask them to contact him maybe?”

“They’d probably ask why,” Hermione said.

“Well, we might as well tell them,” Neville shrugged. “They’d probably be able to get the dragon out easier than we could anyway.”

“We’re going to help them if they agree.” Harry nodded. “Hagrid’s our friend. We can’t just let him get in trouble. Until then though let’s see if we can find anything about whoever Flamel is.”

The others nodded before the trio split up and headed off to bed.

Christmas had come to Hogwarts Castle. Harry hadn’t originally cared too much about it since both Neville and Hermione had headed home to spend the holidays with their families but his opinion changed when he woke up to see actual real presents by his bed. It was the first time anyone had gotten him anything besides worn out socks or maybe a fifty pence piece if he had been very good and very quiet. It was a shame his new friends weren’t here to share the experience with him...

Neville had given him a broom polishing kit while the twins had left him with a package of Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans – along with a note that promised they were untampered with. Hermione had given him a new etching kit that had a lot finer tools than the one he had been using. Shiva had sent him a small box with a note describing it as a spell resistant, tamper-proof, lockbox that was designed to hold volatile rune clusters. Unfortunately, Harry’s final two gifts had caused some problems in the dorm room.
“How am I supposed to know why your mother sent me a Weasley sweater, Ron?” Harry scowled. “I’ve never even met the woman!”

“Well obviously you did something! Those are family sweaters! You have no business wearing one!” the redhead yelled back snarling at Harry.

“Well it’s not my fault that your mother sent me something!”

“Well it’s certainly not mine!”

“You’re both right, it’s our fault Mum sent something,” Fred said walking into the room with a frown.

“At least, we think it’s our fault,” George agreed coming in behind his twin.

“What the bloody hell did you two do?!” Ron yelled turning his rage on his brothers.

“We may have mentioned in a letter that Harry had said he wasn’t expecting to get any presents.” Fred winced. “Sorry, mate. We didn’t think she’d end up making you a sweater because of it.”

“Honestly, it’s a little weird,” Harry said looking at the sweater. “But I really do appreciate the thought and it was a nice gesture. She could’ve sent a note with it too though. That would’ve probably made it less awkward.”

“Mum, can be a bit much sometimes,” George sighed.

“How are you okay with this?” Ron growled. “He’s not a Weasley!”

“Ron,” Fred said his voice amazingly serious for the twin, “just because Harry isn’t a Weasley doesn’t mean he isn’t a friend.”

“Lee Jordan is a friend and he doesn’t get sweaters!”

“Lee gets presents.” Fred shook his head as Ron just growled incoherently. “Thanks for the gift by the way, Harry.”

Harry nodded. He had sent them some Muggle fireworks with instructions on how to use them safely. “No problem guys. Just don’t set them off inside or we’ll have another Troll Incident. Thanks for the beans!”

“Enjoy them. So what’s your last gift?”

Harry opened up his final package and as the silvery material slipped down to the floor Ron gave an incoherent yell. “You got a bloody Invisibility Cloak?! Funny how the guy who supposedly doesn’t get any presents at all gets a bloody fortune right there!” he said scornfully.

“What’s an Invisibility Cloak?” Harry asked the twins ignoring Ron. He picked up the Cloak and started examining it closer. Granted the name was pretty self-explanatory but if Ron wanted to get angry for no reason he might as well poke the boy a bit and satisfy his curiosity at the same time.

“Blimey mate, they are amazing,” George breathed out. “Really expensive too. They make you invisible while you wear it. Darn useful for pranksters like us. Who’s it from?”

“Don’t know; all the note says is that it used to belong to my dad and that he left with whoever sent it when he died.”
Fred’s brow furrowed. “Well if they had it for 10 years you’d think they could have returned it before now.”

“Agreed.” Harry sighed. “At least they did give it back. I probably never would have known about it otherwise.”

“How come you aren’t jumping and down in joy?” Ron asked in disgust. “That thing is probably worth more than everything else combined.”

The three others in the room glared at Ron. “It’s nice to have a memento of my father, Ron, but it’s not like I need it. I could probably make a rune cluster that would do the same thing as this but better and it would be smaller and more portable too.”

“Well if you don’t want it then just give it to me.” Ron held out his hand for the Cloak. Harry snorted and before he could respond Fred and George moved to either side of Ron and grabbed an arm.

“Dear, Brother, I believe it is time for breakfast. Shall we be going?”

“We’ll see you later, Harry. Merry Christmas!”

Despite planning his new Ninja rune cluster, Harry did end up wandering the castle after dark with his father’s Cloak on during the break – more from curiosity than anything else. On one such nocturnal excursion he ended up finding an amazing mirror. A mirror that he had trouble walking away from. A mirror that showed him his family.

“Mirror of Erised?” Harry asked Professor Dumbledore. He didn’t want to look away from the Mirror but he did eventually turn to glance at the Headmaster.

“Yes, Harry. The Mirror shows one their heart’s deepest desire. It is quite the amazing artifact. It is also dangerous. Many have wasted away completely simply sitting and staring at it longing for that which they have never had instead of seeking to attain their desire in reality.”

“Yeah well unless you happen to know how to bring back the dead, my necklace, my mum’s notebooks my dad’s Cloak and this Mirror are the closest I’m ever going to get to my family so excuse me for spending some time here. Sir.” Harry twisted back around to the Mirror. He hadn’t forgotten what McGonagall had said about why he was with the people his mother had hated.

“My boy, no magic can bring back the dead.” Dumbledore sighed. He reached forward to lay a hand on Harry’s shoulder. Harry scowled and threw it off.

“I know that, Professor. I’m not an idiot. Maybe I could come up with a cluster that would give a nice imitation of life but it wouldn’t be real.” Harry was still staring at the Mirror so he missed the flash of fear and desire that passed through Dumbledore’s eyes. “Did you have my dad’s Cloak?”

“I did.”

Harry ground his teeth trying very hard not to lash out. “Why wait a decade to return it then? Sir.”

“I knew your relatives would not appreciate such a treasure. I simply wished to ensure its safety until you rejoined us.” Harry huffed, conceding the old man had a point there.

“Well thank you for making sure I got it back. I would have preferred it as soon as I got to Hogwarts but thanks for not just keeping it, Professor.” Dumbledore gave a slight nod. “You’re
“Taking the Mirror away aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“Fine...” Harry slowly climbed to his feet and touched the Mirror’s surface with a sad smile. “Bye, Mum. Bye Dad. Bye guys.” He turned and walked past Dumbledore. “Thank you for giving me some time with them, Professor.”

“Have a pleasant evening, Harry.” Dumbledore watched Harry walk away and turned to the Mirror himself. An image of Harry – cloaked completely in black with yellow eyes wide open – stared lifelessly back at him from the phantom’s position slump on the floor. A phantom Dumbledore was standing over the boy holding a rune cluster that he held to Ariana’s chest. Dumbledore started crying as the phantom version of his sister slowly started to breathe again.

When Neville and Hermione returned from their holidays Harry showed them the Invisibility Cloak as well as his initial plans for the Ninja cluster that would be an improved version of it incorporating sound dampening effects as well. Both were extremely impressed.

“Did you have any luck in the Restricted Section searching for Flamel?” Hermione asked after correctly guessing he’d have checked the book out from under the Cloak.

“No, none of them had anything.” Harry shook his head. He knew he remembered the name from somewhere but it just kept eluding him.

“My Gran said it didn’t ring any bells,” Neville said. “She said he might be from out of the country.”

“Well that would certainly make a bit more sense I suppose,” Hermione said. She sighed. “That would also make this far more difficult.”

“It’s a shame he didn’t do anything famous. Then he would’ve been in more books even if he was – ” Neville cut off as Harry slapped his forehead. “Harry?”

“I am such an idiot!”

Hermione shook her head and snorted. “Harry, you are not an idiot. You are a savant. It’s pretty much the exact opposite of idiot in the magical world.”

“Exactly, Hermione!” Harry yelled looking between the two of them. “A savant!”

“Um, Harry,” Neville said, “you’re going to have to explain it better than that.”

“Nicolas Flamel. Is. A. Savant! An alchemical savant!”

“He’s what?” Neville asked frowning. Hermione’s eyes widened and she nearly jumped out of her seat murmuring how she’d be right back.

“He’s an alchemical savant, Nev! After my first talk with Shiva I got a book out from the library on previous magical savants and he was in there as one from the 1300s.” Hermione came flying back down the stairs with a giant tome in her arms. “I think he’s on a chocolate frog card too. He was a French savant who specialized in alchemy though he also may have helped found one of the schools there or at least make it into more a world renowned one.”

“Beauxbatons, yes,” Hermione said as she dropped the giant book onto the table in front of the two
boys. “I checked this out for a bit of light reading –”


“Yes. Anyway look! ‘Nicolas Flamel – along with his wife Perenelle – is famous for being the only known inventor of the Philosopher’s Stone.’ Do you know what this means?”

“Philosopher’s Stone?” Harry asked.

“Honestly, Harry!” Hermione huffed. “You remember that he helped with Beauxbatons but not that he created the Philosopher’s Stone? It’s an incredibly complex alchemical creation that can supposedly turn lead into gold as well as create the Elixir of Life!”

“Oh.”

“Bit of understatement there, Harry,” Neville chuckled. “I don’t suppose you could make a rune cluster to do that huh.”

“Well, the lead to gold thing, probably.” The other two stared at Harry while he was lost in the intertwining rune structures testing and discarding possible combinations. “Yeah. I could do that. Not the Elixir thing though. I’d need at least four different prime runes that I don’t think even exist to do that. Direct manipulation of a Soul or variant rune most likely.”

Hermione’s mouth closed with a snap. “Yes, well. Impossible things and eternal riches aside, at least now we know what – and most likely why – Professor Snape is looking to steal it.”

“Yeah,” Harry nodded. “Now we just need proof.”
Chapter 3: Thieves, Traps and Talks

“It makes no sense that the Headmaster’s office is hidden away behind a locked gargoyle!” Harry yelled fists clenched. “How the bloody hell are people supposed to reach him in an emergency if they can’t even knock on his stupid door?”

“Language, Harry,” Hermione absently chastised her friend. She tugged on his arm to pull him away from the recalcitrant stone guardian. “Though I do have to agree – Magicals seem rather short on common sense at times don’t they? Come on. Neville you too. There’s no point arguing with this thing. Let’s go try talking to Professor McGonagall instead.”

“Good idea, Hermione, she’ll definitely help.” Neville said nodding with confidence.

“Well, at least she’ll probably be able to get in to talk to Dumbledore,” Harry grumbled. He stopped fighting Hermione, casting a dark glance back at the gargoyle before turning and quickly stalking ahead of the other two. Their hurried pace had them knocking on McGonagall’s office within only a few minutes.

The Deputy Headmistress blinked in surprise at the trio of students standing outside her door as she answered the knock door. “Yes? Mr.’s Potter and Longbottom, Miss Granger? It is quite close to curfew. How can I help you at this time of evening?”

“Professor we – ” Hermione began but was cut off as Harry started speaking over her.

“Snape is going to try to steal the Philosopher’s Stone!”

McGonagall blinked again. She turned to stare at each student in turn before twisting to Hermione. “Miss Granger, you…you believe this as well?”

“I know it seems farfetched, Professor,” Hermione said nodding, “but we are almost certain of it. Most of our evidence is hearsay and extrapolation but it is the only conclusion that makes any sense.”

“I do not know how you three found out about the Stone,” McGonagall sighed. “I assure you however that it is perfectly safe. Several different members of the staff have added their own unique protections and no one save the Headmaster has knowledge of the entire scheme. There is no need to worry.”

Harry gave a low growl. ‘Ignored yet again. How typical,’ he thought.

“Please, Professor,” Neville said quietly, “if we could at least speak with the Headmaster…”

“The Headmaster was called away to an emergency meeting at the Ministry. He left via broom and is unreachable for the next several hours.” She frowned, thinking. ‘Could it be possible? Would someone really be daring enough to attempt a theft in the middle of Hogwarts with dozens of adult wizards and witches right there? No, no one was that daring! Not for over a decade.’

“But – ”

“Please, I understand your concerns but again, I assure you, the Stone is perfectly safe in Hogwarts and that Professor Snape has no intention to attempt a theft. If you still feel this strongly about it
then we can discuss this in the morning when the Headmaster returns. For now, please return to your dormitory before curfew.”

“But – ” Hermione said.

“Hermione, forget it,” Harry muttered. He grabbed her arm and started pulling her away. “Let’s just go.” Neville narrowed his eyes at Harry before nodding and hurrying along to follow.

“Alright, Harry, what gives?” Neville asked the other boy after they had moved far enough away to avoid being overheard.

“Yes, it’s not like you to just give up like that, Harry,” Hermione added with her brow drawn in worry.

“There’s no way she’s going to believe us. I’m telling Shiva instead. Should’ve gone to her first,” Harry said hurrying towards the Ancient Runes classroom.

“You really think she’ll believe us when Professor McGonagall won’t?” Neville asked with a slight quaver to his voice. McGonagall had evidently sapped at least part of his confidence.

“Worth a try. But yeah I do.” Harry pulled up outside his mentor’s door and quickly knocked.

“One sec!” came the muffled reply from beyond the threshold. “Just give me a – ” Shiva huffed pulling open the door, “minute. Harry?” The young teacher was dressed in a too large t-shirt and had on a tousled pair of pajama pants. “You know what time it is? What’s going on you three?”

“Shiva we need your help!” Harry said with his fists clenched.

Shiva frowned and glared at him. “Harry…”

He waved the rebuke off impatiently. “I know, I know, private! So not important at the moment! We’ve already been to McGonagall – she ignored us! And Dumbledore is gone which means that Snape’s going to try to steal it tonight!”

The older woman opened her mouth to say something before floundering and trying again.

“Maybe you three better come inside.” She sighed. The trio walking in and collapsed into the nearby chairs as Shiva sat down in front of them with her arms crossed. “Let’s try this again. Start from the beginning this time, yeah?”

Harry took a deep breath before leaning forward and starting to speak. “Snape has been acting shifty all year, more so than just his grudge against me. We’ve noticed a lot of little things and once we know that the Philosopher’s Stone is hidden in the school underneath Fluffy.”

“Fluffy?” Shiva asked, her arms spreading wide for more information.

“Hagrid’s Cerberus,” Neville supplied.

“Why does it not surprise me he named his monster dog, Fluffy…” Shiva muttered. “Alright, go on.”

“I like Hagrid,” Harry continued, “he’s really, really nice. But everyone knows he’s not exactly all that good at keeping a secret, and we just found out that he accidentally mentioned to someone shady how to get past Fluffy, and with the attempt earlier this year with the troll, and now with Dumbledore gone for the night the thief has got to be planning to try again tonight!”
“Breathe, Harry,” Hermione muttered from beside him.

Shiva frowned and stared between all three of them. “And you told this to Professor McGonagall as well?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, ma’am. But she just said that the Stone was safe and told us to go back to bed and discuss it in the morning.”

“Well, I was assured that the protections were sufficient when I offered to add some wards to it... but this does sound a bit suspicious.” Harry’s heart fluttered a bit. Would she really help them? “Okay. Here’s what we’re going to do. I’ll go get Dumbledore and we’ll check the defenses to make sure that everything is still secure while you three –”

“I thought Dumbledore was gone?” Hermione asked.

“He is, but he should be arriving at the Ministry by the time I get to the ward line to Apparate over there. We should be able to get back within a half hour tops.” Shiva replied. “Now I want you three to go back to Gryffindor Common Room. Wait for me there, after Dumbledore and I check it out, I’ll come at let you know what happened okay?”

“I…” Harry floundered. She was helping yes, but...shouldn’t someone be watching the door until they get back?

“Harry…” the teacher shot Harry a glare. He wilted.

“Okay,” he finished with a grunt.

“Great. Now go on you guys, I’m just going to grab a pair of jeans and head out. If I’m not up to talk to you in two hours then go to McGonagall again, and this time don’t let her out of your sight until she comes with reinforcements, yeah?”

“We can do that,” Neville nodded.

“Yeah, sure. Come on guys. Thanks, Shiva,” Harry said as he led the others back out into the corridor.

Harry stopped on the landing to the third floor twisting to look down the corridor.

“Harry?” Hermione said from behind him. She pulled on his sleeve. “We have to keep going. It’s past curfew now and we don’t want to get caught by Filch even if Professor Babbling gave us permission.” She shuddered a little. That caretaker was almost as bad as Professor Snape.

“What if he’s already there?” Harry asked so low the other two could barely hear him.

“What?” Hermione asked.

“What if Snape is already trying to steal the Stone right now?” Harry asked again louder. He was still staring down the empty hallway in front of him. “What if by the time Shiva and Dumbledore get back it’s too late?”

“I think we should listen to what Professional Babbling said to do…”

“He might be right, Hermione,” Neville said. He stepped up beside Harry. “Maybe we could just go and guard the door? You know, just to be safe?”
Hermione’s mouth snapped shut. “But – we’re – oh for Heaven’s sake! Fine!” The girl threw her hands up in the air and glared at the two boys. “If either of you get me expelled I will kill you, dig up your grave to spit on your corpse and eat your soul. You understand that, yes?” She got two fearful, hurried nods in reply. “Excellent. Well let’s not dally then.” She stalked off leading the way to the door with Fluffy and the Stone beyond. “Stupid boys,” she muttered.

When the trio reached the door Hermione stopped so suddenly that Harry nearly ran into her back. “Ugh oh…” he said as he noticed the door was slightly open.

“He’s probably still down there,” Neville said, a small quaver creeping into his voice. “Should we stay up here and try to slow him down when he comes back up or should we try to run to McGonagall?”

Hermione shook her head. “She’s not likely to believe us quickly enough to make a difference. Not after earlier.”

“We go down after him,” Harry declared squaring his shoulders.

“We what?” Neville squeaked.

“Harry,” Hermione stopped, steeled herself and started again. “Harry, do you have any more of your…volatile…runes on you?” He shook his head. “Damn. Well, we’ll just have to figure it out as we go. Come on, boys.” She strode towards the door without looking back.

Neville turned to stare at Harry mouthing a silent “wow” at him. Harry just snorted and turned to follow his friend.

Fluffy was loudly snoring inside the threshold. An enchanted harp strumming along in the corner of the room appeared to be the piece of music that had lulled the beast. Harry pointed towards the trap door laying open near the great dog’s paw and the trio carefully walked towards it.

“Looks pretty far…” Neville whispered.

“There’s likely a cushioning charm or something at the bottom,” Hermione whispered back. “Are we sure we want to do this?”

Harry moved up to the edge. “I’ll go first. Hermione, you follow behind me and Neville you’re after her.” And then he jumped into the darkness of the trapdoor.

Harry had just enough time to worry about whether or not there really was a cushioning charm before he landed on something soft and squishy. A few seconds later he heard soft thuds as Hermione and Neville also landed near him. “Well,” Harry said, “that wasn’t so bad.”

“Shite!” Neville suddenly yelled causing Harry to jerk his head around towards the sound. “It’s Devil’s Snare!”

Harry squinted into the darkness before squeezing the spongy material under him. His eyes widened and he gasped in shock as he realized just what his herbology inclined friend had said. Devil’s Snare. A nasty carnivorous plant that enjoyed strangling its victims and slowly digesting the corpses. “What do we do?!”

“Fire! It doesn’t like fire!” Neville yelled back.

“But we don’t have any wood!” Hermione moaned from nearby.
“Are you a witch or not?!” Harry screamed at her. He jerked his wand towards the plant curling around his legs and yelled out, “Incendio!” A small flame burst from his wand followed shortly by two others from his friends nearby. The reaction from the plant was nearly immediate as it uncoiled everything around the three and pulled back towards the wall. Harry, Neville and Hermione hurriedly ran to the door into the next room pulling it closed behind them and letting the flames die out. This room was thankfully perfectly well lit.

“Well,” Hermione puffed, “that was certainly interesting. Good job, Neville.”

“ ‘We don’t have any wood.’ That’s a good one, Hermione,” Harry chuckled.

The girl glowered at him. “Well excuse me for panicking a little. It’s the first time I’ve been almost strangled by a plant.”

“At least we didn’t land on a troll,” Neville snorted beside her.

“Ugh, let’s just keep going. Anybody see a way out of this room?” Hermione glanced around the large room they had found themselves in. It was completely empty with the exception of a large set of doors opposite where they had come in and a flock of small flying creatures above them. “You don’t think those things are going to attack us if we step out into the center do you?”

“Those – They’re keys…” Harry said looking up at the flying items in shock.

“Keys?” Neville squinted upwards. “Wow. Guess you’re the Seeker for a reason. I guess we have to pick the right key then.”

“There are brooms here.” Hermione pointed to the side where two brooms lay against the wall hidden near the door in.

“I got this,” Harry said striding over to the brooms. “You guys go wait by the door out in case they attack and we have to run.” His friends nodded and hurried over. When they were in position, Harry swung a leg over the broom and pushed into the air.

Nearly immediately the flying keys turned towards Harry and started trying to dive bomb the boy. Harry put his Quidditch practice to the test and dodged, ducked, dived and dipped between the attacking keys until he managed to pick out the one with a bent wing reaching out to pluck it from the air just like a Snitch. Barreling towards the door with his prize Harry threw the key to Neville before performing some aerial acrobatics to dodge the attacking keys and follow his friends through the opening. As soon as he skimmed through, Hermione and Neville slammed the door shut again behind him and a staccato series of thumps sounded through the wood accompanied by tips of keys poking through to their side.

“I don’t like how we’ve almost died twice in five minutes,” Hermione said with a shudder. Harry just shrugged and let out a nervous chuckle. “Did you expect it to be easy?”

Neville just shook his head and sighed. “You know sometimes I hate you guys. So, chess this time?” he said jerking his head to what lay ahead of them.

“Looks that way.” Harry nodded. “Anyone have a preference for the King and Queen?”

Hermione walked over towards the board. “Harry you should be the King. You’re the one who really has to make it across all this.” Before Harry could even begin to protest Hermione held up a hand. “You’re the one who can quickly talk to Professor Babbling, Harry. So, ergo, you’re the important one here.”
“You guys are important too, Hermione!” Harry scowled.

“All the same, you’re the King, Harry. Now stop arguing!” Harry glared at Hermione as she finished yelling at him, but nodded agreement all the same. She really could be bossy when she felt like it!

“Hermione, you be the Queen,” Neville said. “I was always better with Knights anyway.”

The three pieces the friends had claimed bowed and walked to the side of board while the group took the empty places. Using input from Hermione and Neville, Harry directed the chess pieces in their game. Considering how awful at chess he was it was definitely a good thing that Neville stepped up and took charge of the strategy of the movements. Within less than ten minutes the other side had been checkmated and the trio was walking through the open doors into the next room.

“Ugh, someone mentioned another troll?” Harry asked holding his hand over his nose.

“This one looks even bigger than the last,” Neville said in a soft voice. Thankfully this troll was quite dead seeing as a large section of its head was caved in.

Harry honestly couldn’t bring himself to care much this time. It didn’t help his compassion that Hermione was wrapped tightly around his arm, shaking and making quiet whimpering noises.

“Come on, guys. We’ve got to be catching up.”

As soon as the trio passed over the threshold into the next room, flames sprang up covering both the way in and the way out. One set of flames burned purple and the other was jet black.

“Well,” Neville said swallowing nervously and staring between the two walls of fire, “this could be a problem.”

“Look,” Hermione unwrapped herself from Harry’s arm and strode over to a small table in the middle of the room. “Harry, Neville, come here. This looks like a riddle of some sort.”

“Hermione, is this a logic puzzle?” Harry asked looking over her shoulder at a note placed in front of the series of potion bottles.

“I believe so,” Hermione commented absently reading over the list of clues several times. “Give me a minute.”

Neville ran a hand through his hair. “That’s a really good idea actually…we wizards aren’t exactly known for our logical abilities are we?”

“Not from what I’ve seen,” Harry muttered. His eyes widened and he looked at Neville stricken. “S-sorry, Neville! I, um, I didn’t – ”

“It’s fine, Harry. I’ve been hanging around you two long enough to figure out that much at least,” his friend replied with a sad chuckle. “I’m trying to work on it.”

“Got it!” Hermione crowed. She pointed out several of the bottles. “This bottle will take us back the way we came. These three are poison. These two are the wine, and this one,” she held up the smallest bottle, “will take us forward.”

“It looks like only one dose…” Harry said taking the bottle from Hermione.

“Well considering none of the bottles appear to have been used already, they likely refill after
She paused and chewed her lip. “Or…Professor Snape used a flame freezing charm.”

“Okay.” Harry nodded. “You two take the one the other one and head back to meet up with Shiva and Dumbledore. I’ll keep going and try to delay Snape.”

“Maybe we should all just wait here,” Neville said with a frown. “I don’t like the idea of you going ahead alone.”

Hermione’s lips were quivering and her eyes were watering. “There’s nothing we can say that will make you wait is t-there?” Harry shook his head with his mouth set in thin line. Hermione threw her arms around him and crushed him in a huge hug. “You come back you h-hear me! You come back!”

“I’ll do my best, Hermione,” Harry said squeezing her back. “Nev, make sure she stays safe.”

“I will, Harry.” Neville clapped a hand onto Harry’s back and gently pulled Hermione off him. “Be careful, mate.” Harry nodded in reply, tipped back the potion bottle and strode through the flames into the next room.

“Professor Quirrell?” Harry blurted out incredulously as he saw the man standing in the middle of the final room. Quirrell was scowling at a mirror set up dead center in the small room and barely even took notice of Harry entering behind him.

“Potter. I really shouldn’t be surprised about this. You and your little friends have been rather annoying this year,” Quirrell sneered, all traces of the usual stuttering gone from his voice.

“But – but – no! This isn’t right, Snape is the one who’s trying to steal the Stone!”

“Yes, he really does seem to fit the mold doesn’t he? Who would ever suspect poor traumatized Quirrell when the sneering bat is making himself such a tempting target? I would’ve probably thanked him had he not made this so difficult!”

Harry had his wand on Quirrell but he had no idea what he should be doing at this point. While Professor Flitwick had taught him the basics of the disarming and stunning spell Harry still wasn’t particularly good with them and he knew he would stand no chance against a fully qualified adult wizard. ‘Shiva is coming soon,’ Harry thought. ‘All you have to do is stall!’

“But…Snape was trying to kill me at the Quidditch game!” Harry managed to yell out.

“Oh no, I was the one trying to kill you, boy,” Quirrell laughed. The sound was hollow and it sent chills down Harry’s spine. “Severus was trying to save you. Muttering his annoying little counter-curse. He certainly hates you just like your father before you. I don’t expect he wishes you dead though. Or at the very least he wishes to do it himself.”

‘Neville knocked Quirrell over to try and distract Snape.’ Harry’s mind was spinning. He cast about trying to find something else, anything else, something to keep him distracted.

“What about the troll? Did you let that in the castle too then?”

“Oh course. I even managed to place some bait near that foolish little girl. Shame the Muggleborn survived. I surely would’ve had more than enough time to retrieve the Stone before this addition had she been a good little girl and died like she was supposed to.”
Harry’s vision tinged with red and his hand clenched on his wand. This…man…had deliberately tried to kill Hermione! Harry’s rage built and with a roar he yelled out, “Expelliarmus! Stupefy!” Two jets of red light burst from Harry’s wand in quick succession. Quirrell twirled as Harry first opened his mouth and erected a shield. His face jerked in surprise as Harry’s second spell shattered the shield but he flicked his wand at the student before Harry could take advantage of the opening. Ropes wrapped around him and Harry snarled incoherently at Quirrell.

“Let…me…speak with…the boy,” a hissing voice sounded throughout the small room. Harry stopped struggling and felt his scar start to burn.

“But, Master, you – ”

“Silence, Quirinus!” Quirrell immediately shut his mouth and turned his back to Harry. With a muttered, “Yes, Master,” the man began unwrapping his turban. As the cloth fell away, Harry recoiled in horror and pain as his scar beat a drumbeat of pain through his skull.

Protruding from the back of Quirrell’s head was a face from a nightmare. Narrow, red eyes. Slits for a nose, a too wide mouth. It was vaguely snake-like and a name drifted up through Harry’s memory. “Voldemort,” he breathed out.

“Very good…boy. I admit…you are…stronger than I had…expected.”

“How is this…?”

“My servant has failed me…one too many times…he needed to be watched…more closely…after his failure at…Gringotts. Too long have I…remained weak…thanks to you and…your mother. But now…I will regain my body. Quirinus…use him.”

“Come here, boy!” Quirrell shouted flicking his wand at Harry. Harry flew towards Quirrell and stopped directly in front of the mirror. “Tell me what you see!”

‘Lie! Lie!’ Harry thought desperately as he looked into the mirror. A quick glance up and he found the familiar markings of the Mirror of Erised stenciled into the frame. ‘How does this help? I couldn’t get the Stone from this thing even if I wanted to!’ Harry hadn’t even finished the thought before his gaze from drawn back down to the Mirror by a quick movement. His phantom self in the reflection was unbound and holding up a hand. That hand was clenched around a blood red stone that almost seemed to pulse from within. The Phantom-Harry smiled at him and dropped his hand into his pocket before vanishing. Harry felt a weight settle against his leg as the images of his dead family again floated into view in the reflection.

“Well! What do you see, Potter!”

“I see…my family,” Harry whispered. “I see my mum and my dad and sisters and grandparents.”

“Too…easy. He…lies!” Voldemort hissed.

“Tell me where the Stone is, Potter!” Quirrell yelled and flicked him around to stare at the older man again.

“Come…Potter. Tell me where it is. Do not be like…your mother,” Voldemort breathed out. “I gave her the chance…to stand aside. All I wanted…was you. I would have spared her then. I will spare you now. Just tell me…where is the Stone!”

“Bullshite! I’ll never tell you!”
“He has it on him! Seize him, Quirinus!”

Quirrell lunged at Harry. As soon as the man’s hands touched Harry’s skin, the ropes dissolved, an acrid burning smell spilt into the air and both Harry and Quirrell screamed in pain. Quirrell fell back, holding up his hands in shock as his skin was burnt black. Harry collapsed to his knees and dropped his wand but, thankfully his own skin was unmarred. “Master, I cannot touch him!” Quirrell whimpered.

“Then kill him you fool and take the Stone from his corpse!”

“No!” Harry snarled at Quirrell and Voldemort. He didn’t have time to lunge for his wand – it had rolled too far away. Instead he jumped forward and wrapped his hands around Quirrell’s throat. Both screamed in pain and this time Voldemort’s shriek joined in as well. Harry felt Quirrell’s skin under his hands boil and his scar felt like it was almost going to split in two but he held on. He held on as the man beneath him flailed. He held on as his vision darkened.

The last thing Harry heard as his hands finally slackened were three distinct cries of, “HARRY!”

Harry awoke to bright sunlight streaming in through a nearby window and a sterile smell. Groaning he shifted in the bed he was lying in noticing most of the decor was a stark white. Fumbling for his glasses from the table beside him, Harry finally figured out he was in the hospital wing and stretched out on one of the beds near the corner. Hermione was sleeping curled up on a chair nearby and there were a pile of cards and snacks on the nearby table. Harry smiled down at his friend but before he could try to move Madam Pomfrey, the Mediwitch, bustled out and shook her head at him.

“Well it’s good to see you awake, Mr. Potter. How are you feeling?”

“Well, ma’am. I certainly have no intention of doing that again.”

“Good,” Pomfrey took out her wand and began casting several diagnostic charms over his body. “You appear well enough off that you may leave after the Headmaster comes to speak with you. Take this potion for your headache.” She nodded at him and, leaving a potion by his bed, walked off back to her office.

Harry drank the potion with a grimace at the horrid taste. He had twisted to wake Hermione when there was a quiet throat clearing behind him. Turning back, Harry saw Professor Dumbledore taking a seat beside his bed. “Professor.”

“Professor, what happened? The last thing I remember is burning Professor Quirrell and blacking
“Well, Harry, it appears that dear Quirinus was…unable to abide your touch. You see, your mother’s sacrifice left a lingering…protection…within your blood. Her pure love saved you as a child, that leftover mark on your forehead from Voldemort’s curse is proof of that. Her love watches over you even now. Someone like Professor Quirrell, whose heart was filled with hate and envy and who allowed himself to be possessed by Voldemort, was unable to withstand your touch. That is why he was injured so badly.”

Harry frowned. That was wrong. His mother’s love may have helped jumpstart a ritual or something but the ‘mark’ on his forehead was a Protection rune. It was definitely not a remnant of a curse gone wrong. It was some sort of focus of what his mother had accomplished when he was a baby. Harry may not fully understand what she had done but he had recognized the rune component right off. Professor Dumbledore was over a hundred years old and supposedly well versed in many arcane branches of magic…there was no way he had missed something like that. Harry shook his head. He could worry about that later; there were more important questions for the moment.

“So, did I kill him?”

Dumbledore sighed and laid a hand on Harry’s arm. “What happened to Professor Quirrell was not your fault, my boy. He killed himself when he allowed Voldemort to possess him. His body lasted but a few moments when the wraith deserted him.”

“So Voldemort got away then?” Harry scowled. Of course the monster got away. If he could survive being killed once then he could probably survive being semi-killed.

“Yes. Voldemort is no kinder to his servants than to his enemies. He abandoned Quirinus as soon as he was no longer a viable host.”

“And the Stone, Sir?” Harry asked with a sigh. “How did I get it out? What happened to it after?”

“Ah, a clever bit of enchanted if I do say so myself,” Dumbledore said, the twinkle back in his eyes. “Only someone who wished to find the Stone but not use it could retrieve it. I daresay not many would fit that description and certainly not Professor Quirrell or Voldemort.”

“And after?”

“I have spoken with Nicolas and he has agreed that the Stone had to be destroyed. The danger of another attempt was simply too great. Nicolas and his wife Perenelle have enough Elixir remaining to set their affairs in order before the end.”

“That doesn’t seem very fair,” Harry frowned.

“Life, unfortunately, is rarely fair, my boy.” Dumbledore sighed and the twinkle left his eyes before he looked back up with a soft smile. “Now, do you have any other questions, Harry?”

Harry considered for a moment. “Voldemort said that Snape hated my father while they were in school together…”

“Professor Snape, Harry,” Dumbledore corrected. “And yes, your father and Severus severely disliked each other. Then, to make matters even worse your father saved Severus’ life. I do not believe he could ever forgive James for that event.”

Harry frowned. That made no sense whatsoever. “Can you at least tell me why he hates me
then?"

“I am sure you over exaggerate, Harry. Professor Snape may not favor you, but he certainly does not hate you.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” Harry muttered with a snort.

“Yes, well, I believe I should be off, Harry. It was good to – ”

“Wait! Professor Dumbledore, I need to know one more thing.” The older man nodded down at Harry. “Voldemort said that he was only there that night for me. That he gave my mother a chance to leave and let him have me. Why was he coming after me? Why did he care about a baby?”

A grimace crossed Dumbledore’s face but he hid it quickly and merely sighed. “Alas, my boy, I cannot answer that question at the moment. You are far too young, far too innocent for me to answer that. I know you do not like to hear this, but when you are older I will inform you what he meant by that.”

Harry scowled at the man. “I’ve lived with the Dursleys for ten years, Professor. I haven’t been innocent since I was five.”

Dumbledore simply gave him a patronizing smile and stared at him with that damnable twinkle. “Be that as it may, I will not burden you with this. Have pleasant day, Harry.”

As Dumbledore left the hospital wing Harry snorted and flopped back into his pillow. “Typical adult,” he muttered. Continuing in a slightly louder voice, “You can stop pretending now, Hermione.”

Barely a second later a bushy brown bullet had engulfed him in a hug so tight he could barely breathe. “I – was – so – scared!” The girl sobbed into his chest. “You – were – screaming – and – you’ve – been – out – for – two – days!”

“Shh,” Harry patted her head and pushed her back slightly, trying to both get some air and to look her in the eyes. “I’m fine now. See?” Hermione’s head bobbed slowly. “Did you guys meet Shiva and Dumbledore on the way out?”

“No,” Hermione shook her head wiping her eyes and finally calming enough that she wasn’t choking out sobs. “No, Neville and I waited in the potion room. We were hoping the vial would refill and then one of us was going to go after you. But after a few minutes Professor Babbling ran into the room with Dumbledore on her heels. When she saw us she started cursing…well cursing you really…and she launched a flame freezing charm at the other doorway. She ran through it with the rest of us following and that’s when we saw you – we saw you – ” She gave another sob before taking a deep breath and continuing. “You collapsed and Professor Babbling and Professor Dumbledore took you back up here. Neville and the twins along with the other members of the Quidditch team have been in a few times. Some of the others from the tower stopped by as well. I think Lavender was the one who left the hair charms book…I might actually borrow that one if you don’t mind.”

Harry chuckled at that. Hermione may be babbling but at least she wasn’t crying anymore. “I don’t think you need it but sure, go ahead. Your hair is part of what makes you, you after all.” Hermione’s eyes widened as Harry rubbed the back of his neck. “So, what do you think the odds are that the Flamels pop up again in a few decades after this whole thing is over?” Harry asked with a smirk.
Hermione snorted. “I don’t know if Professor Dumbledore actually believes he truly did destroy the Stone or if he just wanted you to believe that, but I would certainly never take that bet. You don’t survive for six centuries without having some backups and dealing with attempted thieves every now and then.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Harry laughed.

“Harry,” Hermione sat back, suddenly very hesitant. “About what you said about your family…”

“My relatives,” Harry stated tonelessly. “The Dursleys are my relatives. Not my family.”

“Yes, your…relatives…”

“I don’t really want to talk about it, Hermione. Please,” he pleaded, “please, just…let it go?”

“I…” Hermione frowned but nodded jerkily. “Okay. But we really are going to have to talk about it at some point, Harry.”

“Just not now.” Harry turned to look at the tower of sweets nearby. “Soo…you want to help me eat some of these?”

“Minerva,” Shiva said as she slipped into her colleague’s office, “we need to talk.”

“Shiva,” McGonagall greeted her young friend. “Please take a seat. How can I help you?”

“It’s about Harry.” Shiva said crossing her arms and sinking into the seat.

“Ah. I suppose I should have expected this. Tea?”

“I think this is more of a whiskey conversation, Min.”

Minerva grimaced but moved to her special cabinet. “Have I really acted that terribly?”

“I think it’s more that a lot of little things have piled up but…yeah, Min. You kinda screwed the pooch on this one.” Shiva sighed and accepted the glass, taking a sip. “Look, have you noticed that I seem to be one of the only members of the faculty he comes to talk with?”

“He did speak with Filius and me shortly after Halloween…” Minerva trailed off as her brow furrowed trying to think of any other time the boy had stopped in to speak with the staff outside of classes. “And I know that Harry has taken several after class instructions on basic dueling spells…”

“But that’s it. Min,” Shiva leaned forward and stared into McGonagall’s eyes, “he doesn’t trust any of you. He barely trusts me and I think half that is because I practically beat him over the head to think of me as someone his age instead of a teacher.”

The older woman narrowed her eyes at Shiva. “That is – ”

“But that’s it. Min,” Shiva leaned forward and stared into McGonagall’s eyes, “he doesn’t trust any of you. He barely trusts me and I think half that is because I practically beat him over the head to think of me as someone his age instead of a teacher.”

The older woman narrowed her eyes at Shiva. “That is – ”

“Not appropriate. Yeah, yeah I know. I don’t care, Min! That kid could’ve blown up half a classroom because he didn’t have anyone to tell him the dangers of what he was working on for fun. You were there when I almost killed Hestia and myself! I was working on something downright tame in comparison! If I have to lose some professional respect to make sure the same thing doesn’t happen to Harry then I damn well will!” Shiva downed her drink and poured herself another glass. “But that’s not what I’m here to talk about. I got that handled. He’s consulting me on stuff and I already got him some of the basic equipment to safeguard any experiments months
ago. I’m here to talk about his trust issues.” She blew out a breath of smoke from the firewhiskey and leaned back. “I think he was a bit better about it before his talk with you after Halloween sent his trust into a downward spiral. And from some flippant comments throughout the year...I’m guessing whatever you two talked about had to do with his relatives?”

“His family?” Minerva rubbed her chin. “Yes. I believe I mentioned that Albus and I were the ones who brought him to his family.”

Shiva scowled. “Relatives, Min. Not family. Relatives. Harry is always exceedingly careful to correct anyone who says differently. I don’t know what is going on at the Dursleys but whatever it is it’s not good. And he blames you and Dumbledore for it.”

Minerva’s mouth dropped open. She tried to say something several times before giving up and tossing back another glass. “Just how bad do you think it is?”

“I don’t know. I won’t push him on it because if I do I’ll lose him. My money right now is on Granger eventually finding out first and then coming to one of us. I don’t think they are actively beating him but I imagine they might as well be. I already spoke with Albus about moving him to a wizarding family or perhaps letting him stay with the Grangers for a few weeks, but he was…rather insistent that Harry stay where he is.” Shiva practically growled. “I swear, if that boy comes back with any injuries I am going to tear that old man a new hole.”

“Yes. I’ll likely end up joining you at that. I was assured placing him with the Dursleys was for his protection and that James and Lily would not have objected but now…and supposedly their wills specified not to leave him with those people...” Minerva sighed. “I imagine I did not help things with my reactions to Harry, Hermione and Neville’s concerns. Nor that said concerns proved to be perfectly correct.”

Shiva shook her head. “No, you really didn’t. I talked to him before coming up here. Apparently once they found the door open they didn’t head back to the dorms like I told them to because they were worried that Snape would come back up before Dumbledore and I got back. I asked him why they didn’t go find you again and Harry said that they had already spoken with you and didn’t think you’d believe them if they tried again.”

Minerva threw back another glass of whiskey. “I left them with the impression I would ignore their concerns?”

“Seems that way, yeah. Apparently even our resident genius, Hermione, thought so.”

Minerva held her head in her hands. “Perhaps I have been juggling too much lately...Tell me, Shiva, do you think I can still fix this? The last thing I want is to have forever lost those three due to shortsightedness and stupidity.”

Shiva gave her colleague a small grin and light chuckle. “I wouldn’t be here otherwise, Min. Give him the summer to cool off. When he gets back, apologize, don’t brush off any opinions or criticisms and you should be well on the way to mending fences. I wouldn’t worry about Hermione too much. She’ll likely come faster than Harry. It’s not like you’re Snape here!” Both teachers laughed at that comment. “And Neville is fine. I think. I haven’t had much of any interaction with him honestly. The biggest advice I can give is try not to appear to favor Dumbledore over Harry.”

“But, it’s Albus,” Minerva said in a pleading voice. “I realize he may have made mistakes but surely Harry cannot have lost that much – ”
Shiva held up a hand and shook her head. “Min, he caught the old man in another half truth or outright lie earlier. He mentioned it to me to make sure and I have to say it does raise some questions...”

Minerva flinched back. “What?!”

“His scar.” Minerva just furrowed her brow and Shiva sighed. “It’s some variant form of a defense or protection rune. I’ve never seen something quite like it, but once Harry pointed it out I couldn’t not see it. It looks like it’s tied into something but I have no clue what. He said that Dumbledore implied the scar was a leftover from the killing curse...Look I’ll be the first to admit the old man is a fantastic wizard and is on the right side but something about this whole Potter situation just smells funny you know?”

“I don’t believe we have enough information to truly judge this matter. I think we will just have to wait and see where things lead,” Minerva said rubbing her temples with one hand.

“Agreed. But just so we’re clear, if it comes down to battle lines at some point in the future...I’m most likely going to be with Harry. That kid is looking more and more like the precocious little brother I always wanted. I’m not going abandon him for some nebulous Greater Good or other such bullshite.”

“I can drink to that, Shiva. I can drink to that.” Holding out their drinks, the two friends clinked glasses and moved onto less troublesome topics.

“Promise you’ll write, Harry?” Neville asked as Platform Nine and Three-Quarters came into view from their window.

“I promise, mate,” Harry replied with a smile. “Make sure you do the same.”

“Harry, you’re sure you’re going to be alright?” Hermione asked staring hard at him and taking in the clothes that were far too large for him.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” Harry replied with an evil grin. “Just because I know that I can’t do magic or activate runes at the Dursleys doesn’t mean they know that.”

Neville laughed. “Harry, I think you’ve spent too much time with the twins!”

Hermione didn’t appear convinced though. “Well remember, my parents are Muggles so if you need us to stop by or anything just send a letter or give me a call.”

“I promise, Hermione.” The train puttered to a stop and the whistle blew. “I’m going to miss you guys. It was nice having someone to hang out with.”

“I know what you mean,” Neville said quietly. “But hey, it’s only a few months till we can all meet up again! And I’ll ask Gran about you guys coming over for a day or two at some point. The Longbottom manor can get kinda empty sometimes.”

“Sounds like a plan!” Harry stood up and clapped Neville on the back. He grinned then turned to Hermione and accepted her bear hug. “Have a great summer, Hermione.”

“You too, Harry, Neville.”

The trio smiled at each other and stepped off the train headed back towards their lives outside of Hogwarts.
This had probably been the second worst summer that Harry could ever remember. Prior coming returning to the Dursleys, he had thought he had friends in Hermione and Neville. He had thought he had an ally in Shiva. He had thought that things would be different.

He had been stupid.

As soon as Harry had entered Number 4 Privet Drive he had been thrown against the wall, nearly breaking his arm. Harry had been expecting that and immediately brought out his \textit{Slow Burn}. It was a rune stone that didn’t do much of anything beyond keep a low level \textit{lumos} going for an hour or so. It was basically just a fancy candle. But the Dursleys didn’t know that...so Harry had activated it on the train hoping to intimidate his Aunt, Uncle and cousin into leaving him alone. A bit of misdirection and with any luck Harry wouldn’t have to worry about his relatives at all for most of the summer.

Unfortunately, he had greatly underestimated Aunt Petunia. Upon seeing the \textit{Slow Burn} she just sneered at him. “Idiot, boy, my sister went to that \textit{school} as well. I know perfectly well you can’t do any of that \textit{freakishness} here!” Harry’s eyes had widened as Vernon’s smile practically split his face. Dudley cackled with glee behind him. The beating that followed left him sore for nearly two weeks and Harry had been let out of his room only for bathroom breaks and two meals a day.

Even that wouldn’t have been so bad except that he had received no communication from any of his ‘friends’ at all. Not a letter, not a phone call, not a visit. He couldn’t even send Hedwig to ask what he had done wrong since Uncle Vernon had padlocked his familiar’s cage. Harry was given little enough to eat himself and he had to split that with Hedwig to ensure his poor owl could last until school started again. Having friends and then being stripped of them, yet again, had made this summer practically unbearable.

Harry’s only retreat had been speaking to Hedwig and coming up with new experiments and applications for his rune stones. Whenever he got bored he tried branching out a bit into attempting to craft some ward schemes. While he couldn’t actually test any of them, several designs were complete and awaiting etching. The \textit{Ninja} stone had taken a while but it looked like it should work. The only problem was it didn’t seem like it would play well with too many others so his father’s Cloak would likely still be more useful until he could figure out a workaround. He’d come up with a \textit{Proximity Ping} as well that would let him know whenever anyone not in the original bubble radius entered. A \textit{Lockpick} stone was easy to set up and it seemed to have the potential to work on things specifically designed to block \textit{Alohomora} as well since his rune stone incorporated a \textit{Suppression} rune twined into the \textit{Spell} rune. The improved barrier that he had originally thought of the first time he met Shiva was making progress but was still way too complicated to attempt.

Harry had considered playing around with more offensive designs especially after coming face to face with Voldemort but ended up deciding that was something better left for next year. A simple \textit{Blastor Concussor}, and \textit{Disintegrator} would have to do for the moment. Building up rune stones designed to explode had too much risk without a bit of oversight. At least, at first.

July, 31\textsuperscript{st} rolled around and Harry quietly sang to Hedwig and himself. Uncle Vernon was in the middle of a large business dinner so he figured he’d likely be missing dinner. Getting a soft hoot and gentle nip from his friend, Harry turned to head to bed early.
And found a small creature with very large ears, a long nose and bandaged hands standing on his bed. The creature was sporting several bruises and seemed to be dressed in a pillowcase with holes cut out for the head and arms. Harry’s mouth dropped open and he just stared. ‘And I thought my life sucked…’

“Err, hello?” Harry blinked in consternation at the strange little creature standing before him.

The creature burst into tears and cradled its head. “The Great Harry Potter speaks to Dobby! Dobby is not worthy, Dobby is –”

“Quiet!” Harry hissed frantically moving forward to attempt to shut the creature – Dobby – up. “Please, you have to be quieter! My Aunt and Uncle will hear you!”

“Dobby – is – sorry!” Dobby said between sobs at least attempting to lower his volume. “But yous is the – Great Harry Potter Sir. And Dobby is – just a lowly House Elf. Dobby – cannot believe the – Great Harry Potter would wish – to speak with him!”

Harry turned to Hedwig in confusion who just chuffed at him. “Glad you’re amused. Traitor.” Turning back to Dobby, Harry hesitantly reached out and clasped the little thing’s shoulder. It just made the sobbing worse. “Look, Dobby? Look, Dobby, first off, it’s just Harry. Not The Great Harry Potter Sir. Just Harry. Second, not to be rude or anything but why are you in this house?”

Dobby stopped crying almost instantly and turned sorrow filled eyes on Harry. “Dobby comes to give Harry Potter a message. Harry Potter must not return to Hogwarts.”

Harry’s compassion for the poor creature in front of him dried up and ice crept into his voice. “And who told you tell me that?”

Dobby cringed and held up his hands to cover his face. “Dobby comes by himself. Master would not want Dobby to tell Harry Potter. Bad Master would want to ensure Harry Potter is present. Dobby must shut his head in the cabinet for coming but Dobby will do it! Dobby will protect the Great Harry Potter!”

Harry froze for several long moments running over the house elf’s words. His anger retreated somewhat as he realized some of what the little fellow was implying. “Dobby…” Harry cut off as he watched Dobby grab a lamp from the bedside table and swing it towards his head. Harry’s mouth dropped open and he caught the lamp before it could impact the house elf. “Jeez, why did you do that?!”

“Dobby is bad elf! Elves should never refer to Master like that!” He tried to grab the lamp again so Harry dropped the lamp and held Dobby’s arms instead until the creature calmed back down.

“Okay, Dobby, let’s try this again,” Harry said, cautiously letting the house elf’s arms go. “I’m guessing you can’t tell me who your master is?” Dobby shook his head so hard that his ears flapped. “Can I try to guess?” Dobby considered for a minute before shrugging. “Okay, well is it someone I go to school with?” Dobby paused before half nodding and half shaking his head. “So it’s the family of someone I go to school with then.” Dobby nodded. “Gryffindor? Ravenclaw? Hufflepuff? Slytherin? Okay, Slytherin. Now is it –” Harry was forced to break off again as Dobby ran headfirst towards the wall. Harry just barely managed to grab the little guy before he knocked himself out. “Okay, guess we’re done with that line of questioning. How about a different tack. Why can’t I go back to Hogwarts?”

“The Great Harry Potter Sir must not go back! It is not safe at Hogwarts now!”
“Yeah, kinda figured that out already, Dobby.”

“No, Harry Potter does not understand. Hogwarts will not be safe! Master will make certain!”

Harry swore under his breath. ‘Oh perfect, someone is going to try something again this year. And now I won’t even have my friends to help me deal with – ’ Harry’s thoughts ground to halt as he turned to slowly stare at Dobby. The little house elf had succeeded in slamming his arm into the drawer while Harry was distracted but Harry couldn’t quite bring himself to care as much as he had a moment ago. “Dobby…have you been, perhaps, trying to…dissuade me already from returning?”

Dobby froze. “Dobby thought…Dobby thought if Harry Potter felt his friends had abandoned him he would not want to return the castle…”

Harry carefully got up from his seat on the bed and narrowed his eyes at the house elf. “Dobby, have my friends written me any letters?”

Dobby reached behind him and pulled out a stack of letters in his shaking hand. “Dobby will give the Great Harry Potter is letters if he agrees to not go back to Hogwarts this term.”

“Give me my letters, Dobby.” Harry took a single step forward. He tried very hard not to snarl but he couldn’t quite keep the ice out of his voice. “Now.”

“Harry Potter must promise. Hogwarts is not safe.”

“Dobby I refuse to stay in this house any longer than is absolutely necessary. I have already survived a murderous Professor and psychopathic possessing ghost. The only friends I have are at Hogwarts. The only adult I trust is at Hogwarts. I am. Going. Back. NOW GIVE ME MY LETTERS!”

“If the Great Harry Potter refuses to stay, Dobby will make him.” The house elf snapped his fingers and Harry’s door burst open. Harry sprang to grab him but Dobby sprinted out and bounded down the stairs. Harry flung himself to his feet and ran after the house elf. He caught up just outside the kitchen watching with wide eyes as Dobby stared at the cake on the table outside the door. The door with Uncle Vernon’s business party still going on beyond.

“Dobby, please…”

“Dobby is sorry Harry Potter. But Harry Potter cannot go back to Hogwarts.” Harry lunged for Dobby but only managed to grab the letters in the house elf’s hand before Dobby twisted away, snapped his fingers again and the cake lunged through the door. With a quiet pop, Dobby vanished and Harry was left lying on the floor looking at the astonished faces of Vernon, Petunia and three guests. All covered with cake.

It had been three days since the Great Cake Incident. Harry had received a notice about being expelled at the next underage magic usage. ‘If I had know I had a freebie I’d have used one of my Firestarter stones. Maybe if the house burned down we’d move somewhere that people would listen to me.’ Uncle Vernon hadn’t beaten Harry but he almost wished the man had. At least then his stomach wouldn’t hurt so much from lack of food. And Hedwig wouldn’t be starving then either. His friend was hurting obviously but at least she wasn’t dying yet. That was something right?

As night fell a low rumbling came from outside his window. It sounded almost like a car was sitting there on the second floor. As interesting as that might have been Harry couldn’t bring
himself to move enough to go look. There really just wasn’t any point in it.

“Is this the one?”

“Neville said 4 Privet Drive and this was the only 4 Privet Drive and that map Hermione sent.”

Harry frowned. Fred and George? Was he delusional now? They had given him water though the cat flap so he really shouldn’t be hearing things…

A gentle knocking sounded from the window just barely loud enough to hear over the rumbling engine. Unable to resist the curiosity, Harry headed over to the window only to stare in shock at Fred’s grinning face looking back at him. Hanging out the side of a car window. A car floating next to his window. On the second floor.

“Hiya, Harry!”


“We got worried when you didn’t respond to any of our letters. Neville and Hermione were going to come too but we told them we had it handled. Are these really bars? Who bars a guy’s window?”

“My Aunt and Uncle,” Harry responded. “Can you really get me out?”

“Sure. Just loop this,” Fred handed a piece of rope through the bars, “around those bars there. Cool. Okay, George, gun it!” With a thumbs up George turned the wheel and accelerated away from the house. The bars on Harry’s window tore off with a loud crunch and Harry glanced towards the wall to Dudley’s room and the master bedroom beyond. How had they managed to sleep through that racket? George drifted the car back over to the now open portal. “Come on, Harry, get in!”

“Take Hedwig!” Harry said hurriedly handing off his owl to Fred. “My trunk is locked up under the stairs! It has my dad’s cloak, my mother’s notebooks and my picture book of my parents in it. I can’t leave it!”

“Hang on then.” Fred opened the car door and easily hopped inside. “Downstairs you say?”

“Yeah but the door is locked,” Harry said again glancing towards the wall. He scowled. It didn’t matter if they woke up. He would not leave without his things.

“Locks aren’t a problem.” Fred had brought out a small set of tool and knelt next to the door.

“Are those lockpicks?” Harry gaped at Fred. Out of all the people he had come to know…this really shouldn’t surprise him.

“Yup. Sometimes it’s better to do things without magic. Always good to be prepared!” The lock popped and Fred tip toed out into the hall following Harry’s outstretched arm towards the stairs. In another minute they had the cupboard opened up and Harry had grabbed his trunk.

“Harry…why is there a mattress down here?”

“Used to be my room until I got my letter and Uncle Vernon got paranoid,” Harry muttered. “Can you give me a hand with this?” Fred had to shake himself to stop from staring between Harry and the tiny cupboard. With a scowl the older boy grabbed the trunk and lifted it away from Harry.
“I got it. Come on. Back upstairs and into the car.”

Harry had just jumped into the car and was pulling his trunk in when Uncle Vernon’s voice screamed out. “WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS THAT?! WHAT ARE YOU FREAKS DOING?!?”

“Budge over, Harry!” Fred yelled with a wide grin. He jumped out the window and grabbed the car just as Vernon scrambled over towards them. “George!”

“Hang on back there!” Fred’s twin yelled as he gunned the engine. “Oh, and happy birthday, Harry!” Fred, George, Harry and Hedwig soared away from Number 4 Privet Drive leaving a purple Vernon Dursley shouting at the sky.

An hour or so later, George landed the flying Ford Anglia in driveway to the twins’ house, the Burrow. The car had barely touched down before a screaming woman flew out of the front door yelling obscenities at the twins. Her hair was a flaming mop of red and Harry was willing to bet whatever money he owned that this was the infamous Weasley matron, Molly.

“How dare you! No idea where you were! Car gone! The clock shifted to mortal peril! Do you have any idea—” She cut off mid-rant as Harry stepped out of the backseat lugging his trunk. “Oh hello, Harry, dear. It’s a pleasure to have you here. I’m not angry with you, dear. Just my sons. Why don’t you head inside? I’ll have breakfast on the table in a minute!” The twins had carefully been edging towards the house when Molly turned back to them and continued her screaming.

Harry had opened his mouth to try and defend them but stopped at George’s gesture. A large hand landed on Harry’s shoulder causing him to jump and turn around reaching for his wand before sheepishly realizing that it was still locked in his trunk. The man behind him was tall, with a ponytail, pierced ear and flaming red hair to match the rest of the Weasley’s he’d seen.

“Hey, Harry,” he said, “I’m Bill. The oldest of the Weasley brood. There’s not much point in trying to head off one of mum’s rants. We’ll talk to her and get the twins out of trouble later. Come on inside.”

Harry just nodded and followed Bill into the house with a sorrowful glance back at Fred and George. Surprisingly, George gave him a covert wink and smile as he caught his eye.

“Food?” Bill asked gesturing flicking his wand towards the table which was quickly covered by a plate a flying bacon, biscuits and eggs.

Harry could feel his mouth watering and he just nodded before running to the table and diving in. “Thanks! I haven’t eaten since that stupid party thanks to that crazy elf.”

“Crazy elf?” Bill asked plopping down into the seat across from Harry and swiping a slice of bacon.

“Yeah, some house elf decided the best way to try and save my life was to get my relatives even madder than usual. And of course I get blamed for it as usual.” Harry paused mid bite and squinted at Bill. “Do you know how to submit a complaint to the Improper Use of Magic Department by any chance?”

“Why?” Bill was starting to feel like he was having a conversation with the twins for as much sense as this was making.
“Like I said, I got blamed for the magic. Apparently I get a freebie but I want whatever the elf did off my record so I can still keep my freebie in case I actually need to use it,” Harry said gesturing with his fork like it made perfect sense.

“Err, we can ask my dad. He works in the Ministry so he should at least be able to get a letter to the right people if not take you in to talk to them…”

“Sweet! I love you guys!” Harry dived back into his meal completely ignoring Bill’s facepalm.

“Now I see why you get along with Fred and George and not Ron.”

“Well that’s easy,” Harry chuckled, “the twins are funny and as long as you can get them to keep to some limits, very nice. Ron’s a prat who can’t seem to understand why I get annoyed with people treating me like a celebrity for something I didn’t even do.”

“I’ll…talk to my brother,” Bill said with a sigh. “I’m not looking to take sides in this thing. I’m not home nearly enough to deal with that sort of drama.”

“George said you worked with Gringotts in Egypt right?”

“Yeah. I had a job in the area for an old friend and figured I’d stick around for an extra day or two for you to show up so I could talk to you.”

Harry frowned at that. “Why did you want to talk to me?”

“Well,” Bill shrugged, “my friend mentioned you had a talent for runes so I just wanted to see for myself how far that extended. I’m a Curse Breaker, we deal with runes a lot in that job.”

Harry started to speak before stopping and laughing. “Let me guess, Shiva?”

Bill chuckled too. “Got it in one. The girl was a year behind me but she knew her stuff almost better than I did! Said you were a bit of a savant with runes.” Harry nodded. “Sweet! Would you mind taking a look at this etching? My team in Egypt ran across it a few days ago and while I’m pretty sure we’ve got the dangerous stuff figured out I wanted a second opinion was I was here.”

“You do know I just turned 12?” Harry said raising his eyebrows.

“Harry, I grew up with Fred and George. They were making better potions than Mum at 12 and she’s studied it for years. And you come highly recommended,” he winked. “Like I said, just a second opinion.”

“You’re scouting me…” Harry said with a bit of pride creeping into his voice.

Bill laughed. “Maybe a little.”

Harry just shrugged, pushed his plate to the side and held out his hand. The twins walked into the kitchen and sat down as he took the paper from their brother. “Fair warning, I’m probably going to end up opening a shop at some point.”

Fred and George shared a look and silent grin while Bill just shrugged. “I don’t doubt it. Can’t blame a guy for trying though.”

Molly ambled into the kitchen with a huff. “Bill, stop bothering, Harry. He’s a guest.” Bill rolled his eyes at his mother.

“Hmm,” Harry muttered staring at the rune scheme. “This is nasty. That’s some sort of explosion...
trigger, this part looks like it would turn the target inside out before cooking them, this section is a super powered cutting charm – way more than necessary for even an entrenched target really, and oh, this one…” Harry’s mouth dropped open. “Seriously? Soul absorption? I didn’t even think that was possible!”

“Man, Shiva did not oversell you at all,” Bill whistled. Molly behind him was gaping like a fish. “That was the part we were worried about too. That specific cluster doesn’t look like it worked quite as designed thankfully. If it had, Edgar wouldn’t be around to buy us all drinks, but it’s right nasty that’s for sure. Thanks for the read, Harry.”

“Harry, you put that down this instant!” Molly had finally regained her power of speech. “Children have no business reading horrid things like that! Bill! What were you thinking bringing that into this house! I raised you better than that!”

“Mum…” Bill sighed as the twins snickered beside him.

Before Molly could say anything else, a young redheaded girl came in from off the stairs. She yawned and stretched before glancing around. The girl started towards Bill with a big smile on her face before she caught sight of Harry and froze. Her mouth snapped closed and with a squeak the girl took off like a shot back up the stairs, nightdress flaring behind her.

“Uhh…” Harry uttered staring in confusion at the blank space where the girl had retreated.

“Honestly, that girl!” Molly snorted. “Harry, why don’t you grab your things and take them upstairs. You’ll be sharing with Ron.”

Harry, Fred and George all frowned immediately at that. “Mum, that’s not such a good idea,” Fred said.

“No offense, Mrs. Weasley, but I would really prefer not to. Ron and I…don’t exactly get along,” Harry sighed.

“Nonsense, Ron is a sweet boy. There’s no reason you two can’t get along perfectly well.” Molly turned back to the counter obviously considering the discussion over.

“No reason beyond his jealousy and tendency to insult practically everything Harry likes,” George muttered.

“Ma’am, I really – ” the rest of Harry’s statement was cut off as the boy in question came into the room and plopped down grabbing a handful of biscuit and throwing it into his mouth.

Ron was halfway through his bite when he noticed Harry sitting at the table and his visage darkened immediately. “What the hell is he doing here?”

“The twins,” Molly glared at the two for a moment, “decided not to wait for your father and myself and left last night to bring Harry back.”

“Rescue,” Fred said with a scowl. “Rescue, not bring.”

“Boys, please – ”

“There were bars on the window, Mum. And locks on his door and trunk. And apparently the cupboard was – ”

“Thanks for the support, Fred,” Harry said cutting him off. “I appreciate the jailbreak.” Fred and
George turned to each other then Harry and nodded slightly before falling quiet. “Anyway, Mrs. Weasley, Bill said your husband could take me to talk to someone in the Ministry? I need to get an Underage Magic Warning off my record.”

“Oh, so the Boy-Who-Lived is going to throw around his fame like usual,” Ron drawled around a bite of bacon.

Bill facepalmed again. “It is far too early to deal with this. I’m going to go say goodbye to Ginny and head out. Fred, George, try not to burn down the house. Ron, stop talking with your mouth full. Mum, stop arguing with me about work. Someone tell Perce I said hi and Dad that I love him.” He walked up the stairs leaving Molly shaking her head, the twins with a grin and Ron glaring.

“Harry, dear, Arthur can take you into work with him tomorrow morning if you want,” Harry nodded at Molly’s reply. It was better than nothing and much more than he had expected from the woman the way the previous conversation had been going. “I still think you should sleep with Ron…” Ron’s snarl answered that comment well enough, “but I suppose if Percy is alright with it you can share his room instead.”

It ended up being almost a week before Harry could get to the Ministry to speak with Mafalda Hopkirk. It was also a supremely unhelpful meeting. Harry argued with the annoying woman for nearly an hour repeatedly stating that he had done no magic over the summer and that if he had it would have been a hell of a lot flashier than a simple hover charm. Hopkirk then brought out her records proving that there had been a hover charm performed at Number 4 Privet Drive. Harry had repeatedly stated that a house elf had been the one performing the charm. Hopkirk replied that such an excuse was ridiculous since no wizards lived nearby so obviously no house elf would be near Privet Drive either. Harry offered to take a test or give an oath or drink a potion to prove it hadn’t been him and Hopkirk had scoffed, saying that there was no way she could get authorization for something like that with such a simple clear-cut case. Things quickly descended into a shouting match from there. After Harry demanded to see her boss, Hopkirk threw him out in a huff saying that Director Bones was far too busy to be bothered by a foolish boy’s temper tantrum.

Needless to say, Harry’s first experience with the Ministry of Magic had been decidedly unpleasant.

The shopping trip to Diagon Alley did not go much better. By the time the Weasley clan and Harry were getting ready to head to the Alley, Harry was practically ready to curse someone. It was a hell of a lot of fun to spend more time with the twins – especially once he started asking them about why they were supposedly so good with potions and yet got such bad grades – but that was basically the only high point of staying with the Weasleys. Whenever Ron wasn’t avoiding Harry, he was insulting him. Ginny seemed pleasant enough but could barely speak whenever he was nearby. Molly kept trying to send him on chores that either had him paired with Ron or Ginny and the woman had never once apologized to Fred and George for screaming at them for rescuing Harry. Percy barely came down from his room but at least he let Harry bunk with him. Even Arthur got to be annoying. He was very nice man and Harry really did like him, but asking about the purpose of rubber duck had been the last straw. There was being curious and then there was being annoying.

To Mr. Weasley’s credit, when Harry asked him to slow down a bit, the man did listen. Harry also recommended he start up a correspondence with either Hermione, or the senior Grangers. While Harry had been raised Muggle he had also been extremely sheltered, so they would be better able
to answer Arthur’s questions and explain the concepts.

It only took one trip through the Floo network for Harry to decide he hated wizarding travel. Besides being left nauseous, covered in soot and with skinned knees he had apparently wound up in the entirely wrong location! Growling, Harry got to his feet, asked for directions back to Diagon Alley – telling the owner explicitly he preferred to walk – and started limping back in the direction he hoped to meet back up with the others. Harry had barely taken ten steps out of the shop though when he ran into Hagrid who was nice enough to escort him the rest of the way. Harry could’ve done without the lecture about Knockturn Alley being no place for children though. It wasn’t like he meant to go there.

“Harry!” Harry was still glowering at his feet so he barely had time to look up let alone brace for the brown bullet flying at him before being knocked back into Hagrid by the force of Hermione’s hug. “Oh I’ve missed you so much! How has your summer been? How were the Weasleys? I hope Ron didn’t give you too hard a time – or that the twins didn’t prank you too badly while you were there. Did you really shout at a Ministry employee, Harry? You shouldn’t have done that! Can you tell about the house elf? He sounded very interesting from your letter. Oh, did you end up getting the birthday card I sent? I know you said that you got your letters back but I wasn’t sure – I’m so glad I decided to save the actual gift to give you in person!” Hermione was turning ever so slightly blue by the end of her rambling. Harry chuckled, his spirits lifting immediately at seeing his friend again. He blushed slightly as he realized he had even grown to miss the hugs she gave him.

“Hermione,” Harry said with a grin, “you really need to stop to breathe sometimes. I’ll tell you all about everything as we walk. How are you, Nev?” Harry asked turning his head to smile over at his other friend who was shaking his head off to the side near the relieved Weasleys.

“I’m good, Harry. Nice to see you again. Sorry, that the twins had to rescue you. Gran was going to go herself but they apparently beat us to it.” Hermione’s face fell at that and she started to pull away from Harry.

“Don’t worry about it, Nev, Hermione,” Harry said squeezing her back before she finally let go. Hermione’s face seemed to lighten a bit as he hugged her back and her frown disappeared completely when he continued, “I got to meet the rest of the Weasleys because of it – well besides Charlie. Bill apparently knows Shiva by the way.”

“Oh?” Hermione asked. “Did they go to school together?”

“Year apart I think he said. Let’s get our books then we can talk more.” A familiar gleam entered Hermione’s eyes as Harry said that. He smiled getting just the reaction he had hoped for.

“Eh hem,” a well built man in a jeans and Metallica t-shirt cleared his throat looking at Hermione with a raised eyebrow. The woman standing next to him was obviously trying very hard to hold in her laughter and failing.

Hermione gasped and covered her mouth. “Oh my gosh, I forgot! Harry, these are my parents, Richard and Emma Granger.”

“Sir, ma’am,” Harry said stepping forward and holding out his hand, “it’s nice to meet you.”

Richard shook Harry’s hand and gave into his own soft laughter. “It’s nice to finally meet the boy our daughter gushes about in her letters, Harry.” Harry glanced over at his friend who had turned nearly as red as the Weasley’s hair and was doing her best to completely avoid his gaze. “And it’s Richard, none of this, sir stuff. You saved my daughter’s life, I think that deserves a first name
“Err…”

“It’s nice to meet you, Harry,” Emma wrapped Harry into a hug similar to the ones her daughter gave though thankfully much shorter so he didn’t have to start squirming away. “It’s also nice to see someone else trying to get her to slow down sometimes.”

“Yes, well, if you two are done embarrassing me,” Hermione huffed, hands on her hips, “perhaps we could go into the bookstore finally?”

Neville smirked coming up beside his friends. “Merlin forbid we keep Hermione from her books.” Leading the way into Flourish and Blotts Neville started browsing through the Herbology section while Hermione followed Harry into the Ancient Runes part.

“Ugh can you believe that guy,” Harry jerked a thumb over his shoulder at a blond haired wizard with a gleaming smile signing books in the middle of the store. His hair looked like it had more gel than Draco Malfoy’s and his smile had to have been charmed to look so perfect. The comments streaming from the man sounded so totally fake they made Harry want to gag.

“He is a bit dreamy looking isn’t he?” Hermione mused turning to stare.

Harry’s mouth dropped open and he worked it soundlessly a few times with nothing coming out. “Dreamy? Him?”

Hermione snapped her head back to Harry and gasped. “I – um – I just meant – well – oh never mind! You look much better Harry!” She clapped her hands over her mouth again and Harry heard a snicker from further up the aisle where Richard had stopped to browse. “That’s not what I meant either! Oh for heaven’s sake! Stop distracting me, Harry!”

A now thoroughly confused Harry shook his head, grabbed some new books and tried to buy his things without getting noticed. He almost succeeded in making it to the register before the bleached author noticed him. Sadly it was not meant to be.

“Harry Potter! As I live and breathe. Come to buy my books, eh? Of course you would! After all, we famous wizards have to stick together, that we do.” Lockhart threw and arm around Harry’s shoulder and twisted so that several camera flashes nearly blinded Harry. “Little did you know though, that not only are you going to get a full free, autographed copy of my books,” Harry grimaced and tried to twist away from contact with the man, “you are also getting…ME! I’ll take this opportunity to announce my acceptance of the newly opened Defense Against The Dark Arts position at Hogwarts. Don’t worry, Harry, you’ll be able to grill me on all the best methods of prepping for interviews and grooming tips while I’m there! I’m so looking forward to imparting all my knowledge to you and the other youths.” Harry felt like throwing up. With a final twist he pulled away from Lockhart and practically ran to the front of the store only stopping as he came across Ginny talking with a tiny blond girl wearing what looked like radishes as earrings.

“Ginny, you need a set of these books right?” The poor girl practically seemed to vibrate when Harry addressed her but managed to nod while her friend just cocked her head at him. “Cool. Take them. I can’t imagine they’re very useful and even if they are, I’ll just skim Hermione or Neville’s copies.”


Harry nodded and moved to head outside, sidestepping two girls who looked vaguely familiar.
“Trace, do you think we need two sets of these stupid books? How good can they possibly be? I mean, really, the man looks like a determined pixie would trounce him,” the taller blond said glaring back at Lockhart. Harry snorted – a woman after his own heart.

The dark haired girl next to her just shrugged and put a ratty book back into her bag. “Let’s just go with the one set. At least he’s pretty though. Better than Quirinus I-Have-No-Fashion-Sense Quirrell.”

‘I prefer Quirrelmort myself,’ Harry thought darkly as he managed to squeeze past the girls.

Just before he left the store, Lucius Malfoy and Arthur Weasley started shouting and trading blows just ahead of them. Ron egged his father on while Molly yelled and the twins scowled. A short exchange of blows left Arthur with a black eye and Lucius – with a toilet seat around his neck – stumbling into the dark haired girl and then Ginny and her friend.

Harry moved to help Ginny up and Lucius threw her books back at her from where they had fallen to the ground. “Try to keep better hold of your things child. I will not forget this, Blood Traitor.” Lucius scowled twisting away and stalking down the street throwing the toilet seat off to the side.

“Arthur! I can’t believe you let that horrid man goad you into fighting in the street!” Molly screeched at her husband.

“I will defend our honor, Molly, as I always have. Come children, I believe we still have more things to get.”

'I should’ve asked to stay with Neville or Hermione. At least then I wouldn’t be here less than five minutes before the stupid train leaves!' Harry thought, glowering at the Weasleys. First the twins forgot their trunks. Then Percy forgot his owl. Then Ron forgot he hadn’t actually packed any of his schoolbooks. How the heck did this family ever manage to get to the school to begin with? One would think in nearly a decade worth of leaving for school Arthur and Molly would’ve figured out how to wrangle them here sooner!

Molly and Ginny had just gone through the barrier to Platform Nine and Three Quarters and Harry and Ron lined up for their turn. They waited a moment to make sure that no one was watching and then ran towards the barrier.

And bounced off it landing on their bums. Hedwig squawked as her caged was knocked back and the luggage shifted.

“What the…?” Harry muttered climbing to his feet and staring at the barrier. He turned to Ron. “Has the barrier ever closed before?”

Ron shook his head looking terrified. “I’d have heard about that if it had…Do you think this is a prank by Fred and George?”

“No way. Those two would never pull something like this. Their pranks are funny not mean. Well...not mean unless you deserve it.” Harry walked forward and ran his hands over the barrier. “It feels just like regular brick.”

“What are we going to do?” Ron whimpered.

“Well I imagine the people on the other side are going to freak out about this as well so we might as well just wait for someone to figure it out and come back through.”
Ron’s eyes widened. “We can’t! We’re going to miss the train!”

Harry glared at the other boy. ‘Maybe if you had packed last night we wouldn’t be in this position.’ He took a deep breath to calm down before speaking. “I’m sure it will be fine.” The whistle sounded for 11 O’clock and Ron jumped up in a panic.

“We need to go! Dad’s car is still in the lot. I can drive it and we can follow along behind the train! Come on!”

Harry slapped his hand over his face trying desperately to quell the urge to smash his face against the bricks behind him. “Steal the car and drive the train. You realize how insanely stupid that sounds don’t you?”

“No, FLY. Come on, Harry, there’s no time! If we don’t hurry we won’t be able to catch up!”

“You know what…no. I’m not going to sit here and argue this with you. You want to go be an idiot go ahead. Hope you don’t crash or break the Statute of Secrecy or anything,” Harry waved him off with his free hand.

“You’re…not coming?” Ron looked genuinely confused before his face reddened. “Fine! I’ll let them know you’re still sitting here when I get to Hogwarts.” He turned and raced out the doors with trunk in hand.

“Thank god I am friends with Hermione and not him,” Harry muttered. “Come on, Hedwig. Let’s go sit down over there and wait for someone to figure out how to get out of the stupid barrier. You up to taking a letter to Shiva if no one comes out after a half hour or so?” Hedwig glared at him before huffing and preening her feathers. Harry just laughed. “Okay, fine, stupid question.” Harry sat down on the bench and watched the barrier to make sure he didn’t miss anyone.

It was barely five minutes later when a stern looking woman in a suit with a monocle in one eye tromped into Kings Cross. Beside her was a girl who looked just a bit younger than Shiva. She must have graduated recently though Harry didn’t remember her from his first year. He definitely would have noticed that short, spiky, hot pink hair. She had on jeans and a t-shirt for the Weird Sisters. The girl was hurrying to stay next the monocle woman.

“See! We missed it, Tonks,” Monocle said as she glanced at the clock on the wall. She looked like she wanted to facepalm. Harry could commiserate.

“Come on, Boss, I may just be a rookie but everyone already knows I can’t go ten minutes with tripping on something or another!” Pink said with a sheepish look crossing her face.

“I’m not asking you to stop being clumsy, Tonks. I’m asking you to be on time!”

“Hey, it’s not my fault that Dawlish stuck those doxies there! If he didn’t want to risk falling into them he shouldn’t have had them on the edge of his desk!” Harry could’ve sworn he saw the girl’s hair flicker a shade darker. Monocle sighed but the way her mouth twisted upwards Harry could tell she was fighting her laughter.

Leaning over to Hedwig, Harry whispered, “I think we found our ride, Hedwig.” Hedwig twisted her head towards the two now standing by the barrier to Platform Nine and Three Quarters and scanning the crowd. She turned back to Harry and bobbed her head uttering a soft pleased sounding hoot. Harry gently stroked her feathers through the cage then gathered his trunk and stood up heading towards the newcomers.

They noticed him almost as soon as he began to move. The younger one casually pointed him out
to Monocle and the older woman just sighed though it seemed genuine this time. As he drew closer she extended her hand. “Hello, I’m Amelia Bones and this is Nym – ” The girl cleared her throat and threw a nasty glance at her superior. “Privileges of being the, Boss,” Amelia continued with an evil grin, “next time don’t make me late. As I was saying, this is Nymphadora Tonks.”

Nymphadora’s scowl deepened before she turned to Harry. “It’s just Tonks. Couldn’t help but notice your owl. Muggle-born?”

“Technically, Muggle-raised but yeah. Hello,” Harry said shaking their hands.

“We’re the clean-up crew,” Tonks said with a satisfied nod.

“My apologies,” Amelia said. “We were supposed to be here early enough to wrangle any Muggle-born or raised through the barrier who were either uninformed, forgot or were too scared to try.”

“Err, thanks but I’m not a firstie. I’m a second year and I know how to get through the barrier...” Harry ran a hand through his hair but they started talking again before he could continue.

“Oh, just late then? Don’t worry! It happens to the best of us!” Tonks winked at him.

“A bit short for a second year,” Amelia said frowning.

“I’m not allowed to eat much usually.” Harry scowled. He knew he wasn’t as big as most of the others. How was that his fault? “And no, not late, the barrier went solid when my classmate and I tried to get through.”

Amelia’s frown deepened. “That doesn’t sound right...Give me a moment. Tonks round up his friend.”

Tonks saluted. “Yes, ma’am, you got it, Boss.” As Amelia moved back slightly to examine the recalcitrant barrier, Tonks turned back smiling at Harry. “So where’s your friend?”

“He’s really not my friend,” Harry grimaced. “His brothers are, but he’s a prat. Case in point, he stole his dad’s car to try and catch the train.”

Tonks’ mouth fell open. A bit farther than seemed strictly possible at that. “He what?”

“Stole his dad’s car to fly after the train.”

“Seriously? You’re not pulling my leg here? Did the Weasley twins put you up to this?”

“Funny you should mention them; it’s their brother who stole the car. I imagine Fred and George are going to have a fit when they hear.” Harry said. He grinned imagining the reactions of the twins.

“Wow...”

“That barrier is frozen solid.” Amelia came up behind the two, frown still intact. “I’ve never seen anything like it before. I’m going to have to get some backup here to go over this. Tonks make sure those...two...didn’t you say your friend was here too?”

“No, his classmate has apparently stolen Arthur Weasley’s car to chase the train...I am sooo glad you gave me this job, Boss.” Tonks looked like she was torn between incredulity and being impressed at Ron’s stunt.

flying car?” Now Tonks’ face whitened. Harry was rather impressed with the degree of which her face seemed to empty of blood and yet she still managed to avoid passing out.

“If it helps,” Harry commented offhand, “I did tell Ron it was a horribly stupid idea and that he shouldn’t do it. I don’t think he meant anything bad though. He’s just being an idiot. Like usual.”

“Mr …”

“Potter. Harry Potter, ma’am.” Tonks’ eyes widened as Harry gave his name.

Amelia recovered faster than Tonks and continued. “Mr. Potter, did Ron Weasley know that the car flies?”

“Yeah. He knows about the invisibility thing too and as much as I rag on him sometimes I don’t think he’d forget that part...like I said, he’s an idiot but, he’s not that bad...I hope.” He finished somewhat uncertainly.

“I have to run damage control. Tonks get Potter to the school. Can you Side-Along? You know what, I don’t care. The Express takes hours anyway, just get him there and then wait there for me, Shacklebolt or Mad-Eye. Let’s just pray this doesn’t become a full incident!” She ran off, heels clacking.

Tonks turned to Harry with wide eyes. “Eventful first day back, huh, Harry?”
Chapter 5: Heirs and Affairs

Harry’s knees were still hurting from his trip through the Floo to the Three Broomsticks but at least he had hit the right grate this time. ‘There’s got to be a better way to travel. If there isn’t I’m going to make one.’ Harry thought to himself trying to determine what runes could be pulled together to come up with a better system though he came up blank. ‘Gotta keep working with that. I refuse to fall on my ass every time.’

“So, this sort of thing happen to you often, Harry?” Tonks asked with a smirk as they walked up to the gates of Hogwarts.

“What, the looking like an idiot thing or the horrible luck thing?” Harry asked swiping the last of the soot off his clothes.

“I was thinking the barrier thing. Don’t worry about the idiot thing,” Tonks snorted. “It’s only a matter of time before I go falling on my face too. I’m not exactly coordinated. Comes with the territory.”

“What territory?” Harry furrowed his brow and cocked his head at her. “The punk rocker territory?”

“Punk rocker?” Harry pointed to her hair and Weird Sisters shirt. “Oh, hell no. This is my favorite band. I’ve done the hair thing since I was toddler. My mother freaked out when I turned it blue but it always got my dad laughing. I tend to stick with pink or purple these days. It’s funny to watch people’s reactions.”

“Turned it blue…is there a spell to change your hair color?” Harry thought back. There hadn’t seemed to be anything like that in that book Lavender had gotten him but then he hadn’t exactly looked for one. His hair may be messy but there was nothing wrong with the color.

“Not that I know of. It a metamorphmagus thing. It’s why I trip all the time too. My body changes enough that I’m never quite used to the length of my legs or my stride.”

“Metamorphmagus?” Now he just felt like an idiot. How much of this world did people expect him to just know?

“We’re pretty rare.” A dark look flitted across Tonks’ face and Harry caught her hair shifting to jet black for an instant before both passed. “I can shift shapes into pretty much anything though there are limits. Here watch!” Her nose changed into a pig’s snout and her hair switched to blond. “I’m a Malfoy!” Harry burst out laughing so hard he had to stop and hold his sides. Tonks eventually shifted back and laughed with him. “It’s a lot of fun for the most part. Come on, let’s get you inside the castle.”

Harry was still shaking his head at the girl and laughing as they walked through the Great Hall and sat down at the Hufflepuff table. “Heh, I miss this place,” Tonks sighed.

“You graduated recently?”

“Class of ’91. Had a hell of time convincing the hat to put me with the Puffs though. Stupid thing wanted me to be a Gryff. Mental those.” Harry lifted his eyebrows at her. “Ah crap. You’re a Gryff aren’t you.”
He chuckled. “Doesn’t mean I can’t agree with you. Besides I had to argue with the Hat too. It wanted to throw me into Ravenclaw.”

Tonks snorted and held up a hand. “Well here’s to us, beating a stupid piece of clothing!” Harry high fived her. This girl was almost as much fun as Shiva!

As if summoned, Shiva walked into the Great Hall heading towards the Staff Table. She glanced around, noticed Tonks and Harry, nodded to them and kept walking. She made it another two steps before freezing with her foot in midair then twisted her head to stare back at the two bug eyed. Harry waved and Tonks saluted.

“Harry! Dorie!” Shiva ran over to them and pulled both into a hug. “Merlin’s balls what the hell are you two doing here early? You all right Harry? Didn’t get into another deathmatch with Two-Face did you?”

“Two-Face?” Harry questioned.

“Well I know you hate that I can’t say his name easily – which I have actually been practicing by the way – and well…Quirrelmort did kinda have two faces so…”

“I like it, Shiva.”

“You let him call you Shiva, Shiva?” Tonks turned to Harry. “What’d you get on her? I want the goods. I’ve been trying to get good blackmail on this girl for years.”

“Never going to happen, Dorie!” Shiva crossed her arms and grinned. “Seriously though, what’s a student and an Auror trainee doing here two hours early?”

“Auror?” Harry asked looking between the two.

“It’s like the Muggle police. I got a badge and everything. See!” Tonks whipped out and proudly displayed her badge while Shiva just snorted.

“A trainee badge.”

“Hey, I can still introduce myself as Auror Tonks, Shiva. I count it as a win,” Tonks huffed with a pout.

“Considering I can’t imagine how you passed the sneaking portion I can imagine.”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up Mistress of Destruction. Harry ran afoul of a recalcitrant barrier so I’m dropping him off. Bonesy said to wait in case we have to bring Ron Weasley in. I hope not, his brothers were cool and I’d hate for them to turn their pranks on me…”

“Recalcitrant barrier? Why would you bring Ron Weasley in?” Shiva turned to Harry and just stared at him. “Jeez, kid you didn’t even wait til the term started this year.”

“Hey it’s not my fault a house elf has decided the best way to keep me safe is to try to destroy the best part of my life. Or that Ron’s an idiot and can’t wait five minutes for a better option.”

Shiva worked her mouth for a minute before giving up and sitting down across from them. “Let’s try this again. What the hell happened?”

Tonks shrugged and pointed to Harry. “First I’m hearing about the house elf.”

“When I was back with the Dursley’s a house elf visited to tell me that Hogwarts wasn’t safe. He
was trying to convince me to stay away. The little guy practically seemed to worship me. It was a little sweet in a creepy kind of way...” Harry shrugged. “When I kept refusing to stay away from here he decided the best way to keep me away was to launch a cake into the middle of my Uncle’s dinner party.” Shiva’s face lost a lot of color at that but Harry just shrugged. “I have to admit that was a pretty good idea even if I wanted to strangle him afterwards. Uncle Vernon got pretty mad and then the letter from the Ministry certainly didn’t help. You said you were in Law Enforcement, Tonks? Do you know Mafalda Hopkirk by any chance?”

“Hopkirk?” Tonks asked taken aback by the shift in direction. “I think so...older woman, bit of bitch?”

“Yeah that’d be the one. The Ministry blamed me for the hover charm Dobby – the elf – used. I’m not even good with that charm! A Float stone sure but not the stupid hover charm itself – they have completely different signatures. I tried to get it overturned a few weeks ago but after arguing for an hour she tossed me out. Stupid woman wouldn’t listen to anything I said, refused to give me any of the truth stuff I asked for and then flat out refused to talk to her boss because ‘it’s just a simple case of underage magic, stop fighting this so much’. Don’t suppose you could talk to her for me?”

“I’ll talk with Bonesy about it,” Tonks frowned. “If you had a legitimate excuse or weren’t responsible she’s supposed to bring it up with Bonesy anyway...”

“Typical,” Harry muttered with a scowl. Shiva frowned further hearing that though Tonks looked lost in thought. Harry sighed and continued. “Anyway, I’d be willing to put money on Dobby deciding that if I couldn’t get through the barrier than I wouldn’t be able to get to Hogwarts. He... doesn’t really seem to have the best logic.”

“House elves can be a little weird sometimes,” Shiva admitted. “What barrier are we talking about?”

“The one to Platform Nine and Three Quarters,” Harry shrugged. “It was solid when Ron and I tried to get through. Ron panicked and decided to take his dad’s flying car to follow behind the train. I just went to sit on a bench until someone managed to get back through from the other side. Tonks and her boss showed up before I got bored and sent you a letter telling you I was stuck.”

Shiva’s mouth had dropped open in shock by the end. She turned to Tonks. “A flying car?”

“Hence why I’m waiting here,” Tonks said.

Shiva banged her head on the table and groaned. “Thank you for not going with him, Harry. I think I would’ve had a heart attack!” Harry reached over and patted her shoulder.

Shiva ended up pulling Harry off to the side a few minutes later while Tonks went to find some food. “Harry, you said your Uncle was...upset after the cake incident...” Harry stiffened but nodded. “Did he...”

“He stopped before he went too far,” Harry said softly while giving Shiva a small shake of his head. “I didn’t get to eat for a few days but he still gave me water so it wasn’t too bad. I got a little worried for Fred when Uncle Vernon saw the flying car as the twins rescued me but we’re all fine.”

“That’s not –” Shiva sighed and hugged him. “You shouldn’t be starved for something that is not your fault, Harry.”
“It happens all the time, Shiva. I’m used to it. It doesn’t matter.” He was finding it easier to relax into these hugs. At least when it was just Shiva and Hermione hugging him.

“It does and you shouldn’t have to be used to it.” She let him go and held him at arm’s length staring into his eyes. “I’m sorry I didn’t come visit over the summer Harry. I…my hands were tied –”

“How?” Harry asked, cutting her off.

Shiva closed her eyes and sighed. “At the end of the year I brought up the issue of your guardians with Professor Dumbledore and it turned into a bit of a fight. By the end of it we were both shouting and he threatened to fire me if I didn’t drop the matter and stay away for the summer. Something about wards being renewed being critical to your protection. I’ve never heard of wards that would require that though. At least not ones that would apply in your situation…”

“He threatened to fire you?” Nearly the entire modicum of respect Harry grudgingly had for the Headmaster died a fiery death in that moment.

“Yeah. And I figured it’d be better to stay here where I could be around more often. But I’ve been trying to look into some things and…” she sighed and pulled him back into a much shorter hug.

“Look, Harry, if I can get you away from those people would you be up for it?

Harry froze completely. He pushed back and stared at Shiva. He looked her up and down, taking in the stiffness of her body, the set of her jaw, and the slight sheen to her eyes. Slowly, ever so slowly, Harry nodded. “I would do anything short of killing somebody to get away from the Dursleys for good. I don’t believe you can. I’ve tried before. But thank you for asking.”

“You’ve…tried before?” Shiva asked carefully schooling her features into a neutral expression even while her voice dropped into a dangerous monotone.

Harry kept staring at her. For a full minute he stayed completely silent and still. Eventually, Harry took a deep breath and started talking. “I talked to one of the teachers at school when I found out I had a name like the other kids. He didn’t believe me when I said I hadn’t known it before that day. I asked the school nurse about why we got to eat so much during lunch and how much most kids get to eat. She didn’t believe me when I said I usually only had one or two means a day with half portions. I talked to the Principal who said that the Dursleys were upstanding members of the community. A few months later I talked to a police officer who never came back after the first visit. I asked some shop owners in the area and they said they would never believe the words of a ‘delinquent’ – which was one of the stories the Dursleys liked to spread about me. I asked the parents of one of the girls at the school who promised to look into it but did nothing after that. So, yes, I’ve tried. And I’ve given up. Because nothing ever happens and I’ve learned I can’t trust any adults. So thank you for offering, Shiva, I really do appreciate it. It’s the first time someone else has said something first. But I don’t believe that anything will happen this time either.”

“Harry,” Shiva’s asked, voice still completely flat, “do you trust me?”

Harry shut his eyes and turned away. “Yes,” he whispered. “I don’t want to because I’m pretty sure that sooner or later you are going to hurt me just like the others but…yes.”

Harry found himself enveloped in another bone-crushing hug. “I swear to you, Harry,” Shiva whispered, “I am going to do my absolute best to make sure I never hurt you. I am going to figure out a way to get you the hell away from your relatives and I am going to help you with whatever else you need. You hear me, kid? I’m here for you, no matter what.”

Harry nodded and some of the tension drained out of him. “Thank you.”
The school year started off relatively normal despite the fun of the first day. After Ron had finally shown up—via crashing into a tree which tried to beat him and the car into paste—Amelia Bones spoke with him but let him off with a stern warning after it was confirmed that no Muggles had seen anything. Though she did promise the young Weasley that if he ever did something so stupid again...the consequences would be far more severe. The Howler from his mother was painful to listen to. Harry knew it was mostly deserved and he had no love for the redhead but...berating him in front of the whole school for something done in a panic seemed a bit harsh.

Tonks had followed through with her promise to let her boss know about the hover charm incident and by the end of the first week, Harry had received two letters from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The first was an official—if somewhat biting—apology and retraction letter from Mafalda Hopkirk which had Harry smirking. The second was one from Amelia Bones herself personally thanking Harry for letting her know about the barrier and car before it could become a problem as well as apologizing for Hopkirk’s behavior. Bones had also assured Harry that Hopkirk had been placed on probation and if he had any further problems to let her know immediately and if he wasn’t comfortable with that then to inform Tonks who would get in touch instead. Harry wasn’t quite sure how to deal with that. Tonks was one thing as she almost seemed less mature than himself but Amelia Bones...a reasonable authority figure in an actual position of power was...something entirely new. He could be generous and say that Professor Flitwick was nice and seemed perfectly reasonable but the man had no real power. Even Shiva didn’t have any actual say in the school. Amelia Bones however, did. Harry eventually resolved to wait and see how things played out.

Shiva had stayed quiet on just what she was doing concerning the Dursleys but he noticed she had started disappearing on weekends for several hours every few weeks. When asked, she just said that she was ‘doing Muggle paperwork and it’s far more involved than I had expected’. It gave him a warm feeling inside to know that someone besides Hermione and Neville actually seemed to be completely on his side; that someone besides them actually seemed to care.

Hermione herself had stopped trying to defend Professor Lockhart—or Flophart as Harry started calling him—after his first lesson. Once the man ran and hid from a swarm of pixies Hermione lost any potential respect for him. It was actually rather amusing. Harry and Neville had simply been content to ignore and insult him. Hermione however had gone a step further.

“Look at these dates!” Hermione said throwing two of Lockhart’s books onto the library’s table. Her slamming had Harry and Neville jump. It even started two girls at the next table. Harry idly noticed that they were the ones from the bookstore who had been as annoyed with Lockhart as he had been. “See here?” Harry turned back to his friend and saw her pointing at two sections, one in each book. “He says he fought the yeti at the end of August in 1989 and in this one he says he wrestled that river troll during the Algerian flood. The Algerian flood was the last week of August in 1989! These two events can’t possibly have happened at the same time! He’s lied!”

The blonde from the other table twisted slightly and raised her eyebrows at Hermione. “Does that really surprise you, Granger?”

“Well the man is obviously incompetent but...he’s written about these things! To use inaccurate information is one thing but to outright lie? In a book?! Oh I wish I could give that man a piece of my mind!”

“Books aren’t always all they’re cracked up to be,” the blonde’s friend said hanging her head.

“Well, yes I realize that but still!”
“Hermione, there’s no point in getting worked up about it. You’re never going to get Flophart to admit to it and nobody is going to take our word over his,” Harry said trying to placate his friend.

“Yeah, Hermione, anybody who actually talks to the man knows not to take him seriously,” Neville said with a shrug. “Even Lavender has stopped gushing over his hair and is starting to grimace in his classes.”

“Lavender? Seriously?” Hermione’s eyes widened and her mouth fell open.

The blonde also looked intrigued. “Really, Brown isn’t infatuated with fool anymore?”

“No, she isn’t, Greengrass.” Neville snorted. “His last test, the one that asked about his favorite color and birthday? Lavender sneered at it and muttered that the class was utterly useless for teaching any sort of defense and she might as well just go to Hermione to learn the actual material. Then she muttered how she hoped the curse got Lockhart so that they could get a competent teacher.”

Greengrass blinked while Hermione just stared at Neville in shock. Harry laughed. “Wow. You just know the guy’s an idiot when Lavender hates him. Though I never would have pegged her as actually wanting to learn.”

“She does seem far more interested in gossip most of the time,” Hermione admitted. “Well, anyway, I recommend all of you take everything he says with a grain of salt. While there are details in these books that lead me to believe at least some parts are useful, the contradictions are glaring. I’m going to go over each one and note down every section that proves he’s lied. With any luck, I’ll be able to get enough proof from his own works in order to expose the man.”

Greengrass’ friend sighed and finally turned to the rest of them. “You can do that Granger, or you could just expose the affairs he’s having with the sixth and seventh years.”

Hermione dropped bonelessly into a seat while Neville’s mouths dropped open. Harry just looked confused. “He’s doing what?” Hermione squeaked.

“We don’t have proof but can you really see him not taking advantage of at least the girls of age that are throwing themselves at him? Granted he’s pretty so I can’t really blame them, especially since I doubt any of them expect anything serious, but it’s still pretty scandalous going at it with a teacher.”

“Davis, if you and Greengrass know this why haven’t you told anyone?” Neville asked with a hand over his eyes.

Davis shrugged. “Well I said we have no proof. Besides what is Dumbledore going to do? He can’t fire the man. There’s no applicants for the job to take his place. And it’s not technically illegal as long as he’s careful who and where. It’s just icky.”

“Tracey’s right,” the blond girl nodded. “There’s really no point in letting the information out. There’s nothing to gain from it. He’s a good enough spin doctor he’d probably end up looking better afterwards. I almost feel like I should be taking lessons from the man. He may be a horrible wizard but he certainly knows how to talk.”

“Ugh, Daphne, I have a headache again. I’m going to head back,” Tracey said rubbing her forehead.

“I’ll walk with you. Good day,” Daphne nodded goodbye and grabbed their things before leaving the library.
“That was Tracey Davis and Daphne Greengrass of Slytherin, correct?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah,” Neville nodded. “Man, I really don’t want that mental picture in my head anymore!”

“Lockhart’s not dating the older girls, right?” Harry asked frowning at his book.

“No, Harry, he’s not dating them.” Hermione rolled her eyes.

“And you guys were obviously talking about more than just hugging and kissing.”

“Yeah…” Neville said squinting over at Harry. A dawning look of understand appeared in Hermione’s eyes.

“So…what’s an affair then?” Harry asked trying to work out exactly what Lockhart was doing with the girls.

Neville’s mouth dropped open. Hermione’s eyes widened in silent horror. “Harry,” she said in a careful voice, “do you know what sex is?”

“That’s another word for gender,” he nodded wondering where she was going with this.

“Sex isn’t a verb, Hermione.” Harry said as his frown deepened. Neville made a strangled sound and Hermione sighed.

“Damn those Dursleys,” Hermione muttered before continuing in a normal, if slightly strained, voice. “Harry, I think you need to go and talk to either Madam Pomfrey or Shiva.”

Harry’s expression darkened considerably. Of course the Dursleys had forgotten to mention important pieces of information. “You can’t tell me?”

Neville hurriedly shook his head so fast he probably got whiplash. Hermione twisted her hands together before replying. “I…would really prefer you ask one of them first. It’s umm…I can do it…I’ve certainly read enough about it…but it’s rather uncomfortable…especially with you… and…well look just…please?” She turned to stare at him with wide eyes and her mouth quirked just so and Harry leaned back. She knew just how to defeat him.

“Shiva?” Harry said as he walking into his mentor’s office. “Do you have a few minutes?”

“Sure, Harry. What’s up?” Shiva asked as she pushed a few papers to the side and looked up at him.

“Well, Neville, Hermione two other girls and I were talking in the library a few minutes ago. The others started talking about Lockhart having ‘affairs’ with the girls in sixth and seventh years. After the other two left, I asked Hermione and Neville what they meant.” Harry’s brow furrowed. “She started getting really evasive and nervous and then asked whether I knew what ‘sex’ meant.” He paused for a second as Shiva coughed and paled. “I told her that it was male vs. female but apparently that was the wrong answer. She said I should come talk to you or Madam Pomfrey but she would explain if neither of you would…so…what am I missing?”

Shiva had covered her face in her hands by this point and was muttering unintelligibly. Harry could only catch a few words, “Bastards…supposed to have years to prepare myself…need a basic class on this…” Shiva took a deep breath and slowly lowered her hands to peer critically at Harry.
“Harry, you’ve never had a sex ed class before?” He just shook his head still looking utterly confused. “Merlin’s balls. I could kill those damn Muggles…are you sure you want me talking to you about this? Madam Pomfrey would do a far better job. Hell, McGonagall would probably do a far better job. Both of them had kids. I don’t exactly have much…um…experience with explaining this.”

“I trust you though,” Harry said simply. ‘What does having kids have to do with this?’ he thought to himself.

“This is likely going to be exceedingly awkward.”

“I gathered that. It takes a lot to fluster Hermione about basic facts and explanations,” Harry said raising his eyebrows at the older woman.

“Oh for crying out loud…fine,” Shiva held up her hands before walking around the desk and collapsing into a seat near him. “If I’m going to explain this then you are going to sit there and listen understand? You are not going to run away before I get done, yes?” He nodded. “Dammit. Okay. Look, you know boys and girls have different…parts?”

“Yes, Shiva. I told you, I know about male and female sex.” Harry rolled his eyes.

“Ugh. Sex has two meanings, Harry. One is gender like you’re saying. The other is a verb. The act of sex.”

“How can sex be an act?”

“Would you just let me explain?” Shiva grumbled. “This isn’t exactly peaches and cream for me either you know. I’m 20. I’m not supposed to be explaining sex for another few years at least! Arg! Okay, let’s try this again. Sex is how babies are made.”

“What?” Harry just stared at her.

“When a boy and girl love each other – well actually they don’t have to love each other but you really should – then they have sex. When they’re ready. Generally late teens or early twenties but of course that’s not a rule and there’s nothing wrong with waiting.”

“I don’t understand. Shiva, you’re not making any sense.”

“Males have a penis. Females have a vagina. Tab P into Slot V, Harry.”

“Tab P into…” Harry trailed off as his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open.

“Good. Got that. Thank god. Okay so, when a boy and girl love each other they…join…and if a boy finishes –”

“If they what?!”

“Finishes. Climaxes. Umm, have you ever woken up at night after a strange dream and your sheets were a bit sticky with white stuff instead of pee?”

“I – uh – I – yes?” Harry tried to burrow into the chair.

“That. That’s called semen. And girls have eggs. But eggs that are inside of a girl’s bodies. If a boy’s semen is left in a girl at the right time and it comes in contact with an egg then there is chance that the girl could get pregnant with a baby.”
“Oh.” Harry’s voice was rather high and he was trying very hard to stare at anything besides Shiva.

“Now, sex doesn’t just have to be to make a baby. Actually generally it’s not. It’s fun and it feels good and it’s a natural progression of most relationships and some people just do it sometimes because they’re bored – but you shouldn’t do that! You should only have sex with someone you really care about because it’s a sign of trust and love and…and you shouldn’t do it before you’re at least a teenager!” Shiva was flailing but it helped that both Harry and herself were beet red. “Now I’m not going to tell you what age is appropriate because I’d be a hypocrite and I know what people get up to in broom closets here – ”

“That’s what people mean when they say ‘find a broom closet’?” Harry squeaked.

“Well it’s part of it. Generally people don’t go all the way in broom closets. It’s not exactly comfortable or romantic in those. Rather cramped. I don’t recommend it.” Shiva slapped a hand to her head. Now she was giving recommendations to a 12 year old? “Arg, forget I said that. There are other things you can do rather than full on sex. It’s called foreplay or fooling around. Touching a girl’s breasts or her private area or her touching your privates. Or even just kissing. Kissing can be extremely satisfying too for a couple.”

“Oh,” Harry said trying very hard to sound normal. And failing rather spectacularly.

“Yeah so that’s about it. Well actually I suppose that’s not totally it because there are other types of sex. There’s oral sex where one of the partners uses their mouth and then there’s anal sex where instead of using the girl’s vagina you use her arse instead and then there’s group sex which is when there’s more than just two people involved and you can always use toys or something – but the Muggle stuff doesn’t work here so it cuts out some of the fun – and then there’s bondage which is just tying someone up – but if you do that you want to have safe words so everyone knows it’s too far and to immediately stop – and um…” Shiva trailed off staring very intently at the wall above Harry’s head.

“Anything else?” Harry asked quietly desperately praying this conversation could be over.

“No, I think that’s about it,” Shiva said nodding hurriedly. “Oh! Wait! You started asking about Lockhart having affairs? That wouldn’t surprise me but it’s sleazy. An affair is a term for having sex secretly or cheating on your spouse. And you should never have sex with a teacher. It’s an abuse of power on their part and bad. We can’t really punish it because the wizarding world is kind of backwards on some things but that doesn’t mean you should do it!”

Harry just nodded hurriedly. ‘Please stop talking,’ he silently pleaded.

“Okay I think that’s it. If you have any questions come and ask. I’m not going to teach you the contraceptive charm until you are at least 14 got it? I’d prefer 15 but your best female friend is almost a year older so I’m going to be at least somewhat realistic here and – ”

“Hermione!” Harry blurted out as his features twisted in horror desperately trying not to imagine his best friend doing those things.

“Yes, Hermione. It’s a chance at least. Though I suppose she’ll probably already know it by then anyway, but still, the guy should always know it as well! You can’t be too careful and the last thing you need is to become a father as a teenager!”

“Are we done? Can we be done? Please?”
“Yeah, yeah I think we’re done. Ask Hermione or Pomfrey for some books. I have absolutely no idea what is good to read beyond romance novels which are utterly useless for realistic information…” Shiva finally managed to look down at Harry who reluctantly met her gaze. “I did tell you this was going to be exceedingly awkward.”

“I’ll listen to you next time,” Harry muttered as he got up and hurried to the door. Just before slipping out Harry turned back to glance at her. “Err, thanks, Shiva. That was…probably better than going to Madam Pomfrey.” With that he practically ran out the door and back to the tower.

Shiva slumped down in her chair and eyed the cabinet with her firewhiskey. “Merlin. I haven’t even officially gotten custody of the kid yet and I’m already giving him the Talk…”

Harry had avoided being alone with Hermione for several days after that and it didn’t pass unnoticed. Eventually on Halloween his friend stopped him while they were heading down to the feast.

“Harry, this is ridiculous. You have to stop avoiding me sometime!” she said glaring at him.

“I’m not avoiding you,” he muttered.

“You are.”

“Technically I’m avoiding most girls…” he said trying to appease her.

Hermione just huffed. “Well that’s just stupid. Obviously you talked with Shiva. Nobody’s just going to jump you. Not for another few years at least. I mean – you’re cute and all and – oh Merlin I can’t believe I just said that – look, Harry, you can’t avoid talking to girls just because you understand the Birds and the Bees now!”

‘She thinks I’m cute?’ Harry’s brain caught on that part of the statement and he turned his head to stare up at her. Neville nearby had his hand over his mouth and was shaking with muffled laughter. “Thanks for the support, Nev.” Harry glared at his friend. “Fine, Hermione. I apologize for avoiding you. I’ll promise to stop doing that. Now can we please go – I’m starving and the feast is – ”

{Hungry. Food. Kiiilll…}

“Kill?” Harry frowned and stared at the wall where he heard the voice.

“What?” Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. “Harry?”

{There! Food! Kill! Eat!}

“No! Come on! We have to stop it!”

“Stop what?” Neville shouted after Harry as he tore off down the corridor after the voice. Harry heard his friends pounding along behind him but he focused on the voice trying to follow it.

“Harry! What’s going on?!” Hermione yelled as Harry rounded the corner. He stopped dead and his friends plowed into his back. “Harry?” Harry just lifted a finger to point at the nearby wall and Neville and Hermione both gasped.

On the wall written in what looked like blood were the words: THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN HAS REOPENED THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS. ALL ENEMIES BEWARE. Below the dripping
words, Mrs. Norris lay on the floor next to a small puddle of water. She was completely frozen solid.

“Harry, my boy,” Dumbledore said with soft smile from behind his desk. “I’m sure you can understand why we are having this meeting.”

“I’m not your boy, Professor,” Harry said firmly, the rage in his voice audible. He had sat down in the chair across from Dumbledore after being brought the office thanks to discovering Mrs. Norris. Dumbledore’s phoenix, Fawkes, was perched on Harry’s shoulder softly crooning to the youth. He was a beautiful bird and was at least somewhat helping Harry’s nerves to calm down.

“Why you little – ” Snape sneered from behind Dumbledore’s shoulder.

“What are you even doing here? Sir?” Harry said glaring at the Potions Master.

“Harry, I trust Professor Snape, I assure you he – ”

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything, Headmaster.” Harry turned his glare on Dumbledore. “If I’m going to be interrogated shouldn’t my Head of House be here? Or Professor Babbling?”

“Babbling has even less reason to be present than I do!” Snape snarled. Harry met his gaze and felt his head start to ache. “I can’t believe the arrogance you display!”

“Well I trust Professor Babbling. If the Headmaster is allowed to bring in someone he trusts who has nothing to do with this then I should be allowed to bring in someone I trust who has nothing to do with it.” Harry rubbed his forehead still glaring at Snape. “And you admit that you have no reason to be here?”

“That’s enough, Harry,” Dumbledore said firmly. “Now if you would please tell me what happened…”

“I already told you with everyone else down there. I heard a voice that sounded like it came from the walls. I ran after it and we found Mrs. Norris. The end. If you don’t believe me ask Hermione and Neville.”

“They heard no such voice,” Snape said with a look of supreme satisfaction.

“Doesn’t change the fact that I did. Are you going to give me detention for hearing voices now? Or maybe you’re going to take points for being not being at the Feast?”

“Everyone is required to attend the Halloween Feast, Harry. It is a celebration.” Dumbledore smiled down at him but Harry just scowled.

“A celebration. Sure. Everyone seems to forget that I hate this day.”

“The Dark Lord was vanquished today you insolent little – ” Snape started but Harry cut him off.

“And my parents died today! Today was the day I was sent to live with my relatives because my parents were murdered!” Harry yelled. He completely missed the door opening behind him and a teacher stepping into the office. “Today was the day I watched Dudley go out year after year in costume after costume while I got locked back up in my stupid little cupboard! Today was the day Hermione almost died last year! And now I can say that today was the day I apparently started going insane and hearing voices no one else can hear!”
“Harry,” Dumbledore started but trailed off as Professor McGonagall laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder not occupied by Fawkes. Harry cringed down into the seat immediately falling quiet though Fawkes nuzzled against his cheek. McGonagall to her credit immediately lifted her hand as she noticed Harry’s reaction.

“I believe that is enough, Albus.” The Gryffindor Head of House turned her withering stare onto first Snape and then Dumbledore. “Mrs. Norris was petrified with something very strong and likely very dark. No second year could know how to do this. Harry and his friends have shown a remarkable proclivity to being in the wrong place at the right time. This is clearly yet another instance of his particular brand of luck manifesting. If you have no further questions, I will take my lion back to his dormitory.”

“Of course, Minerva. Have a pleasant evening, Harry,” Dumbledore nodded to Harry with that annoying ever present twinkle still present. Harry just scowled at him and Snape before following McGonagall out.

“Thanks, Professor,” Harry muttered as they walked away from the Gargoyle.

“I never did apologize for my actions last year, Mr. Potter. I was wrong to brush off your concerns,” Harry frowned. Since when did adults apologize to him? “I know you speak with Professor Babbling about things every once in a while. I want you to know that if you feel the need, my door is open as well. I may be...set in my ways but I can promise you that I will listen to any issues you have in the future, Mr. Potter. You are one of my better students. I would hate to think I lost you because of one foolish mistake.”

“I…” Harry cocked his head at her. “Thank you. I’m probably going to keep going to Professor Babbling, Ma’am, but…if the Headmaster calls me in again I would appreciate if you would be there to back me up again like earlier.”

McGonagall nodded thoughtfuly. “I always endeavor to support my lions if they are in the right, Mr. Potter. As your Head of House I should have been present in that meeting to begin with. If something similar occurs in the future, know that you are allowed to refuse to say anything until I arrive.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” The tension in his shoulders had started to lessen. This change in Professor McGonagall was interesting. ‘Maybe Shiva talked to her?’

The two fell into silence until they approached the portrait into the Gryffindor tower. “I hope the rest of your evening improves somewhat, Mr. Potter. Have a pleasant night.”

“Excuse me? Professor Babbling?” Hermione asked hesitantly. She poked her head around the corner of the office door. “May I come in?”

Shiva frowned looking at one of Harry’s friends. The girl hadn’t ever come to talk to her before…“Of course, Miss Granger. Please take a seat. How can I help you?”

“Well…it’s about Harry…” Hermione wrung her hands clearly uncomfortable with bringing this up.

“Okay.” Shiva sighed. Of course it was about Harry. Judging from the nervousness of Hermione though it wasn’t something small or typical. “Why don’t you tell me what’s wrong, Miss Granger.”

“I…I’m not…” Hermione took a deep breath, smoothed her robes and stared at Shiva with a firm
expression. “I’m worried about him. I know he speaks with you but I’m not sure if he’s been in
the past few days. Has he mentioned at all about hearing a voice in the walls?”

“It came up yeah,” Shiva said nodding.

“Neither Neville nor I heard it. However we don’t believe Harry is making it up either. I’ve been
searching for things that might have caused that but I can’t find anything. He’s scared and I want
to help but I don’t know what to do at this point. Nothing in the library has anything that might
indicate why Harry could hear voices that we couldn’t and I need some method to help him.”

“I admit, Miss Granger,” Shiva said with a small smile, “I’m a little surprised you’ve come to talk
to me about this. I would’ve bet you’d go to Professor McGonagall.”

“Normally I would have but…I already feel like I’m going behind his back as it is just coming
to you and I know he has a close relationship of sorts with you.”

“Not as close as he does with you and Neville.”

“I think you underestimate the amount of influence you have over him, Professor, but I am not here
to talk about that. Harry trusts you. I know he wouldn’t want me to speak of this with anyone
really but I also need to help him and I feel like if I spoke with you he’d understand.”

Shiva regarded the younger girl before nodding. “I think you underestimate yourself as well,
Hermione. I assume you’ve checked most of the sensory reference books as well as the divination
sections?” Hermione nodded. “If it helps I’ve done a bit of reading myself over the past few days
and come up blank as well. I don’t think there is much either of us can really do at this point
except be there if he needs us.”

“He is not going crazy.” Hermione said with a harsh glare.

Shiva just held up her hands in response. “I don’t believe that is the case anymore than you do.
Just like neither of us believe that stupid rumor about him being the Heir of Slytherin.”

“Yes, that certainly doesn’t help matters. Professor…” Hermione trailed off again looking even
more uncomfortable than before. “…Harry has…at times…I am worried that his relatives are –
unhealthy – for him.”

Shiva snorted. “Well that’s certainly a far tamer word than I would use.” Hermione’s eyes
widened as she looked up to the Professor. “Has he said anything specific about them to you? I’ve
been careful not to push too hard but it would make things easier if I had more details.”

Hermione shook her head somewhere between bewilderment and hope. “Nothing specific, no.
Mostly just vague comments every now and then and my own suspicions. He…does not like being
touched. He doesn’t seem to shy away from me anymore which I’ve taken as a good sign but
still…Fred and George have also informed me that he was locked in his room with bars on the
window when they rescued him. I confronted Harry about that but he simply said ‘I’ll have a
better plan next time’. I don’t want him to go back to those…people.”

“You and me both, kid,” Shiva sighed. “I was hoping you had more details. Look I’m working on
a way to get him out from under them but it’s slow going. I don’t have too much experience in the
Muggle world and I can’t use magic for this because it has to be completely above board. I don’t
want to tell Harry and get his hopes up for nothing, but I should know for sure in another few
weeks if it’ll work. After I tell him, I’ll have him tell you okay? If I have anything to say about it
that kid is going nowhere near those relatives of his again.”
Hermione sighed in relief. “Thank you, Professor.”

“We both want what’s best for Harry. If you, Neville or Harry find out anything else – about anything we talked about – then please don’t hesitate to come talk to me, okay?” Hermione nodded in reply and walked out, her shoulders considerably less tense.

Harry had actually been looking forward to this duel. Even finding out that the Club was being run by Snape and Flophart instead of Flitwick hadn’t really dampened his enthusiasm too much. At the very least he could’ve used the opportunity to show off the disarming spell that Flitwick had taught him last year and make Malfoy look like a fool. Maybe he could’ve gotten even luckier and carefully tossed one of his Slugvomit rune stones at his ‘rival’, the idiot or the greasy git! He really had to remember to thank Ron for that idea. His backfiring spell from a few weeks ago had certainly given Harry a fun idea for a prankstone. Fred and George were loving it too. Especially since Harry had managed to figure out how to make his special prankstones disintegrate after use. It was a bit annoying having to etch new ones each time but it left no evidence behind. And it held promise for using other materials for the shorter duration prankstones.

Unfortunately, before his duel with Malfoy had even started Snape had apparently given the blond ponce a fancy conjuration spell. The large snake that Draco formed was somewhat impressive, Harry gave him that. However it was also completely useless. Why bother fighting with something that had a brain of its own? When Harry glared at it, the snake slithered into the crowd. It looked like it was going to end up attacking one of the Hufflepuffs though, so Harry was forced to yell out to it.

{Hey! Leave him alone.}

{Ssspeaker?} the snake turned to Harry and bobbed it head.

{If you want to attack anyone, then attack the blond idiot up here. He was the one who summoned you.} Harry said gesturing to Malfoy. Harry didn’t notice that the entire Hall had gone so quiet you could probably hear a quill drop. {However as much as he is an idiot I’d recommend just heading out into the forest. There’s lot of food out there.}

{Very well, Ssspeaker.} The snake started to slither down the line of people towards the main doors when Snape finally roused himself and strode forward, vanishing the serpent.

“Hey!” Harry yelled at his hated potions’ teacher, hands clenched. “Why did you that? It wasn’t hurting anyone!”

“It was a dangerous serpent, Potter,” Snape said with a sneer.

“Be quiet, boy!” Harry flinched at that comment then scowled at himself. “15 points from Gryffindor for talking back to Professor!”

Lockhart came forward, his ever present grin perhaps a bit forced. “Yes, well I believe we’ve all experienced enough excitement for the evening. I call the session of the Dueling Club to a close!”

Whispers broke out around the Hall as Harry started to walk back to his friends. They had barely left the room before Malfoy called out, “Potter! How’s it feel to wield some power for once?” Malfoy laughed at him while Hermione and Neville stepped up to Harry’s side. “Going to set your pet snake on the Mudblood there next time?”
“How dare you!” Neville yelled striding forward face quickly turning red. Harry was a bit slower on the uptake but quickly moved to support his friend. He may not have recognized the slur but he figured it was bad to get Neville that mad that fast.

“How dare you!” Neville yelled striding forward face quickly turning red. Harry was a bit slower on the uptake but quickly moved to support his friend. He may not have recognized the slur but he figured it was bad to get Neville that mad that fast.

“Nev?”

“Hermione. He’s saying Hermione has dirty blood,” Neville hissed through clenched teeth. His wand’s tip was glowing white in his clenched hand. Harry’s face froze and he turned to stare at Malfoy.

“Careful there, Longbottom, Potty,” Malfoy said with a mocking grin. “Professor Snape is just — ”

“Catch!” Harry thumbed the activator on the Slugvomit and tossed it at Malfoy’s head. The blond proved his intelligence by reaching up a hand to grab the projectile. Harry’s grin had an evil little fringe to it as the rune stone sent a dull yellow glow into Malfoy’s hand. The smirk on the boy’s face was wiped away an instant later as the rune stone disintegrated and he doubled over throwing up slugs all over the hallway. “You might want to wash your mouth out Malfoy.” Harry turned and stalked away with Neville and Hermione following along after a final glance at the Slytherin.

None in either group noticed Daphne and Tracey watching the confrontation from the sidelines. “I have to admit, I’m impressed,” Daphne said to her friend. “I know there have been some rumors about Potter but between the snake and how he handled Malfoy…he has a lot more potential than I had expected. Right, Trace?” Tracey barely even responded, she just kept staring at the floor in front of them. “Trace?”

“What?” Tracey looked up, shook her head and focused on her friend. “Oh, right. Potter. Yeah, that was pretty cool. It’s nice to see the ponce taken down a peg even if it is by a Gryff. We should really be able to police our own.”

“Agreed.” Daphne nodded and started to walk back to the dungeons with her friend. “Being a parseltongue isn’t going to do the boy any favors though.”

“I can’t stand this!” Harry snarled as he slammed his book closed causing Neville and Hermione to jump. “There’s nothing on the Chamber. There’s nothing on the lineage of Salazar Slytherin. There’s nearly nothing on parseltongue beyond ‘a very rare ability to speak to snakes’. REAL helpful there!”

“Harry, you need to calm down,” Hermione said reaching for his arm.

“Don’t tell me to calm down, Hermione! You’re not the one that half the school is looking at like an insane Dark wizard! And if I can’t prove I’m not then what the hell am I supposed to do?!”

“Harry, we know this is frustrating,” Neville said in an overly calm voice, “but throwing a temper tantrum isn’t going to help at all.”

“I know!” Harry flopped down into his seat, crossed his arms and scowled. “I know – I’m sorry. I’m just tired of them all whispering behind my back and running the other way when I walk down the corridor.”

“Harry…I’ve been thinking…” Hermione ventured softly. Harry and Neville turned to her with raised eyebrows. “Well…it’s possible the Slytherins know more about who the Heir is then they let on right? I mean it would stand to reason that the Heir would be in their house after all. So…what if we snuck in and got them to talk?”
“What like use the *Ninja* or my dad’s Cloak?” Harry asked leaning in.

“Well we could do that but we couldn’t really interact with them or steer the conversation at all… so I was thinking,” Hermione said taking a deep breath. “What if we used polyjuice?”

Neville whistled. “Merlin. We are a horrible influence on you, Hermione.”

“What’s polyjuice?” Harry asked looking between the two.

“It’s a potion,” Hermione explained. “It’s a potion that when you drink it it will turn you into someone else. You need a bit of the target. Either a hair, skin or blood sample though I imagine hair is the least disgusting. It takes some time to brew and there are some rather rare materials…”

“Hermione, you know that’s supposed to be a NEWT level potion right?” Neville asked.

Harry on the other hand was trying to decide if there was an easier way. ‘An *Illusion*, twined with a *Physical* wrapped in a *Alteration* and…’ He sighed. “Damn. I think I might be able to make a rune stone that could do something similar but I don’t think we’d be able to use too many spells without dissolving it. And it would have to be keyed to a specific target which couldn’t be changed without an entirely new etching. It’s probably easier just to brew the potion.”

Hermione nodded while Neville just shook his head. “You guys really are insane. Oh well, if we’re going to do this let me know which ingredients we need to owl order.”
Chapter 6: Bludgers, Bodies and Buddies

“Professor Flitwick?” Harry asked after Charms class.

“Yes, Mr. Potter? Can I help you? I noticed you were having some difficulties with the Freezing Charm,” the diminutive man replied with a smile.

“Oh, no, Sir, Hermione can help me with that. I actually wanted to ask about the Dueling Club from the other week.”

A gleam entered Flitwick’s eyes as he sat up straighter and grinned from ear to ear. “Oh, looking to take up the circuit then, Harry?”

Harry snorted at the immediate enthusiasm of the teacher. He certainly was a determined fellow. “Not yet, Sir.” Flitwick gave a sigh and shook his hand in defeat but nodded for Harry to continue. “I was actually wondering why you hadn’t been teaching it instead? I feel like we would have actually had more than the one meeting then…”

“Ah,” Flitwick said shifting uncomfortably. “You see, it’s just that Professor Lockhart and I, we have…differing opinions on…teaching methods. I was a little worried we would not mesh well. I hear Professor Snape didn’t end up performing much better though in my place.”

“Yeah, you could say that.” Harry shook his head. “Well thanks, Professor. I was just curious.” As he walked out of the classroom two Hufflepuff girls stepping in front of him and smiled.

“Hello, Harry,” the redhead said.

“Hi…” Harry responded with a frown. He carefully scanned the surrounding area. It was rare these days for anyone outside of Hermione and Neville to talk to him without setting him up to be jinxed or hexed.

“It’s Susan,” the girl continued. “Susan Bones. And this is my friend Hannah. I know we haven’t talked very much what with the different Houses and all but I talked to my Aunt a few days ago, Harry, and your name came up. You apparently made a bit of an impression on her. I brought up the…Heir…stuff. She, umm, well she made me realize I’ve been a bit of a bitch regarding all this.” Harry’s frown deepened but he nodded to her and stopped checking the corners. Susan wrung her hands and looked at the floor while Hannah nodded along. “It’s stupid to blame you for something you’re born with and it’s stupid to think that you’d have a problem with Muggle-borns considering you’re best friends with one. So I’m sorry.”

“And so am I,” Hannah put in with a firm shake of her head.

“Aunt Amy also mentioned that House Potter and House Bones used to have an alliance back before that night so –” Susan took a deep breath, looked straight at him and bowed low before continuing. “I, Susan Amelia Bones, Heir to House Bones, formally apologize for any harmful and inappropriate actions I have taken in the past against you, Harry James Potter, as well as any insults that I have made against House Potter. I am prepared to accept whatever sanctions or punishments you deem appropriate and wish to reestablish a benevolent relationship between House Bones and House Potter.”

Hannah then bowed as well. “And I, Hannah Marie Abbott, Heir to House Abbott, formally
apologize for any harmful and inappropriate actions I have taken in the past against you, Harry James Potter, as well as any insults that I have made against House Potter. I am prepared to accept whatever sanctions or punishments you deem appropriate and wish to reestablish a benevolent relationship between House Abbott and House Potter.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open and was only dimly aware of Neville whistling and moving to his side. Susan remained bowed while Neville leaned over to quietly talk to him. “Harry, this is a bigger deal than you might think. You have two options here: one, accept their apology on behalf of House Potter and offer to determine reparations at a later date or two, refuse their apology and break off the alliance between your Houses.”

“That would be bad right?” Harry whispered back while Hannah started shifting nervously from foot to foot though Susan remained firmly planted.

“It’s up to you, Harry,” Neville said. “Susan’s really nice though and her Aunt is very fair. Hannah’s very also very nice and her family has good business deals overseas. If it was me, I’d accept the apology but you’re the one who they were calling the Heir of Slytherin a few weeks ago.”

Harry turned to regard the two girls in front of him. After nearly a minute he sighed and stood up straighter. “I, Harry James Potter, accept the apologies of Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott and behalf of House Potter. All previous insults are forgiven though reparations will be determined at a later date.” He glanced at Neville in case he had missed something but the other boy just smiled and gave him a thumbs up.

Susan and Hannah stood up together and smiled over at him. “Thanks, Harry,” Susan said. “We really are sorry for what we said.”

“We’ll try to talk to some people in Hufflepuff to see if we can get them to stop spreading those rumors,” Hannah said nodding. “I don’t think many of them really believe it you know? We’re all just a little scared.”

“Yeah, I understand,” Harry sighed. “Thanks for apologizing girls. We should probably all head to dinner. I bet Hermione is wondering where we are anyway.”

Ronald Weasley looked on from the corner as the four left the hallway. He scowled to himself and muttered, “Oh of course Potter has gotten those two to listen to him. He must have used some sort of Dark Parsel magic on them. Everyone knows that parseltongues are evil. Of course he’s the Heir. Well I’m not fooled Potter! I’ll watch you, and when you slip up I’ll figure out how you’re doing it, and I’ll expose you! I’ll stop the Heir of Slytherin – I’ll save them all!”

The Quidditch match against Slytherin was a joke. Malfoy strutted around like a prince beforehand showing off his amazing new Nimbus 2001 and bragging to the entire school how it was hands down leagues beyond Harry’s poor old broom.

Of course Harry proved that the talent trumps money by literally snatching the snitch from beside the git’s ear.

That would have made the game fun if only one of the Bludgers hadn’t decided it had a personal vendetta against Harry’s head. Oliver Wood had tried to stop the game once the team had realized the Bludger was ignoring every other player, but the Slytherins managed to keep distracting Madam Hooch before he could get her attention. The point was moot once Harry caught the
Nobody bothered to tell the Bludger the game had ended though. It ended up breaking his arm before being destroyed by a seething Hermione. Harry would’ve laughed at her telling off Hooch if he hadn’t been busy trying to run from Flophart.

“What did you do?” Harry moaned as he held his apparently newly deboned arm.

“Oh, yes, well,” Lockhart chuckled slightly as he stepped back. “The spell can go a bit wrong sometimes. Guess we’ll just leave the rest to Madam Pomfrey, eh, Harry?” He flashed a winning smile at Harry. The boy tried to remember whether or not he had any runes that could let him castrate the ‘teacher’ and not get caught. “Now just remember this for your own work later there, Harry! It’s important to always have a healer on standby for delicate work just in case the spell fails.”

“I’m going to – ” Harry growled.

“Professor Lockhart, I would thank you to refrain from touching my patients again in the future,” an ice cold voice said. Harry cut off and looked with relief to the school healer. Thank god for Pomfrey. He would never complain about her potions’ tastes or her bedside manners again if she would just keep the lunatic away from him! “Come along, Mr. Potter. I’m going to have to keep you overnight to fix that.”

“Dobby,” Harry sighed as he woke up in the middle of the night to see the little house elf sitting despondently on his hospital bed. Harry’s arm felt like he had thousands of tiny needles thrusting into it but he did his best to keep the pain from his face. It wasn’t as bad as it could have been. “So let me guess, you enchanted the Bludger?”

Dobby nodded his head and turned shimmering eyes on Harry. “Dobby is sorry Great Harry Potter Sir but Dobby felt if Harry Potter Sir was hurt badly then he would be sent home.”

Harry shut his eyes and counted to ten before responding to the elf. “Dobby. First off, I am sorry for getting mad the first time we met. Second, I do appreciate the concern you’re showing as well as the efforts to get around your orders. Third, please stop trying to save my life!”

“But Harry Potter Sir – ”

“No, listen to me, Dobby,” Harry said forcefully. Dobby stopped what he was doing and just stared at Harry. “Good. Now, your attempts at saving my life – while well meaning – are just putting me in more danger. You understand that that Bludger could have killed me?”

“Not kill Harry Potter Sir! Never kill! Just grievously injure!”

Harry had to stop to take a few deep breaths again. “And if it had hit my head?” Dobby’s mouth clanged shut. “Or if it had me while I was a hundred feet in the air?” Dobby started to reach for the nearby potions tray but Harry had been expecting that. He reached out, caught the house elf’s arm and forced him to sit back down before the little guy could hurt himself. “Like I said, Dobby. You’re efforts to save me are dangerous. I know the danger is whatever monster is in the Chamber. My friends and I are trying to figure out what it is. Just like you don’t want to let me be hurt by staying I don’t want them to be hurt either. So if you can’t give me any information on this can you at least not try to get me to leave anymore before I can help my friends? Please, Dobby?”

“Dobby…” the house elf wrung his hands glancing longingly at the potions tray. “Dobby would respectfully request Harry Potter Sir leaves the school with his friends.”
‘Well that’s some progress,’ Harry thought. “We can’t leave, Dobby.”

“But, Harry Potter Sir, Miss Moany died the last time the Chamber was opened! Harry Potter Sir must be –” Dobby cut off as the sounds of conversation drifted into the room. Both human and house elf turned to look at the door to the hospital wing. Dobby popped away and Harry flopped back into his bed just as the door opened. Professor’s McGonagall and Snape, Headmaster Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey all walked in floating an unconscious Colin Creevey ahead of them. Harry sucked in a breath at the way the younger boy’s arms were held in front of his face clutching his ever present camera.

“It is the same as Mrs. Norris, Poppy,” Dumbledore said in a low voice.

“There is nothing I can do without those mandrakes, Headmaster. I can’t even tell if they’re conscious or if their minds are as frozen as their bodies.”

“Nevertheless, we must wait. I will speak with Pomona about when her crop will be fully matured.”

The teachers moved back out of the room and Harry turned back over thinking. ‘You’re just going to leave him there? What if he is conscious? Someone could go crazy trapped in their mind without anything to distract them…What is wrong with these people?’

“Okay, Ginny, you’ve got the rotation list?” Harry asked the young redhead in the Gryffindor Common Room the next afternoon. The girl nodded so fast her hair started fanned out. When he had asked her that morning about getting together a list of Colin’s friends who would be willing to sit and talk to him for a bit each day Ginny had barely managed to eke out a quiet “sure” before running off.

“That’s great, Ginny,” Neville said smiling at her. She shyly returned his grin before handing over the list of people.

“No, Ginny,” Harry said pushing it back to her. “You should tell everyone and around the times. Just try to make sure it’s for at least 3 hours every day okay?” She nodded again. “Great! Hermione, Nev, we’ve got to go check that thing right?”

His friends nodded and joined him as they left the Common Room and headed down to the bathroom they were sharing with Myrtle’s ghost. Moaning Myrtle could be depressing and a little creepy, but she was nice enough to let them use the room and she kept anyone else away while the trio was gone.

“Harry, do you really think that we’re going to be able to keep the rotation going until the mandrakes are ready?” Hermione asked chewing on her lip.

“Well I’ve got two ideas for that actually,” Harry said. “I’ve been thinking of trying to set up a telly for him.”

“Harry you know we can’t! Electronics don’t work here. It says so in Hogwarts, A History!” Hermione huffed crossing her arms and glaring at him.

“They don’t work yet,” Harry said smirking. “I’ve been thinking about it and I figure if I can work a Suppressor into a Local cluster and figure out a way to stamp it onto the machine then we just need to deal with the power issue. Anything with batteries should work fine, meaning if I can’t figure out a way to run an electric line in or convert magic into electricity then at the very least we ought to be able to get a radio set up…” Harry trailed off as he noticed that Hermione had stopped
in the middle of the corridor and was just staring at him with her mouth wide open. Harry turned to Neville who just shrugged.

“You – you – you’ve figured out how to make electronics work at Hogwarts!??” Hermione squeaked pointing at him.

“I might have figured it out. It’s going to take a bit of tinkering you know and I still probably won’t be able to deal with the power issues for a while…I’m mostly just hoping for the radio I guess…what?”

Hermione’s mouth snapped closed and she shook her head. “And they tell me I’m the genius…” Harry heard her mutter. “Come on, you two, let’s check on the potion,” Hermione said over her shoulder.

“You know, Harry,” Neville said following their friend, “you could always just set up a Wizarding Wireless instead of creating an entirely new rune cluster.”

“Oh.” Harry at least had the decency to blush at the mention of a mundane solution. “Yeah, I guess that could work too…”

“So why exactly am I going with you three to talk with the Headmaster?” Shiva asked Harry. He was currently leading Hermione, Neville and Shiva down the halls towards Dumbledore’s office.

“Because I need backup in case this doesn’t go well,” Harry said with a shrug. “I figure Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick will probably be on my side. Snape is likely to shoot it down just because it’s me bringing it up. I’m not sure about Professor Sprout. I wanted to make sure we had a swing vote just in case.”

Shiva snorted. “And how are you so sure that I’m going to like this brilliant plan of yours?”

“Because you and Hermione are always yelling at me to look for mundane solutions instead of resorting to runes all the time. So I talked with Neville and we came up with a mundane solution. I’m actually a little surprised none of the adults brought it up already.” He turned to give her puppy dog eyes. “And because you said you’d back me up on anything.”

Shiva gave a deep laugh at that. “Cute and I give you points for the eyes, kid! But your delivery timing needs some serious work!”

Harry chuckled before turning back. “Well it was worth a shot. I’m not as good as Hermione,” he ignored her shout of protest and continued, “but in all seriousness, Shiva, I really do believe you’ll think this is a good idea.”

“Alright, but no promises if it needs work, Harry. Sugar Quill,” Shiva said to the gargoyle and motioned for the trio to head on up as it stepped out of the way.

“Oh, Harry, my boy, come in, come in,” Dumbledore said gesturing to the seats in front of his desk. Harry ground his teeth. This was not the time to remind Dumbledore that he was certainly not the man’s boy.

“Thank you, Professor.” Harry, Neville and Hermione took their seats while Shiva moved to the side with Dumbledore and the other Heads of House.

“And just what are you doing here Babbling?” Snape sneered at the younger woman.
Inside Harry seethed at the man but he schooled his features before calmly stating, “I’ve been consulting with her, Sir.”

“Severus,” Dumbledore said with a small glance at the Potions Master. The greasy haired man ground his teeth but fell quiet. “Now, Harry. You mentioned in your request that you had a solution to our problem with Mrs. Norris and young Mr. Creevy?”

“Well actually, Sir – ”

Snape again cut off Harry. “We will not be using any of your experiments on school children, Potter.”

“Severus, be quiet!” Eight heads turned to goggle at McGonagall who blushed slightly but returned her harsh stare onto Snape. “We are all worried about the petrification. Let the boy speak.”

“Thanks, Professor,” Harry said shocked. He shook his head and turned back to Dumbledore setting his features again. “As I was saying. It was actually mostly Neville’s idea.” The other boy blushed. “We know that the mandrake drought is the best way to restore Mrs. Norris and Colin but we think it’s stupid to wait for the mandrakes here to mature.”

“You arrogant little – ”

“Severus!” McGonagall snapped. He cut off and the Deputy Headmistress nodded for Harry to go on.

“We don’t see why Hogwarts can’t just order mature mandrakes via owl post. Hermione helped Neville make the list of all the suppliers in Britain who have mature mandrakes currently.” Neville handed the list to Dumbledore while the other teachers present just stared at the trio with varying shades of shock flickering over their features. “We sorted it by price and delivery time. Going the middle of the road option, would have both Colin and Mrs. Norris up and about by the end of the week. Two tops if you choose one of the slower delivery venues.”

“This is…” McGonagall seemed almost speechless as she leaned over to look at the list Neville had provided.

“An excellent idea, Mr. Potter, Mr. Longbottom, Miss Granger!” Flitwick exclaimed. “50 points to Gryffindor for each of you!”

“I agree,” Professor Sprout said peering at the list as well. “I think some of these top options are a bit too much for our current budget but these others should be perfectly within reason.”

“Excellent mundane solution, Harry,” Shiva said flashing them a thumbs up.

Snape just sneered but at least he didn’t say anything against it.

“This was an ingenious idea, my boy,” Dumbledore said peering at Harry. He got a slight headache as he met the man’s gaze but resisted reaching up to scratch at his forehead. “I will bring this up with the board as soon as possible.”

“Okay, everybody got their doses?” Hermione asked for the third time. She received rolled eyes and nodded heads from Harry and Neville as both held up their potion vials along with Hermione. “Excellent. Now remember, we only have an hour after we drink this. Harry you found the Slytherin Common Room already right?” Another nod. “And you know the password?”
“Like I said before, Hermione, it’s Balderdash. Can we please just do this already?” Harry said in exasperation. Her attention to detail was generally welcome but after going over the same information for the fourth time it got frustrating.

“Yes. Yes, I think we’re ready. Bottoms up everyone.” Hermione chugged back her potion vial as the boys did the same with theirs. A few nauseating moments later, Pansy Parkinson, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle were staring back at each other in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom with varying degrees of cringing and fascination.

“Hugh, I feel dirty,” Crabbe-Neville rumbled. “Polyjuice tastes disgusting!”

“Well,” Pansy-Hermione replied, “it’s supposed to change taste and color based on the target. Perhaps it’s just these three that are…”

“Gross and sickening?” Goyle-Harry ventured slipping his glasses into his pocket. “Come on guys. Let’s not waste any time.”

Venturing down into the dungeons Goyle-Harry led his friends into the section of corridor housing the Slytherin dormitory. He couldn’t help a slight nod of approval as they let themselves in. The people might leave something to be desired for the most part but the rooms themselves seemed nice enough. They tapestries were nice and the sunken pit in the middle gave it a bit more character than the Gryffindor Common Room. The trio plopped down on a couch near Malfoy with Goyle-Harry grunting at him.

“Ah there you three are!” Malfoy said rolling his eyes at Goyle-Harry and Crabbe-Neville. “You sure took your time getting back. Pansy, why are you sitting way over there?”

“Uh, I um…” Pansy-Hermione stuttered. She shot a quick glance and Goyle-Harry before shifting closer to Malfoy. Goyle-Harry barely managed to stop his snarl as Malfoy draped his arm over her shoulders and pulled her into his side. Pansy-Hermione stiffened but gave no other sign of discomfort.

Sitting at one of the desks against the opposite wall, Daphne narrowed her eyes at the newcomers and nudged Tracey. Her friend didn’t look up from her paperwork or her little book until Daphne elbowed her again and subtly nodded towards the couches.

“So, where were you?” Malfoy asked not even bothering to look at his bodyguards.

“We heard something new about Potter being the Heir of Slytherin,” Crabbe-Neville said.

“I can’t believe people actually believe that tripe,” Malfoy snorted. “I mean really, that idiot as the Heir of a Founder?”

Pansy-Hermione’s lips curled up in a snarl but Malfoy didn’t notice before she schooled her features again. Daphne and Tracey however raised their eyebrows at the girl. Goyle-Harry leaned forward and stared at Malfoy. “You really don’t know anything about who it actually is? You aren’t holding out on us are you?”

“My father had mentioned something about it ages ago but he’s never elaborated. I wish I could find out who is doing this though. Then I could send them after the best targets!” Malfoy’s face seemed to light up as the trio of infiltrators’ darkened. “I mean really, Creevy was annoying and all but they could’ve gone after Potter’s posse with Granger first. Or those foreigners the Patil twins. Or even the Li girl. She may be pretty but she’s never going to be worth anything beyond a mistress.”
Pansy-Hermione’s eyes had been squeezed closed and both Goyle-Harry and Crabbe-Neville’s hands were clenched so tight, their knuckles were white. “Still, Draco, you’ve got to have heard whispers,” Pansy-Hermione let out, her voice strained.

“I’ve told you time and again I don’t know,” Malfoy laughed and stood to stretch before shaking his head at the girl. “Honestly Pansy you’re supposed to be smarter than these two. I’m going to turn in. See you three in the morning.”

The trio looked at each other. Goyle-Harry checked his watch and then nodded towards the door. All three calmly got up, made an excuse about going to check on something with Snape and stalked out of the Dungeons. They turned into an unused classroom a few corridors down and waited a minute for the polyjuice to wear off. Once the transformation was finished all three pulled off their Slytherin uniforms and swapped back into the Gryffindor ones.

“I never want to do that again,” Neville said shuddering. “I wanted to floor him so bad!”

“You and me both, Nev,” Harry muttered darkly.

“At least now we know for sure that Malfoy is just a blustering fool,” Hermione said though her frown spoke of badly she wanted to use far stronger language.

“Come on guys.” Harry moved to the door but as he opened it he was greeted by two smiling faces.

“Hello, gentlemen. Lady,” Daphne said as she swept past Harry followed by Tracey. Tracey casually pushed the door closed and leaned against it while Daphne looked at the Gryffindors.

“Greengrass,” Neville said nodding to her warily.

“Mind if I put a few privacy spells up?” The Gryffindors turned to one another at this question before Harry hesitantly nodded his okay. Daphne’s smile widened before flicking her wand and throwing up several different silencing and anti-listening spells.

“Where did you learn those?” Hermione asked, her curiosity winning out.

“It’s standard for my family to be taught disarming, stunning and anti-eavesdropping spells before we attend school. Better to be safe than sorry after all,” Daphne said with a shrug. “Now to business.”

“Business?” Harry asked as he stepped in front of the Hermione and Neville.

“Yes. Business. Well, I suppose that might be too strong a word as I don’t really expect money to change hands. It’s not like we’re blackmailing you or anything.”

“Blackmail?” Harry’s eyebrows rose.

“Well you did just illegally obtain or brew polyjuice potion and use it to infiltrate a rival dorm after all. I could blackmail you if I wanted to.” Harry started to reach for his wand before Daphne waved him away and Tracey quietly laughed. “I said I’m not going to do that. Really, Potter, listen better. Actually I’m rather impressed. I wouldn’t have thought any of you had it in you. Almost downright Slytherin of you actually!”

Harry snorted at the irony inherent in that statement but relaxed. These girls weren’t part of Malfoy’s group, they had already spoken with them a few times throughout the year after the library comment about Lockhart…and Tracey was not looking very well anyway. She hid it well
with makeup and laughs but he’d seen the signs of lack of sleep in the mirror enough to recognize how exhausted the girl was.

“So you three were looking for information on whoever is performing these attacks?” Daphne asked.

Harry nodded wondering idly when the two had become the spokesmen for either side in this… arrangement? “Yeah. We had kinda hoped it would end up being Malfoy but didn’t really expect it. He’s too arrogant to not be boasting about it.”

“Agreed.” Daphne sighed. “I don’t suppose there are any candidates in Gryffindor?”

“Not that we’ve noticed.” Harry shook his head. “I’d almost be tempted to say Ron Weasley, but since no Slytherins have been hit…”

“Yes, we really would be his first target wouldn’t we. Well do you have any contacts in Hufflepuff?”

“Yes, actually, I do. They haven’t heard anything and most of them are pretty well convinced it’s me.”

“Yes, well I never really expected it from the Puffs anyway. They aren’t exactly known for their deviousness. I don’t have anyone in Ravenclaw yet myself, and I doubt you do either.”

“No,” Harry shook his head. “But I don’t think it’s them.”

“Neither do I,” Daphne shrugged. “I don’t suppose you think any of the staff could be at fault?”

“I’d believe Snape personally but I’m not exactly unbiased there.” Harry’s face darkened thinking of the hateful man.

“True, you really aren’t. I doubt Snape is doing this. He’d have done something sooner. And he’d likely have a target to take the fall. Since there isn’t any clear perpetrator it’s unlikely to be him. My current guess,” Daphne said shrugging her shoulders, “is someone in the upper years in my own House. I’d be willing to share any information Tracey and I discover if you would be willing to do the same?”

Harry considered for a minute. He glanced back at his friends who just shrugged and nodded back to him. “Sure. I’d be okay with that.”

“Excellent.” Daphne held out her hand. “A deal then?”

“Deal,” Harry said, shaking her hand.

Tracey stepped away from the door. “Great. Now that we’re all partners I think it’s time to head back. Some of us need to get some beauty sleep.” Her voice was nonchalant, but Daphne narrowed her eyes at her friend and a brief flash of concern crossed her features.

“Yes. We probably should return. Potter, Longbottom, Granger. It’s been a pleasure.” Nodding to the trio, Daphne took down her spells and grabbed Tracey’s hand to take her back to the Slytherin dorms.

“That was…unexpected,” Hermione said frowning after the girls.

“Yeah, but I actually trust them. Go figure.” Harry shrugged.
Neville stared back with wide eyes. “Seriously? You?”

“I know.” Harry shrugged. “Search me as to why. Maybe it’s because the Ice Queen actually talks to us almost normally? Or that she seems to hate Malfoy as much as I do?”

“Well, Tracey is a half-blood…” Neville shrugged. “She probably doesn’t get star treatment in that House and those two are practically inseparable.”

Harry smiled at his friends. “A lot like the three of us then, eh? Come on guys. Let’s get back before curfew.”

Shiva leaned back into her chair and rubbed her eyes. It had been a long few weeks. It had been a long few months for that matter. Considering how many offices shut down completely during the holiday season in the Wizarding World she had been pleasantly surprised that her Muggle solicitor kept going strong. A knock on her door had Shiva groaning but yelling out for whoever it was to come in.

“Hey, Shiva. Merry Christmas.”

“Oh, hey, Harry,” Shiva said with a small smile at the student plopping down on the chair across from her. “How’s your break been?”

“Not as…productive as I’d hoped. But I think I made new allies. Maybe not…friends exactly, but allies at least.” Harry frowned but ended up shrugging.

“Wow, way to be cryptic there kid,” Shiva said chuckling.

“Says the woman who won’t tell me where she disappears to every few weeks,” Harry replied with a raised eyebrow.

Shiva’s good mood dried up. She leaned forward and clasped her hands. “Harry, I’ve been avoiding telling you because I swore I would do everything I could not to hurt you. I didn’t want to get your hopes up if it turned out to be nothing.” He nodded. “But…I finally got some of the information I’ve been looking for.” His eyes widened and he leaned forward as well. “Did you know that according to official Muggle records you barely exist?”

“What?” Harry squinted at her.

“You have a birth certificate. Your parents have a death certificate. You are registered as attending primary school. That’s it.”

“So…what does that mean?”

“That means, Harry,” Shiva said slowly. “That my solicitor can proceed as I asked him to. Harry,” she reached out a hesitant hand and clasped the preteen’s own, “what would you say if I asked if you wanted to live with me?”

She watched a flurry of emotions play across the boy’s face before it settled into a hopeful but confused expression. “I thought that wasn’t possible?”

“Technically it’s difficult. Not impossible. We don’t have any blood relation and I can’t really explain the majority of our mentoring thing to Muggles but the solicitor I’m working with is a Squib who’s done this sort of thing before. We don’t have a plethora of evidence that is useful against your relatives unfortunately, but the simple fact that they never bothered to officially file
any guardianship or adoption papers for you and that you have next to no legal footprint is 
damning enough as it is. There’s also the fact that I doubt they’d bother trying to fight for 
custody.” Shiva frowned at the thought of people not bothering to fight for this kid before shaking 
her head and giving Harry a slight smile. “I still have a lot of paperwork and court stuff to go 
through if we do this. But I need to know, do you want me to do this, Harry?”

“You won’t get in trouble with the Headmaster?” Harry asked furrowing his brow.

“Leave it to you to be worried about someone else before yourself,” Shiva said smiling. “I’m 
doing this completely without magic and completely in the Muggle world. That’s a large part of 
the reason it’s taking so long. This isn’t a snap process and there’s a lot of just waiting for things to 
movethough the system on the administrative side. The upside to that is that Albus Dumbledore, 
and Purebloods in general, have next to no knowledge of anything that goes on on the other side of 
the curtain. As long as no one brings this up to him before it’s all complete there’s nothing he can 
do after the fact. I’m making sure it’s going to be ironclad and that it would be a criminal offense 
to remove you at any point before you turn 17 for any reason beyond your parents miraculously 
returning from the dead – and even then it’d still be unlikely.”

Harry leaned back in his seat and ran a hand through his hair. After a few minutes he asked her 
another question. “Would I still be able to keep my last name? I don’t want that link to my parents 
to just…die off.”

“It’s really up to you, Harry. I could ask my solicitor to move forward with either an adoption or a 
legal guardian status. Legally speaking, they’d be the same thing. An adoption would have you 
taking my name or at least hyphenating it in. A legal guardian would basically still have you as a 
member of my family but more as a ward than a son.” Shiva gave his hand a squeeze before 
continuing, “You don’t have to answer right now, Harry. Take some time to – ”

“Legal guardian,” he said cutting her off.

“Sorry?”

“I want you to be my legal guardian. Then I can keep the Potter line going but still get away from 
the Dursleys. And I trust you. That’s…I don’t like adults. I like you. I’d like you to be my legal 
guardian, Shiva,” Harry finished in a rush.

Shiva pulled the boy into a hug and for the first time she could remember, he hugged her back. 
“You sure, kid?”

“Yes,” he whispered into her shoulder.

“Okay.” She lifted a hand to quickly wipe away a sheen from her eyes. “My solicitor warned me 
that this might take a few months. But worst case scenario it shouldn’t be any longer than a week 
or two into the summer before everything is finalized, tops. And even if it takes that long I want 
you to – ”

“No.” Harry pulled back and shook his head. Shiva frowned at him but before she could ask he 
already answered. “If it takes until a few weeks into the summer than I’ll stay with them until it’s 
done.”

“But – ”

“I am not about to risk being stuck there for another five years simply because I couldn’t handle 
two weeks. I’ll stay until it’s done and no one can do anything about it.”
Shiva regarded him carefully before sighing. “You are very stubborn you know that?”

“Professor McGonagall says I get it from my Father. Professor Flitwick says I get it from my mother,” he smiled at her. “The way I see it, I’m cursed to be twice as stubborn as either.”

Shiva had just sent off her owl to her solicitor with instructions and was headed back to her office when she saw a figure moving to block her path forward. A figure whose teeth caught the glint of the full moon. Sighing internally and steeling up her features Shiva nodded to the idiot in front of her. “Evening Gilderoy.” God how she wished she could use his last name instead but she honestly didn’t trust herself not to call him Flophart like Harry and his friends liked to.

“Ah, Babs, fancy running into you on this most beautiful of evenings!” His smile widened while her teeth clenched at the horrible nickname. “Why the night is almost as beautiful as you, my dear!”

“I’ve asked you not to call me that, Gilderoy,” Shiva said, quietly counting to ten internally.

“Ah but Bathsheda is such a horrendously mismatched name for a nymph such as yourself.” Lockhart walked a little closer. It was close enough for her to smell his aftershave. Which was a shame because the scent itself was actually rather nice. It was just that it wrapped such a disgusting package.

“I’m not like your little fangirls prancing around the upper classes, Gilderoy. I’ve had a long day. Good night.” She tried to push past him only to find him stepping back in front of her. Shiva hissed in frustration. Would this idiot ever stop? How many times did she have to shoot him down before he gave up the chase?

“You’ve said that for months now, Babs. Just one evening. You will never regret it, I promise. There are many who can testify to that.” He winked at her. He actually winked at her. Shiva had to fight down the urge to vomit. “Oh, look mistletoe! You know what they say about traditions!”

A horrible idea came to Shiva but she couldn’t stop the manic grin from spreading across her face at its potential. “Oh, that it is. You want a kiss, Gilderoy?” The idiot smiled and moved in, closing his eyes.

“Ah see that’s the spirit my – arrrgghhhhh!” Lockhart collapsed to the stone floor hands clutched between his legs and knees clenched tight.

“Have a pleasant evening, Gilderoy!” Shiva waved over her shoulder walking away. The grin stayed plastered to her face and she whistled happily all the way back to her office.
March was upon Hogwarts and an additional three students had been petrified. Harry was feared and hated by about half the school since the idiots still believed him to be the Heir of Slytherin. He had taken to walking around with the Concussor and Ninja stones on his belt in case either was needed. Thankfully he hadn’t had to defend against any actual attacks beyond the typical tripping jinxes and fearful gazes.

The bigger surprise was the other half the school. Harry actually had allies. Hermione and Neville along with the Weasley twins and their sister were almost assured. A blond, first year friend of Ginny’s – apparently named Luna – had also pledged her support. Though Harry hadn’t been entirely certain whether the girl was agreeing that he was not the Heir or if she was pledging her support to help him take over the school and purge the wrackspurts…

Lavender Brown, Parvati and Padma Patil, and the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team rallied behind him. The Hufflepuff support really only came down to Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott. Besides Padma and Luna, the Ravenclaws were also mostly avoiding him – with the notable exception of Su Li and Cho Chang who had both stated unequivocally that they believed Harry had nothing to do with whatever was going on. The real surprise had been Slytherin. Most of the upper years had apparently been annoyed that Harry was rumored to be the Heir and ignored it on principle. In their own year, Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis had reported that Millicent Bulstrode had taken to threatening anyone who claimed Harry had anything to do with the attacks and Blaise Zabini had also begun to support him from the sidelines.

Now if only Harry could figure out exactly who the Heir was …

“Mr. Potter, Mr. Longbottom?” McGonagall asked from the open door to the Charms classroom. “I must speak with you for a moment. I’m sorry Fillius but I need to remove your students a little early.”

“Of course. Of course,” Flitwick responded with a worried look. McGonagall just gave a slight shake of her head. “Don’t forget to practice for your homework, gentlemen.”

Harry and Neville frowned at each other. An expression which only deepened after they had grabbed the bags and noticed that McGonagall was exceedingly drawn and tired. The stern Head of House had never looked so withdrawn in front of her students before and Harry felt the first fluttering of dread settle in his stomach.

“Professor? What’s happened?” Harry asked pushing down his worry as simply overreacting. She was probably just coming to tell them what was taking so long with purchasing the mandrakes. He had been asking her every day after all. ‘Then where is Hermione. How come she never showed up for class after running off at lunch? When does Hermione ever miss class?’

“There has been another attack, Mr. Potter.” McGonagall’s voice was soft. Too soft. Too controlled to be remotely natural.

‘Where is Hermione?!’ Harry’s brain screamed. “So are we being questioned by Professor Dumbledore again? Does Snape want to accuse me of the attacks yet again?”
“We are going to the hospital wing, Mr. Potter. The student – the student was found in the hallway outside the library…”

Harry barely heard anymore of his professor’s sentence. He was too busy fighting down panic. ‘Hermione was going to the library after lunch. She had had an idea. She had gone to research her idea. WHERE WAS HERMIONE!?!?’

“I assure you both that we will find the cause of this and…”

“Where –” Harry’s mouth ran dry and had to start again. He did his best to ignore the gibbering fool screaming for bloody murder in a corner of his mind. “Where is Hermione, Professor McGonagall.”

The three came to stop outside the doors to the infirmary and McGonagall turned shimmering eyes onto Harry. “Miss Granger is inside, Harry. She was petrified just like the other victims.”

Harry’s control strained against its bonds but he managed to keep hold long enough to open the doors to the wing. He nearly sprinted to his friend’s side, Neville right behind him. Hermione was lying in a bed near Colin Creevy and the others, her hand was extended with a small mirror clutched in it and a look of surprise frozen on her features. Her other hand was curled into a ball and held to her breast. Harry collapsed on top of her and – for the first time in six years – he cried.

“My boy, I am sorry,” Dumbledore’s voice droned out somewhere behind Harry. He couldn’t be bothered to care. “Please take all the time you need here. I am sure Miss Granger would not want you to neglect your classes on her account however.” Harry’s hands clenched and he started to reign himself back in. It wouldn’t do to hex the Headmaster. Hermione would never let him hear the end of it when she woke up.

“I don’t see what the fuss is all about,” Snape drawled near Dumbledore, “the girl is just the same as the others.” Harry’s blood ran cold and his tears stopped immediately. He sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Where are the mandrakes, Headmaster Dumbledore?” Harry said still clutching Hermione’s side.

“Sorry?”

“The mandrakes,” Harry repeated. He lifted his head and gazed at them. If looks could kill than Snape would be a smoldering pile of rags while Dumbledore would likely be twitching in pain.

“The mature mandrakes that Neville, Hermione and I advised you to buy weeks ago. The mandrakes that are now out of season for the large majority of Britain, and so have a diminishing stock every day. The mandrakes that we had compiled a list of. The mandrakes to restore our classmates and friends.”

“Our mandrakes will be ready in mere weeks,” Snape said. Neville growled right back at the Professor while Harry never took his gaze from Dumbledore.

“Where are the mandrakes? Sir.” Nobody took much notice of the breeze picking up or the curtains beginning to flap near the windows. Despite the windows not being open.

Dumbledore sighed. “The Board of Governors – at the urging of Lucius Malfoy – has determined that there are insufficient funds in the Hogwarts budget to justify the purchase of mature mandrakes while a crop is already growing on the grounds.”

Neville’s growl increased to a full snarl. He started to take a step towards the teachers but Harry stood up and all eyes turned to him. Harry’s face was seething in rage, his lips curled into a primal
sneer. The hair on his head whipped about as the breeze in the room became a small maelstrom centered on Harry. Harry stalked towards the assembled staff amidst complete silence from everyone else present.

“You. You bigoted, racist arseholes!” Harry yelled. “BUDGET CONCERNS!?! BUDGETS!?! YOU BASTARDS! WOULD THERE BE BUDGET CONCERNS IF ANY OF THESE PEOPLE WERE PUREBLOODS? IF THEIR PARENTS COULD BE HERE YELLING ABOUT THE LACK OF TREATMENT? IF THEY HAD ENOUGH MONEY TO DONATE TO THE RIGHT CAUSES OR THE RIGHT POCKETS? WOULD THERE BE BUDGET CONCERNS THEN PROFESSOR?! WOULD THERE BE BUDGET CONCERNS IF ANYONE CARED THAT THEY WERE LOSING MONTHS OF THEIR EDUCATION DUE TO THESE ATTACKS? WELL, SIR?! WOULD THERE BE BUDGET CONCERNS THEN?!” His eyes almost seemed to glow and the air near them had several small sparks flaring off every few seconds.

“My boy, I assure you –”

“I AM NOT YOUR BOY! MY PARENTS ARE DEAD! AND THE SAME PHILOSOPHY THAT CAUSED THEIR MURDERS IS LEAVING MY FRIENDS LYING HERE! BUDGET CONCERNS! YOU CAN TAKE YOUR BUDGET CONCERNS AND SHOVE IT WHERE THE SUN DON’T SHINE! SIR!” Harry snarled and swept past the adults.

“Mr. Potter…where are you going?” McGonagall asked softly. She started to reach a hand out to him but seemed to think better of it and stopped halfway letting her arm fall back to her side.

“To the library, Professor,” Harry scowled not bothering to look back. “If none of you can figure out what the bloody hell is going on than I’ll do it myself. Neville!”

“Harry?” Neville nodded to him and hurried to catch up.

“Send off the forms. We’ll buy the damn mandrakes ourselves. If the stores are out of stock send it off to the ones we found out of country. I’ll figure out what Hermione was searching for and if it has anything to do with why she was attacked.”

“On it.” Neville reached the doors a second before Harry and took off down the corridor while Harry turned towards the library.

The staff was left gaping behind the two. “What just happened?” Pomfrey asked quietly.

“We were told very firmly how our world seems to work these days by two twelve year olds,” McGonagall said. She turned her gaze on Dumbledore with barely contained disgust. “And they were absolutely correct.”

“Potter? He had no right to speak to us like – ” Snape tried to spit out glaring after Harry. He was cut off mid-rant by McGonagall slapping him across the cheek. Three sets of eyes turned to McGonagall in shock who simply lowered her hand.

“As I said, Harry and Neville were absolutely correct. You, Albus, could have overrode the Board in the matter of safety of the students. You, Severus, could have immediately searched out low cost, fast alternatives to waiting months for our crop to mature. And I, I could have taken a far more targeted interest in healing my students than allowing this farce to continue. You all know as well as I do that if Draco Malfoy was lying in one of these beds not even a week would pass before he was walking around the castle again. And yet, Mr. Creevy has been lying there since before the turn of the New Year in his first year! We should all be ashamed of ourselves.” McGonagall scowled at all of the them and turned to stalk out of the hospital wing. “I for one am going to
attempt to catch Mr. Longbottom before he sends that owl in order to add my own gold to their purchase efforts.”

The wind trailing Harry had finally calmed by the time he stalked into the library. He was still riled up, but he had regained enough sense to speak with Madam Pince in a somewhat even tone. She had shown him the book that Hermione had been using prior to running off. Dangerous Magical Creatures. And it was missing a page from near the beginning. Harry stared down at the missing section with wide eyes and a gaping mouth. Hermione vandalized a book. The thought of such an event almost had Harry doubling over in laughter and shock.

At least he had somewhere to start now. Hagrid would be the next stop.

Harry had just walked out of the library and almost ran into Neville and McGonagall when he froze again. A soft beeping sounded from his left shirt sleeve and a red mark glowed faintly before dying down.

“Harry?” Neville asked cocking his head at the fading rune mark on Harry’s robe. “What was that?”

“Someone’s trying to get into my trunk,” Harry said confused. His features twisted in rage a second later and he repeated, “Someone’s trying to get into my trunk!” He took off down sprinting down the corridor. Neville and McGonagall shook off their surprise and ran after him a few moments later.

They had just managed to open the Fat Lady’s portrait door when Harry whipped out his Ninja stone, activated it and flew up the stairs to his dormitory. As he threw open the door, he saw Ron Weasley sitting on the floor near Harry’s open trunk with the Invisibility Cloak in his hands. Harry’s world turned red and he lashed out. A kick to the redhead’s hands saw the Cloak fly out and flutter to a heap on the floor. Harry didn’t even notice the door to the dorm bang open again as he threw a punch into Ron’s ribs. The boy cried out but Harry sent another punch into Ron, silencing him with a wheeze. He lost his hold on the Ninja stone and melted back into view but he didn’t care. Harry grabbed Ron and tossed him to the wall. He tried to throw another punch into the whimpering boy but found his arms restrained as ropes wrapped around him. Neville caught him so he didn’t fall and Fred and George ran into the room as well.

“You little git!” Harry yelled. The twins looked from Harry to Ron and back.

“Mr. Potter, would you care to explain?” McGonagall said lowering her wand.

“I saw the look he gave my Invisibility Cloak last year, Professor!” Harry spat out. “Fred and George were there! They saw it too. Ask them how Ron looked at it!” McGonagall glanced at the two older boys who looked guiltily at each other before turning back to her and slowly nodding. “It was the first time I ever got anything! I got worried he might try something so I warded my trunk. There’s three layers. One in case someone tries to open it that sends an alert to the entwined rune on my robes and sounds a warning here as well. The second activates if they try again and it marks their head. See!” Harry jerked his chin towards Ron who had the word THIEF across his forehead as if written with a green Magic Marker. One of the twins snorted and nodded approvingly. McGonagall’s eyes just narrowed. “The third layer knocks them back and gives a mild electric shock. You have to deliberately want to take something to keep going through all three!”

Harry spat at the redhead who had finally managed to stumble to his feet. “What? Got tired of thinking how the Heir of Slytherin had such nice things? You wanted to take some for yourself?”
“I heard Hermione was attacked!” Ron yelled back, his face darkening. “I wanted to follow you and get proof that you’re the one hurting people! That Cloak’s the best way to do it!”

“That’s the only thing I have of my father you arse! You want to take the pictures of my parents as well?! How about my mother’s notebooks?! Or maybe you’re more interested in the rune case Shiva gave me? Or the etching set from Hermione? Well?! What else do you want you –”

“That’s enough, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall said forcefully. Unlike in the hospital wing earlier, Harry calmed down enough to simply glare at Ron. “Mr. Weasley. 25 points from Gryffindor and a week of detention served between myself and Mr. Filch. I am ashamed that you resort to petty theft of a family heirloom! Rest assured this will be brought up to your parents. Mr.’s Fred and George Weasley, please escort your brother to the hospital wing to ensure that any injuries he has are treated.” Both twins nodded and moved to grab Ron’s shoulders. Fred patted Harry on the back as they passed muttered a quiet, “sorry mate,” to him. “Mr. Potter. I understand the stress you are currently under but this is not the way to deal with the situation. 15 points deducted for physical altercation. 5 points gained for a creative warding scheme.” McGonagall sighed. “Miss Granger will be fine, Harry. She was petrified yes, but she is otherwise uninjured. You need to calm down so that you remain that way yourself. Mr. Longbottom, please ensure to take care of him in the meantime.”

“So why are we going to Hagrid again?” Neville asked following Harry. It had been nearly a day until Harry was calm enough to go out and talk to the large man. Shiva had tried to speak with Harry a few times since then but he had simply stayed silent, standing vigil over Hermione.

“Hermione was looking up something about dangerous magical creatures. Who do we know who is the best source to get more information on that particular topic?” Harry said with raised eyebrows.

Neville chuckled. “Yeah. Good point.” He stopped and squinted towards their friend’s hut. “Hey, that’s the Minister. And Aurors…what are they doing at Hagrid’s?”

Harry’s insides went cold. “Neville, activate your Ninja and listen at the window.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Harry grabbed his own rune stone and pushed the activator etching. Feeling the now familiar shiver of the camouflage and silencing wards wrapping around him, Harry hurried to kneel down by the window to Hagrid’s hut. He saw a small shimmer in the air next to him and knew that Neville had arrived as well.

“Really, Minister, this is unnecessary.” Dumbledore’s voice drifted out to them from somewhere inside.

“Now, now, Albus, the attacks have yet to stop. The Ministry must be seen to be doing something!” Harry’s eyes narrowed at the implications of that statement. He shifted so that he could watch the man in the lime green bowler hat. The Minister was standing behind a trio of Aurors talking with Dumbledore while Hagrid sobbed into a large handkerchief at his table.

“Hagrid does not even have a wand. And the last time he was accused, the creature he was found with was an acromantula. Acromantulas cannot petrify victims in any way, Cornelius.”

One of the Aurors shifted her weight from foot to foot. Harry started as he recognized Tonks. Her hair wasn’t pink anymore but instead was brown and mousy. He could barely recognize her
without the wild hair or carefree expression. “He’s right Minister Fudge. I looked it up. Acromantulas can kill no problem and they’re smart as hell but…they couldn’t be related to what’s happening right now.”

“Be that as it may I am the Minister, Auror, and I say what is and is not possible!” Harry snarled. This man was even worse than Ron. At least the idiot Weasley used some form of logic. “Now arrest him and bring him to Azkaban until this mess is all solved!”

“But what about a trial, Sir?” Tonks tried again. Dumbledore just sighed and shook his head. The old man – the Chief Warlock – didn’t seem to be willing to do anything and Harry felt the wind picking up around him again.

“Rook,” one of the other Aurors said to Tonks, “let it go. If you want to graduate just shut up and do what you’re told.”

“That doesn’t seem –”

“It’s al’righ’,” Hagrid said with a final wheeze into his hanky. “I’ll go, Tonksie. Jus’ promise me you’ll find who’s doin’ this and help those kids.”

“We’ll figure it out, Hagrid,” Tonks said wilting even further. How dare they do that Tonks! To Hagrid! Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and turned back to the dim outline of Neville. His eyes widened as he noticed that he himself was visible again. With a start, Harry saw the small tornado that was whipping up by him and the sparks flying from the Ninja clutched in his hands. Harry hurriedly damped down on whatever wild magic he was sending off and the Ninja stopped sparking, the illusions and silencing wards snapping back into place around him. Breathing a sigh of relief and nodding thanks at Neville’s outline, Harry turned back to the window.

“Enough of this. Arrest him. I have other meetings to get to,” Fudge said with a twist of his hat. The small group stepped out with Hagrid in some sort of cuffs between them and Tonks trailing dejectedly behind. If being an Auror did that to her, he hoped she didn’t end up graduating. Tonks should be fun and cheery not looking like Dudley had been jumping on her back. Within a minute everyone had left Hagrid’s hut and Neville and Harry dropped the Ninja stones back into their belt holsters.

“What the hell is going on, Harry?” Neville stared where the group had disappeared to in the distance.

“I don’t know. But now we really have to figure it out. The government obviously doesn’t seem to want to solve anything.” Harry’s glare increased. Yet another strike against people with authority.

“I’m sorry, Hermione,” Harry said holding his friend’s hand. He and Neville had stopped in to talk with her after classes had let out. “We can’t get the mandrakes for you just yet. Apparently,” Harry spit the word like a curse, “Lucius Malfoy has managed to get a new law passed that regulates the import of dangerous magical substances and requires a holding period to ensure they are properly stored and inspected. By the time we could get them here, the ones growing would already be mature. I’m going to get that man. I don’t know how, but I’m going to get back at him somehow!”

Neville smirked from her other side. “We did find the book you were looking at though. I know Harry thinks you tore out that page but I still say he’s mental. I mean really, Hermione Granger defacing a book? That’s more insane that teaching Trevor to do the tango!” He chuckled. “We did order a new copy though just in case you really did do it. That way we can check the page and
try to figure out what you already knew.”

“Yes, maybe next time tell us what you’re running off to check so that we don’t have to guess, eh?” Harry said squeezing her hand. He frowned. She was holding something in the hand clutched to her chest. “What the…Neville look at this!”

“What?” Neville leaned over Hermione and peered at the hand. “Is that paper?”

“Hang on.” Harry grabbed one of the tweezer-like instruments on a side table near him and carefully worked the paper out of her hand. He unfolded it and held it up in triumph to Neville. “Told you she tore the page!”

“Yeah, yeah, bully for you. What’s it say?”

Harry squinted at the little piece of paper. “‘No snakes are more feared than the King of Serpents. The basilisk. A basilisk is born by hatching a chicken egg warmed from under a toad. They continue to grow as long as they live and specimens have been known to survive millennia. A basilisk’s gaze will immediately kill nearly anything that looks into its eyes and in addition, the snake’s venom is the most potent poison known to our world only able to be healed through the tears of a phoenix. Basilisk hide is nearly immune to spell fire – even more so than a dragon. The only known weakness of a basilisk is the crow of a rooster which is nearly instantly fatal to the creature.’ Neville,” Harry stared down at the paper with wide eyes, “weren’t all the roosters killed on Halloween?”

“Yeah…” Neville swallowed nervously. “But that can’t be the monster can it? The book says its gaze kills not petrifies.”

Harry slowly shook his head staring at the mirror still stuck in Hermione’s fingers and the camera Colin was clutching. “But what if someone didn’t see it directly, Nev? What if someone saw it say through a mirror? Or a camera? Or a puddle of water? Or a reflection in a suit of armor? Or through a ghost? And Salazar Slytherin was supposedly a parseltongue like me right? It would make sense for his monster to be something only he could control.”

“And it would explain why you could hear it and we couldn’t…We need to find Babbling and the other professors and let them know immediately!”

“Wait! Nev, give me a minute!” Harry tore into his bag, pulled out his etching tool and whipped off his glasses.

“Harry, this isn’t the time for a new invention! We have to tell them there’s a monster snake on the loose that can kill you by looking at you! Bloody hell, it’s a miracle no one’s died yet!”

“I know! This should just take a minute!”

“What are you doing, Harry?” Neville was practically jumping from one foot to another.

“It’s a Reflection rune twined with a Magic rune. Maybe it’ll bounce the gaze back at the thing if we stumble across it?” Harry finished his work and the glass of his lenses flashed briefly before the lines faded back to barely visible patterns. Harry put them back on his face and grabbed a shiny tray from the table handing it off to Neville.

“What I don’t get a reflection thing?”

“Can you transfigure glasses?” Harry asked raising an eyebrow. Neville wilted and shook his head. “That’s what I thought. Besides there’s probably a 50/50 shot that this does nothing anyway
and the basilisk just kills me. This way at least one of us will probably survive if we get unlucky…”

Harry and Neville practically flew down the corridors slowing only at intersections where Neville would carefully hold his shiny tray to peer around the corner and Harry would pray his Reflector Lenses held up. They had just tore around the corner to Shiva’s office and raised their fists to slam on the door when it was pulled open from the inside. A white faced Shiva stared back out at them, jerking back slightly in surprise before regaining her composure.

“Harry, Neville. This really isn’t a good time. I have to get to the Teacher’s conference room immediately and –”

“Shiva, we know what’s been attacking everyone! It’s a –” Harry explained hurriedly. Before he could get the nature of the beast out though Daphne Greengrass barreled into the corridor at a flat run. She saw Harry, Neville and Shiva and angled for them. Before anyone could say anything, Daphne had grabbed Harry’s robes in both hands and was pleading with him.

“Potter, please tell me you’ve seen her! She ran and I can’t find her! I should’ve realized something was wrong, but I didn’t see it until it was too late! Please, I need to find her!” Harry had never seen Daphne with so much as a hair out of place before but now…now she looked like Dudley had been chasing her for miles. Her face was splotchy, her hair wild, there were tear tracks down her face and her voice was just short of complete panic.

“Daphne, what are you talking about?” Harry asked trying to ignore the hands still clenched in his robes and focus on the girl in front of him.

“Tracey! I touched that stupid diary and she completely freaked out! She ran out of the room and I lost her and she’s gone! She’s gone! Potter, I need to find her! I don’t know what’s going on but something is horribly wrong!”

“Tracey Davis?” Shiva said in a whisper behind the three students. Her face had lost what little color it had left.

“Tracey Davis?” Shiva said in a whisper behind the three students. Her face had lost what little color it had left.

“Yes. Have you seen her, Professor? Please, I need to find her! She’s my – she’s my friend,” Daphne said with a hitch.

“Miss Greengrass I –”

All students return to your dormitories. All students return to your dormitories. Remain in your Common Rooms. Instructions will follow. Dumbledore’s voice reverberated through the castle sounding almost as if it was coming from the very walls themselves.

Harry’s blood ran cold as he turned between the frantic Daphne and the despondent Shiva.

“Shiva? Where is Tracey?”

“The three of you inside. Now,” Shiva said as she wiped a hand down her face and pushed her door open further. The students dutifully filed into the office. “I am sorry to have to tell you this but…another message was discovered on the walls a few minutes ago. It appears that Miss Davis was taken.”

“Taken?” Neville asked as his eyes narrowed. “Taken where? How?” Harry’s mind started turning. How did this fit? Why take Tracey?

“Into the Chamber. We don’t know how. I’m sorry Miss Greengrass.”
“But – that’s – no!” Daphne yelled not letting go of Harry’s arm. Her eyes widened and she took a shuddering breath before sitting up straight and her features visibly freezing into a mask of calm and disinterest. “What did the message say, Professor?”

“It said,” Shiva said, “that ‘Davis’ skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever. Her death will feed the rebirth.’ ” She gave a dark chuckle. “We have so utterly failed this school…”

“What the hell would a basilisk need Tracey for?” Neville asked collapsing back against the wall.

“A basilisk?” Shiva and Daphne both stared at the boy in utter confusion.

“It’s the Heir, Nev. The basilisk is just the weapon but someone needs to be controlling it. Someone who’s done it before. Or at least someone who’s figured it out and is using this as the perfect opportunity. What if it’s Lockhart? Maybe it’s him and he needed Tracey to complete some ritual or something…”

“Flophart? There’s no way that that idiot is the Heir!” Neville shot back.

“It would be a good cover…” Harry muttered.

“What the hell are you two talking about with a basilisk?” Shiva asked turning a hard stare on Harry. “Harry, I need to get to this staff meeting but if you know what is going on I need to know. Now.”

“Hermione figured it out before she was attacked, Shiva,” Harry explained. “The monster is a basilisk. It’s vulnerable to roosters. All the roosters were killed on Halloween before the first attack. It’s gaze kills but nobody has seen the direct gaze. Everybody’s been really, really lucky and only caught a reflection or a distorted view and so they’ve just been petrified. It’s supposed to be Salazar Slytherin’s monster and he was a parseltongue. It all fits. The monster is a basilisk.”

Shiva cursed and Daphne’s eyes widened turning between the two boys present. “But if Lockhart has a basilisk under his control why go after Tracey?”

“Search me.” Harry shrugged.

“Let’s go ask him,” Shiva growled before sweeping to her feet.

“Wait, Shiva! Can you transfigure glasses? Or at least something reflective?” Harry asked grabbing her arm before they could leave the room.

“What? Why?”

Harry pointed to his glasses. “The eyes, Shiva! A basilisk kills if you meet its eyes. I etched these into _Reflector Lenses_ which might bounce its gaze back at it, but neither Nev nor I can transfigure glasses so he had to make do with that tray.” Neville helpfully held up his medical tray.

Shiva peered at his lenses noticing the faint rune lines stenciled into the glass. She stood back up shaking her head. “I suck with transfiguration. Good catch though.” Flicking her wand two small mirrors flew out of the inner room and into her hand. She handed one to Daphne and took the other herself. “These will have to do for now. Come on everyone.”

The foursome hurried down the corridors of the castle. With any luck Lockhart would be at the staff meeting and they’d have backup. Shiva was directing them towards his office first though since it was on the way. She didn’t even stop to say anything as they pulled up outside. Shiva just
slashed her wand down with a muttered banishing hex and the door slammed open.

As the four stepped into the office Lockhart looked up from in front of his desk pushing his trunk closed. “Oh, hello, everyone.” Lockhart’s smile was strained and his face pale. “I’m afraid I just received a call from my editor and I must be off immediately.”

“You’re not going anywhere, Gilderoy,” Shiva said glaring at the man.

“Where’s, Tracey, you bastard?!” Daphne snarled. Her wand started to come up but Harry held her arm down shaking his head and nodding towards Shiva, letting his mentor take the lead.

“Come on, Gilderoy. We’re going to the rest of the staff and you’re going to explain some things about what’s been going on around here since you showed up.”

“I really have no idea what you’re talking about. I must be going,” Lockhart shifted slightly so that his side was facing the group with one arm hidden. He started to bend to seemingly pick up his trunk but spun with his wand out. Before an incantation could leave his lips four disarming spells slammed into the man. Lockhart was thrown back into his desk while his wand flew out his hand and smashed into the ceiling with a crack. The wand dropped back to the tiles, almost broken into two but held together by a sliver of wood and unicorn hair.

“Real smart, Gilderoy,” Shiva said with a snort before picking up the wand and pocketing it. “Now where’s the girl?”

“What?” Lockhart wheezed holding his head and shakily getting to his feet. “The Davis girl? How should I know?”

“Because you’re the one who took her, arsehole!” Daphne yelled. She threw off Harry’s arm and pointed her wand at the teacher with the tip glowing. “I lost her near Myrtle’s bathroom! Where did you take her!”


‘Bloody hell…’

“The entrance is in the bathroom,” Harry said gaping.

“What?” Neville and Shiva said giving him a quick glance before returning their attention to Lockhart.

“Dobby said that the last time the Chamber was opened ‘Moany’ died,” Harry explained feeling numb. They had been sitting right outside the bloody thing for nearly a month and never once noticed it! “The only ‘Moany’ I can think of is Moaning Myrtle. Moaning Myrtle who haunts the place she died. Daphne, you lost Tracey outside Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. The Chamber’s entrance is in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom! I can’t believe I didn’t see this before! I am such an idiot!”

Neville’s mouth dropped open as he processed what Harry was saying. Daphne’s glare just hardened though her wand tip stopped glowing. Shiva’s eyes narrowed in thought before giving a short head nod of agreement.

“Good enough for me.” She flicked her wand towards the entrance. “Move it, Gilderoy. To the bathroom. Harry, take Daphne and Neville and go get some backup.”

“No,” Harry said with a firm shake of his head.
“Harry this is not a debate.”

“If you think I am leaving you alone with him and a basilisk you are insane!” Harry snarled at her losing his grip on the rage that seethed up. “You are the closest thing to a bloody loved one I’ve ever had and I’ll be damned before I let you go into the Chamber alone! I’m coming with you!”

“As am I,” Daphne said stepping beside Harry. “If Tracey is down there, there is no way you are leaving me behind.”

Neville moved to stand with the other two students. “And I’m not backing down from this either. I’d never be able to look at my mum and dad again if I let you three go alone.”

Shiva growled and muttered, “Merlin-be-damned teenagers. Fine! But you all listen to me and do exactly what I tell you yeah?” Three answering nods later Shiva continued, “Good. Okay, fine. Tilly?”

A small house elf popped into view near Shiva startling the three students and Lockhart. This one looked far better off than Dobby though she was still clad in little more than a fancy tea towel. “How can Tilly be helping Mistress Shedy?”

“Tilly, go to Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, Snape and Dumbledore. Tell them I believe the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is inside Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom and I am en route with the assumed perpetrator – ”

“What?!?” Lockhart squawked.

Shiva ignored him and kept going. “Tell them I believe the instrument of attack to be a basilisk and require immediate assistance. Got that?”

“Yes, Mistress Shedy,” Tilly said bobbing her head. “Tilly will be telling the Professors immediately.” She popped out of the room with a snap. Shiva nodded and turned to the others gesturing towards the door out.

Lockhart tried protesting again but found himself tossed out the door by a flip of a wand. The three others followed along behind him as the stumbling staff members started walking towards the ghost’s bathroom and the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.

As they got to the bathroom, Harry grabbed Shiva’s arm. “Shiva, I should go first.”

“Like hell, kid. Not happening,” she said snorting.

“I’m the only one with glasses. I’m the one who talks to snakes. If I go first and it’s there I have a far better chance of surviving than anyone else here,” he said staring at her. “You know I’m right, Shiva.”

She worked her mouth for a few moments before scowling. “Sometimes I really hate that you can use logic, you know that? You open the door and take a quick peek. That’s it. Nothing else. You see anything besides Myrtle and you slam that door closed, got it?” Harry nodded and Shiva let out an explosive sigh. “Fine, everyone step back. Lockhart, stay where I can see you.” She motioned to Harry and made sure she could cover both the door and Lockhart.

Harry took a deep breath and cracked the door to Myrtle’s haunt. He opened it just a sliver, enough to take a short scan of the room beyond. It was empty. Letting out his breath Harry pushed
the door open completely and waved the others forward.

As they trooped into the room, Myrtle floated out of her stall. “Hello, Harry. Hello, Neville. Come to visit with me?”

“Oh, Myrtle we need to ask you a question,” Harry said taking the lead. Daphne looked ready to jump down the ghost’s throat but Neville gave her a slight shake of his head and she backed down.

“Really? Me? How can I help you?”

“Well…please don’t freak out Myrtle because this is really important,” the ghost nodded at Harry’s plea, “we need to know if you remember how you died.”

Myrtle just shrugged. “It wasn’t exciting. I was crying because Olive had said something mean. There was a noise – a boy had come in and started talking and hissing. I got angry at him because this is a girl’s room so I opened the door to yell at him. Next thing I know I’m staring into these giant yellow eyes and then I’m dead. Nothing fun like Nick.”

“Merlin,” Shiva breathed out, “it really is a bloody basilisk.”

“Do you remember where the eyes you saw were, Myrtle?” Harry asked.

Myrtle shrugged again and pointed towards the sinks. “Over there. Are you going looking for whatever killed me?” Harry and the others nodded. Lockhart squeaked. “If you die, you can share my bathroom, Harry. You too, Neville,” Myrtle said bashfully. Harry and Neville both tried to ignore the fact that a ghost apparently had a crush on them.

Harry walked over to the sinks and started looking on, under and around them with Daphne coming over to help. Shiva stayed watching Lockhart.

“You know I really don’t know why I’m here…” Lockhart started. “I mean, sure I may have lied a bit on some of my books but kidnapping and attempted murder? Me? Really?”

“Yup,” Shiva replied simply.

“I’m really only good at one spell you know. I’m a genius with memory charms. I’m not very good at anything else. I simply don’t have the necessary skill set to kill someone even if I ever had the motivation. What would be the point, Babs?” He held his arms out to his side. “Why would I bother trying to kill anyone? All I want is fame and fortune. I have both. I have witches lining up to sleep with me. Why would I risk any of that to try and kill some students?”

“Search me.” Shiva glared at him. “And are you really going to keep using that horrible name that I hate while I am half convinced you’re a wannabe murderer and have a wand trained on you?” Lockhart paled again as the implications sank in.

“Potter!” Daphne exclaimed. She pointed towards a section of one of the sinks. “Look, a snake motif. This must be it!”

Harry shifted around to look at the spot she was pointing at to see a tiny snake etched onto the side of the faucet. “Worth a shot. Everyone ready?” Three answering nods later Harry turned back to the sink. “Open.” He said to the snake motif. Nothing happened.

“That was English, Harry,” Neville said. “Try parseltongue.”
“It’s not exactly easy to do on command you know,” Harry grumbled irritably.

“Well you don’t exactly practice it,” Neville rolled his eyes. “Try imagining it’s real before you say anything again.”

Harry sighed and turned back to the little imprint. He tried to imagine the thing waving its head at him and shifting its body. After a moment Harry felt something click in his head and he whispered, ~Open.~ This time the snake responded. It coiled into a circle around the faucet and the entire sink structure sunk into the floor exposing a dark tunnel leading underground.

“Well…” Shiva said dumbfounded. “That’s new.”

“Let’s go. Tracey’s down there,” Daphne looked ready to jump down before Harry grabbed her and pulled her back from the edge.

“One second, Daphne.” Harry pulled over his pack before popping the top and grabbing the rune case Shiva had gotten him last Christmas. “Neville, Daphne, here. Sorry, Shiva I only have two extras,” he said with a shrug. “These are Concussors, Reductors, and Blastors. They work basically just like the spells they’re named after but you just have to channel a bit of magic into it to activate it instead of going through a wand motion. The rune pattern directs the spell so make sure it’s facing away from you and your fingers aren’t covering it. That hurts. A lot.”

Daphne frowned at him. “I can fire a reducto with my wand, Potter.”

“Yeah, I can too but this is faster and you can use it in your off-hand while using a wand in your main hand if you want. As long as you don’t use it continuously for five minutes or so it shouldn’t disintegrate or crumble on you.”

“Should we wait for the reinforcements?” Neville asked.

Both Shiva and Daphne shook their heads. “If Davis is down there already every second we wait could be worse for her. There’s nothing I can say to make any of you stay up here?” Lockhart raised his hand before she snorted at him and he closed his mouth. The rest just shook their heads. Shiva sighed but nodded. “Very well. Lockhart, you first. I’ll follow. Then Harry, Neville and Daphne you bring up the rear.”

“I really don’t think this is a good – ” Lockhart said before Shiva flicked her wand and he soared into the tunnel shrieking like a teenage girl.

“You know I’m starting to think maybe he really isn’t the controller,” Shiva said with a sigh. “Be careful everyone. If he isn’t, Merlin knows just who is actually down there controlling the bloody snake. Keep on your toes, keep your mirrors out, and be ready to shut your eyes if you see scales.” She stepped up to the edge and muttered, “Merlin help me and Goddess watch over these kids and their idiot of a Professor.” She stepped over the side and slid into the tunnel.

Harry quickly jumped in after her. He heard Neville and Daphne follow him down and then there was a grinding noise reverberating down the tunnel along with what little light filtered through disappearing. Harry flew out the end of the tunnel skidding along on the dirt and mud before stopping near a small pile of bones against the wall. The lower section was lit up by Shiva’s wand and he rolled out of the way as Neville and Daphne flew out on his heels.

“Tunnel closed as I jumped in,” Daphne said getting to her feet and brushing her robes off. “Looks like the reinforcements aren’t going to make it.” Shiva swore and Neville turned a bit green before squaring his shoulders.
Harry just shrugged. “Well, I fought Voldemort alone last year. I’m already doing better so far.”
Chapter 8: Snakes and Anagrams

“That,” Neville said his eyes wide, “is a very large piece of skin.” He was pointing at a discarded molt which had presumably been left by the basilisk. It looked to be about 30-40 feet long.

Harry shrugged. “This thing was Salazar Slytherin’s pet. It’s over a thousand years old. Of course it’s going to be big, Nev.”

Daphne stared at Harry and shook her head. “How the bloody hell are you so calm about this?”

“Well, when you’ve fought a man with a face poking out of the back of his skull a big snake isn’t quite as bad.” Harry paused and sighed. “Also, I’m not calm – I’m terrified. I’ve just had a lot of practice with hiding some of my emotions.” His eyes narrowed and a small storm of fury played over his features. “And this thing hurt Hermione. I’m going to kill it.”

“Right...Remind me not to piss you off,” Daphne muttered edging away from him slightly.

The small group walked a little further down the tunnel before Harry stopped and turned to Shiva. “Shiva? Can you transfigure a rooster? It would make this a lot less dangerous...”

Shiva rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Seriously? I can’t transfigure glasses why would you think I can transfigure a rooster?”

“You could at least try,” Daphne snarked. “You are a teacher.”

“A Runes teacher,” Shiva muttered. “Fine, it can’t hurt to attempt it I suppose. You know even if I get manage to get a rooster it’s not very likely to do much of anything beyond scare the thing? Transfigured animals aren’t actual animals. A transfigured rooster won’t have whatever properties allow real roosters to hurt the basilisk.”

“It’s a thousand year old snake,” Harry replied dryly. “Any advantage is a good advantage.”

Shiva crouched down aimed at a large rock in the tunnel about the size of a chicken and started muttering enchantments and flicked her wand at it. After a few seconds the rock, with a bit of a pop turned into a craggy rooster-like shape that gave a croak before flopping over onto the ground and not moving.

“I told you I suck at transfiguration,” Shiva grumbled.

As she started to stand, Lockhart suddenly rushed her. Neville yelled attempting to fire a stunner at him but the shot went wild. Harry and Daphne drew their wands towards the man but he twisted back away from Shiva with his broken wand in hand before they could do anything. “Such a shame that you all were killed by the basilisk. This will make a perfect end to my newest book,” Lockhart said with a manic grin. He started to slash his wand down.

Shiva yelled out, “Protego!”

At the same time as a luminous shield sprang into existence in front of the group, Lockhart screamed out, “Obliviate!” His spell shot out from both ends of his wand. One beam struck Lockhart sending him into the wall of tunnel. The second beam hit Shiva’s shield and rebounded into the ceiling. A spreading crack was all the warning the group had before a large section of...
ceiling shattered and gigantic pieces of rock crashed into the corridor. Harry dove, knocking Daphne out of the way of the debris, both students holding their hands over their heads as the dust settled and the rumbling stopped.

Picking himself up, Harry turned back to the newly formed blockage. Daphne was the only other one he could see. “Shiva! Neville!” Harry yelled frantically throwing some of the smaller rocks back. ‘Please let them be okay. Please let them be okay. Please let them be okay.’ He didn’t know who he was praying to, but prayed anyway.

“Harry!” a muffled voice yelled back. “Harry! Are you okay? Is Daphne alright?” Harry breathed a sigh of relief at hearing Shiva’s voice. He looked over at Daphne who coughed and gave him a thumbs up.

“Yeah, we’re fine, Shiva! Are you okay? Is Neville alright?”

“I’m fine, Harry!” Neville’s reply was just as muffled as Shiva’s. “Looks like Lockhart brought down the ceiling. One rock hit him in the crotch as it fell. Serves the bugger right.” Now that Neville mentioned it...Harry could dimly make out a sort of muffled groan.

“Harry, stay there, I’m going to try to shift some of these rocks,” Shiva said. A few moments later there was a soft crash as some of the boulders moved and the ceiling groaned. Harry could hear soft cursing coming from the other side of the barrier. “Bloody freaking hell! Okay guys, I’m going to have to shore up the ceiling as I shift this stuff. I’ll add some runes into the supports to make sure it holds but it’s still going to take close to hour to get through this shite.”

Daphne snarled and grabbed Harry’s arm. “We can’t wait that long! Tracey could be dying!”

Harry looked between his…friend…and the cave-in. Eventually he sighed and nodded at her. “Shiva, Daphne and I will keep going. You guys catch up when you can.”

“What the bloody hell?! Don’t you bloody dare you git! You two stay right – ”

“Shiva!” Harry yelled back cutting her off. “We came down here without waiting for the others because Tracey’s in danger! We’ll be careful but we can’t afford to just sit here and wait!”

“I don’t give a rat’s arse about that you little shite! I have not been looking out for you for the past two years or fighting to get custody for the last year just for you to run off and get yourself killed and eaten by a BLOODY BASILISK!! YOU HEAR ME HARRY! YOU STAY RIGHT THERE UNTIL I GET THROUGH THIS!”

“But Tracey could be - ” Harry tried.

“I don’t know Tracey! I know you! I care about you! It’s bad enough I let you convince me to bring you down here! You can’t run off on me like this, Harry! Not now! Not ever!”

Having someone yell at Harry because they cared about him was an entirely new experience to the boy. Even Hermione hadn’t ever really raised her voice to him quite like this. He cringed a huge feeling of guilt settling onto his shoulders.

“Listen to me, Harry. This isn’t a cerberus lulled by music or a troll you can hit with a club or an exploding rune. This is a bloody basilisk. A creature a thousand years old with venom strong enough to kill you with a single drop and a stare that spells instant death. If you and Daphne go forward without us in all likelihood you will die!”

Daphne grabbed his hand and drew his gaze into her eyes. “Please, Potter. I can’t leave her
there...please..."

Harry took a shuddering breath, squared his shoulders and turned back to the cave-in.
“Shiva...what if it was me in there? Would you want someone to wait while they could maybe
save me by going ahead?”

The stream of curses that followed greatly expanded Harry’s vocabulary. He knew he’d won the
argument. It didn’t make him feel any better. “FINE! You are going to end up giving me a heart
attack before I hit 25 you bloody bastard! I swear to the Goddess if either of you die in there before
we get through than I am going to personally resurrect you just so I can kill you again!”

“Harry, make sure you’re careful, mate!” Neville yelled also sounding rather frustrated and
annoyed. “If you get hurt, Hermione’s going to kill me for letting you go alone.”

“He’s not alone!” Daphne yelled. “Be careful with the tunnel and hurry up!” She started down
the tunnel. “Come on, Potter. Let’s get Tracey and get the hell out of this place.”

Harry nodded and started after her. They had gotten a few dozen meters further down when he
heard a soft crack and looked down at his feet. Lifting his boot, Harry saw he had stepped onto a
pair of small glasses. “Daphne, hold up. I need a minute here.”

Daphne came back and glared at him. “We have to keep moving, Potter.” She stared at the glasses
in his hands and froze. Reaching out a shaking hand she pointed at the lenses. “Those are
Tracey’s reading glasses…”

“Well at least we know she’s definitely here,” Harry said distractedly. He pulled out his etching
tool and quickly added the markings to turn them into *Reflector Lenses*. Harry really wished he’d
paid more attention to the charm Hermione had used the first time he met her. “Here,” he said
handing them over to her. “The left lens is a little cracked but I think the runes will mostly hold.
Remember, I have absolutely no idea if these things will actually work to reflect its gaze. If either
of us gets hit and petrified than we know it doesn’t work. If the left lens cracks then close your
eye because that cluster will be broken.”

Daphne nodded slipping the glasses onto her face with a small grimace. “Well at least her eyes are
mostly good. This is still going to give me a headache though.”

“Better a headache than dead,” Harry retorted standing up. “You can see though right?”

“Well enough. Can we go now?”

“Yeah, let’s go.” The two proceeded a bit further into the tunnel before stopping in front of a large
door covered with snake motifs around a central circular seal.

“Guess this is it,” Daphne said barely above a whisper. “Potter...Harry, thanks for this…”

“We’ll save her, Daphne,” Harry replied. He turned to the door. ~Open~. The snake carvings
slithered away from the central seal and the door swung open. “Be careful,” Harry said stepping
through the door, wand and rune held high in each hand.

Harry and Daphne padded cautiously into the Chamber of Secrets covering both sides as they
walked forward. When they were halfway through the cavernous room the torches along the walls
lit up illuminating the rest of the space. Blinking from the sudden light, Daphne’s eyes widened
when she centered on the figures near the base of a statue of the front of the room.

“Tracey!” Daphne ran forwards with Harry cursing and following after her. “Tracey!” she yelled
skidding to a halt next to her friend. Daphne grabbed her sweaty, pale hand and checked for a pulse.

Harry meanwhile had pulled up and held his wand on the transparent figure standing nearby on top of a vaguely familiar ratty old book. “So,” Harry said with forced calm, “you’re the one who’s been doing all this?”

“Technically, Tracey Davis has been, but yes, I’ve been whispering to her and forcing her hand,” the spirit said with a small nod.

“She’s alive.” Daphne carefully let her friend’s hand drop back to her chest then stood and pointed her wand and the figure with a snarl. “What the hell have you done to her, arsehole?!”

“She did it to herself,” the figure shrugged. “She poured her heart and soul out into me. Quite literally at that.” He chuckled. “Being in love with one’s own best friend is apparently enough to upset one quite dearly. Times certainly have changed since I first prowled these halls.”

Daphne visibly flinched at that comment and her wand hand shook. Harry grimaced but resolved to deal with the issue later after everyone was still breathing. “I’m going to kill you, you bastard,” Daphne whispered to the spirit.

“Who the hell are you? And how do we save her?” Harry asked.

“You must be Harry Potter,” the spirit said raising its eyebrows. “I have to say I’m a little disappointed that you’re not more intimidating. However you did reach this place so I suppose you’re not a total disappointment. Tell me, how did you kill me? I am ever so curious.”

“How did you kill me? Do you remember? Tracey said you were just a baby at the time so I doubt it was intentional but still you never really know with things like this.”

A growing horror seeped through Harry at the figure’s words. “That’s not possible…”

“Oh I assure you it is. I took great steps to ensure my longevity after all.”

Daphne looked between Harry and the spirit. “What the hell is going on, Potter? Can you kill it? Will that help Tracey?”

“Oh, he can’t kill me,” the spirit laughed again. “I am not physical. Not yet.”

“You look a lot different than you did last year,” Harry said. ‘Stall. Worked last time. Maybe I can keep him talking long enough for Shiva and Neville to get here. Maybe they’ll know how to kill a…ghost…thing.’

“Ah so that was true? Tracey wasn’t certain if those rumors had substance. Well, it’s good to know my later efforts weren’t entirely wasted. Even if he has been rather pathetic overall. Really, 10 years to make a play? I will do far better once I regain form.”

“Who the bloody hell are you?” Daphne whispered.

“You haven’t figured it out yet? Shame. I thought you were supposed to be intelligent. I was actually planning to give you a high place in my society. Well, perhaps a bit of help I suppose?” He took a wand out from behind his back.
Daphne’s eyes narrowed and her lips curled into a snarl. “That’s Tracey’s.”

“Yes. I am draining her after all. It’s not like she can use it at the moment.” He drew a series of glowing letters in the air: TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE. “Now watch closely here. I thought this a rather ingenious anagram myself.” The words rearranged themselves into: I AM LORD VOLDEMORT.

Daphne’s face emptied of color. “That’s impossible…”

“Why did you think that was a smart anagram, Riddle?” Harry asked swallowing a lump of dread. “Doesn’t seem all that hard.”

“Well, Harry, ‘Vol de mort’ means ‘flight of death’ in French. I have become immortal. Well, parts of me have anyway. It is quite appropriate.”

“All I saw last year was a pathetic ghost parasite that could barely exist on its own,” Harry taunted. “And all I see now is another little pathetic leech.” Harry heard Daphne’s mouth snap closed and she her face take on a slight grin at his words. ‘Good, stand up to him. It’s just a shadow or something. Keep focused, Daph.’

“Little pathetic leech?” Riddle snarled. “Fine. You want to play games, Harry Potter? Let’s play.” His sneer broke into a wide, predatory smile. ~Bessy! Kill these two!~

Harry saw movement in the mouth of the statue behind Riddle and his eyes widened. “Oh, shite! Come on, Daphne, he’s called the basilisk!” Harry grabbed her arm and pulled, running towards the closest pillar and ducking behind it as a large weight crashed to floor behind them.

“Plan?” Daphne asked holding her wand and rune stone tight enough for her knuckles to turn white.

“Well I’ve got a plan A,” Harry said peeking around the side of the pillar. The basilisk wasn’t quite looking at them thankfully, but it was close enough Harry could shout to it. ~Hey, Bessy! I’m, Harry! That guy you’re talking with isn’t on your side. Help me and my friends instead and we’ll give you all the food you want and get you some better living quarters!~

The snake froze and turned towards Harry. He quickly lowered his eyes before he could meet its gaze – no point in testing the Reflectors if it wasn’t needed. ~You may be a Speaker child but you are not the Master. Bessy will not fall for tricks. Bessy has been waiting eons for a Master to return. For food larger than rats. Bessy will not follow you!~ A loud hiss followed the small speech and the snake started towards the pillar.

“Plan A failed,” Harry said ducking back and paling.

“Plan B?” Daphne asked.

“Shoot it until it dies?” Harry said with a slight hesitation.

“Works for me!” Daphne jumped out and started tossing diffindo, reducto, and confrego at the snake from her wand while letting loose with the Reductor from her off hand. Harry jumped out of the other side of the pillar also tossing spells and rune powered shots. He tried adding a few disarming and stunning shots into his volley. Bessy just hissed in what Harry dimly realized was laughter.

Their spells weren’t even making a scratch on the hide of the beast.
The giant tail of the serpent came around aiming at Harry’s head. He ducked and rolled. As he regained his feet he made the critical mistake of looking up. Harry met the basilisk’s eyes and time seemed to stop. Riddle laughed in the distance. Harry almost laughed in return as he could still feel his muscles twitching in fear. He wasn’t petrified!

But then, neither was the basilisk. It shook its head after a few seconds and opened its hissing mouth wide doing an extremely good impression of a pissed off lion’s roar. Harry took the opportunity to run.

He got to Daphne’s side and they ducked behind a pillar further back down the chamber. “Plan B isn’t working so well,” she grunted trying to catch her breath. “I noticed,” responded dryly. “Reflector Lenses work though. I think I stunned it for a few seconds.”

“Yeah maybe for you. My left lens busted the first time it looked at me. It seems only one eye reflection doesn’t affect it. And I’m half blind now.” Harry flinched and quickly looked her face over. Breathing out a quick breath of relief Harry saw her eye wasn’t actually injured, she just had it screwed shut since the left rune cluster hadn’t held up under the strain of the magic.

“Um, okay I have a Plan C but I’m going to need a minute to get it ready. Can you distract it?” Harry asked holding the Blastor against the pillar and palming his etching tool.

“Maybe. What are you doing?”

“Setting a feedback loop into the Blastor. Basically a somewhat controlled explosive failure.”

“You’re making a magical bomb?”

“More like magical grenade. Also it might blow me up once I charge it.” Harry grimaced. “There’s a reason I’ve been staying away from volatile clusters you know.”

Daphne stared at him with wide eyes. “You are either the bravest or stupidest boy I’ve ever met.”

“Just distract the bloody snake please.”

“Don’t die, Harry.” Daphne jumped out from behind the pillar as the basilisk closed in on them. She yelled at it and started tossing out more spells leading it towards the next pillar in line.

Harry finished his modifications uttered another short prayer to whoever was listening and then yelled out, ~Bessy! Your mother was a chicken and your father was a toad!~

The basilisk turned from Daphne to hiss menacingly at Harry. ~I should kill you simply for thinking that was a worthy insult hatchling.~ As soon as the snake opened its mouth, Harry charged the altered Blastor and tossed it at the snake. It ended up exploding a foot or so from the mouth. The stone shards pelted the monster and but didn’t seem to do any noticeable damage.

“Bloody hell!” Harry ducked back behind the pillar swearing. ~If anyone’s listening up there, I could really use some help about now!~ Not expecting any actual answer Harry nearly dropped his wand and Concussor as the air above the basilisk blazed into a burst of fire. A song Harry remembered Fawkes trilling resounded throughout the Chamber before turning into a screech.

Harry twisted to look around the pillar in shock noticing Daphne doing the same around her own. The beautiful avenging phoenix dived towards the group. It tossed a large hat clutched in its talons towards Harry before twisting and attempting to dive bomb the eyes of the basilisk. Bessy was
faster though and managed to stare at Fawkes just before he impacted. The phoenix dissolved into a burst of feathers and Harry’s stomach plummeted again. ‘I’m sorry Fawkes…Thank you so much for trying buddy.’

“Harry! Look out!” Daphne screamed.

Harry glanced up and saw the basilisk striking towards him with its fangs bared. ‘Since when does a snake have more than two teeth?’ Harry idly found himself wondering as he dove out of the way. He tumbled down near the hat that Fawkes had brought.

“What are you waiting for, boy? Put me on!” the Hat yelled. Harry stared dumbfounded before realizing it was the Sorting Hat. Harry hurriedly grabbed the Hat and jammed it onto his head as he ran from the basilisk towards Daphne. The Hat had barely touched his hair before a weight settled onto the top of Harry’s head.

Dashing behind the pillar, Harry pulled the Hat off and handed it to Daphne. A sword fell out of the top and clattered to the ground at Harry’s feet. “That’s the sword of Godric Gryffindor,” Daphne said her mouth gaping.

“I would’ve preferred a powerful staff or energy lance rune cluster myself. Or anything long range,” Harry said picking the sword up.

“Beggars can’t be choosers, Harry Potter!” the Hat said before falling silent.

“Okay new plan,” Harry said glaring at the Hat.

“Your other plans have sucked.”

“Yeah and this one sucks more.”

“Not instilling a lot of confidence here.” Daphne said.

“I’m going to stun it with the Reflect Lenses then I’m going to stab it with the sword.”

“That’s a horrible plan!”

“Do you have a better one?” Harry asked glaring at her.

Daphne ground her teeth. The basilisk was almost on them again. “Don’t die, Harry. I’m just starting to like you.”

“Likewise, Daphne.” Harry took a deep breath and leaped out. This time instead of running away he ran towards the giant snake. Bessy opened her mouth baring her fangs at him and pulled back readying a strike. Harry came closer hoping his horrible brand of luck would hold long enough to finish this. Bessy struck forward. Harry finally managed to catch a glimpse of the basilisk’s eyes and it froze in place as he jumped forward. The stun was just starting to wear off as Harry leaped into its mouth and thrust the sword up through the top plate of its jaw.

The sword pierced through like a hot knife through butter and Bessy made a horrible screeching sound. Harry was flung out of the snake’s mouth as it thrashed. He flew through the air and landed on Daphne who just barely managed to cast a cushion charm on them both. Bessy screeched again and snapped her jaw shut. That was apparently the exact wrong move. The top of Gryffindor’s sword pierced up through the snake’s head and the basilisk flopped down to the chamber completely still.
“Merlin,” Daphne whispered the awe evident in her voice and the trembling of her arms around his waist. “You killed a 60 foot basilisk with a bloody sword.”

“We still have to kill Riddle,” Harry whispered back as he glanced towards the figure at the front of the room. The spirit of young Voldemort was much more solid now and Tracey seemed far paler.

“He said she was pouring out herself out to him right? She’s been writing in a diary since the year started.”

“He was standing over a small book. Was that the diary?”

“Yeah.” Daphne nodded letting her arms go and shifting Harry so that they could both get up. “Look exhausted and beaten.”

“Not going to have to fake that,” Harry muttered. “I’ll grab the sword and we try stabbing the book?”

“Hell, it worked on the monster snake – why shouldn’t we be able to kill a book with a sword?” Daphne paused and giggled. “That sounds so stupid.”

Harry’s eyes widened at the manic sounds coming from his friend. “Hold it together another minute Daph then you can break down. Help me open its mouth.”

Together the two students managed to pry the mouth of the dead basilisk open enough for Harry to reach in and grasp the sword. “Careful, don’t touch the fangs. Basilisk venom is some of the deadliest stuff there is,” Daphne said.

“Really? I didn’t know that. Thanks, Daph,” Harry replied dryly.

“No need to be a jerk about it, Harry.”

Harry got the sword free finally though it was accompanied by a small amount of black liquid dripping from the wound in the mouth. Holding onto the sword in one hand Harry and Daphne supported each other as they stumbled back over towards Tracey and Riddle.

“You two are far more impressive than I initially assumed,” Riddle said with narrowed eyes as they drew close. “You would do well under me. I could lead you both to greatness.”

Harry spied the diary still lying under Riddle’s foot. He walked a bit closer. “You know what I have to say to that, Riddle?”

“What we both have to say to that,” Daphne chimed in.

Riddle cocked his head. “Go to hell, arsehole!” Harry yelled. He raised the sword and stabbed it forward spearing the diary.

“No! What have you done!?” Riddle screamed first in astonishment and angry. The scream quickly shifted to pain as ink began to spurt out of the diary. As the ink drained, the spirit lost its substance. Tracey’s wand clattered to the ground from insubstantial fingers. Tom Riddle gave one final roar of pain and defiance before fading completely, the diary falling completely dormant under Harry’s sword.

“Tracey!” Daphne exclaimed falling to the ground beside her friend. “Tracey! Please wake up! Please don’t let us have been too late! Please wake up, Tracey!”
Tracey moaned and a bit of color started to return to her cheeks. Her eyes fluttered open and locked onto Daphne. “Daph?” She glanced around the room. “Potter? Wha-what?”

“Oh Goddess, Tracey!” Daphne flung her arms around the girl and pulled her into a bone-crushing hug. “I thought you were going to die. I thought – ” She broke off and just clung to her friend.

“You alright, Tracey?” Harry asked leaning on the sword for support. It probably wasn’t the most respectful way to treat a priceless artifact from one of the founders but then he had just killed the pet of one of the other founders and casually tossed aside their enchanted Hat. Leaning on the sword was probably the least disrespectful thing he had done that day.

“I – I – No. Not really. But I’m…better. I think…Daph, Potter…I think I’m the one who was opening the Chamber!” She leaned her head against Daphne and started to sob.

“Shh, shh, it’s okay Trace,” Daphne whispered running her hands in circles along the other girl’s back. “It wasn’t you. That diary was a trap that V-Vol-Voldemort left. It possessed you. You didn’t do anything, Trace.”

“You-Know-Who? What? No, I was writing to Tom…I knew something was wrong but I couldn’t stop…”

“It was Voldemort, Tracey,” Harry said. “A memory or spirit or something from when he was teenager. He showed us his name and it’s an anagram for ‘I am Lord Voldemort’. You got tricked. It’s not your fault. You aren’t like Quirrell. You didn’t invite the arsehole in.”

“It was really him?” The other two nodded. “I can’t believe it…I – I don’t even know where I got that stupid diary from. It was in my stuff when I got back from the bookstore before school started. I must have picked it up but I don’t remember it…Wait!” she pulled back from Daphne’s grip and stared between the two. “If that was You-Know-Who and if he was possessing me to control the monster then where are we and how are we going to kill it?!”

“Trace,” Daphne said clearing her throat. She pointed towards the dead basilisk. “We killed the diary already so Volde-Voldemort is dead. And Harry killed the basilisk.” Tracey’s eyes followed Daphne’s arm and widened before turning back to the other two and gaping. “With a sword.” Tracey’s eyes flowed down to rest on the sword in Harry’s grip. She looked back at his face and Harry just nodded.

Tracey slumped into Daphne’s arms again and groaned. “Can this day get any weirder?”

“Trust me you don’t want to ask that,” Harry sighed. “It’s better not to tempt the universe. Can you walk? We should get back to Shiva and Neville.”

“Who the bloody hell is Shiva?” Tracey asked as she accepted their arms to pull her to her somewhat shaky feet.

Harry winced. “Err, Professor Babbling. I’d appreciate it if you both kept it quiet until next year that I call her by her nickname.”

“Well considering you both saved my life I think I can do that…” Tracey looked at him like he was crazy. Daphne just shook her head and nodded. “And wait, since when do you call him ‘Harry’, Daph?” Tracey got an odd look as she stared at the two of them.

“Somewhere in the middle of getting down here and killing the basilisk. I think that qualifies as a bonding experience don’t you? At least enough to bump him up from ‘Potter’ to ‘Harry’ I would say.” Daphne said looking amused.
“Well I was hoping for ‘friends’ myself,” Harry grumbled good-naturedly.

“Eh, trial basis.” Daphne said before all three of them broke into laughter.

The trio of students got themselves under control and walked back down the middle of the Chamber. Daphne stopped to pick up the Sorting Hat which stayed resolutely silent even when she placed it on her head so she could keep supporting Tracey with one arm and hold her wand with the other. Harry stopped as they approached the pile of feathers where Fawkes had given his life to try and help them.

“I’m so sorry, Fawkes…I never wanted…” Harry trailed off and stared in astonishment as a tiny nearly featherless bird poked its head out of the feathers and ashes. It looked at Harry and squawked happily. Harry’s mouth just dropped open and scooped the baby phoenix up in his hand. “What the…?”

“That’s a phoenix, Harry,” Daphne said with an arched eyebrow. “They’re reborn when they die.”

“Oh.” Harry just nodded still dumbstruck as the phoenix cuddled into his hand.

“Come on. Let’s go.” Daphne started leading the group back up the corridor again pausing only long enough for Harry to again open the door out.

It seemed like forever before the tired group made their way to the caved-in section of tunnel. There was now a large hole opening in the center. Shiva was standing in the center finishing an inscription of a rune Harry recognized as Stability. It flashed as she finished it and she turned back. “Neville, come on. I’m done. Let’s go!”

“Good timing,” Harry said with a soft chuckle. Shiva twisted so fast he thought she would fall over. Her mouth dropped and Harry just lifted his arm from under Tracey’s side and waved tiredly at his friend. “We won.”

“Harry!” Shiva lunged forward and wrapped him in a hug that rivaled one of Hermione’s. He hugged her back laughing as Fawkes chortled from his shoulder. Shiva heard that and pulled back in astonishment. “Is that a baby phoenix? Daphne, Tracey are you two alright? What are you three covered in? Is that the Sorting Hat? Is that a sword?!”

“In order, Professor Babbling,” Daphne said, “yes, it is a baby phoenix. Fawkes to be precise. I am okay though bruised over quite a lot of my body with several small cuts in addition. Tracey is physically more okay than me but spiritually/emotionally less okay...Her lifeforce was being sucked out but we stopped it so now’s she’s just weak, but she should get a full examination as soon as possible. We are covered in an absolutely horrendous mix of sludge, dirt, grime, blood and ink. Yes, it is the Sorting Hat. And yes that is a sword. Godric Gryffindor’s sword actually.”

“I…whatever goddess you seduced Harry I don’t think she has anything to do with logic…” Shiva managed to get out after trying to process that. “Are you okay?”

“Just tired, Shiva. The short version is that nothing we were doing worked, Fawkes came to help bringing along the Sorting Hat but got killed and reborn during the fight. The Hat gave me the Sword which I used to kill the basilisk. The ink is from an enchanted diary made by Voldemort – when he was a teenager still going by Tom Marvolo Riddle – that was possessing Tracey. I stabbed the diary with the sword, killing Memorymort and spraying the three of us with what passed for its blood. That about covers it.”

Neville laughed. “Man, Harry, you really have some of the worst good luck I’ve ever heard of!”
“You can say that again, Nev. Can we go now? I’d really like to sit down for a few minutes,” Harry pleaded. Shiva just nodded numbly.

“Neville, switch with Harry. Harry, let me help you,” Harry handed Tracey’s left side over to Neville who supported the girl while Harry leaned against Shiva for support as the group slowly started to trudge back towards the slide up to the castle.

“So where’s Lockhart?” Harry asked. As they left the makeshift tunnel under the cave-in though Harry’s question was answered. The ‘Professor’ was bound in ropes with a bandage around his groin and staring off into space with a happy grin on his face.

“Lockhart’s quite out of it. His spell was powerful enough to hit all of us at once and that full force blasted right into him.” Shiva flicked her wand and the man floated ahead of them. “He doesn’t even remember his own name. I’m actually not entirely sure he remembers how to speak at all… we only bound him up because he kept wandering off down the tunnel and I got…rather annoyed with him.”

“Ah. Well if it makes you feel better, I cursed out Memormort while I was annoyed with him.”

“And you called him a pathetic leech. Don’t forget that. That was funny,” Daphne chimed in.

“Man I miss all the fun,” Neville complained.

“You can kill the next iteration of Voldemort, okay, Nev?”

“Okay. Now you can’t complain when I get him before you do, Harry.”

Tracey looked between the three of them, shaking her head. “You people are all insane.”

The group stopped at the bottom of the section of tunnel leading back up to Hogwarts proper. Shiva was about to try transfiguring little steps when Daphne snorted. Everyone looked over at her and she shrugged. “Do you really think Salazar Slytherin would simply jump into a dank hole? Especially with no easy way back out?”

Harry laughed and got her meaning while Neville, Tracey and Shiva just squinted at Daphne with furrowed brows. Harry turned to the tunnel and breathed out, {Stairs.} Nothing happened. {Steps.} A dull thump resounded as a staircase extended out from the floor of the tunnel spiraling away into the darkness. Harry raised his eyebrows at Daphne.

“Much better. That is far more appropriate,” the girl responded with an entertaining regal huff.

Shiva shook her head in exasperation. “Haha very funny. Up we go people. Harry, you and me first so you can open the door up top too.” Lockhart floated along ahead of them as the small group of battered students and teachers limped their way up the stairs. When they reached the top Lockhart made a quiet mewl of protest as he bumped into the sealed doorway out before Shiva moved him back. “Whoops,” she deadpanned. Harry couldn’t blame her for being rough on the man. Besides…better for her to take her ire out on Flophart than on him.

~Open.~ The sink and trapdoor slid open at Harry’s command.

Walking back up into Myrtle’s bathroom Harry and Shiva were immediately swamped by Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick and Pomfrey. Snape hung back until Daphne, Neville and Tracey climbed out then he swooped down on his own students.
“My boy, what happened to you?” Dumbledore asked immediately with his mouth set in a frown. Harry glared at the man but didn’t reply. Dumbledore cast a swift glance at the others and stared at the Sorting Hat still perched on Daphne’s head. “Flopsy?”

“Give them room, Albus,” McGonagall said pushing her superior back slightly and waving Pomfrey forward.

“Babbling, injuries?” the Healer asked cutting straight to the point.

“Potter and Greengrass have multiple cuts and abrasions as well as exhaustion likely both magical and physical,” Shiva reported in a tired but calm voice. “Davis has been spiritually drained but the process was halted partway through. She’s coherent and without obvious physical injuries but also exhausted. Longbottom has minor abrasions. Lockhart had a major groin injury as well as abrasions on his left arm. He is experiencing extreme trauma from a backfired memory charm. I have no idea if he can even speak anymore.” Pomfrey began uttering several charms under her breath with wand directed at Tracey.

“What did you do to my students, woman?” Snape said checking over Daphne and Tracey. His last word was uttered almost like a curse as it was directed at Shiva. Nearly everyone in the small bathroom bristled at that. Daphne, Neville, and Harry all stood up straighter and glared at the man.

“She helped us to rescue my best friend, Sir,” Daphne said, her mouth set in a thin line. “She saved the three of us from being hit by an obliviate powerful enough to render Lockhart functionally deceased. She did not hesitate a moment to proceed into a long lost section of the castle expecting to confront a thousand year old basilisk simply because a student was in danger. Please do not deride her character in front of me, Professor. Professor Babbling deserves a great amount of respect.”

Harry’s eyes widened as he witnessed something he never expected to see: Snape glanced between Daphne and Shiva and his scowl noticeably lessened before nodding at the older woman in a show of respect.

“Perhaps we should take this discussion to the infirmary?” Flitwick said stepping forward from where he had been examining Lockhart.

“Yes, I think that might be best,” Dumbledore said softly as he gazed sorrowfully at the assembled students. As he turned back from Harry he froze midstep, cocked his head and then his jaw dropped open. “Fawkes?”

After everyone had been arrayed onto their separate cots the story of how they came to be down in the Chamber was delivered to those assembled. Fawkes remained on Harry’s shoulder the entire time occasionally letting out a trill and headbutting Harry’s neck. Hedwig appeared in the window to the infirmary a few minutes in and stared at the baby phoenix before giving a hoot of approval and turning her head, to all appearances looking like she was settling in to hear the story as well as the humans. Harry could only chuckle at his familiar.

“And so we ended up stabbing the diary with the sword,” he finished with a shrug.

“I find this all very hard to believe, Potter,” Snape said with narrowed eyes. “Surely you exaggerate. There is certainly no way a mere child such as yourself could destroy a creature such as a basilisk.”

Before Harry, Shiva, Neville or Tracey could say anything a low growl floated through the room.
Daphne stood from her bed and walked over to stand in front of Snape with her fists clenched. “You pathetic, spiteful, hate-filled cretin. Harry Potter and I just faced down a creature a thousand years old and 60 feet long. A creature that was intelligent enough to taunt us when Harry tried to reason with it. A creature whose fangs were longer than my forearm. A creature whose gaze we only survived because Harry was smart enough to come up with an effective counter. A creature that could’ve swallowed us whole. We nearly died at least six times in under two minutes by my count. We faced down an apparition of Voldemort himself. Do. Not. Insult. Us. Professor Snape. Do not insult the struggle we just walked away from. Do not insult that danger we were in or the risks we took to help my friend. Make no mistake, Professor. Harry performed something that nearly every adult witch or wizard I know would run from screaming with soiled pants. Do not deride him in my presence sir!”

Daphne finished her speech with her features twisted somewhere between resignation and fury but she got in one further jibe. “It is common knowledge that you praise Slytherins and disparage Gryffindors, as it is common knowledge that you bear some sort of grudge against Harry Potter. Do not let your hatred blind you to facts, Professor.” Snape looked completely dumbstruck. His hand was clenched hard enough to turn the knuckles white, eyes were wide and his mouth was hanging open.

“Daph…” Tracey said quietly. Daphne sighed and turned to pad back to her bed, giving Tracey’s hand a short squeeze on the way.

“Be that as it may,” Dumbledore said filling the sudden silence, “I am still uncertain how Fawkes was able to come and assist you, Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “Search me. The Feedback Blastor didn’t do squat, I asked for help and then, boom,” he waved his arms wide, “he showed up in a burst of flame with the Sorting Hat. Thanks again, buddy.” Fawkes headbutted him again and gave a short trill of approval. Hedwig bobbed her head and hooted in reply.

“Most curious…”

“Headmaster,” Shiva asked sitting on the edge of her own bed, “do you have any idea what that diary thing that Riddle created was? I know Voldemort is stupid powerful but I’ve never even heard of binding a spirit memory to an object before. At least not one that could both think for itself and attempt a full possession.”

“I…am unsure,” Dumbledore replied slowly. Both Harry and Shiva narrowed their eyes at the old man. Harry couldn’t help but think back to Dumbledore’s responses to his questions from last year with Quirrell. The Headmaster knew far more than he was letting on. “Voldemort was certainly familiar with arcane branches of magic. I will have to do research on this subject to ascertain the extent of what was done.” Dumbledore turned and met Harry’s gaze with his twinkling eyes. A moment later the man held a hand to his forehead with a groan and slumped down in his chair.

Pomfrey rushed to the Headmaster while Snape turned on Harry. “What did you do, boy?” As Harry glared at Snape intending to tell him off the potions master also yelled out in pain and fell backwards. His hands clutched his head and he twisted towards Harry though he kept his eyes clenched shut. “Potter!” the man roared.

“I didn’t do anything!” Harry yelled back.

Most of the residents of the infirmary just stared between the three completely lost. Only McGonagall and Shiva seemed to figure out what had just happened. The Deputy Headmistress scowled and stalked towards Dumbledore while Shiva wore a furious expression and put herself in-
between Harry and Snape. As Pomfrey moved from Dumbledore to Snape, McGonagall hauled the older man to his feet. “What has the boy done to warrant that attempted intrusion, Albus? Save the life of a classmate? Slay a danger to the entire student body? Gain the favor of a Founder? Question one too many things? Never attempt to read a student or any minor without cause in front of me again, Albus, or I will see you run out of here before you can say ‘lemon drop’! I would expect such foolhardy behavior from Severus but not from you! And you, Severus!” McGonagall turned to the potions master who simply glared back at her. “You are a fool. If Albus Dumbledore was summarily rebuffed what makes you think you could get through. Go do something productive and make a healing draught! Get out!”

“I have every right to – ”

“GET OUT!” McGonagall screamed, pointing at the door. Snape snarled but stalked out of the room.

McGonagall turned back to Dumbledore rubbing the bridge of her nose. “Perhaps you should leave as well, Headmaster.”

“Minerva, I – ”

Whatever Dumbledore was going to protest was interrupted as the doors to the infirmary swung open again with Lucius Malfoy waltzing in, cane in hand. Harry’s eyes widened as he saw Dobby trailing behind. ‘Of course…of course it’d be Malfoy…Tracey said she had the diary when she got back from the bookstore. Malfoy was there at the same time I first saw Tracey and Daphne. He planned all of this,’ Harry thought his surprise fading away and being replaced by fiery anger.

“Ah, Dumbledore,” Malfoy said, his voice like silk. “I was informed you were here. As the head of the Board of Governors it is my duty to inform you that the death of Tracey Davis has led us to remove you from – ”

“Eh, I’m not dead,” Tracey said waving her hand from the nearby bed.

Malfoy’s head snapped to Tracey so fast his silvery hair whipped his face. “What?! You are…”

Harry’s world dissolved into red. ‘Head of the Board of Governors’ the man had said. The board that had prevented Harry from getting the mandrake potion. This man had set Tracey up to let loose a basilisk. He had prevented the healing of the victims. He had nearly gotten Shiva and his friends killed. He had hurt Hermione. ‘Where’s the Reductor,’ Harry thought searching the table for his rune stone. From his shoulder Fawkes started to quietly trill and a feeling of calm settled over Harry. Breathing deeply he left the table alone and turned to Fawkes. “Thanks,” Harry whispered to the bird quietly. Fawkes’ song stopped and Harry breathed deep. ‘New plan. I’m not the only one who wants to beat Malfoy.’

While Harry had been wrestling with his control Malfoy had been carrying on a short conversation with Dumbledore and McGonagall. “…well I suppose that concludes my business here. Good day.” As Malfoy swept out of the room, Harry leaped out of his bed and jumped past Shiva to Daphne’s side.

“Daph, I need a glove!”

“What?” the girl stared up at him like he’d gone crazy. Maybe he had, this wasn’t exactly the best of plans.

“Harry…?” Shiva came up behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder.
“I have an idea! That was Dobby. Please, I need a glove!” Harry admitted he did sound a bit frantic but there wasn’t much time to get back to Malfoy and Dobby before the man left the castle.

“Here…” Daphne pulled out a glove from her bag on the side table. “How did you know that I –”

“Tell you later! Thanks! Shiva, I’ll be right back!” Harry sprinted out of the infirmary and bounded down the stairs two at a time. He caught up to Malfoy and Dobby as they walked into the Entrance Hall. “Hey, Malfoy!” As the man turned Harry tossed him the glove while eyeing Dobby and jerking his head to the side.

“What is this, Potter?”

“You Purebloods follow the old rules don’t you? A tossed glove is supposed to signify a duel. Since you weren’t man enough to do it when you started this round I figured I should toss my own now at the end. I won this fight Malfoy. Stay away from my friends in future.”

Malfoy sneered and threw the glove over his shoulder. Harry smirked as Dobby made a flying leap for the sailing clothing item snatching it out of mid air before it could hit the ground. “Do not play above your station, boy. You are not prepared to fight in the circles I travel in. Come, Dobby!” Malfoy had walked about ten paces before he realized his servant was no longer following and he turned to glare at the house elf. Harry had the pleasure of watching the man’s eyes as he realized exactly what Harry had just done.

“YOU! You cost me my servant, Potter!” Lucius Malfoy tried to draw his wand on Harry but was immediately flung back into the wall of the Hall with a crack. Dobby lowered his hand and glared at Malfoy.

“You will not harm The Great Master Harry Potter Sir!” the little house elf said, fury evident. ‘Oh, my name’s gotten even longer,’ Harry thought with a chuckle as he watched Dobby walk toward Malfoy. The man was laying crumpled on his side against the wall groaning. Before he could move to sit up, Dobby reached him and lashed out with a vicious little kick. ‘Don’t mess with the little guy!’ Harry cheered as Dobby continued to lay into Malfoy. After a few more kicks Harry sighed and walked over laying a hand on Dobby’s shoulder. “As fun and justified as this is, Dobby, you really should stop. No need to get into trouble over this guy. Let’s head back to the infirmary yeah?” Dobby cast one last vicious glare at Malfoy before nodding at Harry and following along.

The two walked back into the room greeted by stares of confusion. Dumbledore seemed to have left with the Sorting Hat and Fawkes before Harry had returned though all the other teachers and Hedwig were still present.

“Harry? Care to explain?” Shiva said the anger in her voice barely controlled.

“Had to free Dobby,” Harry said cocking a thumb at the little elf who nodded enthusiastically.

“The Great Master Harry Potter Sir has freed Dobby from Bad Master. The Great Master Harry Potter Sir declared a completed duel and tricked Bad Master into setting Dobby free! Then Dobby protected him from Bad Master. The Great Master Harry Potter Sir is the greatest wizard to ever live!”

Harry groaned as the rest of the room just turned to him. “Hey, I’ve tried to get him to stop with names. Dobby, how about you head off to enjoy your freedom for a bit and you can come back to chat sometime later after you get settled yeah?” Dobby nodded, hugged his leg and then popped
away. Harry trudged back to his bed and hopped up.

“Do I even want to know?” Shiva asked letting out an explosive sigh.

Harry just shrugged. “Honestly, probably not. I’ll tell you later though.”

“How did you know I carried gloves?” Daphne asked.

“You’re a Pureblood heiress. I’ve picked up a few things from Neville.”

Neville blushed but didn’t respond.

“So…Professor McGonagall, Professor Babbling, what the heck happened before Malfoy barged in that got you both riled up and knocked Professors Snape and Dumbledore on their asses?” Tracey asked.

Shiva rubbed the bridge of her nose again and sat down looking exhausted. “Both tried to perform legilimency on Harry. It’s basically mind reading. Very few people can do it well but they’re one of the group. It’s not supposed to be done except with very good reason or consent. Their reasons weren’t very good and neither asked Harry hence why we were angry. Dumbledore probably wanted to know what Harry was thinking about the diary while Snape likely just wanted to see how Harry had ejected Dumbledore.”

“And both were fools!” McGonagall spat. Harry’s eyebrows rose at that. His Head of House was continuing to impress him this year. “Honestly, you all just finished a tale where Harry’s glasses were used to effectively reflect a basilisk stare! What idiot would think a simple legilimency spell would break through that sort of protection?!”

The students looked at each other. Every one of them started to laugh hysterically while McGonagall, Flitwick, Shiva and Pomfrey just shook their heads in exasperation.

Two days later, Harry was sitting in the chair beside Hermione as Madam Pomfrey dripped the mandrake draught into his friend’s throat. The ones that Neville and himself had ordered finally came in a few hours ago and Hermione was the last one to be revived. Pomfrey moved off giving them some privacy as the potion began to take effect.

Hermione blinked a few times, lowered her arm and glanced about the room. Her eyes settled on Harry and barely a half second later, Hermione had surged off the bed and wrapped him in a hug. Harry chuckled. “It’s good to see you too, Hermione.”

“Harry! It’s a basilisk! The monster, it’s a basilisk!” she said pulling back and frantically starting to move away to find a teacher.

Harry pulled her back and hugged her again. “We know it was a basilisk.”

Hermione’s mind froze solid as she realized Harry had hugged her instead of the other way around. She hurriedly pushed that revelation aside to be examined later though in order to focus on the more immediate concern. “Oh, so you found the scrap.”

“We did. Great job there figuring that out!” Harry said nodding as he let her go and Hermione settled on his lap. Her gaze widened again.

“But wait! It’s likely moving through enlarged pipes or conduits running behind the walls! It’s quite possible the Chamber’s entrance has been hidden somewhere in one of the bathrooms!”
“Yup, it was. Moaning Myrtle’s ironically enough,” Harry said smiling at her. His friend had figured out the second half of the centuries old mystery in moments. She truly was amazing.

“Myrtle’s…” Hermione gaped at him. She shut her mouth and continued slowly, “How long have I been petrified Harry?”

“About five days,” he said shrugging.

“Five...days?”

“Yeah. Five days. We killed the basilisk two days after you were attacked and it took another three for the mandrakes to arrive. There was a bit of an import problem but between the Senior Abbots, Bones and Greengrasses we got the new law repealed and the mature mandrakes in pretty fast.”

“You killed the…” Hermione was feeling her brain lock up again. Harry’s complete nonchalance was certainly not helping her blood pressure.

“Don’t be modest, Harry,” Tracey chimed in from across the room. She was sitting up in her bed and grinning at the two. “Granger, he killed the basilisk all on his own. With a sword!”

“Sword…”

“Daphne was there too!” Harry protested.

“Yeah but you’re the one who ran straight at it screaming and stabbing it through the roof of its mouth.” Tracey’s grin widened as she saw Hermione’s features twist from shock to frustration.

“Haaarrrry?” Hermione drawled looking at her friend.

Warning bells were going off in Harry’s mind but it was too late. Hermione was already sitting on his lap. He was trapped – though it was a rather pleasant trap. “Yes, Hermione?”

“Explain.”

“Professor Babbling? Do you have a moment?” Hermione asked peeking around the door into Shiva’s office.

“Come on in, Hermione,” Shiva said waving the younger girl inside and smiling warmly at her. “It’s good to see you up and about.”

“Thank you. It’s good to be about.” Hermione sat in one of the chairs. She didn’t look nearly as uncomfortable as she had the first time they had done this.

“So what can I help you with?”

“Can I assume that you yelled at him enough it’s rather pointless and counterproductive for me to do so as well?” Hermione asked getting right to the point.

“Well that depends, I suppose,” Shiva grinned. “What would you be yelling at him for?”

“His stupid recklessness and his frustratingly annoying nobility mostly,” Hermione huffed.

“In that case, yeah I already yelled at him enough for the both of us. You could probably get away with a bit though,” Shiva said laughing.
“Well,” Hermione shifted a bit in her seat, “I may have hit him a bit already when he told me the story.”

Shiva kept laughing imagining Hermione slapping Harry’s chest for nearly getting himself killed multiple times over. “He tell you about afterwards with freeing that crazy little house elf and the poor thing breaking Malfoy’s ribs?”

“Yes he did. He also mentioned Dobby’s penchant for overly long names and to not be too surprised should he show up and start spouting off how Harry is the greatest thing since sliced bread.”

“Muggle expression?”

Hermione nodded. “On a related note…” The girl adopted a stern, mildly frightening look as she leaned forward and fixed a stare on Shiva. “He also mentioned that you were finishing up the paperwork to become his legal guardian.”

“Ah,” Shiva leaned back into her chair. She met the young witch’s gaze and nodded. “He told you that huh?”

“It came up when I tried to convince him to come to my parents’ instead of the Dursleys.”

“Yeah that would do it,” Shiva said thoughtfully. “Thank you for offering by the way.”

Hermione nodded never once letting go of Shiva’s eyes. “Of course. I will protect that boy in every way I can. Bathsheda Babbling, aka Shiva, allow me to make myself perfectly clear.” Hermione paused long enough for Shiva to nod. “I believe we care deeply about Harry in our own ways. I also know that Harry looks to you as the sister he never had. You have been good to and for him.” Hermione took a moment to breathe in deep and intensify her glare calmly folding her hands into her lap. “I am not in the habit of threatening authority figures. But if you hurt him – if you dangle this in front of him and then rip it away – I will make your life a living hell. Professor Snape is an arse, Ronald Weasley is an idiot and Headmaster Dumbledore is foolish to an extreme, but you can hurt Harry in a way none of them can. You can cut him through the heart and that is not something I will allow. I may only be 13 and I may not be a fully accomplished or accredited witch, but if you hurt Harry make no mistake; I will end you.”

Shiva gulped and nodded. She could see why Neville said Hermione was scary. Hermione Granger would be fearsome when she had received her full education, of that Shiva had zero doubt. “I’m getting him away from those people, Hermione. And short of dying on him, I’m going to try my best – for as long he’ll have me – to keep him from getting hurt like that again. I doubt Harry can ever have a normal childhood but I can certainly try to at least make it more loving then it has been until now.”

“Good.” Hermione leaned back and let out a breath. Her demeanor instantly lightened and a smile spread across her face.

“You know, you two can both be scary as hell when you get all protective,” Shiva mused.

“What? Harry? Harry’s not any more protective of me than anyone else,” Hermione said with a laugh.

Shiva just shook her head and grinned at the younger girl. “Hermione ask Neville sometime about how Harry went ballistic on nearly the entire senior staff when you were attacked then tell me he’s not protective of you. And of course then there was the time when we were waltzing through the
bones of the basilisk’s victims and Harry calmly stated, in no uncertain terms, that he was going to kill the basilisk because it had the audacity to harm you.”

Hermione gaped for a moment before replying, “Well, err, I’m sure he would’ve said that about any of his friends.”

“You keep telling yourself that, girl.”

“Yes, well, anyway, about next year’s classes…”

Severus Snape sat in his office drinking. His bottle of firewhiskey was nearly half empty. It just wasn’t fair. He wasn’t supposed to be able to respect the boy. The Potter spawn looked nearly identical to James. How could he not be exactly like his father? Never mind the eyes. Never mind the genius he’d inherited from Lily. Harry Potter was the son of James Potter. That was all there was supposed to be to the matter. That was all the boy would ever be. Just some arrogant little shite that waltzed all over the school like he owned it. Like no one else mattered. A tiny little boy who only cared about his friends and would do things simply for the glory and the adulation. Harry Potter was nothing to be respected!

And yet…Harry Potter had saved two Slytherins’ lives. Harry Potter had killed an ancient basilisk. Harry Potter had done this not for fame but because he wanted to protect an acquaintance. Harry Potter had earned the gratitude and protection of Daphne Greengrass, Ice Queen. And Harry Potter was actively rebelling against Albus Bloody Dumbledore.

Harry Potter was not James Potter. So…what did that make him?

Snape scowled and downed another glass of firewhiskey. That was not a thought train he wished to follow this night.

While Snape was draining his liqueur, an old man was sitting in his office chair thinking. Albus Dumbledore was staring at his phoenix but not seeing the small bird. He was lost in thought, his lemon drop bowl long since emptied of all sweets.

“Why did you go to him? Why would you take that initiative all on your own? Why take Flopsy?” Dumbledore turned to the Sorting Hat laying dormant on the shelf. He knew the Hat wasn’t a fan of the name but as far as he knew there was no official designation for the relic. It wasn’t even supposed to be truly active beyond the start of the year. That Fawkes had brought the Hat to Harry without any input was worrisome enough. That the Hat had then delivered the Sword of Gryffindor to the boy was…frankly frightening.

To make matters worse Dumbledore had been profoundly rebuffed from his attempts to claim the Sword afterwards. The Greengrass and Longbottom Heirs had both starting stating Right of Conquest and Right of Bequeathment allowing Harry Potter to wiggle around and maintain control of such a dangerous weapon…

The boy was treading a dangerous path. Dumbledore could see all the signs he had missed with Tom Riddle. Harry had been sent to the Dursleys in an effort to both ensure the boy’s safety and to lower his confidence. As long as Dumbledore could influence the boy and direct him, Harry could be steered away from the Dark. Yet now he was slipping through Dumbledore’s fingers. Harry Potter was gaining allies and friends at an alarming rate. Bathsheda Babbling was making inquiries into his past and trying to remove him from the environment Dumbledore had so careful engendered for the boy. He knew the Dursleys weren’t loving but they weren’t as bad as other
options. Taking care of the few people who looked too closely was trivial. The boy had simply been acting out as children were wont to do. But he could not simply obliviate or compulse Babbling. As frustrating as she was, she was extremely skilled and resourceful.

Somehow Harry had managed to win over Dumbledore’s oldest supporter as well. Minerva had been berating him in public! In public! Why could she not see that he needed to be the one to show the boy the correct path?

The Longbottom scion had been a good choice of friends. Even the Granger girl appeared to quite useful if frustratingly superior and resourceful. The Bones heiress could have been a problem if young Susan was closer, though on the periphery it left Amelia still removed from the boy so the situation was not untenable. Dumbledore still lamented that young Ronald Weasley continued to destroy any hope of befriending the boy. The Weasleys were a firm light side family and he had promised Molly long ago that Harry would be Ginevra’s intended. At least the girl and the older members of the family were not pushing Harry away as Ronald was determined to do.

Saving the Davis girl was unforeseen. Dumbledore had known of course about the basilisk. It was rather hard to truly hide information about the goings on in the castle when many of the portraits reported to him. A 60 foot snake – even one that primarily stayed in the walls – was not particularly stealthy. He hadn’t known for certain just who had been controlling the serpent but it hadn’t managed to take out anyone of importance prior to Granger. And even when it had, that had certainly worked as sufficient motivation for Harry. Dumbledore was a little disappointed he had run straight to Babbling with his discovery rather than someone like Minerva or Severus or himself but…the boy had figured it out and still showed the determination to assist. That was a good sign.

Greengrass though…Greengrass was a problem. Dumbledore was not fooled by the “Grey” veneer. The “Neutral” family. There was no such thing as “Neutral” or “Grey”, there was only Light and Dark. The Good and the Bad. That Harry was now closely associating with the Dark was...problematic. Worrisome. Harry was already being corrupted. He had killed with no true remorse shown. Quirrell had been understandable. That poor man had been utterly corrupted by Voldemort’s shade. But the basilisk was intelligent and desperate. Surely Harry could have reasoned with it? Surely he could have taken the time to make the creature see. Even after the stress of the situation was diminishing Harry had allowed the house elf to assault Lucius! That the elf likely had legitimate grievances was irrelevant – such violence was evidence that Harry was starting to slip.

And the diary. The Horcrux. The indisputable proof that he had been correct. That Voldemort had survived utilizing these items. And that Harry Potter would have to die.

The residual scans of the diary were clear. They matched those Dumbledore had taken long ago of Harry’s scar. The boy was a Horcrux. Of that there was no doubt. Greengrass’ involvement may have jump started the corruption of the horrid remnant or it may have become more active on its own. Either way, it was clear that Harry was being influenced by the spirit sheltering within him.

If Dumbledore could not pull Harry back to the Light and convince him of the rightness of the path he must tread…then Albus Dumbledore would make certain that Harry Potter did not walk the easier route. When Gellert fell to the Dark Dumbledore had lost his lover. He had lost his friend. He had lost his sister. When Riddle fell he had lost his remaining faith and hope.

Dumbledore would not allow a third Dark Lord to arise because of his lack of action. Harry Potter would return to the Light and rid himself of the Horcrux willingly…or Harry Potter would meet his next great adventure before his ascendance to power.
Hi, Tonks. You had said I could write if I wanted so I figured I’d send you a short letter. I imagine by now Susan has told her Aunt Amelia (great job letting me know that your partner that day was the big boss by the way...) about the Chamber of Secrets and the monster. In case word didn’t filter back down to you though I wanted to give you a head’s up that the monster was a basilisk. It’s dead now. My friends and I killed the thing. I don’t think it was entirely sane at the end which is a bit sad. I might not have had to kill it if it had listened to me. (I can talk to snakes by the way. You’re a metamorphmagus, I’m a parseltongue. We each have rare gifts!)

Anyway, you were right, Hagrid couldn’t have done anything either this time or the last time when Moaning Myrtle was killed. It actually turned out to be the same person both times ironically enough though that’s a bit of a long story to put in a letter. For the moment, let’s just say that it was a very scary memory that was at fault along with a ponce who horribly mistreats his house elves. I know that Hagrid’s not in Azkaban anymore but...if you wanted to clear Hagrid’s name from his first conviction too then feel free to use this memory of my talk with Myrtle about how she died. (Shiva told me how to extract the thing and that you’d have a court pensieve able to play it. I still think this is weird but then again I think a lot about the Wizarding World is weird.) I can’t believe nobody ever actually asked her! This should be more than enough to clear Hagrid.

And yeah in case you’re wondering, I did see you when he was arrested. I know you seemed pretty happy about the Aurors when we met and Amelia seemed somewhat reasonable but if being an Auror is going to beat you up inside like it did that day maybe you should reconsider? It was fun seeing you with your hair spiked and colored and bouncing around like the devil couldn’t care. But watching you in Hagrid’s hut didn’t feel right. You should do what makes you happy and keeps your hair lively Tonks.

So this letter is getting longer than I had planned. Hope you’re good.

-Harry

P.S. Just to make sure you get some color today: Nymphadora.

Harry finished off his letter with a smirk and tied it to Hedwig’s leg. He gave his owl a pet and fed her a few slices of bacon. She hooted at him in thanks. “Remember, Hedwig, after you drop this off with Tonks hang around Shiva. She’ll take care of you until things are done. No point in annoying the Dursleys more than we have to.” Hedwig nipped at his fingers and bobbed her head. “Good girl. One more slice of bacon for the road?” The owl eagerly gobbled the proffered treat, hooted a quick goodbye and took to the air.

“Who were you writing to, Harry?” Neville asked.

“Tonks,” Harry said. “I wasn’t sure how much Susan told her Aunt and I rather doubt Dumbledore will do anything to help Hagrid so I figured I’d let Tonks know at least.”

“That was a good idea, Harry.” Hermione flashed a smile at her friend. “I suppose we should get on the train.”

“Probably, yeah.”

“Well this summer should be better than the last one at least, right?” Hermione said as they walked onto the platform.

“Hopefully,” Harry nodded.
“Harry, remember,” Neville said, “If you need anything at all send for me or Hermione. And if we don’t hear anything after two weeks then we’re coming on a rescue mission ourselves this time.”

“We’ve already let the twins know as well,” Hermione chimed in.

Harry laughed. “Thanks guys. You know, for the first time I’m actually looking forward to going back there.” He gave one last glance at the castle smiling. With any luck, this would be one of the best summers he had ever had.
Chapter 9: Guardians, Gringotts and Goblins

“I thought you said Aunt Marge wasn’t coming for another week,” Harry groaned as he set the dinner table. Aunt Petunia had just informed him that Uncle Vernon’s sister was coming over early. The horrible woman was now going to arrive just time to have one last hurrah with Harry before he could escape the clutches of this family forever.

Aunt Marge and her dogs were quite possibly the worst among his relatives. Uncle Vernon mostly just yelled and occasionally hit him. Dudley just beat him and scared away any potential friends. Aunt Petunia waged emotional and psychological warfare but was somewhat reserved. Aunt Marge pulled no punches. She did everything she could possibly get away with to Harry and he had realized several years ago that at times she did actively try to either have her dogs kill him or get him to kill himself.

Needless to say Harry had no intention of going to this dinner unprepared. Screw the Underage Magic laws. He had his freebie back if he needed to use it. He stuck a Concussor, a Lockpick, a Boomstone and a Ninja into his belt slots. Shiva had owled to say the Legal Guardian paperwork would be done tomorrow. Aunt Marge was not going to screw this up for him. Harry wasn’t planning on firing the first shot, but he would make sure that he’d be the one firing the last.

“Her plans shifted, boy,” Petunia sniffed. “So add that last place setting like I told you.”

“You know I’m leaving tomorrow. I don’t see why you want me to come to this dinner knowing none of you will ever see me again,” Harry said with a scowl. “Can’t you just let me have one final night of peace here? We both know Aunt Marge is going to be horrible.”

Petunia sneered in response. Harry supposed he should be thankful she hadn’t flung the spaghetti pot at his head like she had done a few years ago. He shouldn’t have badmouthed Marge. But…he was almost out. It was so hard to keep watching what he said to his relatives…

“I’m so glad you finally placed that boy into the system correctly, Vernon,” Aunt Marge said sloshing some of her wine as she patted her brother’s arm across the table. Harry glared at his plate counting down until he would be allowed to leave. “St. Brutus’ is an excellent first step. I only wish you could put him where he truly belongs.”

“As do I, Marge, dear,” Vernon agreed nodding.

“Prison may be extreme in some cases but with this…child’s antics it is the only appropriate response. He has been nothing but trouble for you and Petunia!”

“Too right,” Petunia said. Harry’s scowl deepened. This woman was related to his mother? It was almost enough to convince him to never have children.

“That’s not quite how I handle things with my dogs though of course.”

“What do you mean, Aunt Marge?” Dudley asked shoveling more food into his bottomless pit. Harry smirked at the idle thought that perhaps Ron and his cousin would get along smashingly. Or they’d kill each other over the last plate of food. It was a tossup.

“Well the brat is obviously incurable.” Aunt Marge lifted a pudgy finger at Dudley. “One of the
puppies in Ripper’s latest litter was the same. Completely rabid, unable to be trained or controlled.”

‘Is she seriously comparing me to a rabid dog?’ Harry thought idly. It would almost have been funny if she hadn’t been so serious about it.

“Now I didn’t just put that dog down. I put down the bitch as well. It’s certainly not Ripper’s fault that his spawn had issues. But the instability had to come from somewhere.” Harry’s brow furrowed and he clenched his hands. She couldn’t possibly be about to… “If there is a problem with the bitch, there is a problem with the progeny. You put them both down for the good of everyone. You can’t let freaks and crazies and rabids like them continue their lines. Any who would shelter them should be put down as well. Because only those who have no morals would possibly defend such an obviously broken and awful existence!” Marge slammed her glass back and leered proudly at Harry. His teeth were clenched and his muscles locked. It was all he could do to hold the table and push the magic that was threatening to flood out back down.

“So, Dudders,” Marge continued with a smile, “I’m simply saying that if the boy was one of my dogs he wouldn’t have seen his first year. And his bitch mother would’ve shortly followed behind him.”

Harry lifted his gaze to scan the table. Dudley surprisingly was looking rather uncomfortable at the direction things had turned. Vernon however was happily nodding along and Petunia simply gave a little noncommittal shrug. Harry desperately tried to remember why he needed to remain controlled. That letting go would only confirm what Marge was saying about him.

“I hear that you managed to find some foolish woman to take him off your hands, Vernon. It would be only appropriate for her to perish along with him as they leave in the same manner as the brat’s parents. It would serve them all – ”

“SHUT UP!” Harry screamed. Insulting him was one thing. He was used to it. Insulting his parents was completely different. Insulting Shiva for rescuing him was the last straw. “I’ve had enough,” Harry continued in a voice barely above a whisper. “All I’ve ever done to you people was be born. I gave up trying to get you to care a long time ago and I understand that you hate me. I don’t even really care anymore. But you will not insult my parents! My parents who DIED to SAVE me! And you will not insult the one person in my life who is getting me away from you and your poison!” Harry was standing with his fists on the table. He left the rune stones in his belt so that he wasn’t tempted to use them. If he could get out of this without resorting to them it’d be a bonus.

The way that both Vernon and Marge’s faces were purpling though…it didn’t seem likely. “How dare you, you little freak!” Vernon shouted. “We put a roof over your head for years! We feed you! We clothe you!”

“You throw rags at me that I have to staple to fit into!” Harry yelled back. “You stuck me in a cupboard! You leave me scraps!”

“It is more than you or your precious parents ever deserved!” Marge sneered. “You should’ve died with those fools that night! I don’t know for sure what you are doing for this woman claiming you but it is certain to be unnatural! She should be ashamed of herself to allow her body to be defiled by you – ”

Harry lost all control at that. The windows in the kitchen blew out and the table flipped. Marge flew into the wall leaving a whale sized dent. Her dog, Ripper, flew towards Harry for daring to attack his mistress. Harry just ripped off the Boomstone and activated it. The localized silencing
charm snapped into place around him while a piercing screech was let off just beyond his bubble. It was strong enough in the enclosed space that Harry felt the sound reverberate in his bones. The *Boomstone* cut off after a second but the damage was done. Ripper had fled to the backyard, Dudley was cowering in the corner behind the overturned table, Petunia was leaning against the counter for support and Marge was still stuck half in the wall. Only Vernon was up. His ears were bleeding as he reached for Harry but Harry grabbed for his *Concussor* and held it aloft pointed towards the man.

“Go ahead, Uncle,” Harry whispered. He didn’t know if the whale could hear him or not but either way, Vernon proved to be mildly more intelligent than Harry had initially assumed: he stopped. “I’m leaving. I hope Voldemort finds you and your family.” Harry twisted and stalked out of the room. He pressed the *Lockpick* to the door of the cupboard and it popped open. Grabbing his trunk Harry stormed out of the house all his belongings held in one little container.

Harry practically ran down several blocks before coming to a halt. He turned back in the direction of Number 4 Privet Drive and scowled. A low whine from behind him had Harry twisting back around in an instant with *Concussor* held up. Whatever was making the noise was hidden in the bushes. Harry carefully put down his trunk and popped it open pulling out his wand before shutting it again. The *Concussor* was useful, but not very versatile after all. “Hello?” Harry asked into the dark. Now that he was starting to calm down again he was starting to get worried at the amount of magic he had just performed at his former house. If he could get away with not using his wand, that would be preferable at this point.

A thin, mangy looking, giant, black dog crawled out of the bushes. The animal was huge, but it looked so sad and…well, pathetic, that Harry dropped the *Concussor* back onto his belt. “It’s okay, boy, I’m not going to hurt you. You seem nicer than Ripper at least.” The dog cocked its head at Harry and gave a soft woof before picking itself up and padding over to him. Harry petted the dog’s head and it panted its enjoyment. Squirming away from his hand, the dog reached up to lick his face and Harry laughed. The dog then reached out to his hand still holding his wand and nosed it up. “I’d prefer to keep a hold of this for the moment, buddy,” Harry chuckled as the dog lifted his arm up towards the street with its persistence.

 Barely a moment passed before there was a soft bang and a large purple, double-decker bus sprang into existence out of nowhere and came to a crashing halt on the sidewalk next to Harry. The boy jumped back landing on his ass and the dog gave a woof that sounded practically like a laugh. Shaking his head Harry stared at the obnoxious vehicle.

The doors opened and a pimply head poked out, “Knight Bus at your service, sir. Last respite for the stranded witch or wizard too pissed to apparate home! I’m Stan Shunpike, how may I help you today?”

Harry just gaped at the man. He shook his head before muttering, “Well, I guess that’s one way to get to Shiva’s.” Harry picked himself up and grabbed his trunk thanking his lucky stars that Shiva had mentioned her address in her last letter. “How much to go to Colchester? Say 73 Northgate Street?” Harry saw the dog cock its head at that and let out a small woof.

“Hmm, Colchester eh? ‘Bout a galleon. That would include a hot chocolate too.”

“Deal.” Harry grabbed his trunk and turned to the dog but it had already disappeared back into the night. “Good luck, buddy. Hope your night ends better than mine started.”

Harry left the knight bus behind and stumbled up the steps of Shiva’s apartment complex working hard to ignore his still flip-flopping stomach. Leaning against the wall outside her door for a
moment to regain his equilibrium Harry eventually tamed his body enough to knock.

A muffled curse sounded from the other side after Harry knocked twice more. “Do you bloody know what time it is?” Shiva’s voice groused from within. She opened the door with murder written in her features until her eyes lit upon Harry standing in front of the portal to the apartment. Shiva’s anger melted into concern and she wrapped Harry into a hug. “Jeez kid, what the hell are you doing here at this time of night? What happened?”

She pulled him into the apartment and kicked his trunk to the side as she shut the door again. Hedwig hooted amicably from her perch in the corner of the living room and Harry waved at his familiar. Shiva sat him down at the kitchen table and moved to the side. “So, how bad is it and how awake do I need to be for this conversation?”

“Err,” Harry said looking down at his rune belt, “somewhere between a 6 and 9? How much trouble I get in will probably end up depending on just how much Mafalda Hopkirk hates me and how much Amelia Bones likes me. In terms of wakefulness probably about a first class of the day level.”

Shiva sighed and set a teakettle of water on to boil. “Great. So tea for you and one cup of coffee for me.” She plopped down into a chair across from him and Harry finally got a good look at his friend. It was blatantly obvious she had been sleeping before he knocked on her door. Her shoulder length brown hair was arrayed around her face not unlike Hermione’s first year norm and her eyes were tired slits. The t-shirt she was wearing was large, hanging down to a few inches above her thighs. Harry realized with slightly burning cheeks that she was wearing a pair of tight boyshorts and was suddenly very thankful that at least she hadn’t answered the door in panties.

“Why are you green?” Shiva asked squinting at him.

“I uh, took the Knight Bus here,” Harry grimaced. “I swear, literally every form of wizarding transit I’ve experienced so far hates me.”

Shiva laughed in commiseration with him. “If it helps, everyone hates the Knight Bus. My aunt was convinced that it’s deliberately horrible to make people less inclined to drink enough that they can’t apparate anymore. Considering it’s mostly used by minors these days though it seems counterproductive to me.” The pot whistled and Shiva poured Harry the tea and got the coffee set up for herself. “Alright, tell me what happened.”

“Uncle Vernon’s sister, Aunt Marge, came over tonight. She was supposed to come a few weeks later but apparently word got back to her that I was leaving for good and it seems like the Dursleys wanted one last Pick On Harry Day. She’s awful. Worse than the other three combined and I still have some scars on my legs from where she used to let her dogs bite me.” Shiva’s expression darkened quite a bit as she perked up, the coffee in her hands mostly forgotten. “I knew it would be bad so before dinner I grabbed some of my rune stones just in case I ended up needing them. She started going on about how I was incurably insane and evil and other such stuff but I’m used to that so I mostly ignored it. Then she started talking about Mum and Dad and you and how it was good they had died and how she hoped that you and I would also die as soon as we got in the car to leave. I…got a bit angry at that point.”

“Go on.” Shiva’s face was carefully neutral though Harry noticed the way her hands were clenched around the coffee mug.

“I started yelling back at them all for the first time in years. Vernon screamed back while Dudley and Petunia just sat there. I yelled again. Marge…err…she um…she said it would’ve been better if I’d died as a baby but that wasn’t what set me off…”
“And what did set you off?”

“She um…she started to say that the only reason you were taking me in was because I was having sex with you…I kinda lost my temper at that point. The windows blew out, the table flew across the kitchen, and Aunt Marge was knocked into the wall. At that point I got my wild magic under control but I wasn’t thinking clearly so I grabbed my Boomstone – the one that makes a lot of noise like a boombox – set it off, partly to make them pay and partly to scare off Ripper. Uncle Vernon started coming for me after it shut off so I switched for the Concussor and threatened him. He backed off, I unlocked the cupboard with my trunk with the Lockpick and left. It was all over in under two minutes but it was still a lot of magic…” Harry was wringing his hands by that point. He hadn’t even noticed Shiva had gotten up until he was pulled into another hug.

“You don’t have to defend my honor, Harry, but thank you for doing so. Everything for the guardianship is done, signed and ready. I’m just picking up the official document first thing, but it was all already legal by the time I went to bed last night,” she whispered to him. “You are never going back to them, Harry. Nobody deserves to be raised by people like that. I can’t get them locked up, but we will spend some time thinking about how to make them pay.” Harry nodded and Shiva pulled back. “Okay now let’s get you to bed. We can go talk to Madam Bones and Hopkirk in the morning after I get the paperwork okay?”

“Can I say hi to Tonks while we’re there?” Harry asked perking up a bit.

Shiva laughed. “Sure, kid. Figured you’d be sweet on Hermione not going for the older women!”

“That’s not – I mean – she’s just nice and funny is all!” Harry sputtered.

“Uh huh.”

“And I want to make sure she’s okay!”

“Yup.”

“Besides neither she nor Hermione are interested in me,” Harry finished, crossing his arms.

Shiva slapped a hand to her face and shook her head. “Kid, it is far too early in the morning for me to try and knock some sense into you. Both about women and your general romantic suitability.

“Your bedroom is the first door on the right, mine is the last of the left and the loo is at the end of the hall. Towels are in the closet in case I’m gone already by the time you wake up and there’s cereal in the cabinets,” Shiva scratched her head. “I think that’s about it. Push the brick on the top left of the fireplace to open the Floo for anything beyond calls though I’d prefer to be here if you’re going to let someone in. I’ve put wards on the window so Hedwig and any post owls can get in or out on their own. Also…wait to read the Prophet in the morning till I get a chance to talk to you about it tonight okay?”

“That bad?” Harry asked looking worried.

Shiva grimaced. “Well, it’s not like Two Face showed up again but yeah it’s kinda bad. It’s also rather complicated so I’d prefer to talk about while fully awake. Is that cool?”

“Not Voldemort?” Shiva shook her head. Harry sighed, but nodded in agreement. “As long as you don’t just ignore it later, I can live with waiting.”

“Sweet.” Shiva moved to give him a quick hug and ruffled his hair before heading down the hall. “Night, kid. Sleep well. Try not to stress too much. Night, Hedwig.”
“Goodnight, Shiva.” Harry looked around the apartment with a smile. For the first time in his life he actually felt like he was home.

Harry had just finished his shower and thrown some clothes on when Shiva walked back in the front door. A manila envelope was held in one hand while her other was balancing a large apple pie. “Brought food!” she called out.

Harry jumped up to grab the pie his mouth already watering. “You are amazing.”

“Why thank you,” Shiva mock preened. “Tarts are harder to find and I can’t bake to save my life. So you get pie instead. I got the paperwork and spoke to Amelia Bones. We have an appointment for 10 which gives us some time to get you clothes that fit. Do you want to go in Muggle or wizard stuff?”

“Err, the only wizard robes I have are Hogwarts…”

“I just said I was taking you shopping, kid,” Shiva chuckled. “We only have time to hit up one store first though so: Muggle or wizard?”

“Would it be okay if we went in Muggle stuff?”

“Sure. I need a new set of jeans anyway,” Shiva shrugged.

“I thought you were a pureblood?”

“Eh, sorta.” Shiva said waving her hand. “My paternal grandpa was Muggle-born so I’m technically considered a three-quarter blood but nobody uses that term. I know most of the basics about Muggle stuff but my dad always preferred the wizarding world so I’m not as well versed as I could be. I can get around though without standing out and I can pronounce most of their terms correctly. Which is honestly a heck of a lot better than some of the so-called experts.”

“Like Arthur Weasley for example,” Harry said with a small cringe. “For someone obsessed with Muggles you’d think he could say electricity right…”

Shiva laughed. “Yeah, Arthur’s special that way. Great guy though and he taught his kids well.” Harry raised an eyebrow as he munched on his pie. “Well, okay, he taught his kids besides Ron well.” Harry nodded and went back to breakfast. “Don’t get used to this by the way, Harry. You’re not getting pie for breakfast all the time. Stop pouting. Pie is dessert not breakfast. Just because I can’t cook doesn’t mean I can’t feed you right. And I should probably get you some nutrient potions as well so we can get rid of some of the problems your relatives left. Actually now that I think about it, have you had your inoculations?”

“Like for TB and measles?” Harry asked. He paused and tapped the table in thought. “I don’t think I’ve had those actually…”

“No, those are important but I meant inoculations for things like for dragonpox and spattergroit,” Shiva said. At Harry’s blank look she sighed. “Why am I not surprised. Okay after Bones, we’ll hit Gringotts then get you your shots and potions. I’m going to have to talk to Min about forgetting to get you those.”

“McGonagall?” Harry furrowed his brow. “Why would Professor McGonagall have handled that?”

“Well all Muggle-born or raised are supposed to be brought to St. Mungos for a full screening and
inoculation set during their Diagon Alley trip.”

“Oh. Err…McGonagall didn’t take me to Diagon. Hagrid did,” Harry said hoping he wasn’t about to get his friend into trouble.

“Hagrid?” Shiva’s mouth dropped open. Then she muttered, “Dumbledore.” She fumed for a moment before calming down and looking back to Harry. “Hagrid is nice, Harry, but he is not qualified to explain the important parts of our world to someone raised with Muggles.”

“I can agree with that,” Harry sighed. “He didn’t even tell me how to get on Platform 9 and Three Quarters. I was lucky I read about it in Hogwarts, A History beforehand.”

Shiva just groaned and banged her head on the table. “Neville was right, kid. You seriously have the worst good luck possible.”

“Good morning, Madam Bones. It’s nice to see you again,” Harry said as he and Shiva met Amelia Bones in front of her office at 10. They shook hands and Amelia nodded down to him.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter. Ms. Babbling tells me you had a bit of an incident last night?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And why does that necessitate coming to the Department Head to explain it?” Amelia asked glancing between Shiva and Harry.

“Well, Director,” Shiva said with a shrug, “Hopkirk didn’t seem very reasonable the last time there was an incident and Harry wasn’t even at fault back then. This time he is and there is a fair bit of magic involved from what he told me. We figured we’d head the problem off at the pass and just ask you to sit in instead of coming with another complaint later.”

Amelia sighed and rubbed her forehead letting the monocle fall off her face. “Mafalda does tend to hold a grudge. It’s really probably for the best. Not like I have much else I can do at the moment with all of our resources tied up in Black.” She waved them inside the office. “Well, sit down. Hopkirk should be here right about…” the older witch stalked in and took a seat without waiting for an invitation, “now.”

“Problems again, Potter?” Hopkirk said with a barely disguised sneer. Harry resisted snorting. This woman should take lessons from Snape if she wanted to truly master the art of a good sneer.

“Well, ma’am considering this was my first underage magic event after starting Hogwarts I don’t believe it would be correct to say ‘again’.”

“Play nice, Harry,” Shiva muttered.

“Please tell us what happened, Mr. Potter,” Amelia said taking out a quill and parchment.

“Yes, Madam Bones,” Harry said. He took a calming breath and sat up straighter. “My relatives were having Aunt Marge over for dinner. She hates me even more than the rest of my family,” Harry stopped for a moment at Hopkirk’s snort.

“Is there an issue, Ms. Hopkirk?” Amelia asked glaring at the woman.

“I simply find it hard to believe that The-Boy-Who-Lived’s family dislikes him.”

“They are not my family,” Harry snarled. “They are my relatives. Bathsheda Babbling is far more
family than they ever were.” Shiva sniffled a bit at that but Harry barged on. “And just because reality isn’t what you find believable doesn’t make it untrue, ma’am.”

“Please continue with your explanation, Mr. Potter,” Amelia said before Hopkirk could say anything else.

“I spent most of the dinner being berated and insulted. Eventually Aunt Marge got around to saying that it was good my parents were dead and that with any luck me and Ms. Babbling would be joining them soon. I started yelling back at that point and then Aunt Marge insinuated that I was intimate with Ms. Babbling.” Amelia’s eyebrows rose at that statement while Hopkirk just snorted again. “I had a burst of accidental magic after that which destroyed many of the windows in the room and knocked the table over in addition to sending my Aunt careening into the wall. Her dog moved to attack me and I defended myself by using a rune stone which creates a very loud noise. After it cut out I had to retrieve my things with the use of an unlocking rune and left the house.”

“And that’s when you went to Ms. Babbling’s home?” Amelia clarified.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Ms. Babbling, can you corroborate any aspects?” Amelia’s quill was scratching along as she turned to look at Shiva.

“Harry showed up at my door last night around 1 am. He had just gotten off the Knight Bus but was still visibly upset and some clothes were half sticking out of his trunk. It looked like he had left in a hurry. When I asked what happened he told me the same thing you just heard.” Shiva sighed. “I was coming to pick him up today anyway. His relatives have a history of this sort of thing, Ma’am.”

“Really?” Amelia’s quill stopped moving and she turned her full gaze upon Shiva. “And why am I just hearing about this now?”


“Mr. Potter, it is not normal for relatives to behave in such a manner.”

“Again, that doesn’t change the fact that nobody cared before, Ma’am. I’m done with them now. I don’t plan on ever seeing them again.”

“You don’t actually believe this, Madam?” Hopkirk asked sounding incredulous. “He’s the Boy-Who-Lived! No one in their right mind would say such things to him. He’s obviously making the entire thing up to get away with breaking the law like a spoiled little child.”

Shiva glared at the woman and Harry’s eyes narrowed. Amelia just rubbed her forehead and picked up the quill. “Mafalda, I placed you on probation last year because you refused to listen or investigate. You are doing the exact same thing right now. I advise you to stop speaking before I fire you.”

“Madam Umbridge would never –”

“I don’t care what the Senior Undersecretary thinks or threatens, Mafalda. I run this department. And I don’t take being given ultimatums well. Pack your things and get out.”

“You can’t do this to me!”
“I already have. Out. Now.” Amelia pointed towards the door with a scowl on her features. Hopkirk glared at the Director but stiffly stood and walked out of the room. “Damn, now I need to find yet another clerk. Mr. Potter,” Amelia said switching gears and turning back to the others in the room, “I believe your story and cannot fault the accidental magic. It’s termed accidental for a reason. I can also understand the use of the noise and lockpicking spells though I feel at that point the situation could have been handled better. You are however still only twelve years old so that must be taken into account. Consider this an official warning. No charges or fines will be levied but it will be entered into your record. If there is another incident than you will be likely find yourself fined.” She paused and set the quill down. “On a more personal note, I apologize for the conditions leading to this. Am I safe in assuming that Ms. Babbling is looking after you from this point forward?” Both nodded at that. “Okay then. Do you have the paperwork to make that official?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Shiva handed over the papers she’d picked up that morning.

“Hmm…” Amelia quickly scanned the documents. “This looks to be in order for the Muggle side of things. What about the magical side?”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about, Madam Bones…” Shiva said trailing off with a confused look.

“The Muggle paperwork handles official guardianship. The magical side deals with the magical guardian.”

“Doesn’t that just implicitly follow if the legal guardian is a magical as well?” Shiva asked. Harry could feel his stomach knotting. Of course it was too good to be true.

“Honestly I’m not sure. That’s not my field. I never had any issues with my ward, my niece Susan, but…it’s always better to be sure. Ask Gringotts. They’d be able to tell you faster than dealing with the bureaucracy here.”

“We were headed there next anyway…” Shiva scowled. “Thanks for the heads up.”

“Of course.” Amelia sighed. “If you do run into problems with it know this, Ms. Babbling, Mr. Potter: your place of residence and physical guardian is resolved in this paperwork right here,” she pointed to the documents Shiva was holding, “even should you not be his magical guardian, these make the boy your ward. Wizarding world decisions might be more difficult but he can’t be taken away while those exist.”

Harry’s stomach unclenched slightly. Worst case scenario of being forced back to the Dursleys was apparently off the table. “Thank you, Ma’am.”

Amelia nodded. “Of course. Now if there’s nothing else, I really do need to get back to dealing with this task force.”

“Sure. Thanks again for your time, Madam Bones.” Shiva stood up and led Harry back outside. She ruffled Harry’s hair and grinned at him. “So slap on the wrist ain’t too bad! Don’t worry about the magical guardian thing too much. We’ll deal with it at Gringotts if we have to.” Harry nodded back trying to pat his hair back into a semblance of order. “You wanted to stop by and say hello to Tonks right? Aurors should be this door.”

Harry entered the section of the building that Shiva indicated and glanced about the room. He almost missed Tonks at first but then there was a loud crash and muffled cursing from one side of the room. Looking over Harry had to stifle his laughter as one man was face-first in a garbage bin.
and Tonks was leaning against a desk holding her leg and looking guilty. “Sorry, Dawlish,” she said speaking up to be heard around the laughter in the room. “I swear that desk was few feet to the right before. Thanks for breaking my fall though!” Dawlish pulled his head out of the bin, glared at Tonks and stalked out to the bathroom.

Harry grinned and walked over towards Tonks. “Still two left feet, Tonks?”

“Wotcher, Harry. Wotcher, Shiva.” Tonks grinned over at the two and dropped into the chair behind the desk still rubbing at her leg. “I could do the two left feet thing. Want to see?”

Harry laughed again. “That’d be a bit weird I think. I see you got some color back.” He waved to her dark blue hair.

“Yup. Pink just didn’t seem appropriate and all. I’m going to get you back for mentioning the name where I couldn’t hit you upside the head you know.” Tonks said half glaring and half smiling.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Did the memory help?”

“Actually yeah it did. Thanks for that,” Tonks dropped into a bit more of a professional bent. “Hagrid was cleared of most of the original charges on him thanks to you. He still got a sanction for keeping a dangerous controlled magical beast but that was mostly just a large fine which had been paid long ago. Don’t know if he’s going to get a new wand anymore or whatnot but the option is open to him now.” There was a slightly frustrated air about her though she seemed to shrug it off before continuing. “I think he has something special planned for you when you guys meet up again at Hogwarts.”


“So what are you two doing here?”

Shiva slapped Harry’s shoulder while his face turned a bit red. “Well, this guy had a bit of a fight yesterday and magic got involved. He put them in their place.” She smirked and Tonks laughed.

“Well I certainly hope he did! Did Hopkirk give you any problems?”

“Actually I got her fired…” Harry mumbled.

Tonks’ eyes widened, her mouth dropped open and her hair flashed through a rainbow of colors before settling back to blue. “Remind me never to piss you off, Harry.”

“It wasn’t really his fault,” Shiva said with a shrug. “She ran her mouth and ticked off Madam Bones.”

“Ah, yeah that makes sense. Bonesy has a bit of short temper at the moment. Fudge is coming down on her hard over the Sirius Black case and it’s not like we have anywhere close to the amount of people we need with the recent budget cuts.”

“Fudge again?” Harry’s visage darkened. “Who voted for that guy?”

“Malfoy.” Shiva and Tonks both said at the same time.

“I really hate that man…” Harry grumbled.

“Agreed,” Tonks said. “Look, it’s been fun guys but I really do need to work this case a bit. He is
my cousin after all. It’s pretty much my responsibility to find him.”

“Sure, we’ll let you go. I just wanted to say hi.” Harry waved at her as he and Shiva turned to make their way back outside.

“Later, Harry! Bye, Shiva!”

Harry and Shiva were almost to the front of the queue at Gringotts when she turned to him.

“Remember, goblins take smiles with teeth showing as a sign of aggression. Be polite and direct because they don’t like to waste time.”

“I know, Shiva. I talked to Flitwick about proper conduct regarding goblins before I left for the summer. I got it covered,” Harry said waving off her concerns. The goblins weren’t that bad. They at least were blatant in their dislike of most people. He could respect that. Stepping up to the free teller Harry nodded and said, “May your gold ever flow, sir.”

Harry didn’t notice it but every goblin within earshot paused for a moment at the traditional greeting being spoken by a wizard child. The teller blinked down at the boy and his original, automatic sneer twisted into a confused frown. “May your hoard be increased, patron. What is your business with Gringotts?” His words were just as short as before but the tone sounded far less ornery than the first time Harry had been here.

“I need to visit my vault and I’d also like to speak with the Potter Account Manager. I have had a recent change in guardianship and I need to ascertain that she is added to my accounts as well as any necessary paperwork is in order.”

“Harry,” Shiva whispered with wide eyes, “you don’t have to do that.”

“I know. But I want to.”

The teller blinked down at the two again. “Potter?” Harry nodded. The goblin frowned then snapped his fingers. A smaller goblin hurried forward from behind the counter. “Follow the Vaultrunner to the meeting room.”

“Thank you, sir. May your enemies fall before you,” Harry said with a small bow.

“And may their blood wet your blade.” The teller responded with another surprised head nod.

“Hello, Griphook. I hope you’ve been well. May your gold ever flow,” Harry said as he turned to the goblin they were to follow.

“You remember me?” Griphook’s eyes had widened considerably and the pause in the surrounding goblins was noticeable to all nearby this time.

“Of course.”

“That was two years ago, wizard.” Griphook sounded dumbfounded.

“You were the first goblin I ever met,” Harry said with a bit of chuckle. “It made a bit of an impression.”

Griphook just nodded and shook his head before turning to lead the way back through the bank’s corridors. As they trio moved off many goblins heads watched their progress. It had been a long time since wizards from a prominent family had bothered to remember their names. Or to give
proper greetings. Or to even truly be polite. Perhaps Harry Potter would follow in his ancestor’s footsteps after all...

Harry and Shiva were led into a small office and after greeting the goblin behind the desk took their seats. “I am Snapfist, Mr. Potter. It is good to see you have finally found the time to deem a response to my questions was warranted. Though a simple owl would’ve sufficed.”

“Wait, questions?” Shiva said furrowing her brow at the goblin.

Harry scowled. “Let me guess. You’ve sent me owls for years and I’ve never replied to a single one?”

Snapfist leaned back with a barely concealed sneer. “We have sent letters since you first turned 11, Mr. Potter. At least one letter every month for nearly two years now.”

“I haven’t received any of them, sir. I apologize for any offense taken as I assure you none was intended.”

Snapfist’s eyebrows furrowed at the little wizard’s response. This was highly unexpected. An arrogant heir was perfectly normal. A lying wizard was also perfectly normal. Both were exceedingly easy to spot. Harry Potter instead appeared nearly as frustrated as Snapfist himself. It certainly helped the child’s case that wizard heirs as a rule never apologized; certainly never to a goblin.

“You don’t sound surprised by this, Harry,” Shiva said.

“I’m the bloody Boy-Who-Lived. Shouldn’t I have gotten letters from half the witches and wizards in Britain with everything from simple thanks to marriage proposals? The first letter I ever got was from Hogwarts. The second was from Hermione. No, Shiva, it doesn’t surprise me at all that someone’s been stealing my mail.”

“If you suspected this, Mr. Potter, why did you not say anything earlier?” Snapfist asked, eyes narrowing.

“Because, Snapfist, if I started getting letters while still at the Dursleys I’d be in for an even rougher summer than usual. I was waiting until I was free of my relatives. Now I am.” Shiva was glowering at the situation as Harry explained.

Snapfist gave a low growl. “Tampering with one’s mail is a criminal offense, Mr. Potter. Tampering with official Gringotts communications is an offense against the Goblin Nation.” Shiva stiffened but Harry just snorted. “We will find the guilty party and ensure adequate punishment is meted out. Who may we address your letters to in the meantime?”

“Bathsheda Babbling.” Harry nodded towards Shiva. “She’s my legal guardian as of yesterday. Which is actually one of the reasons why I’m here but we can go over that later. What were you trying to get ahold of me for?”

“Three primary reasons, Mr. Potter. First, we were sending account statements detailing your holdings. Here is a copy now.” Snapfist handed across a piece of parchment to Harry who glanced at it and passed it to Shiva. “The summary of the information is thus: your trust vault is refilled to 2,000 galleons on the first of June each year. Your family vault remains open to perusal however all items must remain inside including gold, jewelry and heirlooms. Documents may be copied but the originals must remain in the vault. These restrictions will dissolve upon you reaching your age of majority and any items remaining in your trust vault will be deposited into your family vault.
Your Muggle holdings investments have been mostly profitable with the largest producer being a company termed ‘Apple’. Your current approximate holdings amount to 150,000 galleons of liquid assets, along with an additional 250,000 pounds in Muggle holdings. This figure does not take into account the jewels or jewelry in your family vault nor your family heirlooms or properties. In addition only the 2,000 galleons inside the vault are available at any given time until your age of majority.

Harry’s mouth was gaping and he turned to Shiva who was looking similarly dumbstruck. “I’m almost a millionaire…”

“It’s not quite enough to live on for the rest of your life without a job – especially while supporting a family – but Merlin, kid…wow,” Shiva shook her head. “Don’t spend everything in one place…”

“You mentioned properties, Snapfist?” Harry asked almost afraid to turn back to the goblin.

“That was the second issue we wished to discuss,” Snapfist said nodding. “The Godric’s Hollow home was officially claimed as a historic monument and your magical guardian signed off on this. The Potter Manor summer bungalow on the coast of France is still in good order and well maintained as per the original agreement.”

“Summer bungalow?” Shiva asked with a slightly strained voice.

“Yes,” Snapfist pulled some papers out of his stack to examine. “It is a small property. One floor, three bedrooms, two restrooms. The primary advantage is the location as it resides on a cliff overlooking the ocean. I am told it is quite the view though I have never visited myself.”

“Anything else?” Harry asked controlling his breathing.

“The primary Potter Manor is the only other property. It is also the reason for the summons. The Manor was heavily damaged during the Blood War and while provisions were set up for the Manor’s repair they were never activated.”

“Why not?”

Snapfist rubbed his head. Apparently some gestures crossed species. “A very frustrating technicality. James Potter had arranged for everything as well as already completed payment. However, he had yet to sign the revised paperwork acknowledging agreement with the upgraded warding schemes prior to his death. We were unable to move forward without that signature or official release in his will to perform the work. As James Potter’s will was sealed prior to being read our hands were tied. As the eldest Potter you, with your Legal Guardian’s signature, may authorize this work.”

“My father’s will exists?” Harry asked his lip twitching. “I was led to believe my parents’ wills had been destroyed the night they died.”

Snapfist frowned. Could nothing be normal with this child? “I assure you, Mr. Potter. Both James Potter and Lily Potter nee Evans’ wills are safe in our records.”

“I want to read them.” Harry’s hands had clenched into fists and his knuckles were going white.

“That is not possible at this time,” Snapfist said apologetically. “James Potter’s will was sealed by order of the Wizengamot and cannot be read without a counter-order or release by the Head of House Potter. Lily Potter’s will was never activated to begin with and cannot be read until this condition changes.”
“You just said Harry could sign to start the work on the Manor, why can’t he unseal the wills?” Shiva asked, laying a calming hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“The paperwork to repair Potter Manor was completed and signed by the Head of House. That an addendum was added to incorporate a definition of the ward scheme is what is preventing work. It is a technicality that allows for any Potter to complete the work by accepting the addendum as sufficient. The wills would need to be released by the Head of House. Harry Potter is not considered the Head of House until he reaches the age of majority and assumes the title Lord Potter.”

“Well can’t I unseal them? I have the paperwork proving I’m his legal guardian.” Shiva got out the documents and handed them over.

Snapfist however shook his head after a quick scan. “These are Muggle forms. Mr. Potter’s magical guardian remains unchanged and only he may authorize the release. As it was he who initially sealed the will I rather doubt you will gain cooperation from that direction.”

“Dumbledore right? He’s my magical guardian isn’t he?” Harry growled.

“That would be correct, Mr. Potter,” Snapfist snarled. The old wizard had trampled over many Gringotts policies through the years and did not engender warm feelings.

“How do I change it?” Shiva frowned as Harry spoke. This was a problem. She had initially assumed Dumbledore simply had in loco parentis guardianship while Harry attended Hogwarts not that he was an official magical guardian.

“It would need to be a Wizengamot decision to strip his magical guardianship rights and grant them to another,” Snapfist explained.

Harry just growled in response. Snapfist found himself growing to genuinely like this little wizard. It was rare enough to meet a magical that could be polite. It was even rarer to find one capable of a respectable growl.

“Snapfist,” Shiva asked slowly, “just what kind of power does Dumbledore have as Harry’s magical guardian?”

“Primarily, financial control over any transactions more than 50 galleons though he cannot perform any transactions regarding the trust vault or your investments,” Snapfist said tapping his fingers on the desk. “A magical guardian also has the right to accept or deny any magical contracts including marriage contracts.”

“That’s still a thing?” Harry said scowling even deeper. “What the hell is wrong with this world?” Snapfist had to hold in laughter at that question. Many goblins had asked the same thing regarding wizards.

“They’re really rare, Harry,” Shiva said but then frowned. “Snapfist, has Dumbledore signed any magical contracts or marriage contracts in Harry’s name?”

Snapfist shifted a few more papers before shaking his head. “No. There is a draft marriage document for one Ginevra Weasley with Molly Prewett’s signature already stamped however Albus Dumbledore has yet to sign.”

“Thank god,” Shiva leaned back with a sigh. Harry’s face was starting to turn colors that only Vernon had ever reached. “What was the date on that one?”
“November 5th, 1981.”

Both humans gaped at that and looked at each other. Harry unfroze first. “I am going to strangle that old man with his own beard.”

“At least he didn’t sign the bloody thing. Snapfist, is there any way to block that from ever getting signed?”

“Well...” the goblin tapped the desk again thinking. A scary grin split his features as he recognized an option perfectly in line with bank policies. “We could place it into the family vault. As a draft document it would be required to be either destroyed or signed before any other marriage contracts could be formed.”

“And Dumbledore isn’t allowed in the family vault despite being a magical guardian,” Harry said. Snapfist nodded, noting with approval that the predatory grin spreading across Harry’s features mirrored the goblin’s own. “Can I give access to that vault to Shiva?”

“No. Not until you reach your age of majority. Currently you are the only one allowed access to the Potter family vault.”

“Oh. Well it was worth a shot. Wait,” Harry frowned, “by locking away this contract I’m screwing Ginny aren’t I? She seems nice enough and I don’t want to stop her from dating anyone until I turn 17 or something...”

“In one manner you are limiting her options, Mr. Potter. Miss Weasley would be unable to enter into another marriage contract the same as you. However, that does not mean neither of you can form relationships. It simply means neither of your hands can be bought or sold,” Snapfist said.

“Shiva?”

“Do it,” she nodded to him and gave a thumbs up. “This is definitely the best option until we can get you out from under him. I just wish I knew why Dumbledore seems dead set on managing your life.”

“Maybe he’s just senile,” Harry muttered. “Was there a third thing, Snapfist?”

“Yes. A Wizengamot proxy.”

“A what?”

“Shite,” Shiva said softly. “I didn’t even think about you having a seat on the Wizengamot. It’s a hereditary one I assume?”

“It is,” Snapfist agreed. “It is generally not a topic Gringotts handles however with the sealed will we have been...forced,” Snapfist made it sound like a curse, “to bring up the issue. Currently the proxy is Albus Dumbledore in his role as your magical guardian. You are unfortunately unable to change this fact without his consent.”

“Fantastic.” Harry sighed. “Well this sucks. If you guys manage to figure out a way for us to change magical guardians before we do let me know please.”

“I will ensure we do, Mr. Potter.” Snapfist nodded to them both. “Before we conclude...it has come to the attention of Gringotts that you are in possession of the Sword of Godric Gryffindor. Is this true?” His eyes were beady and his stare intense.
Shiva narrowed her eyes at Snapfist and stopped Harry before he could speak. “Yes,” she said. “The Hogwarts’ Founders’ artifact chose Harry as a champion and bestowed the Sword of Godric Gryffindor upon him in his hour of need.” Harry shot her a questioning glance but Shiva just shook her head.

Snapfist frowned, deep in thought, before slowly replying, “You claimed this blade during a crisis?”

“Yes,” Shiva said.

“Mr. Potter, please explain.”

Harry again looked at Shiva. She just sighed and motioned for him to go ahead. “My friend and I were fighting a basilisk. Nothing was working against it so I asked for help. Fawkes, the phoenix, showed up with the Sorting Hat. I put the Sorting Hat on and the Sword came out. I used it to stab the basilisk. I think I hit the venom sack and the brain when I stabbed it.”

Snapfist stayed quiet for some time. “You have claimed Right of Conquest and Right of Bequeathment then?”

Shiva nodded. “He has.”


“Okay one of you has to explain what is going on because I’m pretty sure I’ve missed a very large chunk of this last part.” Harry looked between the two others getting annoyed. “Obviously something delicate was just decided and I don’t appreciate feeling like it was done without my input.”

“Harry,” Shiva said softly, “goblins view any items they make as belonging to the crafter and the crafter’s descendents after they pass. In their view any items made for a witch or wizard are merely rented. When the owner passes, the period of rent is up and they expect the item returned to the crafter or his family. We don’t agree with that. We feel we paid an extreme amount for a very finely made item and we own that item so we pass them along to our children.”

“Okay,” Harry looked between the two again. “So you thought I was cheating you by not giving the Sword back?”

“Correct, Mr. Potter,” Snapfist nodded.

“So...what made you change your mind?”

“Two things. You claim the Right of Conquest and the Right of Bequeathment. The Right of Bequeathment is valid as you did not ask for the blade yet it was delivered to you all the same. You were chosen as a champion of Hogwarts. We respect that choice and the judgment of your abilities and character. The Right of Conquest is equally valid as you accomplished a feat many would die failing to perform in your place. A basilisk is no easy prey. This marks you and your ally...”

“Daphne Greengrass,” Harry supplied after Shiva elbowed him.

“...Daphne Greengrass as Warriors in our eyes. A Warrior is entitled to the spoils of his kill as well as the instruments used to perform said kill. We recognize and respect your Claims, Harry Potter.”
Snapfist leaned forward. “But be wary, Warrior Potter. Goblin steel will imbibe that which will make it stronger. You say you punctured the venom of the basilisk? There are very few substances stronger or deadlier than that venom. The blade is likely infused with its properties. Take care not to cut yourself,” the goblin finished with a sly grin.

Harry’s eyes widened at the implication that he had wrapped up a blade that could kill with a nick in an old sweater and then tossed it into his trunk...a scabbard was immediately required. Above any other errand today. Shiva gulped besides him. ‘Oh good. I’m not the only one mildly freaked out by this.’

“That concludes the business I had.” Snapfist nodded at the two and then held out a piece of parchment to Shiva. “Ms. Babbling if you will please place a drop of blood on this parchment Gringotts will recognize Warrior Potter as your ward as well as give you access to his trust vault. Do you have anything else you require?”

Harry turned to Shiva who shook her head. “Nope. Thanks for your time and help, Snapfist. May your enemies fall before you.”

“May their blood wet your blade.”

Harry and Shiva left the office leaving an exhausted goblin behind. After composing himself, Snapfist left to meet with Director Ragnok. His liege had to be informed of the events surrounding the Potter Heir.

“Snapfist,” Ragnok rumbled as he walked into the chamber. “So are the whispers true? Does the Potter child have honor?”

“My lord, Harry Potter is – to all appearances – as honorable as his mother before him.” Snapfist’s declaration was met with raised eyebrows. “He knew the appropriate greetings and dismissals and did not blame Gringotts for failings beyond our control. He treated the Goblin Nation as knowledgeable and fair. He has performed a feat justifying the label of Warrior but does not lord this fact as wizards are wont to do.”

Ragnok considered before asking another question, “And how does the boy explain his lack of communication?”

“He claims his mail has been tampered with and that he has received no letters, my lord.” Snapfist saw the expression on his liege’s face darkening so he hurriedly continued. “I believe him, my lord. He seems to be operating under the assumption that Albus Dumbledore is the one who prevented his mail. It is possible this was not a malicious act however if true...”

“Yes, he would still have intercepted Gringotts business,” Ragnok growled. “Investigate. Is Albus Dumbledore still the Potter magical guardian?”

“He is, my lord. We have been asked to inform Warrior Potter of any means of changing this situation if we determine one.”

Ragnok laughed. “Oh so the child chafes at the bit. Did his companion seem capable?”

“She is his new guardian in the Muggle world, my lord. While not at the same standard as Warrior Potter she was more courteous than most.”

Ragnok nodded. That had been expected from the reports received. “And the Sword?”

“He has claimed Right of Conquest and Right of Bequeathment, my lord.” Snapfist bowed and
nodded his head. “His Claims are valid. The blade was gifted to him by Hogwarts herself and he used it in the slaying of a basilisk. I recognized Harry Potter and his ally during the battle, Daphne Greengrass, as Warriors for this feat.”

“Hmm a worthy predator,” Ragnok thought for a few seconds before smiling. “In that case we would not be able to maintain a grip on the blade anyway even should we attempt to reclaim it. He could simply summon it back whenever he wished.” Ragnok burst out laughing. “I am growing to like this child!”

“I feel the Nation would be well served by maintaining an amicable working relationship with Warrior Potter,” Snapfist ventured.

“Yes,” Ragnok nodded, “I believe so as well. Snapfist, put out feelers for the magical guardian issue. Let us make this a race shall we? Goblin vs. wizard. Who will find the loophole first I wonder?”

Harry and Shiva made a stop at St. Mungos after leaving Gringotts. He received vaccinations for everything Muggle and magical as well as a prescription for nutrient potions to reverse some of the malnutrition left over from his years at the Dursleys. Shiva had received several dirty looks as the results of Harry’s deep-scan were revealed though the two quickly corrected the healers that Shiva was actually the one responsible for removing him from that environment. After that the Healers were far nicer and agreed to their request to keep the visit quiet for the time being. It wouldn’t do for the majority of the wizarding community to start hating Muggles just because Harry’s relatives were the worst of the lot.

After the medical appointment was a shopping trip through Diagon Alley and the nearby Muggle shopping center. It had been an experience for both of them; Harry had never been to one before as the Dursleys always left him at the house when they went shopping. Shiva on the other hand had a relatively willing young man to play dress up with.

After a few hours Harry had stopped being amused and requested to return home.

“Let’s go for a walk, kid,” Shiva said tossing the bags they had accumulated on the couch and waving towards the door.

“We’ve been out all day!” Harry grumbled. “Can’t we just sit down for a few minutes?”

Shiva sighed and shook her head. “Come on, Harry. We need to talk about that thing in the Prophet I didn’t want you to read.”

“And we can’t do that on the couch why?”

“Because it’s a beautiful evening for once and there is a nice park a block away. Stop complaining, we can sit down on a bench in five minutes.”

“You will be the death of me, woman,” Harry said standing back up and following her out. True to her word, Shiva had them on a bench in the park near the house before five minutes had passed and with snacks to boot.

She handed Harry an ice cream cone as she took a seat next to him. Harry raised his eyebrows but attacked the dessert. “This is definitely going to be bad if you are bribing me with ice cream before even starting.”

“You know about Azkaban right?” Shiva said wincing at his comment.
“Yeah. The prison. Horrible guards that literally suck out all good feelings.”

“Yeah, that’s the one. It’s also supposed to be impossible to escape from,” Shiva paused as a large black dog poked its head out from the nearby bushes.

“Hey, boy,” Harry said holding out the remainder of his ice cream to the dog. The dog seemed to consider it for a moment before slowly padding out and licking the cone. “You’re a long way from home, buddy.”

“You know this monster?” Shiva asked squinting at the dog. It was huge but very underweight. The poor thing’s fur was somewhat matted as well. At least it seemed friendly enough.

“He was there when I took the Knight Bus to your place. I figured he’d just ran away but I guess he jumped on the back or something.”

“That...seems odd, Harry.”

“He’s a dog Shiva. Not an evil mastermind. If he was an animagus trying to kill me he could’ve done it when I first ran into him the other night.” The dog’s tongue lolled out and he sat down promptly next to Harry. “He’s obviously smarter than a regular dog though – probably as smart as Hedwig if he managed to follow me here. He was probably some wizard’s familiar or something and the guy died leaving the poor guy alone. Can we keep him?”

Shiva sighed. “I don’t think so, Harry. You already have a familiar and I’m more of a cat person. We’re not really supposed to have dogs at Hogwarts and we can’t exactly just leave him here while we’re gone for months.” Harry’s face fell. “Tell you what, I’ll ask around a bit. Maybe one of my friends in Hogsmeade will want to take him in. Then you can visit him during the school year.”

Harry smiled at that and the dog yipped. “Okay, that works. Thanks, Shiva!”

“No problem, kid.” Shiva gave the animal a scratch. “You should probably name him.”

“How about Blacky?” The dog growled at that making Harry laugh. “Guess not. Thunder? Hmm, Snuffles? Oh, you like that one. Okay, Snuffles it is.” The newly minted Snuffles licked Harry’s hand. “Alright, enough stalling I suppose. What were you saying about Azkaban?”

“A prisoner broke out a few days ago.” Shiva leaned back on the bench and stared off into the distance. “His name was Sirius Black.”

“You say that like I should recognize the name,” Harry said while scratching Snuffles who had fallen silent.

“You were just a baby when he was locked away. Sirius Black was one of your father’s best friends, Harry. He was also your godfather.” Harry’s eyes narrowed and the dog whined a bit as his scratching got more intensive. “When your parents went into hiding with you they were under a charm called **Fidelius**. It works to hide the existence of a secret – generally a location but it could be anything – from the world at large. Only someone called the Secret Keeper can show or tell others the secret.”

“And Black was the Secret Keeper for where Mum and Dad were?” Harry asked quietly. Snuffles whined beneath him but Harry gently shushed the dog.

“Not a lot is known for sure about that night, Harry. All we know for sure is that Sirius Black was the most likely candidate for Secret Keeper. From what everyone said he and your dad were practically inseparable. They were basically brothers in everything but blood. Neither your mum
nor your dad could be the Secret Keeper since they lived in the house. Black was the next person they’d trust most.”

“And Voldemort walked right up to our door.” Harry said nodding. “So he knew the secret.”

“Yes. Even more damning…their other friend, Peter Pettigrew apparently hunted Black down after that night. Pettigrew caught up to Black on a street in Muggle London. There was a battle; Pettigrew yelled out about how Black had betrayed your family and then Black cast a curse that caused an explosion, blowing up a large section of the street. 12 Muggles died and the only thing recovered from Pettigrew was his finger.” Snuffles put his two front paws over his head. Shiva slung an arm around Harry and pulled him close to her before continuing. “The Aurors caught up to Black almost immediately and found him laughing in the destroyed street. He didn’t even put up a fight. They stunned him, snapped his wand and tossed him in Azkaban. Nobody ever looked back. A few days ago, somehow...he managed to escape. According to the guards, he had been whispering for several days beforehand that ‘he’s at Hogwarts’. The Ministry is assuming that he’s coming after you; to finish the job that he and his master started over a decade ago.”

Harry was quiet for a few minutes, just scratching Snuffles and leaning against Shiva. “So,” he finally said softly, “I have a second madman after me. Fantastic.” He chuckled and shook his head. “Want to put a bet on whether he’ll be our DADA teacher this year? The first one was possessed and tried to kill me and the second tried to obliviate us all. It’d be par for the course for Sirius Black to wrangle the job.” Snuffles started a low growl and a nearby squirrel jumped away before he quieted down.

Shiva snorted. “You do seem to inspire murderous thoughts in our Defense teachers, kid.”

Harry shrugged as best he could while leaning against her. “It’s a talent. Shiva…I think I’m going to start working on more offensive runes this year…”

The older woman sighed but nodded. “I can understand that. Promise me you’ll consult with me before going for anything too dangerous?”

“Promise.” Harry nodded. “I think the most volatile design would be more Feedback stones. They’d be like the one I used against the basilisk. Directed failures; magical grenades. I’ve been a bit scared to work on them before after the whole troll incident thing but...I think I have enough of a foundation now that I can do them safely. And I can always go to my legal guardian for advice both in and out of class now,” he finished grinning up at her.

“Damn right you can, kid,” Shiva said laughing. “Any other ideas I should be watching out for?”

“Well I’m going to have Comm Stones finished before we get back to school.” Harry frowned and said, “Muggles have mobiles now. They can contact almost anyone in moments and it’s not a one way channel. It’s stupid that we don’t have something like that in the magical world.” Snuffles cocked his head at Harry and Shiva found herself nodding along. “I worked out how to make a cluster that could function the same while at the Dursleys. It’s restricted to audio and has to be tied to specific people at the moment but each stone can be tied to multiple others. I can work on making a completely open, untethered cluster later. Can you pierce one of my ears?”

“What?” Shiva asked blinking at the non sequitur.

“Like for an earring? I’m going to miniaturize the Comm Stone. You know, make earrings out of them. The magic flowing through them should be small so the stone can be tiny without worrying about failure or breakage. I was going to make one for me, Hermione, Neville, Daphne, Tracey and you. I’m thinking I might make one for Tonks too so that we could call the Aurors fast when
we need them. Maybe one for Susan and Hannah too, but I want to talk to them first so those will probably come later.”

Shiva shook her head laughing. “You really don’t do things halfway, Harry! I’ll take you to get a piercing in a few days. Wait till I tell Bill you got an earring!”

Harry snorted. “Hey, his dragon fang one was awesome!”

“He thinks so too,” Shiva commented still laughing. Snuffles started chuffing along with the humans. “Alright, kid, dog, time to head back home.”

“Yeah. Let’s go home,” Harry smiled at Shiva as he stood and stretched. “Thanks for telling me this stuff, Shiva. And thanks for supporting my ideas.”

Shiva smiled back at him as Snuffles fell into a trot beside the two. “Anytime, Harry. Anytime.”
“So why did I have to get this huge contraption again?” Shiva asked as she finished plugging in the final wires to the television unit. The telly earned a glare from her when she flipped the switch and the screen remained resolutely black.

“Because you promised we could watch Star Wars and your apartment doesn’t have enough magic to short the thing out.” Harry snorted and plugged the power cord into the wall. “Forgot the power, Shiva.” Snuffles huffed from the floor behind them.

“I thought you were working on that Tech Bane cluster to make these things run without being plugged in.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Tech Assist, Shiva, the Tech Bane is going to burn out any close by electronics not let them work. And neither are remotely ready yet.”

“Whatever,” Shiva waved him off and hit the button again. This time she grinned triumphantly as the telly flickered to life. “Excellent! Hermione and Neville should be here any minute. Did Daphne and Tracey ever get back to you?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. Both should be coming via Floo right after Neville. I’m still a little surprised that both were interested in seeing a Muggle movie…”

“Harry,” Shiva said shaking her head, “when you describe a story as ‘the evil Dark Lord attempts to take over the galaxy using a weapon that can destroy planets only to be stopped by a space wizard who just left the farm’ of course they’re going to come. Hell, Greengrass probably considers this research for when Voldy comes back.”

“Yeah, I guess I did kind of con them a bit,” Harry said rubbing his neck a bit sheepishly. “You know I still don’t get why you can’t stick to one name for Riddle.”

Shiva shrugged. “Well, Two Face doesn’t quite fit anymore. I still sometimes get hung up with Voldemort itself. Tom is way too informal. Riddle just doesn’t seem…evil enough. Moldymort is awful and will never be uttered again. I think I like Voldy though. I may stick with that one.”

Harry shook his head responding, “As long as you don’t go back to You-Know-Who I guess I really shouldn’t complain.”

“Right you are, kid.”

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. Snuffles stood up and directed a doggy grin at the entrance while Harry went to open up. “Hey, Hermione! Glad you could make it!”

Hermione walked into the apartment a little wobbly and flushed. “Next time I come over, would it possible for Shiva to apparate me? I…did not enjoy the Knight Bus very much.” The ginger furred large cat clutched in her arms bobbed its head in full agreement making a small yowling noise.

Harry laughed and gave her a quick hug and scratched the cat behind its ears. “If it makes you feel better, I felt the exact same way after I got off it too.”
Hermione blushed slightly but smiled. “Actually it does a little. If that horrible transport can flap the great Quidditch prodigy then I do feel a bit easier about disliking it.”

“Hey, Hermione,” Shiva called from the living room waving to the younger girl.

“Hello, Professor,” Hermione replied ignoring Shiva’s rolling eyes at the moniker. Harry chuckled at the ever so slight smirk Hermione had gracing her lips. His friend’s humor was subtle but noticeable to one who knew where to look. “This is Crookshanks by the way,” she said, holding up the cat. “I hope you both don’t mind me bringing him over. My parents had to leave for the day and I didn’t want him all alone so soon after bringing him home.”

“It’s fine, Hermione. He can play with Snuffles if the two get along.” Harry eyed the cat. It was almost easier to think of it as a small tiger honestly. The animal was as large for its species as Snuffles was for his. Crookshanks’ face was also rather squashed truth be told.

Hermione let the cat squirm loose and he hopped down to the floor of the apartment. “Play nice, Crooks and don’t damage anything.” The cat gave her a look then deliberately turned and padded over to Snuffles who cocked his head and huffed at the smaller creature. “I just fell in love with him at the store. The clerk said that he kept getting passed over for some reason…I just can’t see why; he’s part kneazle and just the most brilliant cat I’ve ever seen.” Harry laughed at his friend. It was just like Hermione to completely ignore Crookshanks’ somewhat odd features and focus on his intellect.

“Well Snuffles seems to like him and Hedwig hasn’t chased him out yet so I think your choice of pet gets the seal of approval,” Harry said.

“Oh, I almost forgot to ask, Harry, have you been practicing with that Occlumency book I sent you?”

“Yes, Hermione,” he said with an exaggerated sigh. “I still don’t see why I have to. I do still have my Reflector Lenses you know.”

“And what if someone tied you up and took off your glasses, hmm?” she asked putting her hands on her hips and giving him The Look.

“Then I think I’d have bigger problems than having my mind read.”

“Don’t complain, Harry,” Shiva said grabbing a handful of popcorn. “She has a point and Occlumency helps with memory and organization as well. You don’t want to be the only one in your group ignoring it just because you have a rune equivalent do you?”

“Allright, alright!” He held up his hands laughing. “It was just a question you two!”

“So what does your mind palace look like?” Hermione asked.

“Umm, a castle…why?” Harry shrugged.

“I was just curious. Mine’s a library.” Harry smiled; of course Hermione would make her mind into a library.

“You know I had an ex-girlfriend who actually had Windsor Castle?” Shiva commented. “She took the ‘mind palace’ thing a bit serious. I know one Muggle-born who used something called ‘the Enterprise’ too.” Hermione’s eyebrows rose at that and Harry smirked. That wasn’t a bad idea at all. “Apparently he scared his tutor so bad with that that the guy refused to ever enter his mind again. Never did figure out just what the Enterprise was referring to…”
“Well, I guess we know what the next movie night will be huh Harry?” Hermione asked sharing a grin with her friend. Before she had a chance to say anything else the Floo flared to life and Neville’s head showed up in the flames.

“Professor Babbling?” Neville asked. “Are we clear to come through? Daphne and Tracey are here as well. We figured it was easier just to use the same fireplace.”

“You’re good, Neville,” Shiva said as she pushed in the brick to open the Floo.

“Alright, we’re coming.” Neville’s head disappeared but a moment later the boy himself came stepping out of the green flames followed closely by Daphne and Tracey.

Harry grumbled, “I hate you all. Why am I the only one who can’t stay standing using the stupid Floo?”

“Because you are horribly uncoordinated?” Daphne said with raised eyebrows. The grin on her face showed she was only teasing with the barb.

Tracey smirked. “Nah, it’s ‘cause of karma biting your arse. I’d put money on you forever failing at the Floo just so that you keep being awesome at other stuff. You can’t keep winning everything without losing some after all.”

“Haha very funny.” Harry shook his head before turning giving Tracey a serious glance. “How are you doing, Tracey?”

The girl shrugged and Daphne gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Been better. The Mind Healer has helped a lot and I still feel like a complete idiot. I really should’ve known better than to keep talking to something that talked back. At least when I couldn’t see where it kept its brain.”

“It’s not your fault, Trace,” Daphne said softly.

“I didn’t say it was my fault,” Tracey smirked at them all. “I said I was an idiot. Really though, I’m fine. Thanks for asking, Harry.”

“How about you, Daph? We haven’t really had a chance to talk much…” Harry ran a hand through his hair.

Daphne rolled her eyes and plopped down on the couch. “You worry too much, Harry.”

Hermione nodded and sat down next to the Slytherin. “I agree. Good luck getting him to believe that though.”

Tracey sat down on Daphne’s other side smiling at the two. “It is a little cute though how noble he is. If I liked guys I might develop a crush on him.” Snuffles perked up at that looking between Tracey and Harry before chuffing softly and laying his head back down.

Shiva snorted and claimed the armchair before replying, “It’s cute until he gives you heart attack.”

“I am right here, people,” Harry said throwing his hands in the air. “Neville, a little help please?”

Neville laughed. “Sorry, mate. I’m with them on this one.” He sat down in the other armchair leaving Harry to collapse into the spot next to Hermione.

“I hate you guys,” Harry sighed as he relaxed down.

“Nah, you love us. Why else would you give us presents on your birthday?” Tracey smirked at
“They’re not *presents,*” Harry grumbled. “They’re *useful.* And here, take it before I change my mind.” Harry handed out his completed *Comm Stones* to the assembled group. “Each are keyed to all the others at the moment as well as one for Tonks so that we can contact the Aurors if something crazy happens again. Just say ‘Comm on, contact…’ and then the name of the person you want to talk to. To shut it off just tap it and say, ‘Disconnect’. You don’t have to use them as an earring if you don’t want to but the volume is adjusted to assume it’s hanging by the ear so if you use it as a bracelet or necklace or something you’ll have to hold it to your ear.”

“Harry,” Hermione said slowly looking at the tiny rune stone and turning it over in her hand, “this is amazing. You should really try to market these.”

“He’s going to,” Shiva said nodding at the girl. “After he gets the clusters so that they don’t have to be keyed to other stones at least. Harry was saying something about affiliating with potential business partners after he got back to school.” Harry glared at Shiva but rolled his eyes after a minute.

Neville looked over at Harry in confusion. “Really? Who, Harry?”

“The twins,” Harry sighed. The rest of the group raised their eyebrows at him. “What? They’re brilliant. Have you seen some of the stuff they’ve invented?”

Shiva frowned. “Their grades suck though…”

“Then they either don’t care or they’re like me when I started Hogwarts,” Harry said shrugging. “Intentionally doing poorly?” Hermione asked with a frown.

“Yeah. Seriously, Fred and George are amazing at what they do and they have some really good ideas. I heard them mention last year that they were hoping to open a joke shop at some point in the future. I figure if I help them market their shop when they get it running then I can sell some rune stones through them before I get my own place set up in a few years.” Snuffles had come over and licked Harry’s hand by the end of his little speech and Harry scratched the dog behind the ears.

“That’s a very ambitious plan, Harry…I’m impressed.” Hermione smiled at him and bumped his shoulder with her own.

“Okay well now that I feel inadequate for being beaten in ambitions by a *Gryffindor,*” Daphne huffed, “can we start this…movie thing?”

Neville laughed and shook his head at Daphne. “That’s what you get for slacking Slytherin!”

Shiva just chuckled at their antics and hit the play button, the group twisting to watch the opening scrawl of the video.

“I thought you said we were watching the first one. Why does it say Episode IV?” Tracey asked.

Harry shrugged. “The creator envisioned this as the middle part of nine. He’s only made four through six so far.”

“ Weird.”

“That…is a very big ship…” Daphne said with wide eyes staring at the Star Destroyer panning
across the display.

“Well at least we know it’s fake. It’s not like we can make spaceships,” Neville said.

“Nev,” Hermione said with a snort, “you do realize Muggles landed on the Moon in the 60’s right?”

Daphne, Tracey and Neville gaped at Hermione before turning to Harry who just nodded at them. All three immediately twisted to Shiva who also nodded. Neville whistled and Tracey snuggled closer to Daphne. Daphne just shook her head and mumbled, “No wonder my mother says Muggles should be respected…”

“I have to say this is very impressive,” Shiva said grabbing more popcorn. “Far more so than I had expected. I may know about movies but I’ve never actually watched one before. I love how they have the sound going with the pictures! Those white suited guys could really do with improved target practice though…”

“Shhh!” Hermione said waving her hand at the group. “One of the most iconic villains of our time is coming!”

“She means one of the two Evil Dark Lords,” Harry helpfully supplied as Darth Vader made his entrance.

Neville nodded approvingly. “Wow. Now we know where Snape learned his swishing cloak trick.”

The room erupted into laughter and after a minute or so they finally all quieted and settled in to experience entertainment the Muggle way.

Harry stopped before the barrier to Platform Nine and Three Quarters giving Shiva a short hug. She pulled back and ruffled his hair before smirking at him. “Try not to get into too much trouble on the train okay, kid?”

Harry glared at her before shaking his head laughing. “I think that would start the yearly murder attempts a little early don’t you?”

Shiva snorted. “Well going from Two Face to a 60 foot snake does tend to set the bar rather high for this year. Seriously though, Harry, the new DADA teacher is riding the train with you guys just in case Sirius Black tries anything so if something happens get Professor Lupin.”

“I will,” Harry replied rolling his eyes. He seriously doubted Black would attempt anything. Something just seemed off about the whole situation though he hadn’t been able to put his finger on the problem for the past few weeks since it started niggling at him. Hermione would help him figure it out. She was always good with that kind of puzzle.

“Good. I’ll drop Snuffles off with Rosemerta before I head to the castle. You can visit with the monster during Hogsmeade trips.”

“Do you think Professor McGonagall will let Dumbledore know about the guardian thing?” Harry asked thinking about his signed permission form.

“I doubt it. Not with how she’s been standing up to him lately.” Shiva shrugged. She didn’t particularly care anymore. They hadn’t been able to find any loopholes to take away Dumbledore’s magical guardianship, but by the same token, her physical guardianship was rock
solid with how deeply rooted the paperwork was now. Even the Ministry and ICW couldn’t justify obliterating hundreds of people and falsifying the massive amounts of paperwork it would require to take Harry away from her.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. I doubt it doesn’t really matter anyway.” Harry squinted up at her. “Do you mind if I call you Shiva in the open now?”

“Just not in professional settings, kid. Like in class. It’s Professor there,” she said smirking.

Harry laughed and popped a mock salute. “Yes, ma’am.” He glanced up at the clock and picked up his trunk and Hedwig. “Alright, I’ll meet you there.”

“See you soon, Harry.” Shiva waved and Harry stepped through the barrier. He hopped onto the train searching for the compartment with his friends. Daphne waved him over towards one near the end.

“Hey, Harry,” she said. “A lot of the compartments were full already so we had to share this one. I think the sleeping man is the new DADA teacher.”

Harry nodded as he stepped into the compartment and levered his trunk up to the rack. There was a man slumped into the corner with a suitcase on his lap reading R. LUPIN. He was dressed in a robe and coat that was had a fair number of patches on them. The wrackspurt girl from the previous year, Luna Lovegood, was also inside the compartment sitting next to the professor and reading a magazine upside down. Hermione, Neville and Tracey had already taken up seats with Neville sitting next to the younger girl.

Harry sat down beside Hermione and twisted his head so he could see the name of the magazine. “The *Quibbler*. I haven’t heard of that one.”

“My father edits and publishes it. When I’ve finished the rune puzzle for this week would you like to borrow it to read about the Rotfang Conspiracy?”

“What’s the Rotfang Conspiracy? And did you say rune puzzle?” Harry asked perking up.

“I did,” Luna said in a soft voice. Tracey snorted and Daphne rolled her eyes while Hermione just sighed. “It’s not very nice to mock him you know.”

Harry smiled. “They’re just teasing me, Luna. I tend to have a one track mind when it comes to rune stuff.”

“I have heard that yes.” She paused before lowering the magazine and smiling. “I think you would find this far too easy however, Harry Potter. And to answer your earlier question, the Rotfang Conspiracy details how the Aurors are attempting to bring down the Ministry of Magic using Dark Magic and gum disease.”

“Huh,” Harry tapped his chin, “I’m not really a huge fan of the Ministry. Too bad they’re using such awful methods though because otherwise I might have been interested to hear more.” Beside him Hermione laid her head back against the headrest muttering while Daphne, Tracey and Neville all just rolled their eyes.

“Yes, I am not a fan of the use of gum disease either. I rather like my teeth,” Luna said nodding sagely.

“So how was your summer, Luna?” Harry asked.
“Pleasant enough. Daddy and I attempted to find the crumple-horned snorkack but were again unsuccessful.”

“That was the one that had the twisted horn right?” Harry asked trying to think back to the few times he had talked to her before.

“Yes, we think so.”

“You don’t know what it looks like?” Hermione asked frowning at the girl.

“Well we’ve heard reports but they are conflicted,” Luna said shrugging. “I am sure Daddy will find one eventually. If not, well at least the hunts are interesting and afford time for us to spend together.”

Harry nodded, laying a hand on Hermione’s arm and squeezing softly to stop the reply he knew was coming. “Well I can certainly understand wanting to spend time with your parents, Luna.”

She smiled sadly in reply. “Just my father, Harry Potter. My mother passed away when I was 9.”

Harry closed his eyes feeling like he had just inadvertently punched the girl in the gut. “Oh. I didn’t know that. I’m sorry, Luna.”

“How could you know?” She shrugged and picked her magazine back up. “I am almost done with the puzzle. Let me know if you would like to read the article, Harry.” Harry nodded and the compartment fell quiet.

Shortly before they reached Hogsmeade station the sky outside the compartment began to darken and grow stormy. Professor Lupin had remained sleeping the entire ride and the students had stayed mostly quiet after the initial burst of conversation with Luna.

“Are we stopping?” Neville asked perking up and rousing the others. “We still have a ways to go…”

“Why is there frost on the window?” Daphne said squinting at the spreading sheet of ice.

The train lurched to a stop and the group’s breath started to fog in the air. Harry was going to volunteer to find a prefect to see what was going on but froze before he could do more than open his mouth. Dim screaming started to sound in his head. *Not, Harry! Please not, Harry! Kill me instead! I’ll do anything, just don’t hurt Harry!* Harry was only vaguely aware of the door to their compartment sliding open and a tall, dark figure wrapped in a cloak standing outside. The others slid away from the imposing figure. Tracey whimpered and tried to burrow into the seat while Luna curled up into a ball across from him. Harry could only hear the screams of the woman in his mind. The creature in front of him raised its skeletal hand and stretched out to him. There was a rustle from behind him as something heavy clattered to the floor. A green flash filled Harry’s vision and he crumpled to the ground. The last thing he heard as he lost consciousness was a firm shout of “*Expecto Patronum!*”

“…Harry? Harry?” a dim voice washed through Harry’s brain. He felt someone’s hand on his shoulder and opened his eyes only to shut them again at the brightness surrounding him.

“Urggg,” Harry mumbled raising a hand to his head. “Did anyone get the number of that lorry?”

“What’s a lorry got to do with anything?” Daphne asked from somewhere behind him.
“It’s a Muggle expression Daph. Means he feels awful,” Tracey supplied with a slight shudder. “About the same as me and Luna, I’d guess.”

“Yeah, but neither of you two fainted,” Neville said softly helping Luna to sit back up. She was still pale and slightly shaking.

“Harry?” Hermione said softly leaning over him to peer into his eyes. “Harry, are you okay? That was a Dementor. Professor Lupin chased it away but it had a severe effect on you. You need to eat this.” She held a bar of chocolate out to Harry and he numbly took it from her fingers taking a bite.

“Chocolate? Really?” Harry asked raising his eyebrows at his friend.

“It really works, Harry,” Tracey mumbled eating a bar of her own. “Nobody is really sure why.”

“Daddy says it’s because the snagglepuffs make the chocolate as a natural defense against their nightmares. I don’t think it works as good as pudding myself,” Luna said after swallowing a mouthful of chocolate.

“Well if you run across any snagglepuffs, Luna, thank them for me.” Harry slowly levered himself back into the seat with Hermione’s help. “What the heck was a Dementor doing on the train?”

“Probably looking for Black,” Daphne said wrapping an arm around Tracey and pulling the other girl closer to her side. “We’re lucky that the new Professor could do the Patronus charm. Not too many people can do that one and it’s pretty much the only thing that works on Dementors.”

“Oh shite,” Harry moaned slapping a hand to his head.

“Language, Harry,” Hermione quickly replied before peeling his head off his forehead. “And what’s the problem?”

“I got into trouble on the train…” Harry said dejectedly. The students just stared at him waiting so he continued in a quiet voice, “Shiva is going to kill me…”

His friends all looked at each other not sure how to respond. Until Luna started giggling softly which quickly turned into a full blown laugh. The rest soon followed suit and the compartment had completely devolved into raucous laughter by the time a dumbfounded Professor Lupin returned.

“That was a very mature response running away there, Harry,” Hermione said rolling her eyes. Harry, Neville and Hermione had dropped on the couch in the Gryffindor Common Room. Harry had practically ran up the stairs once the feast had ended, trying to avoid Shiva.

“I swear if looks could kill, that woman would’ve burnt me to a crisp!” Harry said shuddering. Neville was laughing hysterically and even Hermione shook her head with a small grin on her face. “It’s not funny! This totally wasn’t remotely my fault. If I’m going to get yelled at for being in danger again then I am at least going to have done something to deserve it first.” Harry crossed his arms and pouted.

Hermione nudged his shoulder full on smirking. “Well at least you know she cares.” Hermione nodded her head towards a young redhead who had just walked into the Common Room. “And there’s Ginny. Did you want to talk to her tonight?”

Harry sighed. “Yeah. You two can come if you want. Depending on how the twins take it I may
need backup anyway.” Neville and Hermione nodded and stood to follow Harry as he walked over to Ginny, Fred and George. “Hey, guys, can we talk for a few minutes?”

Ginny nodded fast enough to flip her hair and started to walk off before Harry called out, “No, Ginny, you too.” The girl stopped mid-step, blushed hard enough to turn her face red, but hurried back to the small group. “Fred, George, do you guys know any strong privacy spells?”

The twins turned to each other frowning before looking back at Harry. “A few…how private do you want this to be?”

“As private as possible,” Harry said with a grimace.

Fred nodded and pulled out his wand. “George, I’ve got the Notice-Me-Not and quieting ones. You get the silencing, aversion and deafening charms.”

“That’s a NEWT level spell!” Hermione exclaimed staring at Fred as he cast the Notice-Me-Not.

“I told you they were smart,” Harry said casting a smug grin at Hermione.

“Done,” George turned to the small group and sat down on the chair nearby waving his twin and sister into the others. “What’s going on, Harry? It’s a little early in the year for the annual Harry’s Fun Day.”

“I –” Harry stopped abruptly as he processed what George had said. His face burned as he replied, “What do you mean, Harry’s Fun Day?”

“Well it seems a little insensitive to call it Attempt To Kill Harry Day.”

“Or Defense Professor Fly Off The Handle Day,” Fred tossed in.

“Or Harry Fights To Not Die Day.” George nodded at Fred.

“Or –”

“Okay, okay!” Harry muttered. “I get the point, guys. And no this is not about that.”

“To be fair, you did almost get your soul eaten by an overeager Dementor a few hours ago,” Neville said with a shrug. Ginny’s face drained of all color and her hands gripped the stool under her hard enough to turn white.

“Thanks for that, Nev.” Harry sighed. “Can we please focus everyone? This going to be awkward enough as it is.”

Fred and George turned to each other again before dropping the smirks and adopting serious expressions. Fred twisted back to Harry and nodded at him. “Why don’t you just tell us what’s got you worried, Harry.”

Harry picked at his shirt and ran a hand through his hair. He sighed and then started talking. “Okay, I went to Gringotts over the summer with my new guardian. They told me a few things I had been unaware of. One of the chief issues was a…marriage contract.”

Neville’s eyebrows rose while Fred and George scowled along with Hermione. Ginny just looked a bit confused. “Hermione already knows this,” Harry said waving to his female friend. “I figured I should give her a heads up because…well…”

“I tend to overreact sometimes,” Hermione said still scowling. “And he was right to. I ranted for
nearly an hour about the unfairness and backwards ‘traditions’ involved in some aspects of the magical community.”

“Marriage contracts are barely ever used these days,” Neville said frowning. “They’re considered old fashioned and most families don’t want to risk alienating their kids.”

Fred took a deep breath and said, “Should we be getting Percy or Dad here?”

“No,” Harry said shaking his head. “I don’t completely trust Percy and there wasn’t really a good excuse to contact your father yet. I would’ve told Bill or Charlie to be honest but they’re hard to sit down with since both are out of the country.”

“Wait, wait,” George said holding up a hand. “I get Bill, you two seemed friendly when he was around the other summer but why Charlie and not Percy?”

“Because Percy worships rules and authority,” Harry said shrugging. “Charlie worships dragons. He broke up with my guardian over them and he helped us get Norbert out of the country. I trust Charlie because he is more interested in his dragons over anything else in the world.”

“That’s…very odd reasoning…” George said frowning.

Hermione huffed and rolled her eyes. “You get used to it. Harry’s mind works in strange ways sometimes.”

“Anyway,” Harry said glaring at her, “I’m sure you’ve guessed who the named parties are in this contract.”

Fred nodded. “You and Ginny.”

“What?!?” Ginny nearly fell out of her chair as she screeched. She jumped up and turned to her brother with fire in her eyes and her wand out. “What the bloody hell!? Why would I have a marriage contract? I’m twelve!” She twisted to Harry with horror written all over her face. “Not that I mind the idea of getting married to you, Harry! I mean, one day, sure! But not right now! This is not my idea, I swear I didn’t know about this!”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed next to Harry and she shifted forward in her seat slightly covering Harry with her body. “We know it wasn’t your idea, Ginny. All the same the point is currently moot. There will not be a wedding imminent.”

Ginny worked her mouth for a moment before slowly sitting back down and putting away her wand. “What do you mean?”

Harry sighed. “The contract only had one signature not two. Dumbledore left his section unsigned thank god. Your part however, was filled in. It was signed by Molly Prewett. Would I be correct is guessing that Prewett is your mother’s maiden name?”

Yeah,” Fred shook his head. “That’s Mum alright. Merlin’s balls. When did she sign the thing? Please tell me this was somewhat recent at least.”

“No,” Harry shook his head, “it was signed November 5th, 1981.”

“I was barely 3 months old!” Ginny yelled out horrified. The twins groaned and leaned back in their chairs covering the faces.

“Yeah and my parents were dead for 5 days, Ginny, so trust me I understand.”
“November 5th?” Neville asked. He grimaced and sadly shook his head. “My parents were attacked the day before.”

Hermione frowned. “Really? November 4th?” Neville nodded frowning at Hermione. She shook her head. “Never mind, we’ll talk later. Continue, Harry.”

“Umm…okay…” Harry stared at Hermione who simply mouthed “later” at him. “Alright, well anyway, your Mum signed the contract but Dumbledore apparently had left his part blank. When we found out about it we put it into my family vault. No one except me is allowed in there and I can’t take anything out until I’m of age.”

Fred and George both whistled. “Impressive bit of pranking there, Harrykins.” Fred nodded appreciatively at him. “You’ve effectively prevented both that contract and any others from being enacted either for yourself or Ginny. Well done.”

George continued, “And you didn’t even have to destroy the contract so if you and Gin Gin do end up getting together then you can just sign it yourself later on.”

Ginny sat there frowning before slowly looking up. “Harry? Does this stop me from dating at all?”

“No, Gin,” Neville answered shaking his head. “It just stops your mum or anyone else from making a new contract for your hand until the current one is either dissolved or fulfilled. You can still date anyone you want; you just can’t get married until Harry decides what to do with the contract later.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “I suppose I’m okay with that. Why would Mum do this?” She looked torn between hexing something and crying.

“Mum has always thought she knew best for all of us Gin.” Fred sighed pulling his sister into a hug. “She’s the reason Bill and Charlie left as soon as they graduated. She’s the reason Percy is all set to move out the moment he finishes off this year. She’s the reason George and I are planning to open shop once we’re done here. Mum means well enough but…she’s not exactly the best of role models nor does she always consider her actions.”

“Dad probably didn’t even know about this,” George piped in. “If he had the name would be Molly Weasley not Prewett.” He scowled. “This is going to be a fun conversation when we get home. I’m going to make sure Bill is there. He can be the one to tell Dad. We’ve pulled one too many pranks at home for him to take this as seriously as it requires.”

“We haven’t pulled pranks like this, brother,” Fred said. “He’d believe us.”

“Yes, brother, but do you really want to be the one bringing this to him when we have beloved older brothers to do it for us?” George raised his eyebrow at his twin.

Fred laughed. “Too true, George. Too true. Ginny, let’s go draft a letter to Bill shall we?”

“Should we tell Ron?” She asked before they stood. The twins just raised their eyebrows at her. “Yeah, you’re right, that’s probably a bad idea.” She looked over at Harry and smiled at him. “I’m really sorry about this, Harry. It’s probably not a secret that I like you but I don’t want you to be forced into anything. Can we talk about this in a few years and decide what to do about the stupid thing then?”

“Sure, Ginny. Thanks for not freaking out too bad. I just figured you should know,” Harry said.
“And we appreciate the heads up, Harry.” Fred nodded to him. “We’ll take care of the family side over the holidays. You may get an invitation to speak to our dad afterwards. Have a nice night you three.” The Weasleys walked out of the privacy barriers, but Hermione motioned for Harry and Neville to stay put for the moment.

“Hermione, what’s up?” Neville asked. “Why was the date my parents were attacked important?”

“Neville, your family and Harry’s were close correct?” He nodded in response to Hermione’s question. “Do you know who your godparents were?”

Neville shrugged. “My godfather was an uncle. He was killed soon after I was born. My godmother was Harry’s mum. Why?”

“Do you know if your mother was Harry’s godmother?” Hermione continued.

“I think she was though I’d have to ask Gran to be sure.”

“Where are you going with this, Hermione?” Harry asked.

“I’m not certain,” she admitted. “It’s just quite a bit seemed to happen within a few days of October 31st, 1981. Your parents were killed. Then you were left with the Dursleys the next night. Two days later Sirius Black, your godfather, was arrested and sent to Azkaban. The next night Neville’s parents, your godmother, were attacked. A day later you were entered into a marriage contract, albeit an incomplete one.”

Harry gaped at her and Neville’s face was so red he looked ready to explode. “Look, Hermione,” Harry said quietly, “you both know I am no fan of Dumbledore and I hate how he seems to have been manipulating my life but…you don’t think he actually framed Sirius Black and then arranged for Neville’s parents to be hurt do you? I don’t like the old man but that seems like it’s going a little too far.”

“I’m just saying that this is an awful lot of coincidences, Harry. There’s a famous quote, ‘once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action.’ ” Hermione sighed. “I think we need to look into the Sirius Black case ourselves. That might be a good lynchpin.”

Neville took a few deep breaths and slowly got his color and temper back under control. “If the Headmaster had something to do with Mum and Dad…”

“Let’s not accuse anyone of anything until we know more, Neville.” Hermione said placing a calming hand on his arm.

Harry nodded agreement. “Yeah, remember we were wrong last year about Lockhart being the one to open the Chamber.”

“The git still tried to kill us,” Neville pointed out.

“True, but not because we were right about our guess. I’ll admit this all looks bad but let’s poke around a bit. I’ve been building a list of grievances against Dumbledore, and while there’s a lot nearly all of it is technically legal even if it is an abuse of authority. The man may be manipulative but this sounds almost evil and I don’t think he’s evil.”

“Just an arsehole,” Hermione muttered. Harry and Neville both gaped at her, mouths hanging practically to the floor. Hermione looked up and glared at them both. “What?”

“You cursed!” Harry uttered pointing at her.
“Well what kind of person draws up a marriage contract for a baby and a toddler?” Hermione crossed her arms and scowled. “Not to mention leaving you with those people and threatening to fire Shiva when she had the audacity to argue with him. Dumbledore is an arsehole through and through. And while I have no intention of proclaiming that from the ramparts I am allowed to curse a bit here and there thank you very much!”

The boys held up their hands. “We’re sorry, Hermione,” both stated in unison. The girl glowered for a moment before accepting their apologies with a nod.

“You know,” Harry said, “it’s funny. I was actually going to ask you to help me look into Sirius Black anyway.”


“I’m not really sure. Something’s been nagging at me for the past few weeks since Shiva told me about it and I honestly can’t figure out what the problem is. Something just doesn’t sound right…”

Hermione sighed. “Well, I suppose it’s a good thing we agreed to check the facts then. We can get started tomorrow. It’s been a long day, gentlemen. Let’s head off to bed.”

“Yes, Mistress Hermione,” Neville said with a cheeky grin. He ran up the stairs laughing at the glare his friend sent his way.

“Good morning, Luna,” Harry said as he passed the younger blonde in the Entrance Hall.

“Good morning, Harry Potter,” she replied airily.

“You know, you can just call me Harry,” Harry said with a chuckle.

“You don’t mind?” she asked cocking her head at him.

“I really don’t. The only ones who call me Harry Potter these days are people just interested in staring at my scar and a slightly manic house elf.” Harry smiled thinking about Dobby. Hopefully the little guy was living large and enjoying his life with its new freedom.

“Well then, I shall refer to you as Harry, Harry.” Luna paused to consider for a moment before sighing and shutting her eyes. “If you wish…you may call me Loony.”

Harry frowned at that and stopped before they could make it to the tables. “Why would I want to call you that, Luna?”

“It is what nearly everyone else calls me. I am convinced the wrackspurts encourage it though I have not ruled out the nargles either.” Luna’s eyes had opened and she turned to look at him. Her face was very carefully set and betrayed next to no emotion. “The term first started when I defeated Ronald in chess while visiting Ginny two years ago.”

Harry’s gaze swept to Ron and he glared at the back of the boy’s head hard enough it was amazing the redhead’s head didn’t spontaneously explode, before turning back to Luna and smiling softly. “Luna, I have no intention of ever calling you Loony, okay?” He saw her eyes widen but that was the only thing that registered on her face. “And I’ll see if I can find some of the…wrackspurts and have a bit of a talk with them about that name also.”
“Why would you do that, Harry?” Luna’s gaze abruptly shifted from distant and unseeing to piercing and scarcely focused.

“Because you seem nice, Luna. I was called names myself for a long time. It wasn’t very fun.” Harry shook his head. “Would you like to sit down with Hermione, Neville and I for breakfast?”

“Change tables?” Luna asked.

“Yeah. We could always move to sit with you over at the Ravenclaw table if you’d prefer…”

“I…Yes,” Luna said nodding. “I would like to sit with you, Harry. May we sit near Ginny as well?”

“Sure.” Harry led Luna towards his usual spot sitting down across from Hermione and Neville with Luna plopping down to him. Both his friends shot him a questioning glance but Harry just shrugged and smiled prompting the other two to shake their heads and return to their breakfasts.

When Ginny walked into the Hall a few minutes later Harry waved her over next to Luna. “Morning, Luna,” Ginny said with a yawn. “How come you’re over here today?”

“Harry invited me,” Luna said simply.

“Oh. Cool. Can you pass the bacon please?” Ginny yawned again while taking a few slices from the proffered plate.

“Luna,” Hermione said after they were all looking a bit more awake. “Harry, Neville and I were going to start looking into a rather old case shortly. You said your father was the editor for the Quibbler, yes?” Luna nodded. “Have you helped him write any articles by chance?”

“I have written a few,” Luna said, fingering her radish earrings. “I used to have a column on things the blibbering humdingers said.”

Hermione shut her eyes and visibly took a breath before shaking her head and continuing with her query. “Would you be interested in helping us with our investigation? Perhaps assisting in the write up of any potential findings?” Harry smiled over at his friend for the suggestion.

Neville was nodding along as well. “Yeah, that’d be good to have an actual reporter help out.”

“I’m not really a reporter…” Luna said glancing down. “I prefer to think of myself as an explorer. A reporter would have far less success finding the crumple-horned snorkack than an explorer.”

“Well,” Harry said, “you still have more experience tracking down this kind of stuff than we do. We tend to solve mysteries right in front of our noses. This one might take a bit more work.”

“You truly want me to help?” Luna looked at Harry with that same piercing gaze from a few minutes ago. He felt like his soul itself was being weighed by this young blonde.

“We do, Luna,” he responded not breaking her gaze. Luna blinked slowly and smiled nodding yes to them all.

Ron finally looked up from his third helping of food at that point and noticed Luna sitting nearby. “Why is Loony sitting here?” Fred and George sitting a bit further down the table smacked their heads against the wood.

Harry watched Luna’s shoulders slump slightly before her distant smile returned. Harry bumped
Harry turned to Ron before Hermione could start in on the redhead. “Hey, Ron, do you remember last year when you tried to steal my Cloak?” The table immediately fell completely quiet. The only people who didn’t remember that little incident were the new first years. And even some of them had heard the story already.

“Y-y-yeah?” Ron mumbled starting to pale.

“If you don’t want similar wards to mysteriously appear around your bed you should probably call her ‘Luna’ or ‘Miss Lovegood’ or really anything but ‘Loony’.” The silence in the Hall had stretched to include the other three House tables.

Ron’s eyes widened but color returned to his cheeks as he got redder and his complexion grew splotchy. “I can call her – ”

“Ron,” Neville cut in, “remember who your brothers are too. And which side they tend to support in these arguments.”

All the red again drained out of Ron’s features and he turned to look at the twins who still had their heads on the table but flashed identical thumbs up at Neville. “Right. Yeah. Sure. No problem.”

He abruptly shut up and conversations seemed to restart. Harry turned to see Luna staring at him wide eyed. “Fun, eh?” She slowly nodded and giggled a bit.

Harry noticed Snape standing up from his place at the faculty table with a sneer firmly plastered onto his features. Harry sighed and murmured, “Comm on, contact Daphne.”

“Harry?” Daphne responded almost immediately. “I assume you’re about to want the rule verbatim?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “I know we had discussed this for us but it looks like I’m about to need it now instead.”

“Shame. This would have been far more fun if I or Tracey cited it. Oh well, just repeat what I tell you when prompted.”

“Will do. Thanks, Daph,” Harry turned to face Snape as the man walked up to him.

“Lovegood. Return to your table immediately,” Snape said with a scowl.

Harry placed a hand on Luna’s shoulder keeping her sitting down as he raised his brow at Snape. “May I ask why, Professor Snape?” Again conversation in the Hall quieted down. Harry caught a glimpse of Shiva at the faculty table leaning over to whisper to McGonagall and Flitwick. All three quickly covered their mouths obviously stifling potential laughter.

“Students are to sit at their House tables, Potter. This does not concern you. Now, Miss Lovegood.”

“Actually, Professor, that’s not true,” Harry said with a lopsided grin.

“What are you babbling about?”

“Harry, said your statement was untrue Professor,” Luna stated with a dreamy smile. “Perhaps the
wrackspurts have been hovering around you too much?”

“Get back to your table now, you silly girl,” Snape said barely containing his sneer.

“Sir, before you interrupted I was telling you that you were wrong about the requirement to sit at House tables,” Harry responded calmly.

“Of course they are required to sit at their tables, Potter!” Harry saw Shiva giving him a small salute.

“Well…” Harry started and then waited a moment for Daphne to murmur the exact wording to him. “According to Hogwarts bylaws Section D, Subsection 2, Paragraph 3A, Line 12: ‘Hogwarts students are required to sit at assigned House tables only during the Welcoming and Leaving Feast and any specifically designated Special Occasions Feasts such as welcoming a Foreign Visiting School. At all other times, students are encouraged to sit at other House tables with friends, family or acquaintances in an effort to foster inter-house camaraderie and cooperation.’ So Professor,” Harry said smiling up at Snape, “Luna is not only allowed to sit here, she is actively encouraged to do so.”

A pin could have dropped like a cannonball in the Great Hall for all the noise that was going on. Harry caught sight Shiva shaking with her hands desperately clamped over her mouth. Flitwick wasn’t even trying to hide his laughter, holding his belly and chortling merrily. McGonagall had a smirk plastered on her lips which – for her – might as well as been her rolling on the floor. Surprisingly the new Defense teacher was also chuckling though he was attempting to hide it if a bit less successfully than Shiva.

Snape just snarled and spun on his heel to stalk out of the Great Hall.

“Excellent work, Harry,” Daphne said into her Comm Stone. “We’ll make a Slytherin out of you yet. Disconnect.”

Dumbledore watched his Third Year students filing out of the Great Hall with mixed feelings. On the one hand he could appreciate a well executed prank even if the victim was Severus. That the prank had been performed simply by knowing the Potions Master’s likely reactions and having a rulebook handy was impressive.

On the other hand…Harry had undermined the staff authority quite decisively. And in a distinctly Slytherin fashion. He could see Greengrass’ hand in this. A fact that was distinctly worrisome. Even more so – Minerva and Filius tacitly approved. That Bathsheda did not lift a hand in prevention came as no surprise and Remus had been a Marauder so his amusement was expected as well. Dumbledore had hoped that another summer with the Dursleys would have reminded Harry just how precious Hogwarts was as well as how trustworthy its teachers could be.

But Minerva and Filius…Dumbledore was losing control of his faction. Voldemort was moving again.

He could not afford to lose control. Not when so much was at stake.

“Hermione…” Harry said looking at her schedule for a third time and finally giving up rubbing his forehead as he handed it back to the girl. “How can you possibly take every single course at once? You realize three of those classes meet at the same time?”

Hermione blushed and snatched her paper. “I’m surprised you noticed that honestly. I know it
will be difficult but I have no doubt I can handle it.”

Neville just shook his head at the girl. “Seriously though, why do you want to take Muggle Studies? Your parents are Muggles.”

“Well it will be interesting to see them from a witch’s perspective don’t you think?”

Harry sighed. “I think you should just get a notebook to compile a list of issues if you’re going to take that class, Hermione. We’re still using quills and parchment plus 90% of the magical population can’t even pronounce electricity let alone know what it does. Don’t complain to us when you find out the things they teach are a hundred years out of date.”

Hermione glared at her friends. “We shall see.” The trio walked into the Ancient Runes class waving at Shiva who winked back at them. Grabbing seats near the middle Hermione stopped and stared wide eyed. “Lavender? You’re taking Ancient Runes?”

Lavender shrugged, tossing her hair a little. “I’ve seen some of the things Harry comes up with in the Common Room. It seemed interesting. And besides,” she smirked, “just because I love to gossip doesn’t mean I can’t study as well as the rest of you.”

“She’s got you there,” Neville laughed. “Hello, Susan. I hope you had a good summer.”

“Hi, Neville, Harry, Hermione,” the redhead said flashing them all a smile. “My summer was great thanks. Harry, I hear some congratulations are in order?” She winked at him and slyly nodded toward Shiva.

Harry nodded back at her. “Thanks, Susan. Tell your Aunt we appreciated the advice by the way.”

“Will do. So is anyone else surprised that Millicent Bulstrode is in this course?”

“Harry’s exploits have made a rather big impression on her. She’s trying to follow in his footsteps a bit,” Daphne said as she and Tracey grabbed seats nearby. “Millie may be intimidating, but she’s a lot smarter than she looks and she’s pretty nice if you can get her talking.”

“Well,” a raven haired, oriental girl said sitting in front of Harry said, “I for one was planning on taking this class before you starting making waves, Harry. We haven’t really been properly introduced yet. I’m Su Li.”

“Nice to meet you, Su,” Harry said shaking her hand.

“Alright, people,” Shiva said, rubbing her hands together and getting the class’ attention. “Welcome to Ancient Runes. Let’s get started, shall we?”

“I can’t believe Hagrid is teaching hippogriffs for the first class!” Hermione muttered besides Harry and Neville.

Harry had just gotten off of the hippogriff named, Buckbeak after a short flight around the campus. The animal was beautiful sure but... “Give me a broom any day. That was not my idea of a fun flight.”

“Says the man who flies directly towards the ground at a 100 km/hr,” Hermione scoffed.

“Yeah but I’m in control when I do that,” Harry grumbled. “How the hell am I supposed to know
what my flight partner is going to do if it has a brain of its own?”

“Heads up, people,” Neville murmured. “Malfoy’s up.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed watching his self-declared rival stalk towards Buckbeak. He palmed his *Fishing Line* rune just in case. It had been an idle experiment in pranking over the summer that ended up turning out pretty good. The cluster functioned somewhat like a modified version of the summoning charm they’d learn next year, but this one was directed and could just yank on a distant object and pull it a short distance in whatever direction the rune stone was jerked. He knew Fred and George would have a field day with it when he showed them.

“I still think if the blockhead is foolish enough to annoy the hippogriff you should just let him get hurt,” Tracey said from beside the trio. “Getting a bit bloody would serve the ponce right."

“And if he runs to daddy afterwards, Trace?” Daphne commented watching Malfoy sneer at the animal.

“Yeah, I know…it wouldn’t be fair to the critter. I still want to see him bloody after he tried grabbing your arse earlier,” Tracey replied.

“Well the Whomping Willow is close. Maybe we’ll get lucky and the *Fishing Line* will be a bit stronger than I expect,” Harry snorted.

Malfoy glared at the hippogriff who screeched back at him and pawed the ground, obviously rejecting the boy. Malfoy didn’t care. “Stupid birdbrain. You’re just a pathetic little animal. You’ll submit to me.” He smirked and strode forward. Buckbeak reared back onto his hind legs talons extended to slash Malfoy. The boy’s eyes’ widened and he held up his arm to fend the hippogriff off. Harry groaned and stretched out his hand with the *Fishing Line*. He latched onto Malfoy and jerked the boy away from Buckbeak before the half bird could get in trouble for injuring a student. Malfoy sailed arse over teakettle about 5 meters towards the Whomping Willow though he tumbled to a halt well short of its reach.

“Pity,” Tracey muttered, “though I admit seeing his robes flapping over his head like that was satisfying. I would’ve figured him for a boxers kind of guy, but I guess not…”

“Yes, we certainly have something to taunt him with now,” Daphne agreed with an evil little grin.

“You see? This is why hippogriffs should not be shown to Third Year students.” Hermione shook her head and sighed at the moronic quality displayed by her yearmate. She was careful to hide the upturn of her lips from her friends. It simply wouldn’t do for them to find her laughing at the misfortune of another during a class. Even if that other was Draco Malfoy.

“Headmaster Dumbledore,” Lucius Malfoy said as he glided into the Great Hall at the end of the week during breakfast. Draco hurried up to his side. Harry shook his head and raised an eyebrow at Hermione. She sighed and waved him on. Harry stood and made his way towards the staff table along with Hermione, Neville, Daphne and Tracey. Surprisingly, Millicent, Blaise and Lavender all stood as well and followed them. Harry glanced at the others but they just nodded to him and waved him forward.

“…demand the location of the animal in question,” Lucius was saying. “Such a dangerous creature cannot be allowed near students and it will be put down immediately. I assure you I will also be seeking the immediate dismissal of Rubeus Hagrid from his post. The man has no business teaching an important class.”
“Mr. Malfoy, so good to see you again,” Harry said with a smile any Slytherin would be proud of. “I see you managed to dress yourself without the assistance of a house elf.”

Malfoy sneered at Harry but did not otherwise acknowledge his presence. Snape on the other hand did. “This does not concern you Potter. Return to your seats. All of you.”

“ Actually, Professor, if Mr. Malfoy is discussing Buckbeak and the incident in Care of Magical Creatures class the other day than I assure you, this does fully concern me.”

Snape sneered and replied, “Well the others certainly should return to their seats then.”

“We’re present as witnesses, Professor,” Millie said earning a supportive nod from Blaise and Lavender as well the rest of his core group.

“Mr. Malfoy,” Harry said before anyone else interrupted, “are you attempting to punish Buckbeak for knocking back Draco?”

“Of course, child,” Malfoy said, an oily grin spreading across his face. “The Minister has agreed that such an event cannot be allowed to occur in the future.”

“Oh well there’s no problem then. Buckbeak didn’t do anything to Draco beyond rear back in warning. I was the one who jerked him away.” Harry shrugged while inside he was cheering in triumph. This was going to be fun.

Draco’s face had gone from superiority to confusion to rage but he managed to hold himself back while his father was there. Lucius on the other hand looked dumbstruck. “What?”

“It seems just like the last time you were here,” Harry nodded at Tracey who gave the man a predatory grin, “you are operating on horribly mistaken information. I noticed that Buckbeak had reared back and looked likely to fall forward in Draco’s direction so I used this,” he pulled out a Fishing Line rune stone, “to jerk him out of the way of any danger.”

“You did what, Potter?!” Draco exclaimed. His father quickly shushed him though his own face was twisted into a snarl as well.

“Be that as it may, boy, the animal is still dangerous and – ”

“Technically a flobberworm is dangerous too, Mr. Malfoy. You could choke on one at least if you tried to eat it.” Tracey snorted at that and Lavender looked slightly ill. Harry just smiled and continued, “All students were warned extensively not to approach a hippogriff without receiving a bow. All these people behind me will testify that Draco ignored this warning and proceeded towards Buckbeak – not only without receiving a bow, but also while insulting the animal.”

Daphne raised her eyebrows and said, “The equivalent behavior in Potions class would be throwing in several ingredients at once and then tossing spells at the hissing concoction. Neither Buckbeak nor Hagrid did anything wrong. Draco did. Harry Potter saved him from his own stupidity. You should be thanking him.”

Lucius’ expression settled into one of acquiesce though the corner of his mouth kept twitching as it tried to scowl. “It appears I did not have the full story. Very well then. Good day, Headmaster.” He started to turn back towards the doors but Harry got in one last call.

“Should I toss out another glove, Mr. Malfoy?” His only response was the slapping of shoes on the stone.
“Potter,” Snape snarled, “detention tonight for assaulting a fellow student!” Harry looked to Dumbledore with raised eyebrows but the old man didn’t make any expression.

“Actually, Professor Snape, seein’ as Harry was protectin’ yehng Draco I think he deserves to be rewarded not punished. 10 points to Gryffindor!” Hagrid said with a large smile.

“I agree, Hagrid,” McGonagall said. “You will not be serving detention, Mr. Potter.”

“Hey don’t forget the others,” Shiva threw in, grinning. “All of you guys who came forward as witnesses take five points each. Good show of support and doing the right thing!”

As Harry turned to head back to his seat with the others, he could practically hear the grinding of Snape’s teeth behind him.
Chapter 11: Boggarts, Blowups, and Brooms

“Alright, class, in honor of the holiday today we will be going over how to deal with a boggart. After all, it is rather appropriate to be frightened on Halloween is it not?” Remus Lupin said with a soft chuckle as he stood in front of his classroom of Third Year students. Filch had discovered a boggart in one of the wardrobes the other day and rather than getting rid of it Remus had decided to use the opportunity for a teaching exercise. It did fit ever so nicely into the spirit of things after all.

Harry for his part just sighed and shook his head standing with his friends. Of them the group’s reactions were mixed. Tracey seemed rather indifferent while Neville was exceedingly pale. Hermione rubbed a quick circle on Harry’s back, knowing exactly what her best friend thought of on this day every year. Daphne also stood beside Harry flashing him a small smile of reassurance when no one was looking and leaning in. “Hey, at the very least you’ll be able to laugh up a storm when we get to my turn.”

Harry peered at her with interest but before he could ask anything Neville had his hand in the air. “Professor, when the boggart shifts…it doesn’t umm, have the exact same powers as its new form does it?”

Remus shook his head in response. “The abilities are an echo at best. For example, if you were to fear a specific wizard,” he paused and his eyes flicked towards Harry, “the boggart would not be able to launch actual spells at you, merely a fancy light show. If you were to fear a nundu, it’s possible the breath would make you ill but it would not kill the entire population of the school.” The classroom filled with the nervous laughter of the students at that. “A boggart does not aim to kill people who stumble across it. It merely wishes to frighten them into running for the hills, so to speak. Now if everyone will get in line please, we can get started. Remember, the incantation is riddikulus.”

The class queued up and Harry’s group slotted in. Neville got in line first followed by Tracey, Daphne, Hermione and finally Harry. Harry was still scowling slightly as the students started cycling through. He hoped that Professor Lupin would actually let him have his turn instead of cutting him off for fear that Voldemort would pop up in class. Voldy was frightening sure, but he was most certainly not Harry’s deepest fear. Harry was honestly a little curious just how the boggart would choose to personify empty, abandoned, loneliness.

Busy trying to puzzle out how his fears might manifest, Harry almost missed Ron Weasley’s gigantic spider; though when said spider started tap dancing he did finally start to pay attention. Ron moved off looking rather green as Neville stepped forward already pale. The tap dancing spider disappeared and was replaced by a basilisk filling up half the classroom. Neville has already brought his wand forward before the boggart had even finished forming and shouted, “Riddikulus!” The faux-basilisk hadn’t even been able to start opening its eyes before it became a weaving paper construct of the type seen in parades with people walking underneath. Breathing a sigh of relief Neville stepped back. Harry slapped him on the back as he walked past giving him a thumbs up as well.

Tracey moved up and the parade basilisk twisted itself into a small ratty looking diary. Most of the class murmured, obviously curious, but her friends narrowed their eyes and watched her with concern. Tracey took a deep breath, gave out the incantation and the old, brown diary was suddenly bedazzled in addition to being covered in ribbons and hearts and pink paint. A smirk lit
Harry was initially somewhat confused by Daphne’s boggart. Why was Arnold Schwarzenegger her worst fear? Harry cocked his head as the muscle bound man took out his sunglasses and dropped them into place. Suddenly understanding Harry grinned and muttered, “Somebody didn’t enjoy Terminator apparently.” Hermione swatted his shoulder for that. Daphne shouted out her spell and in place of leather the T-800 was instead clothed in a frilly, pink ballerina outfit. Bursting out in laughter Harry found himself in complete agreement with Daphne’s earlier statement about him enjoying her turn immensely.

Moving back with a satisfied smirk, Daphne made room for Hermione to step up. His friend was already moving very slowly and with a great sigh. Harry’s laughter quieted and he eyed Hermione, ready to support her if she needed it. The boggart noticed Hermione and shifted. Laying in front of the ground crumpled into an unmoving heap, was a broken, bloody form. A body so beaten it wasn’t even recognizable beyond having short, messy black hair and Hogwarts robes. Harry tried to see the face but Hermione, with tears streaming down her cheeks, shouted, “*Riddikulus!*” The dead body vanished before Harry could figure out just who it had been and was replaced by a blow up doll. He blushed looking at the – at least somewhat – anatomically correct plastic doll before Hermione shuffled back wiping at her eyes. Harry tried to catch her hand but she moved too fast for him to do anything beyond smile softly at her.

As Harry started to move forward he noticed the Defense teacher also start to jump forward. Surprisingly enough the older man stumbled and Harry caught a brief nod from Daphne as he walked close enough for the boggart to focus on him. Lupin regained his balance but before he could stop it, the boggart had shifted. As the form resolved into Shiva, Lupin frowned and held his place. Harry peered at his guardian curiously wondering just how this…was…

Shiva was laughing at him. “You thought I cared? Idiot, Freak!” Harry froze, shaking his wand only half raised. “It’s called a long con, Boy! Doesn’t it just hurt soo much more this way? Vernon and I are getting together tonight to share a drink over it. I’ve been waiting so long for this,” the apparition cooed.

“Harry!” A dim shout penetrated the fog that had descended over Harry’s brain. He ground his teeth. He’d faced the murderer of his parents twice and killed a 60 foot basilisk with a sword! He could beat a single boggart! Harry cast the *riddikulus*…

And Hermione was suddenly looking at him, smirking. “Did you really think I’d stick around, Harry? After I nearly died three times? Did you think that I – ” Harry dropped to the floor like a puppet with cut strings. Four *riddikulus* spells crashed into the faux-Hermione and the boggart vanished in a puff of smoke. Professor Lupin and the rest of the class were left staring dumbfounded between the traces of the boggart and Harry.

The boy in question was sitting on the floor with his knees to his chest and arms wrapped around them, his head buried firmly between them. Anyone asked later would swear they never even saw Hermione move but suddenly she was wrapping Harry in her arms instead of standing on the back wall. “It’s okay Harry. She would never say that and I would never leave you either. It’s okay. It’s okay. We’re not leaving you.” Daphne, Tracey and Neville came behind the two and put their hands on Harry’s back as well murmuring their own reassurances.

“Well done Harry,” Remus said finally jerking into motion. “Nothing to see here, people. Boggarts are dangerous for a reason after all. Out with you.” He managed to wrangle the majority of the class outside leaving just the small group of five still clustered in the middle of the floor. “Harry,”
Remus said softly as pulled out a calming potion from his robe pocket. “Harry,” Remus froze as four sets of eyes turned on him with venom and promised pain held in each gaze. His inner wolf gave a soft whimper meeting the eyes of the bushy haired girl still curled around Harry.

“What is that potion, Professor?” Daphne asked taking charge.

“A calming draught. I had several prepared just in case anyone had a strong reaction to the boggart,” he said trailing off. “I...hadn’t quite expected something this strong though…”

“Yes, well, Harry Potter is never quite able to have a normal experience in practically anything now is he?” The question was far more of a statement of fact and dismissal than anything else. Daphne plucked the potion from his hands and handed it off to Hermione. The brunette subtly coaxed Harry to lift his head and poured the potion into his throat.

A few moments later, Harry gave a shuddering gasp and his eyes cleared somewhat. He shook his head then gazed back at the ground. “Bugger. Sorry guys…”

“Language, Harry,” Hermione chastised without any actual rebuke in her voice. She was rewarded with an ever so slight upturn at the corners of her friend’s lips. “You have nothing to apologize for. As Professor Lupin told the rest of the class: boggarts are somewhat dangerous for a reason. They are evolved to do exactly what they did to you.”

“I faced Voldemort,” Harry said. Beyond Hermione he dimly registered Professor Lupin flinch at the word. “I ran right at a basilisk. I shouldn’t collapse at...a boggart.” He sighed.

“Harry, you weren’t afraid of the boggart,” Remus said softly. “You were afraid of something far worse and it used that against you, as is its nature. It is very good at what it does.”

“Riddle is someone you fight against,” Neville commented. “A basilisk is something you can kill. You can’t really fight against an idea. I would’ve crumbled to that too if it had become my parents.”

“Some things you can’t make funny,” Tracey said with a shrug.

“Come on, Harry.” Hermione stood and levered him to his feet. “Let’s get you some food. The Feast will be starting soon. You’ll feel better afterwards.” Harry nodded and let her maneuver him towards the door.

Remus stopped Neville as he started to follow the others. “If Harry needs anything further have him stop by Madam Pomfrey.” Neville nodded and headed off after his friends.

Shiva was concerned. It was Halloween Feast so by the simple law of probability she’d be a little on edge throughout the day. Harry wasn’t the only one who had noticed that things tended to fall apart on that day. Plus the fact that Harry was usually a little grim – for good reason yes, but still – on this day and she’d of course be watching out for him. To make her even more worried, Harry was...off...at the moment. He may be laughing and smiling but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. And he was sticking very close to his friends and them to him. Not even a minute had gone by when one of them wasn’t in physical contact with him which by itself was more than strange enough. Usually only she or Hermione could get away with that level of contact. He was even letting Luna bump up against him without flinching.

Shiva finally managed to catch his eye and raised her eyebrows a bit shooting him a questioning glance. Harry smiled gave a small shrug and turned back to chatting with his group. He did seem to perk up slightly though and it was at least enough for her to stop feeling like she needed to rush
over there and interrogate him.

Remus Lupin leaned over from the seat beside her and spoke softly, “Good evening, Bathsheda.”

“Evening, Remus,” she replied.

“You seem a little on edge. Expecting trouble?” he asked with a bit of a half chuckle.

“It’s Halloween. Two of the three years I’ve been teaching there’s been a disaster today. I’m just staying on my toes in case it’s three out of four,” she said sighing.

“Ah. Yes, I can understand that sentiment then.” He paused seeming to consider before coming to a decision. “If I may...You are more to young Harry Potter than a simple mentor, are you not?”

Shiva very deliberately took a bite of her food before fixing him with piercing glare. “Whatever I am to that boy is none of your concern, Professor Lupin.”

“My apologies. I did not mean to accuse you of anything,” Remus said shaking his head. “I just wished to inform you that there was...an incident in my class earlier.”

Her mind ran a mile a minute. Harry hadn’t been looking bad at breakfast or lunch and Defense was right before the Feast...’Shite.’ She took a deep breath and centered herself before replying out loud, “What sort of incident?”

“A boggart was discovered the other day. I had decided it would make an excellent lesson for the holiday so many of my classes were working on dispelling the boggart,” Remus explained as Shiva’s stomach dropped. This was not going to be good at all. “Harry’s class was doing fine with relatively normal fears until his group. I had heard some rumors about the past two years but I hadn’t truly believed them until that point I think. One of his friends’ boggart was a basilisk – thankfully the boy in question was able to hit it with a _riddikulus_ quickly enough for it to change. Boggarts don’t take on many of their form’s abilities, but I do worry about what could have happened had it managed to gaze at someone. Another was a simple diary though judging by the looks on those five it was anything _but_ simple. Hermione Granger’s fear was someone close to her dead. I don’t know who. The body was nearly unrecognizable for the abuse her fears had had it suffer. Harry’s...” Remus paused. Had he been paying attention he would have noticed her hands clenched around the silverware and her teeth grinding together.

“Harry’s boggart was you initially, Bathsheda,” he said. That threw Shiva for a loop. Why would Harry be afraid of her? “It said several rather awful things to him. Mostly centered on you only having pretended to care for him and being in league with his uncle to make his suffering worse.” Shiva was suddenly very thankful that the silverware was metal and not something weaker. There was far less likelihood of metal breaking under her grip. “He managed to cast the spell after Hermione shouted to him but...the boggart then switched into a version of her which also proceeded to verbally attack him. Harry collapsed right about the same time that each of his friends let loose an extremely powerful _riddikulus_. I admit, I have never seen a boggart simply...disintegrated before.”

“And where were you during this episode, Professor Lupin?” she managed to growl.

Remus’ eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. For the first time he focused fully on Shiva and noticed just how enraged she had become. He shifted back slightly before responding, “I was unprepared for such an episode especially from one so young. I’ve heard of existential boggarts from adults far older but never realized one could result from a child. I was fully expecting to see You-Know-Who –”
“Voldemort,” she cut in, lip twitching.

Remus flinched but continued, “Yes. Him. When the boggart turned into you I was stunned and did not move to act until after his friends reacted.”

“No wonder why the kid is freaking out. Do you have any idea how bad that could’ve been?”

“I was prepared for You-Know – ”

“I don’t give a rat’s arse about Voldy you arsehole,” she hissed. “I care about Harry. You have no idea the shite that boy has been through and to have him faced with a version of me telling him something like that? After the summer he just had? Do you even have a clue about the potential psychological damage you have done to my ward?”

Remus’ mouth narrowed into a line. Ward? He hadn’t been around much yet at Albus’ suggestion but he was here now and he had a duty to James and Lily to watch out for Harry. “What do you mean your ward?”

Shiva full on snarled at him then. “What the bloody hell does it sound like?”

“You have no relation to him whatsoever. What possible reason do you have for attempting to claim custody of – ”

“I may not be related by blood but that boy over there is as much my family as my mother and father are. I have been there far more than you, you sonofabitch!” Remus flinched back at the venom in her voice. “You were his parents’ friend and you never did anything to contact him. No phone call. No letter. No visit. Nothing! You left him with his relatives – with those horrible excuses for human beings! How dare you say I have no reason for looking out for him when you so obviously didn’t give a wiff yourself! I have been working my arse off since I first met that kid to help him out. Where were you for the past 12 years Remus Lupin?”

“How could you possibly know that?” Remus asked his eyes wide.

“The past two Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers have tried to kill Harry,” she sneered. “Sirius Black just escaped recently. As I just said; I watch out for the kid. As soon as I found out who Dumbledore had hired to teach DADA this year I did my homework. I know all about you, Professor Lupin.”

Remus could only stare into his plate of mostly untouched food. “Why did you not say anything earlier in that case?”

“I was curious to see how long it would take you before you approached him on your own. Obviously that isn’t going to happen anytime soon!” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “If you want to talk about Harry more then do it in my office later where I can scream at you as loud as I want first.” Shiva turned back to her plate and speared the little potato resolving to ignore Remus Lupin for the rest of meal.

Remus for his part closed his eyes and sighed. He had a lot of apologizing to do it seemed.

By the time the Gryffindors made their way back up to the tower Harry was feeling much better. He would talk to Shiva in the morning after this day was over and done with but his friends had perked him quite a lot. He was mostly just frustrated with himself at this point.

And annoyed, that yet again, the universe had decided to call his bluff for tempting fate. Harry
really had to start watching how he thought since Fate apparently liked to have a bit of fun with him.

No sooner had he finished that thought, he turned the corner to see a gaggle of his fellow Housemates staring in shock up at the portrait of the Fat Lady. Groaning and slapping a hand over his face, Harry started muttering about Fate being an evil little prankster.

“Who would do this…?” Lavender quietly asked. The Fat Lady’s portrait had three large slashes down the center and the frame behind her canvas had marks of spellfire.

“Someone who wanted in,” Neville said glaring at the portrait.

“Sirius Black! It was Sirius Black! Sirius Black tried to kill me!” The Fat Lady gave a keening wail from one of the portraits a ways down the corridor. With a hitched sob the painted woman took off, leaping from portrait to portrait retreating from the slashed canvas.

“Err…” Ginny said looking around in confusion. “How do we get into the Common Room now?”

This Quidditch game was miserable. The rain was awful, his reflector lenses had the unfortunate side effect of repelling water-wicking charms so he could barely see, it was cold, and the stupid Dementors were making things even worse as they got closer.

‘Wait. Dementors? Closer?’

Harry’s broom careened to a halt as his conscious thoughts finally caught up to his unconscious grumblings. The storm had blanketed the grounds and masked the fog and cold of the Dementors. Harry had only seen them massing thanks to his height and continued circling for the Snitch. Flipping around, Harry peered into the darkness a short ways away only to see it moving. The horrible creatures were assembled and pushing towards the pitch in the middle of the game. Harry’s eyes widened and he turned his Nimbus seeking out the box with McGonagall. He had… to…tell…

Not Harry! Please, not Harry!

“Well, bugger…” Harry muttered as the screams filled his head and he slid off the broom’s side. As the wind whipped past his ears, Harry heard a dim roar of panic rise from the crowd. Harry slipped into unconsciousness thanking god that at least the people had noticed the Dementors.

Harry woke to a bland white ceiling hanging over him. A very familiar bland white ceiling. And a weight pressed against his side, trapping his arm.

Turning, Harry squinted and could make out brown hair splayed over the bed next to him. He smiled slightly and said, “Hey, Hermione. Any idea where my glasses are?”

The head leaning beside him shifted slightly. A dull murmur of protest rose before she twisted towards him. Hermione’s blurry face centered on Harry’s and suddenly she was a lot clearer as she jerked upright and leaned over him. “Harry! You’re awake! Hang on, I have your glasses right here.” Reaching off to the side, Hermione grabbed his glasses from the table and slipped them onto his face.

“Jeez, Harry, can’t you even play a game like normal people?” Daphne snarked from the other side of his bed.
“I don’t think ‘normal’ really means the same thing in Harry’s personal dictionary, Daph,” Tracey commented with a smirk.

“Perhaps ‘normal’ is another synonym for ‘danger’ or ‘risking death’ for Harry?” Luna asked in an airy voice, a faint smile on her lips.

“Hey, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: worst good luck ever,” Neville pronounced with a laugh from near Hermione.

“Nobody got hurt from the Dementors did they?” Harry asked looking between his five friends. He saw Shiva slumped across a bed across the way. “And is Shiva okay?”

Hermione smiled. “You’re the one waking up in the hospital wing. Again. And the first thing you ask is if everyone else is okay.” She shook her head. “What are we going to do with you, Harry.”

“Technically, Hermione, the first thing he asked was where his glasses were. The nobility actually came second this time,” Daphne said. “I think we’re making progress even if it is incremental.”

“Nah,” Neville waved of her judgment. “He’s got to be able to see to run off and save everyone. Doesn’t really count.”

“Is anyone going to answer my question?” Harry grumbled.

“No, no one was hurt besides you, Harry,” Tracey said shaking her head. “Shiva is over there sleeping because she and a lot of the other Professors were busy casting Patroni to get the Dementors to back off. Hers was…a little more powerful than most of the others. Madam Pomfrey told her to rest to recover some of her stamina.”

“Why was hers…”

Hermione shook her head. “We all saw you fall, Harry. You were very lucky. Professor Flitwick was close to you as you slipped off the broom and his quick relaxes let him hit you with an arresto momentum before you had picked up enough speed to receive more than bruises.” Harry nodded and she continued, “Shiva was quite perturbed at the Dementors for nearly causing your death. Again. She was very enthusiastic with pushing them back. Professor Dumbledore told us all afterwards that they were likely drawn by the large crowd at the game.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “So is it rescheduled then?”

The group sadly shook their heads. “Sorry, Harry,” Neville said mournfully. “Just before you fell, Cedric caught the Snitch. He didn’t even realize something was wrong until the Professors starting jumping over the stands to get at the Dementors. He’s been apologizing to everyone he could find about it. Even Oliver told him to shut up and that he doesn’t blame him. You might want to talk to him later.”

“Yeah. Guess I should.” Harry sighed. While it sucked losing, he really couldn’t complain considering how miserable the game had been anyway.

“Harry…” Hermione said. Harry turned back to her and saw her expression pinched and she was wringing her hands. His insides clenched. “Everybody was so focused on the Dementors that…well nobody really thought about your broom.” His eyes widened and his breath hitched. “We tried to save it but…the winds pushed it into the Whomping Willow and by the time we realized it…I’m sorry Harry…”
Harry flopped back down into the bed. ‘Bugger.’ Careful to make sure his voice was steady, he asked, “Does anyone think I could sue the Ministry to pay for a new broom?” His friends gave the sad little laughs he had been hoping for. It may not be much, but it was something.

“Professor Lupin?” Harry asked knocking on the door to Remus’ office. The man waved him inside and Harry sat down in the chair across from him.

“How can I help you, Harry?”

“Well, I could use some help, Sir…Also, I talked with Shiva about Halloween the other day. She…mentioned that you two got into a bit of a fight and that I should ask you about it first.”

Remus sighed and pulled out a tea set. “Would you like some?” Harry shook his head. Remus poured a bit for himself and leaned back into the chair. “Did Bathsheda tell you the general subject of our disagreement?”

“No, but it’s not too hard to figure out that it was about me.”

“It was, but probably not in the way you are thinking, Harry. I…have not made the best of choices in the past decade. Your guardian drilled that into me rather effectively the other night. First allow me to apologize for the boggart incident. I should not have frozen like that. I simply never expected to see a student’s boggart manifest as a teacher. Especially not one they are known to like.”

“It’s fine, Professor,” Harry said waving that off. “I wanted to face the boggart. One of my friends actually tripped you up to make sure I could.”

Remus’ eyebrows raised. “Really?” he chuckled. “No wonder I tripped. Well whoever it was, congratulate them for me would you? That was a delightfully subtle little prank.”

“I will. Anyway, it wasn’t your fault. I figured my boggart would be weird and I’m a little embarrassed about how poorly I handled it. I do think I’m going to let others stick to dealing with them in the future though.”

“There is certainly no shame in that, Harry,” Remus said nodding to the boy. “Now, as to what Bathsheda and I argued about… I knew your parents, Harry.” Harry’s gaze jerked up and a lot of the humor in his expression visibly drained away. “I was quite close to your father actually. We were best friends during the majority of our schooling.”

“Like with Sirius Black?” Harry asked.

Remus flinched. “I deserved that. Yes. While James and Sirius were always exceptionally close, I was almost as good of friends with them. I have a…problem…a disease. It has caused many complications in my life. Your father and Sirius discovered my little problem but instead of shying away from me it instead drew them both closer. A fourth joined our little group –”

“Peter Pettigrew.”

“Yes, poor Peter,” Remus sighed. “The four of us grew quite close and when James started to date your mother, Lily, she shortly became a fifth member of our circle. After we graduated we all remained somewhat close though I drifted apart. Again largely due to my shame. After James’ and Lily’s deaths I blamed myself. I realize that was foolish, but I did. I felt that if I had let them in more than perhaps I could have helped. Or at least died with them.”
“While this is interesting, Professor, I don’t see what this has to do with why Shiva would yell at you and as she put it ‘come within a hair’s breadth of beating the stuffing out of you’. It takes a lot to rile her up like that. Generally I’m the only one who can do it and that’s just because I tend to almost die on her a lot.” Harry shrugged. People knowing his parents was no longer as interesting as it used to be.

“It relates because the context is important.” Remus sipped his tea and grimaced. “After I sobered up I attempted to find you. I felt it was my duty as the last remaining Marauder to at least look in on you from time to time. Albus however, informed me that you were safe with your relatives and I took his word for it. He was Albus Dumbledore, the greatest wizard since Merlin himself. Who was I to question what he said?” Remus sighed again and closed his eyes. “I never bothered to consider that your relatives were Petunia and her family. Lily had…complained about her sister often enough that I should have taken action. Bathsheda would not tell me what Petunia did and I don’t expect nor ask you tell me yourself. But, I know it was not pleasant and I know that it was persistent. I can only imagine what you endured because I was a fool more interested in my own self pity than in you.”

Remus spread his hands in supplication. “Even now, I have been a fool. We have seen each other for over two months and I never once mentioned that I knew you as a baby or that I knew your parents. I have failed you in many ways, Harry. I humbly request the chance to attempt to rebuild the bridge I burned so many years ago.”

Harry frowned at the teacher and considered. On the one hand, here was a man who was at least partially responsible for his neglect at the hands of the Dursleys. On the other, like McGonagall he did seem to be genuinely sorry for the past. “What did Shiva say to this?” Harry eventually asked.

“She said,” Remus gave a small, sad smile, “that she did not have the right to do anything more than berate and threaten me. That the decision of how to proceed in the future would be left completely up to you. Though she did threaten to remove my bits should I do anything untoward in the future. That is quite a fiery young woman you’ve chosen as a protector.”

“I think she kinda chose me, more than the other way around,” Harry muttered. He sat thinking for a few minutes. “Will you tell me what your problem was that didn’t scare my dad away?” It would be a good test to see just how far Professor Lupin was willing to go for his forgiveness.

“…Will you agree in turn to keep this between us?”

“And Shiva. That’s non-negotiable.” Harry countered.

Remus gave a slow nod. “Very well. As a young child I was bitten by Fenrir Greyback during a full moon. I…am a werewolf.” Remus closed his eyes and braced for the explosion. For the look of disgust in the eyes of his best friends’ son.

“Seriously? That’s it?” Remus’ eyes snapped open and instead of disgust or pity in Harry’s eyes he instead saw confusion. “I thought you were going to say you’d killed someone or something. A werewolf, that’s the secret? That’s nothing.”

“Harry…I don’t think you quite understand the stigma associated with my…condition…”

Harry snorted. “So you’re a super big wolf that likes to rip things apart one or two days a month. Hell Shiva is worse than that for longer.” Remus opened his mouth to protest again completely confused at this reaction but Harry waved him quiet. “Whatever, I’m not going to argue about this. Look you want another chance? Okay, fine. But we start over from square one. Professor McGonagall has proven that she’s pretty cool and I avoided her like the plague for a while. I can
at least give you the same chance. But I don’t give out third chances.”

“Fair enough.” Remus nodded at the boy. “I truly appreciate this, Harry.”

“Okay. Now that that’s out of the way. I need help.”

“With what?”

Harry sighed. “I got to thinking about Dementors the other day. It’s hard not to what with them surrounding the school and all,” he said and growled. “Especially after falling off my broom thanks to them. Things like that and the train incident can’t happen again. I can’t afford to collapse like that in a bad situation. I need to be able to defend myself.”

“Well,” Remus said rubbing his chin, “I could attempt to teach you the Patronus charm. However it is quite complicated. And I am certainly not willing to bring you out to the grounds to practice in on an actual Dementor. There is quite a large difference between performing it in the middle of a classroom and against the creatures themselves.”

Harry shrugged. “Being taught the charm is all I’m looking for, Sir. Once I know the basic underlying principles of it I can try to make a rune cluster to replicate the effects. Whether I can perform the charm under pressure would be moot at that point.”

Remus’ eyebrows rose into his hairline. “A rune stone to reproduce a Patronus? That…I don’t believe that is possible, Harry…”

Harry laughed. “I’ve invented at least five different clusters that are supposedly impossible and I’m pretty close to figuring out another three. Hell this should be simple really. I’m not making anything new, just a rune to perform a spell. Three of my primary combat runes do exactly that with reducto, confringo, and diffindo. I’ll probably try to supercharge it or something in case I’m ever swarmed and I should be able to do the spell itself at least somewhat proficiently to make sure that I get credit for it when it comes time for OWLs and NEWTs but the rune itself shouldn’t be too hard.”

Remus’s jaw snapped closed. He started laughing. “You have your father’s confidence and your mother’s brilliance, Harry. Let’s get started then, shall we?”

Breakfast the next morning was... unusual. Harry and company had just laid into their food when a bevy of owls showed up carrying a long, rectangular, paper-wrapped package. Immediately after dropping it in front of Harry, the owls all left.

“That’s new.” Harry blinked at the bow. Hedwig swooped into the Hall and landed on his shoulder with an indignant hoot glaring at the package. “Hey, don’t look at me, girl. I didn’t order anything.” She hooted again and twisted towards him. “Yes, of course if I had ordered something I would have told you so you could pick it up yourself.” She hooted again and ruffled her feathers apparently satisfied. Harry reached over to his plate and held a slice up bacon up for her. “Peace offering?” Hedwig happily gobbled the snack and flew back out of the hall. “What?” he asked looking at his friends who all had varying degrees on incredulity on their faces.

All except for Luna at least who merely looked amused. “I think they are surprised that you were told off by your owl, Harry.”

“Not the giant package somebody sent to me then?” Harry asked with a smirk at the blonde.

“That probably has something to do with it as well though I think Hedwig was the larger part.”
She tapped her finger on her chin and asked nonchalantly, “You don’t suppose she might actually be a Mayan Wind Chatterer do you?”

“I admit, Luna, while I’m not familiar with the Mayan Wind Chatterer I really don’t think Hedwig is anything more than a really smart owl,” he said laughing.

“Shame. I’ve always been curious whether the Mayan Wind Chatterer truly existed or not.” Luna shrugged and went back to her food.

Hermione ground her teeth and was about to say something before Ron cut in. “Well? Are you going to open the thing or what?!”

Harry rolled his eyes and shrugged. “Why not. Might as well see what it is.” He opened the card that had come with it. “Sorry about your last match. Consider this a repayment for missing so many birthday and Christmases.” Huh.” Tearing the wrappings off Harry was presented with a brand new, mint-in-box Firebolt. The fastest, most maneuverable, best broom currently on the market. A broom worth a thousand galleons. “Urg,” Harry couldn’t do anything more than croak upon seeing it.

“Wow…” The sentiment was expressed by many of the surrounding people. Ron looked like he was going to faint and Oliver Wood looked torn between joining the redhead and drooling.

Harry reached out a hand to caress the broom but found his arm locked in place by Hermione’s iron grip. “Harry, you can’t touch that. You can’t use that. Not yet!”

“But – but it’s a Firebolt, Hermione!” Harry whined.

“Yes and you have at least one person out for your blood. Plus whatever the heck is going on with the Sirius Black situation. There is no indication of who sent you that broom beyond a vague reference to the problems from the match meaning they had to have heard yours was destroyed and have enough money to get you a new broom in very short order. That implies power which implies dangerous. You are going to have that broom thoroughly checked for traps or sabotage before laying a hand on it.”

Harry’s expression fell and he looked with longing at the broom. He turned back to Hermione’s stormy expression. He glanced at Shiva who just looked pained. Harry turned back to the beautiful broom sitting before him and drew his hand back sighing. “I hate when you make sense like that.”

This was too much for Ron apparently. “You can’t be serious! That’s a FIREBOLT! What if they dismantle it?! What if they break it?! What if they can’t put it back together?! Do you know how expensive those are?! Who cares who sent it?! It’s a Firebolt!”

“We prefer Harry alive, Ronald,” Luna commented not even bothering to look up from her pudding. “This is very good. You should have some pudding.”

“Nobody asked you what you think Loo – ” Ron was hit by a silencing spell before he could finish the sentence.

Ginny lowered her wand, stood up and cuffed her brother on the back of the head. “Do you ever learn? Sorry about that, Harry, Luna. I’ll take the git upstairs so you don’t have to hurt him.”

McGonagall and Flitwick who had wandered up behind during Ron’s episode nodded approvingly. “Miss Weasley,” McGonagall said, “very good foresight. Five points to Gryffindor.”
“I assure you, Mr. Potter,” Flitwick said, “we will be exceedingly careful not to damage or degrade your gift in any fashion. I would expect you to have it back in a week assuming no complications. Two tops.”

Harry just nodded glumly. The professors levitated the box with the broom out of the room with Harry staring after it. Shiva clapped him on the shoulder. “Cheer up, kid. Best case scenario, you get it back in a week and can lord your epic broom over your rivals. Worst case scenario, it’s trapped meaning you can properly thank Hermione for saving your life. I can point you to a few unused broom closets on the fourth floor or if you need more light for the expressions of gratitude there are some excellent empty classrooms up on the sixth.” Shiva smirked down at her ward as she walked back to the staff table.

Harry and Hermione on the other hand were both blazing red. Luna happily hummed away, glad that Professor Babbling had managed to firmly get Harry’s mind off the broom.

The Firebolt examination was completed in five days. Flitwick had apparently fallen in love with the broom and between him and McGonagall’s efforts, they worked round the clock to lovingly check over every inch of the beautiful thing. No unsavory charms, runes, traps, enchantors or potions were found. It was entirely mundane.

If a thousand galleon present from a mysterious benefactor could be considered mundane.

Harry and his friends had gathered to discuss this and the Sirius Black problem. There had been frustratingly little actual progress on that front. So far the only thing that they had confirmed was that literally everyone was amazed that Sirius Black had betrayed the Potters. Hagrid, McGonagall, Flitwick, Tonks, Andromeda Tonks, Amelia Bones, Augusta Longbottom, Xenophilius Lovegood, the late Pandora Lovegood (according to Xenophilius), Celeste Greengrass (Daphne’s mother), Madam Rosemerta, the owner of Zonko’s Joke Shop…Even Filch had admitted to being surprised when the news had first broken.

“And we’re sure he couldn’t have been under an Imperius curse?” Harry asked after they had checked everything again.

Daphne shook her head. “The Blacks specialized in mind magics. There is no way any child of House Black would fall to Imperius.”

“And even if he had,” Tracey said banging her head on the table, “laughing afterward wouldn’t have happened.”

“We’re going around in circles.” Neville shook his head and leaned back staring at the ceiling of the library.

“Let’s focus on something else,” Hermione said. “Instead of looking at why, let’s look at how and backtrack. Does anyone know of any charms or curses that could cause an explosion like was described?”

“I could make a feedback cluster that could do that. It’d be really dangerous though,” Harry commented with a shrug. The group ignored him.

“I…” Daphne tapped the table for a bit before shaking her head. “Father has knowledge of many borderline spells but as far as I know there is nothing that could do quite the amount of damage all at once as was discovered. At least, nothing that would still leave Black and the rest of the street alive and somewhat intact.”
“Why was Peter Pettigrew’s finger recovered?” Luna asked her eyes narrowing in what Harry was quickly coming to find meant the girl was following an idea down the rabbit hole. She might reach different conclusions than the rest of them but she was startlingly insightful when her threads panned out.

“Well obviously if the street exploded centered on him there wouldn’t be much left,” Tracey said with a snort.

“But there should be something.” Luna twisted her gaze from Tracey onto Hermione.

“There was. There was a finger,” Tracey replied. Hermione’s eyes though had narrowed in thought and she nodded at Luna.

The little blonde continued, “Was the finger mangled? Bloody? Was the base clean or ragged?”

Harry perked up starting to see where his friend was going with this line and not at all liking the conclusions that were starting to form in his head. He shuffled through their notes until he found the initial report from one of the first Auror responders. “According to this, Peter Pettigrew’s finger was nearly entirely unmarred with a clean cut at the base…”

Hermione slowly nodded. “Which shouldn’t be possible. Not in an explosion. And even if by some miraculous coincidence it had happened, where were more pieces of his body? I think you’re right Luna…god, do you know what this means?”

“You guys have lost me,” Neville glanced over at Tracey and Daphne who were looking just as confused. “Help a friend out?”

“One moment, Neville,” Hermione said waving him off. “Daphne, Tracey, you two conducted many of the interviews. Did anyone mention anything about Peter Pettigrew’s character? Specifically their reactions to finding out he had gone after Sirius.”

“Yeah, to a man they were incredibly surprised by it,” Daphne said. “Everyone said he was generally the squirrely one. The first to run or cower if things got tough. The first to look for help. The last to agree to the insane schemes of his friends. They were extraordinarily impressed that he had…gone after…oh Merlin…you don’t think…?” Daphne’s face morphed into a horrified grimace.

“Why do I get the feeling we’re the only two not invited to the party, Nev?” Tracey asked glaring between her other friends. Neville just nodded along with her.

“Sirius Black did not kill anybody that day, Tracey, Neville,” Luna said, all traces of airiness and levity having dissolved from her voice. “The facts do not fit. One of the two wizards present fired some curse that damaged the street – ”

“Probably a blasting or incendiary curse that hit a gas main,” Hermione cut in.

Luna nodded and continued, “Then in the confusion, Peter Pettigrew used a severing charm on his finger and escaped. Sirius Black was likely surprised at the deviousness of his former friend or the resulting carnage and was not fully lucid when the Aurors arrived so shortly after the event. By the time he would have been coherent he was already in custody.”

Neville frowned. “Okay but why would Pettigrew keep hiding then? If he was alive and Black had been caught then shouldn’t he have come forward?”

Harry shook his head. “Not if he had been the traitor…” Neville and Tracey fixed him with a wide
eyed stare but Hermione, Daphne and Luna just nodded in agreement.

“Everyone says that Black was basically my father’s brother and a good friend to my mother. On the other hand, everyone also says that Pettigrew was more or less an outsider hanging out on the fringes of the group.” Harry looked from face to face. “Of the two, who would you put money on betraying my parents and who would you guess would hunt that traitor down for revenge?”

“Merlin’s balls…” Neville whispered. “Why wouldn’t anyone else have thought of this though?”

“It was right as the war ended,” Daphne said sadly. “Don’t underestimate people’s desire to just want horrible things to be over and done with. They probably just accepted the easiest explanation and didn’t bother to look too closely. There was a lot of secrecy at that point too and secrets are double edged swords.”

“So then why would Sirius Black be hunting you, Harry?” Tracey asked. “That part still doesn’t fit.”

Luna cocked her head at the older girl. “What makes you so certain that he is hunting Harry? Or even if he is hunting, who says he is hunting Harry?”

The others turned to her wide eyed. “You think he found out Pettigrew’s here?”

Luna shrugged. “It is possible I suppose. It also possible that someone finally mentioned that you were at Hogwarts to him and he thought to protect the last Potter as he could not do with your parents. Either way, we need to find and speak to the man himself to ascertain his true intentions.”

“I agree,” Hermione said nodding. “This entire investigation was bungled. The means makes no sense and the motive makes even less sense. I find it highly likely that Sirius Black was framed for this but I don’t think running off to find the man to ask him personally is the best plan. Not just yet at least. Let’s get the trial records first and then perhaps we could ask Susan’s aunt to reopen the original investigation and have him come to us.”

“I’ll just ask, Tonks,” Harry said shrugging. “Give me a second.”

Harry walked a bit away from the group to have a modicum of privacy before activating his Comm Stone. “Comm on, contact Tonks. Tonks? Are you busy, do you have a minute to talk?”

“Harry?” the metamorphmagus’ voice came through from the stone. “Is there an emergency? Are you alright? Is anyone hurt?”

“No it’s fine, I’m on break.” There was a short pause where Harry heard muffled scuffling sounds as well as a dull bang and soft curse. “They move these desks on purpose, I swear…alright I can talk. Have I mentioned how awesome these things are by the way? I mean really, if you can mass produce this, Harry, you’re going to be richer than Merlin.”

“I don’t know about richer than Merlin…but definitely richer than the Queen,” Harry said smiling.

“Nah, she’s got her crown jewels and all. Merlin had crown jewels but his were dangly instead of shiny.” Harry gagged as he caught the pun. Before he could say anything Tonks kept going just making it worse, “Though I suppose his crown jewels were shiny at times. I mean it’s only natural and you’ve got to keep things fun and – ”

“Seriously woman stop! I give, I give! You win!” Harry hurriedly babbled wishing he could
clamp his hands over his ears. It would just make it worse though by bringing the rune stone closer
to his ear.

Tonks laughed over the line. “And that’s what you get for using my name, Harry. Don’t forget it.
Next time I won’t be so niiicccceee,” she taunted. “Now, seriously, what’s going on?”

Harry sighed. “My friends and I have been investigating the Sirius Black case —”

“Harry, that is really dangerous! You guys are just kids, you can’t —”

“Tonks, stop,” Harry cut her off. “For one thing we weren’t going out looking for him or anything,
we were just interviewing people mostly. Secondly, we are not kids. Tracey was basically mind
raped for months. Neville’s been grown up since he was told what happened to his parents when
he was eight. I’m half convinced Hermione was born an adult. Luna watched her mother die two
years ago right in front of her. Daphne faced down a thousand year old basilisk with me. And I
not only faced the basilisk but my parent’s murderer the year before that. We may be young,
Tonks, but we’re not kids.”

Harry could practically see his friend rubbing her forehead. “Fine. I’m sorry for calling you kids.
Shiva does it you know. I’ve noticed.”

“Shiva is a special case. And she only calls me kid,” Harry shrugged. “I think it’s her term of
endearment or something. Better than Freak or Boy and she doesn’t mean it in a demeaning way
or anything so I don’t mind. And we’re getting sidetracked!”

Tonks laughed. “Yes, we are. I’m guessing you think you guys found something?”

“We think.” Harry paused and then rushed ahead, “we think that Sirius Black was actually
innocent. We think he was hunting Peter Pettigrew down instead of the other way around. We
think that Pettigrew was the real traitor and that he escaped in the confusion, using the opportunity
to frame Black. We’re not entirely sure why he’s here now but this makes a lot more sense
because none of the facts seem to fit the official story. Can you get us copies of the trial records?
If we knew what he said at the trial then maybe we can get the case reopened and instead of a
manhunt for a murdering psycho we can get justice for an innocent.”

Tonks was quiet for a long time. Long enough that Harry was beginning to worry something had
happened to the **Comm Stone**. Finally she said slowly, “You think we are hunting an innocent
man? How sure are you?”

“Between 80-90%. It all fits a hell of a lot better, Tonks.”

“Merlin’s balls…Look I’m not exactly popular here at the moment with how I reacted to Hagrid’s
arrest plus later proving to be right about it. Not to mention a bunch of other little things.” A note
of bitterness had leaked into Tonks voice. “I doubt I’ll be able to influence anything on the
manhunt itself. I should be able to get you copies of the trial records though assuming they aren’t
sealed. If they are you might have to have Susan ask her aunt to get you a copy. Harry, I need you
to write up why you guys suspect this in a letter and send me what you have. This manhunt is
being personally pushed by Fudge to a scary degree. That fact alone…well it probably means
someone is whispering in his ear. I’m going to need a lot of actual evidence to get the Kiss On
Sight order removed from Sirius Black.”

“I understand, Tonks. I’ll send Hedwig off with what we have by dinner,” Harry said. “Tonks…
thanks.”
“I want to see justice done as much as you do, Harry.” She paused. “And I owe you for making me laugh with that letter. Get me that info, and don’t go looking for trouble, Harry. Even if my cousin was innocent he’s still been in Azkaban for 12 years. He might not be entirely sane at this point.”

“We’ll be careful, Tonks. Keep some color in your hair, Nymphadora.”

“Why you little – ”

“Disconnect,” Harry said smiling.

As Harry hung up on her Tonks shook her yellow hair in exasperation. “I’m going to have to contact the Weasley twins. That boy is asking for it.” She sighed as she shifted from yellow to black and back again. “I’m not sure what’s worse. If Harry’s right and Sirius was imprisoned over a decade for something he didn’t do or if Harry’s wrong and the man really was that much of a bastard to betray his surrogate family.”

Casting a quick \textit{tempus} Tonks saw she still had nearly an hour before her shift started again. Steeling herself she headed for the lift down to Records. She didn’t think she’d managed to piss anyone off down there yet so she should be able to walk away with the trial data copies assuming they weren’t sealed. Unless Norman was there. If that arse was around she’d walk back out and come in again with a different face.

Tonks’ hair flashed a quick red than a longer red as she noticed the shift. Her powers were getting even more frustrating lately with the flak her coworkers were heaping on her. Her abilities were always tied with emotions – her hair in particular – but usually she was able to lock it down better than this. Maybe she should take her mother up on those Occlumency lessons. It was supposed to be able to help metamorphs lock in a form without having to keep the concentration going.

She scowled again thinking about her fellow Aurors. It wasn’t bad enough that she was a rookie who had been proven right; no, she had to have a mind of her own as well. Something that apparently didn’t sit well with current leadership. Scrimgeour was against her from Day 1 thanks to her powers, her attitude and her competence. He took every opportunity to pair her with Dawlish who only saw her as a piece of arse rather than someone who could do the job. Her hair turned darker as she thought about that idiot. She’d been with the Aurors barely more than a year and a half and she did the job better than he had for a decade!

The lift stopped and Tonks walked out stubbing her toe on the garbage can outside the records hall. Biting down on her tongue, Tonks ignored the typical pain and went up to the desk, breathing a sigh of relief at the lack of Norman.

“Wotcher. Auror Tonks. I’m looking for trial records,” she smiled at the clerk and made sure to keep a tight leash on her yellow hair.

“Name of the defendant, Auror?” the clerk asked completely uninterested.

“Sirius Black.” That got a reaction. The man dropped his quill and turned a wide eyed gaze onto her. Tonks just smiled back. “It’s important so the faster the better.”

“Right away, Auror. Please wait here. It should only be a moment.” The clerk turned to his rolodex and started flipping cards. That never ceased to amuse her. Muggles used it for contacts and phone numbers while wizards had appropriated it to assist in filing. It wasn’t too far off, but she pitied the poor fool who tried to explain the difference to a pureblood.
Ten minutes later Tonks was starting to worry she’d have to come back later when the clerk finally looked up at her with an expression of worry on his features. Tonks frowned and had to concentrate hard to prevent her hair from shifting. “Problem?”

“It’s the records, Auror…”

“Well yeah, I gathered that, buddy.” Tonks rolled her eyes. “Guess they are sealed then, huh?”

“No, Auror…they don’t exist…”

Tonks coughed incredulously and just stared at the man. “What do you mean ‘they don’t exist’?”

“An index for all records, whether sealed or open, for criminal trials are kept here. The spells involved don’t allow for misplacement or incorrect filing. If there was a trial conducted, the index is updated. There is no index annotation for a Sirius Black,” the man was sweating now.

“Are you sure?” Tonks frowned not at all liking what this was starting to look like. A lack of trial records coupled with Harry’s suspicions…she really needed his information as soon as possible. “It would have been 12 years ago. November 1981.”

“I know when Sirius Black was caught, ma’am. I’m telling you there is no record of a criminal trial.”

“What about a special Wizengamot session or something? Or a tribunal? Or…”

The clerk just kept shaking his head. “They are all considered criminal proceedings and so they’d all be recorded here. There is nothing for Sirius Black at all beyond the arrest record. There isn’t even a transfer order.”

“Merlin…” Tonks clamped down on her roiling emotions and used her powers to put on a stone cold, iron hard face. “Alright, I’ll handle this. Keep this quiet for the moment, understand?” The clerk nodded. “Good. You’re not in trouble by the way. Thanks for your assistance.”

Turning Tonks strode from the room, her mind running a mile a minute. If her cousin had been delivered straight to Azkaban without a trial or sentencing of any kind…this case just got a whole lot more complicated.

Now the real question was whether to tell Rufus Scrimgeour or jump over him to Amelia Bones.
“Yes, sir,” Tonks intoned, voice completely flat. It was taking everything she had to keep her hair unresponsive. The logical inconsistencies and deductions that Harry and his group had come up with were crunched in her fist, completely ignored by her boss. “I understand, Sir.”

“I don’t think you do Auror Tonks,” Scrimgeour said leaning back in his chair with her fingers steepled in front of him. “You have been with us what? A year?”

“Year and a half, Sir,” Tonks ground out.

“Yes, a year and a half.” He waved a hand dismissively. “And did you check with Auror Dawlish before bringing this to me?”

“This seemed rather important, Sir. Something to be brought up immediately.”

“Yes. And yet you haven’t followed procedure at all. You are supposed to be working to find Sirius Black not dredge up old filing errors.”

“Sir, the magic involved with Wizengamot proceedings and the Hall of Records prevents filing errors like that. If they don’t have – ”

“Auror Tonks,” Scrimgeour said cutting her off, “I assure you, a filing error is the only explanation. The Ministry of Magic is not in the habit of sending prominent members of the pureblood elite to Azkaban without a trial. The implications of something like that could bring ruin upon this administration and our way of life. It is simply not possible that such an event would have taken place.”

“But, Sir – ”

“Allow me to be perfectly clear, Auror.” Scrimgeour scowled. “Drop this. Trying to find loopholes for your cousin is foolish and idiotic. If you want to drag your reputation down even further by all means go ahead. It gives me a legitimate excuse to drop you when more complaints against you are brought to me. But if you wish to maintain your position here I suggest you stop acting on your own initiative and fall in line.” He sighed and shook his head. “Why do you have so many issues with this, Auror? Following orders is not that difficult. Look at Auror Shacklebolt! He voices his dissent once and then immediately does as told when shot down. You should learn from his example.”

“Sir, this is – ” Tonks’ control slipped and her hair flashed a brief red as Scrimgeour again cut her off. It had been a mistake to come to her boss first. She should’ve listened to her gut.

“You are dismissed, Auror.” Scrimgeour waved a hand towards the door. “I don’t want to hear about this error again. I have far more important things to occupy my time. Like catching and killing a murderous madman.”

Tonks walked out of the Head Auror’s office and stormed past the desks of her colleagues. “Hey, Nymphie, your idea get shot down again?” Savage called with a grin. “What was it this time? Hanging around the pub looking like the latest heister in order to catch his buddies when they showed? Or maybe you wanted to implement those polyjuice screening attempts again?” The rest of them laughed as Tonks scowled and kept walking. As she stormed out of the main room
towards she hesitated, leaning against the wall and taking a deep breath.

Going directly to Director Bones now would likely end her career if it got back to Scrimgeour. On the other hand...a group of teenagers were doing more to see actual justice done than any of the law enforcement personnel. Pushing off from the wall and heading towards the DMLE Head’s office she couldn’t help but think about what Harry had said months ago: maybe she should reconsider this job. She snorted derisively. Since when had she started to value the opinion of a 13 year old over that of her superiors?

Christmas time found Harry and most of his friends staying over at Hogwarts. While he actually had a home to return to now, Shiva was staying over the holidays to help some of her seventh years work on their senior projects, so he remained as well. Hermione’s parents had left for a dentistry conference and Daphne…well he wasn’t sure why Daphne was staying actually. Luna, Neville and Tracey had all returned home however. He was expecting a visit from Tonks before school started back up with word about the trial records. Why she wanted to deliver it in person he had no idea but he was willing to wait a few days.

Especially since his latest efforts with the Silver Spirit – his rune cluster answer for the Patronus charm – were not working at all.

Growling in frustration, Harry tossed his latest sketch of the cluster into the rubbish bin. “I don’t understand why this doesn’t work! The theory is perfectly sound and the interweaves are fine. It just doesn’t make sense!”

“Harry,” Hermione said gently, “maybe you’re focusing on that too hard.”

“I need this to work, Hermione,” Harry said scowling. “And it should work!”

“Harry,” Hermione sighed. “You could just learn the spell instead.”

“A spell is inefficient.” He waved her off. “A rune stone is better. It doesn’t take concentration to activate, it doesn’t matter if I start losing the happy memory with the Dementors nearby, it’s more powerful, it’s versatile…the rune stone is just better! Look at my utility belt!” Harry held up his latest accessory shaking it at her. “I have a Reductor, a Concussor, a Blastor, a Freezer, a Lockpick, a Boomstone, a Fishing Line, a Ninja, a Slow Burn, a spare Comm Stone, two Feedback Blastors. I’m walking around with a small armory now and I can only do half the spells these are based on well. Fixing the Silver Spirit is far better than trying to do the Patronus correctly. All I get with that is a half formed mist. This will work a hundred times better! And I can market it to people who can’t do the Patronus themselves. It’s safer all around, Hermione!”

Hermione’s expression darkened and she stood walking over to stand in front of Harry with her arms crossed. “I can understand you wanting to make rune stones like that, Harry, but you are being lazy and irresponsible. They should be there to assist you after you manage to master the spell by itself not used as a shortcut or a crux.”

“If I can do it this way first why shouldn’t I? I can do this stuff well. I can understand this stuff better than anything else. Why shouldn’t I play to my strengths?” He scowled. Why couldn’t she understand?

“Harry,” Hermione’s voice dipped dangerously low. “You will never pass your O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s if you cannot do the basic spells. Without those you will not be a qualified wizard. Even ignoring that simple fact, there may yet come a day when your…utility belt is taken from you. When you don’t have your runes and you don’t have the time or tools to make new ones.
You need to focus more on the spells instead of discounting them and using your shortcuts!” Her face had gone red towards the end and her hands were balled into fists. Harry however, refused to back down.

“Shiva says my utility belt is a good idea! Now I’m always going to be prepared in case Voldemort comes after me again!”

“Shiva does not know everything, Harry! She is only a few years older than us!”

“Hermione, don’t you dare imply – ” Harry shouted surging to his feet.

“I am not implying she is an idiot, Harry!” Hermione cut him off. They were each full on yelling now and had attracted the attention of the remaining Gryffindors. “I am merely stating that she is not always correct. And you are taking things completely out of context! She said that your belt was a good idea when you brought up protection and preparedness!”

“Exactly!”

“I am not talking about protection and preparedness! I am talking about you showing a disturbing pattern of taking shortcuts and ignoring the foundations that your works should be built on! I am talking about you being defenseless if someone were to simply take away your tools! I am trying to look out for you!”

“Well then stop telling me what to do, Hermione! I know what I’m doing!”

“I don’t think you do, Harry,” Hermione said quietly. She shook her head and turned her back on him wiping away a tear. “I am worried about you.”

“I know what I’m doing,” he muttered turning back to the table and sitting down.

“Uh, if you guys are done shouting,” Parvati said raising a hand, “would one of you tell me who this Shiva woman is? It’s kind of annoying.”

Harry scowled and turned to the girl. “And why is a name annoying?”

“Because Shiva is a man,” she said with a huff.

Harry’s just stared at her. “What?”

“Shiva is a man in my mythology. Not a woman. So I’d like to know what girl is using his name because it’s weird.”

Harry’s anger cooled as he frowned in confusion. “Shiva is Professor Babbling. It’s a nickname from when she was in school because she blew stuff up and some classmates said that she was the goddess of destruction…”

Parvati slapped a hand to her head and started muttering. After a minute she raised her eyes to Harry and said, “I hate when wizards appropriate my religion without understanding it! When you see her would you mind telling her to pick up a book on Hinduism please? Honestly, just because we have magic doesn’t mean we should discount everything Muggle!”

“Err…” Harry’s confusion deepened. “So…Shiva isn’t the goddess of destruction?”

Hermione twisted to look at her roommate as well. Her earlier frustration had mostly melted off her face and been replaced entirely by curiosity. “I know that Shiva is in the Hindu pantheon. I
remember reading that as a little girl.”

“Shiva’s in the pantheon alright,” Parvati nodded. “He’s one of the main three and is more or less regarded as the aspect responsible for destruction but he’s a man not a woman.”

“Are you sure?” Hermione asked in genuine curiosity.

Parvati sighed shaking her head. “Yeah, pretty sure, Hermione. My namesake is his wife after all.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Wait, what?”

“Well, technically I suppose she’s his second wife, but Parvati was his first wife reincarnated too so depending on your point of view she’s his first, his second and his only wife.” She waved her hand dismissively. “Look, there are some stories in the myths about Shiva and Parvati being two halves of a whole and Shiva appearing to people as half man half woman, but the woman half is usually understood to be Parvati.”

“Oh.” Harry nodded filing this away. He was never going to let his guardian live this down.

Hermione was frowning and sadly shook her head. “I can’t believe I got that wrong… I’m usually so good at remembering things like that…”

“Well, it’s not your religion. It’s mine,” Parvati sighed. “I guess it’s not Professor Babbling’s either since she invokes some Goddess or other. But I’d still appreciate it if you give her a heads up. I don’t have a problem with her nickname – even if it is weird to hear a girl called that – but I do take issue with people talking incorrectly about my gods and goddesses.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll let her know. Sorry if we offended you, Parvati.” He shrugged and said, “I honestly had no idea about any of that.”

“Yeah, I know, Harry. Hermione,” Parvati looked to the older girl and rolled her eyes, “just because you almost always get things right it doesn’t mean you know everything. Neither of you do.” She looked pointedly between the two friends who had the decency to look at the floor. “Harry, Hermione is right. You’re being an idiot by ignoring the basics. Even I know that and I hate extra work. Hermione, Harry is right. He does what he does well so stop berating him for being prepared. Both of you stop acting like five year olds and start listening to each other.”

Shaking her head Parvati turned and headed back up the stairs to the dorms. The few people nearby slowly started to walk away now that the show was over.

Harry sighed and turned back to his work. Just because Parvati was right didn’t mean he’d immediately cave and apologize. He had some measure of self respect now after all.

Early during breakfast the next day Harry was joined by Susan. She carefully glanced around and, seeing nobody nearby, nodded to herself. “Harry,” she said. “Aunt Amy is coming tomorrow morning to talk with you. She sent me a letter and asked me to set up a meeting spot. I asked the elves and they gave me a room you could use. It’s on the seventh floor across from the portrait of the dancing trolls. Just walk past the portrait three times thinking about a room where you can’t be overheard and the door should open.”

Harry nodded to her. “Okay, thanks for the heads up. Why can’t we do this in an unused classroom though?”

“Got me,” Susan shrugged. “She just asked for it to be safe from any potential eavesdropping.
That was the room the elves directed me to.”

“What elves?” Harry asked.

“The house elves. You didn’t know about them?” She snorted in response to his shaking head.
“Wow. How did you think all the food popped up during the meals or how all our clothes got cleaned? Never mind, they tend to stay in the kitchens or out of sight. Most Hufflepuffs and the Weasley twins can show you the kitchen if you want. It’s sorta near our common room and I’ve seen the twins sneaking in every so often. The point is, my aunt said this was important.”

“I’ll be there,” Harry said, smiling. “Thanks for the heads up, Susan.”

“Glad to help, Harry,” she replied. “Feel free to take anyone you want to invite with you.”

“Hermione?” Harry ventured softly. He still hadn’t gotten the nerve to apologize to his friend for his outburst. He felt awful about it, but a simple ‘I’m sorry’ didn’t seem like it would be sufficient. He needed to do something bigger. Something to show he knew how much of a prat he had been and that he truly regretting it. For the moment though, the coming meeting was more important and he needed to ask his friend while he had the chance. “Hermione?”

“Yes, Harry?” Hermione replied without raising her head from her book. She was curled up on the armchair in the Common Room and her voice was utterly neutral. Harry just cringed.

“Amelia Bones is coming to talk to me tomorrow around eight o’clock.” He paused but the only response from his friend was raised eyebrows. “I’d like you to come to the meeting if you don’t mind…I really value your opinion, Hermione.”

“Is that all?”

“Umm…yeah?”

Hermione sighed. “Very well, Harry. Where is it?”

“Seventh floor corridor across from the portrait of the dancing trolls. You might have to walk past the portrait a few times thinking of a meeting room if you can’t see the door.”

“That sounds like an awfully complicated place to hold a conversation,” Hermione commented frowning. “I didn’t know Hogwarts had rooms that protected.”

“Had no idea myself. I just passed the information by Susan. I checked it out a little while ago and it seems to work fine,” Harry said shrugging.

“Alright then. I’ll meet you there, Harry.” She turned her eyes back to the book in clear dismissal. Harry cringed again. He really needed to figure out his grand gesture soon.

Harry had only been sitting at the table for a minute or two before Daphne walked in. She looked around with an approving nod and moved to sit next to him. “This is good. Silencing charms on the walls, anti-eavesdropping wards, no windows and no portraits. We might have to use this room more often. My father had to spend quite a bit for a setup like this. I wonder why there’s one in Hogwarts.”

Harry shrugged. “I didn’t even know there was a room in this corridor until yesterday.”
Shiva walked in then and quirked her mouth in confusion. “You know, I could’ve sworn there was a storage room here with blank rune stones and carving implements. I guess that was another section? Is there a second tapestry of that idiot with the dancing trolls?”

“You’ve been here longer than us, Shiva,” Harry pointed out.

“Well yeah, but still…”

“This is a most unusual way to open a door,” Hermione huffed as she walked in behind Shiva. “I understand the need to protect one’s clandestine meeting room but it still seems silly.”

“I would agree, Miss Granger,” Amelia Bones said with a small chuckle as she opened the door. “You know, when Susan said to use this area I thought she was mistaken. When I was in school I was sure this was a hidden bedroom not a meeting room.”

“Oh?” Tonks said with a grin stepping in behind her superior. “And just why were you looking for a hidden bedroom, Madam Bones?”

Amelia shrugged and looked at Tonks with an unreadable expression. “Well, Auror Tonks, if you must ask I don’t think you are old enough to know.”

Tonks’ hair flashed to purple and she burst out laughing. “See this is why I love you, Boss! Wotcher, Harry, Hermione, Shiva, girl I haven’t met.”

“Hey, Tonks,” Harry said waving. “This is Daphne Greengrass. Daph this is She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named Tonks.”

Tonks frowned. “Yeah, let’s go with a different moniker shall we? How about Thy-Forbidden-One Tonks?”

“You need at least four words for a hyphenated name, Tonks. Everyone knows that,” Harry laughed.

“So says the great, Boy-Who-Lived?” Tonks snorted waggling her eyebrows at him.

“Nope. So says the great, The-Boy-Who-Lived. Can’t forget the article.”

“Alright people, I actually do have things to discuss you know.” Amelia moved to sit at the table and Tonks sat next her shaking her head and laughing with Harry. Her hair stayed purple.

“What can we help you with, Madam Bones?” Shiva asked trying to get the others back on track.

“Before we start,” Amelia said bringing out her wand, “may I check everyone for listening charms?” Receiving head nods all around she quickly cast several charms and nodded happily at the results.

“Well it looks like we’re clean. Though, Harry, I detect some residue of a listening charm on you. It seems like it was stripped as you walked in here though so there’s that.”

Everyone’s face on Harry’s side of the table darkened. Hermione scowled, Daphne frowned, Harry growled and Shiva looked ready to hit something. “I don’t suppose you could tell whose signature it was?” Shiva asked through clenched teeth.

“Unfortunately, no,” Amelia apologized. Shiva nodded and waved the woman to continue. “Alright, let’s begin. Harry, Professor Babbling, you both trust Miss Granger and Miss
“Greengrass?”

“We do,” Harry said.

“Very well. I asked to meet you in person because Tonks has brought something to my attention that apparently not only affects you, but that you were instrumental in discovering to begin with.”

Hermione frowned. “You mean, Sirius Black? All we truly have is character testimony, logic and circumstantial evidence. It’s not enough to overturn a conviction even if it is enough to reopen the case. I really think we need to see the trial files in order to actively move forward.”

“That’s exactly the problem, Miss Granger.” Amelia sighed and leaned forward to meet the eyes of each of them in turn. “There was no trial for Sirius Black.”

Harry’s eyes widened while Shiva cursed under her breath. Hermione just hung her head and muttered, “This really shouldn’t surprise me I suppose.”

Daphne had the most marked reaction of any of them. She jumped to her feet and slammed her hands on the desk glaring at Amelia. “Do you mean to tell me, Director Bones, that the Heir Black was sent to Azkaban without even the semblance of a trial?”

“That is exactly what I mean to tell you, Miss Greengrass.”

“That’s—that’s—I can’t even—how did such a thing happen!?”

“Daphne?” Harry asked turning to look at the girl.

Shiva shook her head and laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “House Black is a very old family, Harry. That their Heir was imprisoned without a trial is a huge offense to the House and would set a dangerous precedent for all the other older families.”

“And what of the less important families?” Hermione asked with narrowed eyes. “Or of Muggle-borns? Would imprisoning people like me without trial cause any fuss all?”

Daphne gasped and immediately twisted to Hermione and wrapped her in a hug. Harry’s eyebrows rose at the display from the normally reserved Slytherin but remained quiet. “Hermione, I am so sorry. That’s not what I meant! I just – this type of thing only happened centuries ago! It’s not supposed to happen anymore! If they could do that to the Heir Black imagine what they could do to the rest of us!”

“If it’s any consolation guys,” Tonks said her hair having shifted to a more muted blue, “we think it only happened because everybody was so certain that my cousin was guilty. Coupled with the attitude of the war just ending and wanting to have the remaining horror show over and done with…well, nobody really wanted to look too closely at things.”

“Well it obviously wasn’t very cut and dry was it?” Harry said with a scowl. “We tore apart the entire thing by just asking a few questions!”

“Questions that no one cared to ask before, Mr. Potter.” Amelia removed her monocle and sighed. “Investigations in the magical world do not always proceed the same way as in the Muggle world. I have been trying to change that since I’ve taken up the mantle, but there are only so many changes our society will accept at once.”

Harry’s scowl deepened. ‘Then I’ll drag this world into the 20th century kicking and screaming if I have to.’ Out loud he said, “So you believe that Sirius Black is innocent as well then, Madam
Bones?”

She nodded. “I do. Though apart from Tonks and myself we are rather lacking in support for that opinion.”

“But – ”

Shiva held up a hand and Harry stopped. She continued instead. “Is that why we are having a secret meeting? Do you feel like any efforts we make to prove his innocence could be sabotaged?”

Amelia sighed and rubbed her eyes. “Honestly I’m not sure. I don’t think sabotage is truly likely, but obstruction? That I would place good money on.”

Tonks snorted and her hair flickered to red. “It’s already being obstructed. Before I went to Madam Bones I tried to talk to my first boss, Head Auror Scrimgeour. I was laughed out of the office and politely told to drop it or I could be fired for any minor complaint.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “What the bloody hell are you still doing working with people like that, Tonks?”

“Harry,” Shiva coughed and looked at him sheepishly. “Don’t forget that Dumbledore threatened me with the same thing regarding you.”

“He did?” Amelia frowned at Shiva. “Regarding Mr. Potter’s guardians I assume?” Shiva nodded. “What is that man playing at…?”

“Do you think Dumbledore is behind Black not receiving a trial?” Daphne asked finally somewhat calm again.

“Not that I know of, no. Why? What makes you suspect him?”

“I’ll give you the full accounting afterwards,” Harry said. “Why don’t you think it was Dumbledore spearheading this?”

“My predecessor that’s why,” Amelia said. She shook her head. “Bartemius Crouch was a good man in principle but he had a vendetta against the Death Eaters and he was obsessed with getting justice against them. A lot of his later actions in the war were extremely questionable and sadly it doesn’t surprise me overmuch that he sent Black to Azkaban without a trial. He likely thought the man’s family would simply buy his freedom if one were to be allowed. I am ashamed to admit he had motive to believe that – seeing as it happened to others.” Harry nodded thinking of Lucius Malfoy.

“So what do we do?” Hermione asked.

“I am primarily attempting to get the Kiss On Sight order revoked. If that happens I am confident I can arrange a hearing for Black and the truth will out.”

“And if you can’t get that revoked?” Daphne asked. She looked between Amelia and Tonks. “What happens if Black is found by someone else and that is still in effect?”

The uncomfortable looks on the two Aurors faces were enough to answer that question.

“What if we get proof?” Harry asked quietly. All eyes turned to him. “There’s gotta be something right? We think that he might have come here hunting either Peter Pettigrew or looking to protect me. Either way, he’s probably around. If I can find him to talk to him…”
Tonks shook her head. “I’d really prefer you didn’t, Harry.”

Shiva bumped her fist into his shoulder. “As your guardian, I agree. We still don’t know sure for sure that he is innocent, kid. And even if he is…”

“He may not be entirely sane,” Amelia finished. “Very few survive so long in Azkaban with their mind fully intact. If you do get word on where Sirius Black is hiding tell us and we will come take care of it. I give you my word that he will receive both a trial and fair proceedings. Tonks tells me you have a way of contacting her at a moment’s notice?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, ma’am. We all wear Comm Stone earrings I invented.” He pointed to his ear showing the little rune stone. “They work like Muggle mobiles. I’m still trying to get one that can be untethered, but these work fine linked together for the moment.”

“Excellent. When you do succeed in making others, let me know. The Aurors could certainly use that and I’m sure I could shift some money around in our budget to afford some.” Harry nodded to her. “Alright, now let’s discuss your issue with Dumbledore. Why exactly was he the first name you jumped to regarding this situation? While I’m not particularly fond of him or his methods myself I can attest he has always been a staunch supporter of what is right.”

“Where do I start?” Harry snorted. “First off, did you know my parents had wills?”

Amelia frowned. “I had assumed those were destroyed the same night your parents perished. They should have been read otherwise.”

“Well apparently, Dumbledore sealed my dad’s will to prevent that,” Harry explained. “We’re almost certain it was because his and mum’s wills both said that I wasn’t to go to my relatives and Dumbledore felt I should.”

“That…” Amelia shook her head. “That is unsettling indeed, but in his position as Chief Warlock at the time such a thing, while frowned on, was within his rights…”

“Yeah I know. I looked it up. Very few of my problems with Dumbledore are actually illegal but the pattern established is…bad.”

“Well, what else then, Harry?” Tonks asked.

Harry sighed and started holding up his fingers as he listed the rest. “He left me on the Dursleys’ doorstep with only a letter rather than explaining in person. He left me with the Dursleys period despite knowing that they hated my mum and magic in general and also despite my godmother and godfather both being alive and well at that point. He claimed my magical guardianship yet never bothered to check on my well being at the Dursleys. While I was still a toddler, he established a marriage contract with Ginny Weasley even if he never signed it – which confuses me a bit there though I imagine it was to use as leverage against either me or Molly Weasley at some point in the future.”

Harry leaned back and switched to his other hand. “As my magical guardian it was his duty to inform me about my future responsibilities as a Head of House yet I didn’t even know House Potter was a thing until Susan and Hannah officially apologized last year and Neville told me a bit. He should’ve told me about my accounts, but until this summer I didn’t even know I had more than the trust vault nor did I know about the properties I apparently own. We’re pretty sure he redirected my mail – which I can honestly understand a bit to begin with – but there was no reason for him to keep doing so by this point.”
Harry nodded towards Hermione and Daphne. “For things during school; he flat out lied to me about my scar. Hermione has pointed out that the ‘protections’ on the Philosopher’s Stone during our first year seemed almost tailor made to test me, her and Neville. That fact calls into question exactly why he flew to the Ministry on a broom the night Quirrelmort tried to steal it when he could’ve simply Flooed or apparated there. Last year he didn’t do a thing when Lucius Malfoy blocked us getting mature mandrakes for the petrified students. He also tried to read my mind using Legilimency shortly after the Chamber incident.”

Harry paused to center himself before continuing. “Even with all that, the only thing that was technically illegal was the mail blocking and the Legilimency. Both though have official explanations with the Legilimency being shortly after the Chamber of Secrets and the mail being preventing me from receiving cursed mail as a toddler. And we can’t even prove that one was him.”

Amelia was glowering by the end of Harry’s rant and Tonks’ hair had turned a mousy brown. “You would likely be able to make a case for neglect concerning your relatives and the lack of information about House Potter however it would be difficult against someone with the amount of goodwill that Albus has. At best you’d probably just receive an apology and a confession that he was overworked with his many positions.” She scowled. “You’re absolutely right though. That is a very disturbing pattern of a man seemingly horribly focused on you.”

Shiva nodded. “That’s what we thought too. It’s why we haven’t gone to you or anyone else to bring up charges. There is very little that is concrete that we can point to and he has too much power to try anything without something truly major.”

“Harry,” Daphne said softly, “tell them the rest.”

“The rest?” Hermione asked giving Daphne a calculating look.

“I’m not a fool, Hermione. I can put dates together too you know. It’s not hard to figure out that that marriage contract was signed shortly after Harry’s placement…and the other attacks and arrests.” Daphne gave a sad smile in response to Hermione’s wide eyes. Harry just chuckled. His friend was not in Slytherin for nothing – unlike Draco Malfoy.

“What’s she talking about, Harry?” Tonks asked turning toward the lone male in the room. Her eyes were wide and she was sitting a little slumped in her chair.

“Well,” Harry said, “the timing is just suspicious. I honestly think that the others are making a bigger deal of this than it likely is. My parents died October 31st. I was placed with the Dursleys November 1st. My godfather, Sirius Black was arrested and shipped to Azkaban November 3rd. My godmother, Alice Longbottom was attacked and rendered catatonic November 4th. The marriage contract for me was drawn up and signed by Molly Weasley November 5th. I agree it all looks a bit suspicious but as much as I dislike Albus Dumbledore and hate how he seems determined to control my life I don’t think he’s evil. And only someone evil would have deliberately arranged to have the Longbottoms attacked and Sirius Black framed.”

Amelia was quiet for some time while the others just sat back. Shiva and Hermione had already heard this and weren’t surprised. Daphne was holding her chin and considering the potential options. Tonks simply stared blankly up at the ceiling.

“Mr. Potter,” Amelia finally said, “do you truly think Dumbledore had nothing to do with those events?”
“I think he saw opportunities and used them,” Harry shrugged. “Like I said, I don’t like him, but I don’t think he’d deliberately hurt the others just to control me.”

“That…” Amelia sighed and shook her head. “It is still disturbing. Now I am very glad I asked for this meeting to be kept quiet. I agree there is very little that we could actually bring to bear on him. I will make some quiet inquiries and see what I can find. In the meantime attempt to keep your head down around the esteemed Headmaster. You…may wish to find alternate schooling arrangements, Mr. Potter.”

Hermione’s eyes widened and she twisted to stare at Harry while Daphne nodded tiredly. Harry just shook his head and ignored his two friends. “Not possible, ma’am. I already talked about it with Shiva over the summer. Dumbledore is still my magical guardian so he would have to approve any change in schools.”

Amelia gave a soft nod. “Damn. Very well. Should something occur that requires immediate Auror attention please don’t hesitate to contact Tonks. If you get a chance it might be a good idea to craft one of those stones for me as well. I would also take it as a personal favor if you made one for Susan.”

“I can do that.” Harry smiled at her. “Thanks for listening by the way. There are very few adults who do.”

Amelia nodded. “Of course, Mr. Potter. I always endeavor to listen to legitimate concerns. I believe we should adjourn for now. I’ll keep you informed of anything we discover on both fronts. Please do the same.” She stood up to head to the door. “Tonks, I’ll meet you back at the office?”

Tonks jerked out of her reverie. “Yeah, Boss. I’ll meet you back there in a few minutes.”

“I’ve got to go finish grading some papers. Feel free to stop by later, Harry,” Shiva winked at him as she followed Amelia outside.

“Harry,” Hermione said, “can we talk when you get back to the Common Room?”

“Sure, Hermione,” he replied. “I have something I wanted to ask you anyway.” She nodded and hurried out.

“Jeez, Harry, you can clear a room can’t you?” Daphne said with a small giggle. “We need to talk about Tracey by the way. I…could use some advice.”

“From me?”

“Well I can’t exactly talk to her without getting a second opinion now can I?” she said, raising her eyebrows.

“Whatever,” Harry said waving her off. “Just give me a minute to talk with Tonks, yeah?”

“By all means.” She gave a playful grin. “Should I give you two the room?”

Tonks’ face turned red as Harry’s did. “In case you forgot Little Miss Greengrass, Harry Potter here is only 13 so whatever you are implying I suggest you take a U-turn.”

“Yeah, sure, Miss I Have A Contact Earring,” Daphne said laughing. “Don’t mind me; I’ll just be over in the corner then reading.”
“Sorry about that,” Harry sighed turning to Tonks.

“It’s fine, Harry.” Tonks snorted and her hair flashed a quick blue before settling on purple. “She does kind of have a point. I am the only person outside your immediate group of friends who has a Comm Stone.”

“Yeah, but you’re my friend too, Tonks,” Harry said. He frowned at her in concern. “Are you okay? You didn’t really look too good throughout that meeting. Especially near the end…”

“It just sucks having your dreams and idol crushed, squirt.”

“Squirt?” Harry said raising his eyebrow at her.

“Well ‘Harry’ doesn’t exactly lend itself to an easy nickname now does it? And you’ve made it clear that Shiva already stole the ‘kid’ moniker so I’m left with ‘squirt’. You’re shorter than me. It works short term.”

“Uh huh. We’ll see. Stop dodging the question.”

“Actually I didn’t,” Tonks shrugged. “Dumbledore was kinda the guy I always looked up to as a kid. The last few minutes rather effectively destroyed that.”

“And your dreams? I take it the other Aurors aren’t treating you well?”

“I rock the boat. It’s kinda my thing,” she smirked at him. “It nothing intentional anymore really beyond the hair and occasional pranks. I put in a few ideas for improved security and got shot down because of lack of seniority or funds. The thing with my cousin is just exacerbating things. It just sucks not being taken seriously by anyone except Bonesy.”

“I’m sorry, Tonks. I feel like this is partly my fault for pushing you to begin with.” He grimaced.

“Harry,” she said with a snort, “you’re one of the few things that still make me laugh these days. My problems with my coworkers are because they are arseholes who see me mostly useful for my powers rather than my brains. It’s not much different from school honestly so I should be more used to it.”

“I still say you should do what makes you happy.”

“Well the faster you get your eventual rune shop set up the faster that might happen, squirt.” Tonks laughed with him and gave him a quick hug. “Alright I gotta head out. Remember, call me if you find my cousin and I’ll grab Bonesy and be right over.”

“Take care, Tonks.” Harry waved as she headed outside. He turned back to Daphne and sat down on the armchair across from her ignoring her grin. “Were these chairs here when we walked in?”

“No clue. I only noticed them when I was looking for an out of the way corner so you two could chat. Granger better be careful. You look like you’re moving on to the older women.”

“You’re the second person to say that to me,” Harry grumbled. “And you do realize Hermione is almost a year older than me right? Hell almost all of you except Luna are older than me.”

“I rest my case,” Daphne laughed.

“Yeah, yeah laugh it up, Greengrass. Are we going to talk about me and my potentially nonexistent girlfriend or are we going to talk about you and your potential girlfriend?”
Daphne grimaced. “That really doesn’t bother you?”

“Shiva has had ex-girlfriends and ex-boyfriends,” he commented with a raised eyebrow. “Tracey has mentioned several times that she is interested in girls only. I was right next to you when Diarymort mentioned she loved you. I have yet to shun any of you, Daph.”

“I know,” she said sighing, “but from my end this is all very…weird. And it is exceptionally odd talking about it with a boy, let alone a Gryffindor.”

“I could go get Hermione you know,” he said with a reassuring grin. “Or we could wait til Luna comes back which would solve both problems.”

Daphne snorted. “No thank you. Luna is sweet enough but there is absolutely no chance of me having this conversation with her unless she drops the act entirely.”

“You know it’s not that easy, Daph. But we’re getting sidetracked. Have you mentioned to Tracey what Diarymort said? That you know?”

“No, I haven’t.” Daphne shook her head. “Tracey’s smart though. She knows something’s changed. I’ve been trying to keep an open mind about it and honestly the idea has some appeal. She has been my best friend for nearly as long as I can remember…It could be…nice.”

“So what’s the problem then?” Harry asked.

“It’s twofold really. The first and most obvious is that she is my best friend. What if it doesn’t work? What if it ends badly and I lose her in the process? I would rather not start a relationship at all than lose her as a friend.”

“You could both agree to move back if things start to fall apart. That your friendship would always be the most important relationship you have. It’s pretty much what I’m going to say in a few minutes.”

Daphne stared at him before shaking her head. “Gryffindors charge ahead indeed,” she muttered. “Well good luck, Harry. I don’t know if that approach would work for me but you are right I suppose that it would be something to bring up to her and work out amongst ourselves.”

“I’m not sure that’s what I said…but sure let’s go with that.” Girls made so little sense to Harry. He could’ve sworn she just made up a solution he had in no way been close to saying. “What’s the second main problem?”

“Harry,” Daphne sighed, “you weren’t raised as a pureblood. More specifically as a pureblood Heiress. The expectations for Luna, Neville, Susan and myself are far different from people like Tracey and Hermione.”

“Oh? Where do I fit into that expectations thing?”

“Well unlike us, you have never shown the slightest interest in the same sex. So you have nothing to worry about – despite Colin Creevy following you around like a drooling lost puppy at times.”

“Wait Neville has –”

“Focus, Harry. We are talking about expectations here.” Harry scowled at her comment. She had so done that on purpose. “As a pureblood Heir or Heiress to a Noble House, we are expected to provide an Heir to continue the bloodline. Luna, Susan and Neville are all last of their lines and so they must provide an Heir or be essentially shunned from high society for allowing their lines to
die. I have slightly more leeway since I have a sister yet… I would not let that burden fall to
Astoria. Tori has always been a wild child and, while she may frustrate me, I do love her dearly
and would never force her into a Line Continuation arrangement.”

“So,” Harry said furrowing his brow, “you don’t want to try and date Tracey because you need to
have a baby in the future?”

“Well that is horribly simplifying it but…yes.” Daphne shrugged. “I must provide an Heir at
some point. Tracey lacks the rather necessary equipment for that. Magic can do quite a lot but it
can’t change your bits. Even your friend Tonks, while she could morph into a male form with the
appropriate plumbing to enjoy the act, she could never actually impregnate a woman.”

“Daph,” Harry said, “you do realize that we are teenagers yeah? While I love a fairy tale ending as
much as next wizard, there’s no guarantee that who we start dating now is going to be who we
marry.”

“I know. But there is still a stigma against homosexual relationships involving Heirs and
Heiresses. My father is difficult enough as it is. I do not relish the day he learns I entered into a
relationship without the potential for an Heir of my own.” She frowned and crossed her arms
staring off into space.

Harry rubbed his forehead in exasperation. “Daph, there are other ways to get pregnant.”

“I have no interest in using those sorts of potions or rituals Harry and blood adoptions freak me
out.”

“I have no idea about anything you just said,” he gave a rueful chuckle. “I was talking about
Muggle means. I saw a program about it over the summer. They have treatments meant for
couples who have trouble having kids but I imagine it’d be just as easy to use with two girls as long
as you find a willing male donor.” His face went a little red remembering that television show
though he managed to keep the blush mostly in check.

“Hmm, you know that’s not a bad idea. And there is always the old fashioned way if the donor
understood that it was just a onetime thing…” Daphne eyed him and Harry suddenly felt
uncomfortable, like he was a piece of meat.

“Err, Daph? Why are you looking at me like that?” His blush began to spread.

“No reason, Harry.” she said grinning and patting his arm. “I was just considering your idea.
Thank you for that by the way. It has some merit. It would also keep my father off my back long
enough to see if the relationship could even work to begin with.”

“Um, sure. Glad to help.” He breathed a sigh of relief as Daphne turned back to the fire. When
had a fire been lit anyway?

“You did. Harry,” Daphne leaned over and gave him a short hug, pulling back almost before he
even realized she had done it. “Thank you.”

Harry walked through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor Common Room immediately spotting
Hermione off in the corner curled up on her favorite armchair with book in hand. Taking a deep
breath he muttered to himself, “Enough stalling. Gryffindors charge ahead.”

“Hey, Hermione,” he said as he walked up and dropped into the chair across from her.
“Hello, Harry.” Hermione closed her book and put it off to the side turning to look at him. Harry noticed her eyes had a slight sheen to them and were a little red around the edges. “Were you really going to just leave once you had your new guardian?”

“What? What does that –” Harry cut off suddenly going wide eyed as he realized what Hermione had thought. “Oh god, no, Hermione, I was never going to just run off to a new school without saying anything! It was just an idle conversation we had and almost immediately discarded. If it had ever – or ever does – pan out, you will be one of the first people to know and I fully intend to invite you to come with!”

“Oh.” She wiped a quick hand over the back of her eyes. “That’s good. I…Harry, I know we’ve been fighting the past few days, but I don’t want you to leave. You were my first real friend. You’re my best friend. I don’t think I’d enjoy Hogwarts without you here…”

“Hermione,” Harry reached out a hand and grasped hers. “You’re my best friend too. I can’t imagine going through the crazy things in my life without you. I…” He took a deep breath and kept going, “Hermione, I’m really sorry about what I said and how I acted earlier. I felt horrible afterwards and I know I screwed up. You were just looking out for me and I completely brushed you off. I’ve been trying to figure out a way to apologize with some sort of grand gesture but I just keep coming up blank.”

“Harry, you don’t need to do that. I was wrong too,” she said giving him a small smile. “You do excellent work with your rune clusters. I just feel like you are headed for trouble if you don’t work on other things besides that.”

“I know. And after I thought about it I think you’re right. I have been neglecting my spells because runes are so much easier for me. I barely even have to work at those and it was…nice finding something I was good at,” he shrugged. “I can’t promise that I’m going to stop concentrating on building the clusters but I can promise that I make sure I can do the spells they are based on before relying on my inventions.”

“I think that’s a perfectly reasonable compromise, Harry.”

He nodded. “Thanks. Okay, now for the hard stuff…”

“Oh?” she cocked her head looking intrigued. “That wasn’t hard?”

“No, compared to this,” he muttered. “I gave Daphne some advice that I’m going to try to follow myself. At least I think I did. Maybe. It was a very confusing conversation for me.” He shook his head to clear out the errant thoughts. “Anyway, the point is, Hermione, you’re my best friend. And I – I’d like to maybe try to be more than that. When you were hurt last year I lost it. The things beforehand pushed me but when you got it hurt it was like the world ground to a halt. I’ve been thinking about that over the summer and I – well I don’t really know exactly what love is. The Dursleys definitely were not a role model there. But I’ve been learning since I came here. And while I’m not sure if I love you or not I do know that I feel more for you than just as a friend.” Harry paused for and then rushed on so fast the words blended together. “And I was wondering if you’d go to Hogsmeade with me and maybe be my girlfriend.”

Hermione blinked and stared at him for a moment. “Harry, before I reply to any of the rest… would you mind repeating that last sentence? Usually I’m the one talking too fast to understand.”

Harry gave a rueful chuckle and ran a hand through his hair. “I was wondering if you’d go to Hogsmeade with me and maybe be my girlfriend.” His face was burning and he was horribly glad he didn’t have a mirror. He probably had the same amount of color as the Weasleys’ hair.
“Harry, look at me,” Hermione said. Slowly Harry lifted his eyes to her face. He was surprised to see that she was smiling widely. “I have been interested in you since you jumped on the back of a troll to save me.”

“You – wait – what?”

“You jumped on a troll to save my life, Harry. How was I not supposed to fall for you?” Hermione laughed and pulled him into a hug kissing his cheek. “I would love to go to Hogsmeade with you, Harry. And yes I would love to be your girlfriend as well.” She pulled back and gave him a stern look while holding him at arms’ length. “But just so we’re clear, mister, I have zero intention of losing my best friend. If this gets weird or if you ever feel uncomfortable you say something immediately and we step back and reassess. I care about you deeply, Harry, but I would much rather maintain a friendship than a relationship if it’s going to tear us apart.” She started to glare at him. “Why are you laughing? I’m serious!”

“Sorry, Hermione!” Harry got out between his wheezing. “It’s just that I literally told Daphne to say almost that exact same thing to Tracey!”

Dinner that night was…interesting. Harry and Hermione were eating dinner shyly holding hands and blushing when a tiny brunette girl plopped down across from them smiling widely at Harry. “Hiya!” she said.

“Err, hello? Have we…” he trailed off as he looked more closely at her. She was exceedingly familiar.

“Astoria.” The girl held out her hand, smile widening. “You can call me Tori. You’re friends with my sister.”

“Hello, Tori,” Hermione reached over and shook the younger girl’s hand. “I’m Hermione.”

“I know. And you’re Harry. My sister has talked a lot about both of you.”

“Good things I hope?” Harry asked already feeling a bit lost.

“Mostly. Though she does complain a bit that you both should’ve been in Slytherin like us,” she snorted and shook her head. “I just say that it proves you’re both smarter than us because you’re Slytherins hiding in another House. That’s so amazingly sneaky of you! Sal Slytherin would’ve been so proud!”

“Suuurre…” Harry said. ‘How can she be so perky?’

“So are one of you going to date Daphne? I was hoping for a big brother but another big sister would be cool too.”

Hermione spat out the juice she had just drunk and Harry started groaning. Astoria for her part deftly avoided the juice and looked between the two expectantly. “Tori,” Hermione said trying and failing for a semblance of calm and amusement, “we actually just agreed earlier to date each other.”

“Oh,” Astoria shrugged. “Well is there room for Daphne too? She could be a consort to continue the Greengrass line that way.”

The two Gryffindors’ mouths dropped open. They were saved from replying as Daphne shouted from behind them, “Tori! What are you doing? Shut up you little menace!”
“I was just asking a question. You said I could start talking to your friends after the New Year. It’s after the New Year.”

“I am so sorry guys,” Daphne said groaning. She picked her sister up and started pushing her back to the Slytherin table. “I swear we raised her better than that. Talk to you later!”

“Bye, Harry! Bye, Hermione! Think about what I said!” Astoria yelled waving as she let herself be dragged along.

Harry thumped his head into the table. “Were we ever that…energetic?”

Hermione sighed and refilled her glass. “Honestly? I don’t think so. But we really should count ourselves lucky. Imagine if Luna acted like that.”

Harry’s eyes widened and he stared at his friend. “And with that thought I think I’m going to have nightmares for the rest of the week.”
Chapter 13: Wrackspurts

“I feel like this would be more pleasant if it wasn’t freezing,” Harry mumbled through the scarf wrapped around his neck. He and Hermione were walking through Hogsmeade heading towards the Three Broomsticks. He was thanking his lucky stars that she hadn’t wanted to go to Madam Puddifoot’s Tea Shop. The older boys in the dorm had told horror stories about that building. It sounded worse than facing Voldemort.

“Well it is February, Harry,” Hermione chuckled beside him. At least he thought she chuckled. Her scarf was also muffling sounds. “And this is fine. We can’t exactly have a picnic with the temperature, the snow and the Dementors. There is no need to make this date awkward after all. Dementors really aren’t conducive to a nice date atmosphere.”

Harry laughed. Trust Hermione to make a joke about the evil soul sucking abominations. He held the door to the pub open for her and stepped in after stomping off the snow before they headed to a table.

“I’m really glad that Neville was okay with us…you know…dating…” Harry said.

“Harry,” Hermione smiled and shook her head, “Neville told me earlier he had thought we were already dating and just hadn’t realized it yet. It was rather entertaining though when he started to go with Daphne and Tracey and they also said they were going on a date.”

“Yeah, especially when he got that scary smile and said it looked like it was time to ask Susan,” Harry paused and ran a hand through his hair. “You know I thought Hannah liked him actually…”

Hermione peered around the area, nodded at the lack of people close by and leaned in. “I actually asked them already. They both apparently like him and they want to try to convince him to switch off between the both of them by the end of next year.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “What?” He was incredibly thankful they hadn’t gotten butterbeers yet.

“That was my first reaction as well.” Hermione shrugged. “I looked it up afterward though. Apparently – while not often used – there is precedent for Heirs to take consorts if the women involved are the last of their line. I think it’s rather horribly outdated – even if I can understand wanting to preserve the family name of old houses. I admit these sorts of things are beginning to frustrate me far less than they would have initially. I’m not certain whether it’s a good thing or not that I’m starting to become immune to the fact that the wizarding world appears stuck in the Middle Ages in several areas.”

“Didn’t Tori mention something like that to us over the holidays?”

“I really don’t remember. I was a bit preoccupied with her trying to set us up with her sister honestly,” Hermione snorted. “As long as everyone involved finds it acceptable I suppose it’s not really my place to dictate their lives. After all if it makes them happy, they might as well go for it.”

“You think Nev would go along with it?” Harry asked.
Hermione just reached over and patted his hand. “It’s cute that you think the boys have a choice in these matters, Harry.”

“Err…” Harry was saved from replying by Madam Rosemerta dropping off two butterbeers. Snuffles bounded up behind her and promptly licked Harry’s hand before sitting down beside the boy and presenting his ear. “Nice to see you too, Snuffles.” Harry shook his head giving a rueful grin to the dog as he scratched the giant’s ears. When the matron had moved on Harry turned back to his girlfriend. “So, um, I’m uh…what do we…err…”

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him and let him stumble along for a minute before bursting out laughing. “Harry, it’s a date. You don’t need to fumble for what to do or say.” Snuffles perked up and peered between Hermione and Harry. He gave a delighted sounding woof and promptly moved over to lick her hand and sit beside her. “Apparently we have Snuffles’ approval. Seriously, Harry, just act normally. We promised to be friends first, remember?”

Harry shook his head and returned her laugh. “Yeah, sorry. Hit me if I start being a prat again yeah?” She nodded sagely. “So, you never did tell me how you keep getting to all those classes going on at the same time. I know that you don’t leave halfway through because you’re definitely sitting beside me throughout the entirety of the runes class and Dean always asks you about what’s wrong with the Muggle Studies teacher so you’re obviously in that one too.”

Hermione gave a noncommittal shrug. “I got a little help from Professor McGonagall. That’s really all I’m allowed to say.”

“Well can I try to guess?”

She chuckled. “Sure. I doubt you’ll hit on the right answer anyway.” Snuffles gave a bark of encouragement though which side he was rooting for was up in the air.

“Hmm,” Harry rubbed his chin, “you didn’t like split yourself did you? You aren’t really studying while still sitting here with me are you?”

“No, Harry, I am not a starfish. I did not split myself,” Hermione said, rolling her eyes. “Did you get a magical clone who can give you its memories of the class?”

“No, but that’s not a bad guess actually. I wonder if they can do such a thing with magic…”

“Hmm, did you…no that wouldn’t work…well it’s not like you’re time traveling or something. If magicals could time travel so many problems would be…” Harry trailed off as he noticed the panicked look in Hermione’s eyes. He gaped. “No. You aren’t! You’re time travelling?! To attend extra classes!?!?”

“Shh! Keep your voice down, Harry!” Hermione hissed. She quickly took out her wand and cast a few privacy spells that the twins had taught her. Snuffles cocked his head at her. “You’re not going to let this go now are you?”

“Are you kidding? You’re time traveling! For class! Tell me everything. Please,” Harry reached over and clasped her hand putting on his best puppy dog, doe-eyed look.

“Oh fine,” she sighed. “You cannot tell anyone. Do you hear me, Harry? If you tell anyone I swear I will – well I don’t know what I’ll do – but you will not like it I can assure you of that!” He nodded hurriedly at her glare. Hermione eventually judged him truthfully and sufficiently cowed before pulling a hand up to her neck and pulling out a small little hourglass on a golden chain. Harry only got a quick glimpse before she tucked it back into her robes. “It’s called a time turner.
They’re very tightly controlled. I only have it because Professor McGonagall has a friend in the Unspeakables.”

“Wow… I can’t believe you got a time machine just to take a few extra classes…”

Hermione shook her head at him. “I take my studies seriously.” Both Snuffle and Harry snorted at that. “Besides, it’s not exactly a time machine. It’s actually somewhat dangerous if you aren’t careful. And it’s quite limited. I can only go back six hours every day and I have to be careful to avoid myself. Plus I can’t change anything. Anything I do in the past I already did so I’d simply be bringing about the exact same occurrence. Trying to get around this could theoretically erase someone from time entirely.”

“That… doesn’t really make sense, Hermione. And sounds incredibly dangerous.” Harry was gazing at his friend trying to decide whether to annoyed that she had been putting herself into a potentially hazardous situation just to take some electives or impressed that she had managed to time travel under everyone’s nose for over half the school year.

“Well the laws of time are not well understood and from what little I could make out of the arithmantic theory they contradict themselves anyway. I decided to just stick to the established rules.” She shrugged.

“Still… you couldn’t have just dropped a few classes?”

“Well… it’s not going to be an issue after this year, Harry, so please don’t worry.” She shuffled and averted her gaze.

“What do you mean? Hermione?” Harry asked.

“I’m doing this enough that I’m shifting my birthday by a few months… I’m actually somewhat uncomfortable with that fact so I intend to stop after the year is over. Besides I already dropped Divination over a month ago and Muggle Studies is simply ridiculous. Did I ever tell you that the only thing they teach about World War II is that Gellert Grindelwald secretly backed Hitler? That’s it! One of the most devastating wars the world has seen and it’s relegated to a single line! Nothing about the atomic bombs, nothing about the Holocaust, nothing about tanks – the class doesn’t even acknowledge the existence of guns! I have half a mind to suggest simply lobbing a grenade at Voldemort or hitting him with sniper round should he ever get a body back.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair. “Actually I asked Shiva about that one already. She said some Muggle-born tried it during the war. He had done something to his body to block conventional weapons from hurting him. It worked on a few of his lieutenants though I think until he gave them similar protections towards the end… Muggle Studies is really that bad? I knew it would be a joke but still. Wow.”

“Yes. The only reason I haven’t dropped it too is because I want to finish a list of all the problems with the class,” Hermione sighed. “No wonder purebloods don’t take Muggles seriously if that’s their main introduction to the group.”

“Yeah.” Harry frowned as he considered the rest of her statement. “Wait, you’re shifting your birthday?”

“It’s not much at the moment,” Hermione said waving her hand dismissively. “A little less than a month. It’ll only be about another half month or so by the end of the year; less if I don’t travel back as much to get more sleep.”
“Oh. So it’s not like you’re going to be an extra year older or anything,” Harry said breathing a short sigh of relief.

Hermione grinned at him and Harry felt a spike of danger approaching. “Too bad huh? From what I hear, you like older women.”

Snuffles chuffed and Harry groaned slumping down to hit his head on the table. “I am seriously going to kill both Shiva and Daphne.”

“Okay so we’re all agreed? We tell Professor Lupin what we believe?” Harry asked turning to regard each person surrounding the table. It was the beginning of March and the group was back in the secret meeting room with Daphne, Tracey, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Shiva and himself all assembled. They had considered bringing Susan in as well, but Amelia Bones had asked them to wait as she wanted to explain the situation to her ward herself. Receiving nods all around, Harry turned to Shiva. “Okay, can you go get him?”

“Back in a minute, guys,” the Professor said striding out to grab her fellow teacher. She was still annoyed with him but was standing by Harry’s decision to at least let him try to work up to some sort of relationship with the kid.

Shiva found him in his classroom grading papers. Giving a soft snort of amusement she leaned up against the wall and called out, “Those essays look a lot shorter than the two feet ones that were supposedly assigned, Lupin.”

Glancing up Remus shrugged, replying, “Well seeing as how Severus had no business assigning that essay to begin with I felt it far more prudent to grade my students on the work they had already accomplished prior to my absence.”

“Well we both know why he gave that work out.”

“That we do. I admit I am somewhat surprised that no one else appears privy to my furry problem after his lesson.” Remus sighed and leaned back slumping into his seat. “It is far more tiring to work with him than I had expected.”

“Yeah well he hates me almost as much as you so I get that. And I wouldn’t bet that no one picked up on the werewolf thing either. Hermione almost assuredly knows – completely disregarding her boyfriend she would’ve figured it out anyway. I’d also put good money on Daphne Greengrass knowing as well.”

Remus looked up in surprise. “Truly? But if she knows –”

“Lupin, Daphne is bosom buddies with Harry and his group. You’re a competent Defense teacher that is not trying to kill him. She’s not going to say jack squat.” Shiva pushed off the wall and strode over to him. “Now stop throwing yourself a pity party. Harry and I have something to tell you. Follow me.” Lupin frowned in confusion but nodded and headed up to the seventh floor behind Shiva.

As they walked back inside she raised her eyebrows at the group.

“…and that is how my father and I discovered the Atlantean Micro-dragon. Its keepers were most displeased with us,” Luna finished whatever story she had been telling. It had apparently required her to be lounging across the table and kicking her feet in the air. Daphne, Hermione, and Neville all looked extremely confused and mildly horrified.
Harry and Tracey on the other hand were roaring with laughter. “Luna,” Harry managed to wheeze out in between his laughs, “that’s not an Atlantean Micro-dragon. That’s a komodo dragon! They’re muggle lizards, not magical dragons!”

“I love this girl!” Tracey said clapping Harry on the back. “I am totally keeping her if you don’t.”

“I leave you people alone for five minutes,” Shiva said shaking her head. Lupin stood behind her apparently trying to restart his thought process.

“What,” Lupin started. He closed his mouth, took a breath and tried again, “May I ask what is going on?”

“Hello, Professor Lupin,” Luna said, sitting up and waving. “Harry and Tracey were informing me that one of my earlier discoveries was incorrect and debating on which one of them had the better claim to me.”

Hermione’s hand came up to slap her forehead while Harry and Tracey started laughing even harder. Daphne grimaced and looked over at Hermione. “You reign in your boyfriend and I reign in my girlfriend?”

Neville turned to other two girls and cocked a thumb at Luna. “That leaves me with Luna. I don’t think I can reign in Luna.” Try as she might, Shiva couldn’t avoid laughing at that one and even Lupin started to chuckle softly.

“Don’t worry, Neville,” Luna said giving the boy a bright smile. “I can reign myself in. Most of the time anyway. I make no promises when the wrackspurts are near, but otherwise I can stop whenever I want.” At the mention of wrackspurts, Harry had immediately gotten his laughter under control and turned to the girl with a questioning glance. “See? I can even reign in Harry without even trying! One day I might even get just as good as Hermione!”

Hermione groaned in response and the rest shook their heads. Tracey finally calmed down as well and the two teachers took their seats, Shiva near Harry and Lupin on the opposite side of the table.

“Hello, Harry, Neville, Luna, Daphne, Hermione, Tracey. Professor Babbling mentioned that you had something to tell me?”

“We do, Professor.” Harry glanced around to make sure that everyone was more or less back into a serious state. “Might as well just rip off the band-aid. We’re almost certain that Sirius Black is innocent and was wrongly imprisoned for a crime he did not commit.”

Lupin rocked back in his chair and sucked in a breath. His eyes widened and he turned to Shiva. She nodded in response. “Yeah. The teenagers figured out in less than four months something the rest of us dropped the ball on for over a decade.”

“That’s not possible.” Lupin shook his head and his eyes narrowed in rage. “Sirius turned on us all. He betrayed us. He betrayed James and Lily. He is worse than his family ever was! It’s not –”

“Professor Lupin,” Harry’s voice cut through the older man’s rant. “Sir, you said you were friends with both him and my parents. Let me ask you just one question: who was more likely to betray my father, Sirius Black or Peter Pettigrew?”

Lupin’s mouth snapped closed with a clack. Shiva had to repress a sigh. She may not have liked the man but she didn’t relish him being put in a position of realizing his hatred for a friend for the last decade was most likely based on a lie. “It’s not possible. Peter died. They recovered…”
“A perfectly separated finger,” Hermione said calmly. “A finger so clean that it might as well have been…cut off.”

“No…” Lupin sagged back. “He set him up. Merlin, he set him up didn’t he? How did you figure this out?”

“We’ll walk you through everything later, Sir. Right now we need a bit more from you,” Harry said gently.

“Of course. Anything you need. But wait, Sirius would’ve defended himself at the trial! This can’t be – ”

“A trial the Heir Black never received,” Neville said shaking his head. “We have friends in the Aurors who searched for the records when we first suspected something was off. There never was a trial, Professor. Director Bones has been trying to get the manhunt called off or at least to remove the Dementors from the equation. So far it hasn’t worked. We’re being blocked at several levels. What we need to do is find Sirius himself and get him to come in under our terms so that we can get a trial. It’s too dangerous to risk letting him stay out there and get caught by someone who simply thinks he’s a murderous madman.”

“No trial?” Remus appeared to age a hundred years in an instant. “I should never have pulled back,” he muttered. Scowling he turned to the group and spoke louder, “How can I help?”

“Do you know how Pettigrew might have managed to escape?” Daphne asked. “That’s the main sticking point we keep coming back to. We think we’ve got the rest sorted but we have no idea of how he managed to get away since there were anti-apparition and anti-portkey wards already in place.”

“I keep telling them he got smaller and ran away, but no one believes me,” Luna said airily with a small shrug.

“That’s because it’s not possible for a human to shrink like that, Luna,” Hermione explained in a strained voice. “I keep telling you, the laws of magic don’t work that way.”

“Professor McGonagall does it all the time. Every first class of the year in fact I’m to understand,” Hermione was about to reply when she and everyone else in the room except Luna froze and just stared at the blonde. She looked back at them and cocked her head. “Did I say something odd again?”

“Luna…you…I can’t…why didn’t you say that before?!” Hermione got out before grabbing two fistfuls of her hair and pulling hard.

Tracey shook her head in wonder. “Wow, I told you, Harry, I am definitely keeping her.”

“Professor Lupin…” Harry asked turning to his teacher with an exasperated look.

“Yes,” Lupin nodded still staring at Luna slack-jawed. “Peter was an animagus. As was James and Sirius. Lily was still working on hers, but had almost succeeded.”

Shiva chuckled. “Harry, you draw in some of the smartest, strangest folk, you know that, kid? Congratulations, Luna, you just figured out a secret that Lupin and his buddies here kept for ten years!”

“Ten? Try twenty.”
Now it was her turn to stare in amazement. “Twenty?! But that would’ve put you in school still!”

“Exactly,” Remus smiled at her with a genuine pride in his face. “James, Sirius and Peter all learned to be animagi in order to accompany me.”

“Because werewolves can’t infect other animals, only humans,” Neville said nodding. “That makes a lot of sense. Talk about a show of support; animagus transformation is one of the hardest magics you can learn.”

Lupin gaped at the boy as did Shiva. Like she had thought, Daphne wore a small pleased grin and Hermione was nodding approval. Luna and Tracey however stared between Neville and Lupin. Tracey was the one who spoke first. “Wait, you’re a werewolf, Professor? Well I guess that answers why Snape was a bastard the other week and gave us that essay.”

“Do you howl at the moon or is that just a myth?” Luna asked curiously.

“Guys, later. Neville, cool. Sir? What animal could Pettigrew turn into?” Harry asked taking charge and recentering the group.

“A rat. A white rat about this big,” Lupin commented holding up his hands dazedly. “James was stag, approximately 18 hands at the shoulder. Sirius was a large black dog somewhat resembling a Grim.”

“Okay so we are looking for a Grim and a white rat. Yeah because those are so easy to find,” Harry said sighing. Why did that sound so familiar? Something was tickling at the back of his mind just like with Dobby and ‘Moany’ from last year. “Where the bloody hell are we supposed to start?”

Spring blossomed on the Hogwarts grounds though one group of students and two Professors were not feeling the levity a shift of seasons was supposed to bring. In fact most of the castle’s population was still subdued. The Dementors were a continual feature, prowling around the edges of the grounds and wandering Hogsmeade. The Minister had been brought under increasingly heavy fire by the population over the Dementors and Sirius Black. It had leading to a stymieing of every effort by both Amelia Bones and Tonks to get Black’s Kiss On Sight order revoked. The group had been trying to determine hiding locations on the grounds for either a rat or a large dog but every spot turned up nothing.

Desperate measures were beginning to be considered.

“Harry, as your girlfriend I feel the need to prepare you –”

“Yet again,” Daphne interjected with a raised eyebrow.

“Yet again,” Hermione agreed, “that this is not going to work and you shouldn’t get your hopes up.”

“Hedwig is the smartest owl there is,” Harry said stroked his familiar’s feathers. She hooted and fluffed up under his praise. “She’ll find him. Even if he is still hiding as a dog.”

“Harry, even if Hedwig had been a Mayan Wind Chatterer I do not think it would have increased her odds into a positive number,” Luna looked at him sadly. She turned to the bird and petted her chest. “Please don’t think I doubt your abilities, Hedwig. It is simply that a man smart enough to escape Azkaban would not forget to ward himself to avoid owls.” Hedwig nipped at Luna’s fingers and bobbed her head. She twisted back to Harry and held out her leg for his letter.
“I seriously can’t believe we are sending a letter to Sirius Black,” Neville said shaking his head. “This has got to be one of the strangest ideas you’ve ever had, Harry. There is no way this is going to work.”

“It’ll work,” Harry said proudly. “You just watch. Hedwig will find him and we’ll be able to convince him to come in with Amelia and Tonks and everything will work out. Tracey thinks it’ll work.”

All eyes turned to the black haired girl who held up her hands. “Hey I never said it would work. I said it would be entertaining to try and that we didn’t seem to have any better ideas.”

“You know not to encourage him, Trace,” Daphne groaned.

“Well I am officially out of ideas people so short of taking out an ad in the *Prophet* – ” Harry grumbled as Hedwig took wing.

“Why don’t we do that?” Luna asked.

“What?” Five eyes turned to the blonde.

“Instead of an ad though I could write an article for the *Quibbler*. I’m sorry I didn’t suggest it earlier,” she looked at Hermione. “That was why you initially invited me into this investigation to begin with wasn’t it?”

“You know, Luna,” Hermione said with a look of amused frustration on her face, “I’m starting to think you are the smartest one among us.”

“Well I *am* the only Ravenclaw.” A less observant group would’ve completely missed the smug note in her tone. “I’ll have the article to daddy by the end of the day. If he works quickly we can probably have the next issue out for tomorrow morning.”

The *Quibbler* article did manage to be delivered by the next morning. Before lunch, half the school had read about how: ‘The Ministry Covers Up Sirius Black’s Lack of Trial’ and ‘Only The DMLE Head Is Working For Justice’. By dinner the rest had seen it.

Luna quickly found dirty looks directed her way. She had fully expected it as she was the author of both articles. It was part of the reason why she had avoided taking this step for so long. The other was she had gotten used to the protection being friends with Harry and Daphne had afforded her. The others were wonderful true, but people were frightened of Harry and Daphne in particular. Daphne had very deliberately spread the story of the fight with the basilisk to ensure that Harry and she received proper credit. They commanded respect and fear. For a time that had extended to Luna as she was taken under their wing. The wrackspurts…the bullies…had stopped. They didn’t want to get on the wrong side of the Slytherin Slayers.

Now that was going to change. Nothing else had worked. Harry had been tearing his hair out for the past two weeks trying to determine what he was missing. What he was overlooking regarding the two fugitives. But he had come up blank. So Luna had acted. She had sacrificed her protection to help her friend. She would deal with the consequences as she had for so long until he had come.

She was left alone until 9:55 pm. Just prior to curfew. Marietta, Lisa and a girl whose name she did not know, came for her as they had all last year. They laughed as they stripped her, berating her for printing her delusions. For showcasing her oddity. For presuming to be friends with Harry Potter. For standing in the way of her betters. For daring to be different.
Luna refused to give them the satisfaction of knowing their barbs hurt. She never once let her eyes fill with tears nor did she cry out as they slapped her nor did she plead as they forced her out of the Common Room to wander the halls. They let her keep her bra and panties for which she was grateful, but she did not show it. It would only be worse the next time if she showed any emotion. She had learned that long ago. Luna would endure as she always had. She had friends she could go to in the morning. She had a room with a delightful couch she could curl up on for the evening. Luna would endure.

Then she heard the laughter. “Well, well, well, if it isn’t Loony Lovegood,” Marcus Flint crooned from behind her.

Luna’s thoughts froze. Flint was even worse than Draco Malfoy. All Malfoy would do would be throw a few curses, maybe lock her in a closet for the night and surreptitiously unlock it in the morning. Flint…might not unlock the closet.

With widening eyes Luna realized that it might be even worse. She had recently hit puberty and actually required the bra now. Flint would want to sample the fruit before he spoiled it.

“Good evening, Marcus Flint,” she said injecting a bit of mocking into her airy voice carefully modulated to show complete disinterest even as her muscles tensed.

“Girls shouldn’t wander the halls this late at night you know, Loony.” He stopped behind her. Close enough for Luna to feel the brute’s breath on her neck. “Marietta told me you might be up here around now. Such a shame to see that she was correct…I suppose I should…lead you back.” His hand running down her back left no illusions on just where exactly he intended to lead her.

“Why, thank you. I appreciate that,” she said. She had to wait. Wait just long enough to…

“Oh you’ll be thanking me indeed little one,” Flint turned her around and leered at her body. Luna used the movement to throw a punch into his neck and lash out with her leg towards his crotch. Flint had better reflexes than she had hoped. He managed to avoid the jab and shifted enough to miss her groin shot. However his move did put his knee into the path of her leg. Grunting in pain Flint fell back holding his injured knee as Luna turned on her heel and bolted. There was no point in trying to get back into the Ravenclaw’s Common Room. No doubt Marietta and the others were still there. Instead she had to find other means of escape. She could still perhaps –

Any idea of hiding her pain and continuing along the same path as before fled at Flint’s footsteps sounding behind her. “Get back here you little, bitch!” He had long legs. This race would not last long if she didn’t take additional steps.

“Comm on, contact Harry!” Luna said between breaths. She thanked all the gods and goddesses she knew that Marietta had left her the earring Harry had given her.

“Wha? W’as goin’ on?”

“Harry, where is,” she dodged as a red spell shot over her shoulder. Tearing around a corner Luna continued, “where is the Gryffindor Common Room?”

“Luna? Seventh floor, Grand Staircase, North side. Why? Luna why are you breathing heavy?”

“If you wouldn’t mind,” she paused again as Flint threw another spell at her. She just barely managed to jump over that one though the landing hurt in her bare feet. She jumped onto the staircase and started heading up. “If you wouldn’t mind opening the door, I would greatly appreciate it.”
“Stop running you little –” Flint’s shout was cut off as Luna lobbed a helmet from one of the suits of armor she passed at him.

“Where are you, Luna?” Harry asked all traces of sleep vanished from his voice. “I’m coming.” She smiled. Harry had saved her before. He would again.

“One level down, Harry. I should be there in a moment,” Luna used her momentum to slingshot around the edge of the banister and into the corridor Harry had specified. Flint seemed to have realized where they were as he redoubled his efforts to catch her. It was useless, the portrait of a rather corpulent woman swung wide in front of her and a roiling aura stood in the open path beyond. She flew into Harry’s arms and he swung her aside as he swept his other arm forward. She burrowed into her savior’s chest only dimly realizing he had no shirt on – only a small leather belt with holsters on it was draped over his chest. With a satisfied grin, Luna watched a torrent of water flow out of the palm of Harry’s outstretched arm. It flooded towards Flint’s lower body and after barely a second froze completely solid. Flint’s upper half jerked down and his head smashed into the ice sculpture he was encased in drawing a bit of blood from his nose. The impact threw his wand forward towards the portrait hole and seemed to knock the older boy out.

Harry glared at Flint for long enough to make certain he wasn’t a threat then turned his eyes towards Luna. She tried to force back the tears she felt welling up but was only successful in holding them to a sheen across her eyes. She pushed her head into his chest further to avoid him seeing her like that. Avoid him seeing her as weak. As incapable. As unable to defend herself. As pitiable. As useless.

“Luna? Are you alright?” His voice was so gentle. So quiet. No one had spoken to her like that since her mother died. No one had ever even bothered to ask her that question in over two years.

“I am fine, Harry. Thank you for asking,” she responded, voice thankfully light and airy and not betraying her feelings at all.

“If you’re fine then why was Marcus Flint chasing you through the corridors in the middle of the night?” Harry put his free hand under her chin and lifted her face. Inwardly, Luna cursed that she hadn’t managed to dispel the sheen from her eyes yet. “Luna, where are the rest of your clothes?” Most wouldn’t have heard it but Luna could detect the strain in his voice – the need for her to answer, to tell him. But it was tempered by the restraint of holding back, of not forcing an answer. With a start Luna remembered back to the day he had asked her to sit with him in the Great Hall. He had said that he had been called names as well. Perhaps…perhaps she should say…something.

“The…the wrackspurts took them,” Luna appeared to crumple inward. It was all she could ever say when confronted. It was all she could ever say when confronted. It was more than most but it was still not enough.

“Wrackspurts plural? Are the wrackspurts in Ravenclaw, Luna?” he asked quietly. Luna flinched. It was all the answer he needed. Hugging her close, Harry tapped his Comm Stone. “Comm on, contact Hermione. Mione? I need you to come down to Common Room immediately. Bring a spare set of clothes please. Yes. Yes, I’m serious. Yes, it’s an emergency. No, I’m fine. Mione…Okay, thanks.” He had barely disconnected the call when Hermione flew down the stairs to her dormitory leaping over the last three. Luna saw Hermione quickly scan the Common Room and settle on Harry wrapped around her in a protective cocoon.

Hermione’s eyes widened and her nostrils flared. She practically flew across the room and draped the robe over Luna’s shoulders. Harry pulled back enough for her to pull it on and smile at the two Gryffindors. “Thank you. It was quite cold.”
“Luna, what happened? Are you okay? Did they hurt you? Did they touch you?” Hermione asked softly pulling the blonde into a hug. Luna gave her a quick hug back inwardly sighing that Hermione hadn’t minded Luna holding onto her boyfriend’s chest.

“I am fine, Hermione. As I told Harry, the wrackspurts took my clothes and Marcus Flint merely took advantage of the opportunity he was presented. Harry assisted in handling the situation,” she nodded her head to the still frozen and passed out Flint. Hermione looked over, widened her eyes slightly and then twisted to Harry.

“Freezer,” he said with a shrug slotting a rune stone back into his harness. “I heard her being chased but not who was chasing. It’s a good nonlethal, but still extremely effective, stopping option. Luna, can you…has this happened before, Luna?”

She hesitated. How was she supposed to answer that? It was a direct question and there were few evasions available. She couldn’t use a creature the way he had worded that. With a groan she realized she had hesitated too long. Like her earlier flinch, it was all the answer that Harry needed. He growled and Hermione’s lips curled into a snarl as well. The older girl clutched Luna tighter.

“Luna,” Hermione said stroking her hair. “This is never going to happen again.”

“You cannot promise that, Hermione.”

“Yes, we can, Luna,” Harry said folding into the hug from behind.

Luna wiggled out from both of them growing angry in spite of herself. “No, you cannot. I endured long before any of you came along. I endured my mother’s death. I endured my father’s insanity. I endured the taunts and the names and the threats and the disappointment and the abuse and the bullying and the hexes. I asked for help tonight because I am older now and Flint is not the type to stop. Thank you for your assistance but I will endure as I have and you cannot promise that this will not occur again. I spent the entirety of my first year learning how to deal with this and I can handle it on my own.”

“Luna…” Harry waved her to the couch and down in the chair across from her. Hermione joined her on the couch. “Luna, do you remember the first time you sat down with us at breakfast?” She nodded. “I was like you for a long time. I have friends now though and I have people I can turn to for help and support. People I can lean on when it gets hard and things come crashing down. You have that now too, Luna. You’re not alone anymore and you don’t have to deal with this on your own. I may not have a ton of political power just yet but I have enough friends that I can ask for some favors and make sure that people answer for what has happened.”

“I don’t need that, Harry.” She sighed and let the mask slip. It was tiring to keep it up around them.

“Luna, please,” Hermione said laying a hand on her leg. “We are your friends. Please let us help. What are the names of the…wrackspurts?”

Luna looked into Hermione’s eyes. She let the last remnants of her mask slide and used her full piercing gaze to stare into the depths of Hermione. She knew what effect her look could have on people but the older girl didn’t even flinch. Turning to Harry, Luna looking into him as well. Eventually sighing and nodding Luna gave a wry grin and snorted. “You aren’t going to let this go are you?”

“They didn’t let it go for me, Luna,” Harry said giving her a small, sad smile.

“Very well. Marietta Edgecombe, Lisa Turpin, a girl I don’t know who hangs out with them. But
really there’s no point. Nearly the entire House is aware of it. Only Su Li and Padma Patil don’t know the extent. They spoke up once when they found my missing clothes and Marietta and the others have been careful around them. I think Cho Chang only believes it to be harmless stealing. So you see? Short of changing Houses, there is no point in doing anything. You cannot take on an entire House, Harry, Hermione.”

“Watch me,” Harry said, a slightly scary glint entering his eyes. Luna couldn’t help but feel buoyed by that. He would never turn that gaze on her but her enemies…Luna grinned in response. Hermione snorted. “You’ve been around us long enough, Luna. You should realize not to give Harry a challenge like that.”

“Comm on, contact Neville, Daphne, Tracey and Susan,” Harry said. “Sorry to wake you all, but we have a bit of a situation. I need everyone to meet outside the door to the Ravenclaw Common Room in five minutes. It really can’t wait until then. Great, thanks guys.” He tapped his earring and disconnected.

“I didn’t know the stones could connect to more than one at once?” Hermione said cocking her head. Luna chuckled quietly. Of course that would be what the witch noticed.

Harry shrugged. “I try not to use them on conference too much for too long. The stones are small enough that a conference call taxes them a bit too much for me to be comfortable with it.” Neville came down the stairs to the Common Room yawning and Harry stood up nodding at his friend. “Luna, wait here with Hermione okay? I’m going to go talk to the…wrackspurts about this.”

“You don’t seriously think you’re leaving me out of this?” Hermione asked with raised eyebrows.

“I am not sitting on the sidelines if you are doling out justice like an avenging angel,” Luna commented at the same time as Hermione. Both girls looked at each other, smiled and laughed. Hermione waved for Luna to go ahead. “Harry, I am fine. I am uninjured beyond a minor bruise on my shoulder and you have succeeded in ensuring I am calm. If you are going to confront them, I want to be there to watch.”

“Confront who? Luna?” Neville narrowed his eyes at her. “I missed the action again didn’t I?”

“Don’t worry, Neville,” Luna said with a smile. “The action is just about to get started. You merely missed the prologue. As did Hermione at that.”

“Oh, good,” Neville nodded looking a bit more awake. “I keep missing most of the fun stuff and Harry promised I could have first crack at Voldy this time.”

“We’re not going against Voldy, Nev. Just some schoolmates who have gone a bit too far,” Harry said leading the way out the portrait hole. He stopped to grab Flint’s wand and tucked it into his pocket stunning Flint with a _stupefy_ for good measure.

Neville looked at the Flint-sculpture and shook his head. “I guess that was the prologue?”

“Yes,” Luna replied nodding.

“I like that rune.”

“Yeah. Worked better than I had hoped actually,” Harry said. “You know I have to admit, I would’ve put money on Malfoy, not Flint.”

“Draco Malfoy is an idiot, but he is not so stupid as to attack me with anything beyond what he
does to the rest of the student populace,” Luna said shrugging. “Marcus Flint however... well he is that stupid.”

Harry shrugged in reply as the group pulled up outside the Ravenclaw tower. Daphne, Tracey and Susan melted out of the shadows, dispelling their Ninja stones. Tracey snorted seeing Harry while Susan shook her head and Daphne whistled appreciatively. Harry cocked his head in confusion as Daphne ran her eyes up and down his chest. “Err, guys?”

Hermione groaned and slapped her boyfriend’s head. “Idiot. You forgot to grab a shirt. Daph stop ogling my boyfriend.”

“Hey, I can look. I just can’t touch,” Daphne replied waggling her eyebrows. She quickly turned to glance at Tracey who just chuckled and waved for her to go ahead and keep staring.

“Hey as long as I can ogle other people too, Daph, feel free to stare,” Tracey drawled.

“Harry put this on,” Hermione said handing him a shirt she had transfigured from her jumper.

“As funny as this is, why are we in front of the Ravenclaw Common Room in the middle of the night?” Susan yawned. She moved over to rest her head on Neville’s shoulder but kept her eyes open staring at Harry.

Harry sighed as he adjusted his harness to fit over the shirt. “One second. Hermione can you fill them in?” She nodded and as she moved over, Luna listened to Harry activate his Comm Stone again. “Shiva, I’m about to enter the Ravenclaw dorms. Luna was attacked. She’s alright but this has been ongoing for a long time. I could use Professor backup. Would you mind grabbing Flitwick on the way? This concerns him too. No, Shiva, I’m not going in alone. Everyone else is assembled already. I wanted to start before you got here. Plausible deniability, Shiva. No. No, I’m not letting this go until morning. Yes, it is that bad. Shiva, she was almost raped because they tipped off Flint. Roger.” Harry disconnected and turned to the others. “Everyone up to speed? Good. We have between two to five minutes before the Professors arrive. Daphne, you and me at the front. Let’s play up this image you’ve built for the two of us.”

“Slytherin Slayers,” Luna provided helpfully. “Because you slew Slytherin’s monster.”

There were soft chuckles at that though most lacked actual mirth. Luna smiled at them all. She did actually have friends. That was... something beautiful.

“...a hole,” Hermione said, answering the riddle to open the door into the Common Room. Luna padded in after the rest. They stood in formation. Harry and Daphne in front side by side, Tracey behind Daphne’s shoulder to the side, Neville mirrored her behind Harry, Hermione centered and able to provide support to either or both sides, Luna and Susan slotted in behind Hermione slightly offset.

Harry grabbed a rune stone and held it up in his left hand before holding his wand in his right. “Silencing charms everyone. This is loud. You can drop them once I lower the stone.” A quick set of thumbs ups later and Harry activated his Boomstone. Luna could feel the sound reverberating through her bones though it stopped after a moment when Harry lowered the cluster back into his harness. She dropped her silencing charm and listened in.

“RAVENCLAWS! ASSEMBLE IN THE COMMON ROOM NOW! FRONT AND CENTER!” Harry yelled holding his wand to his throat for the sonorous charm. Stamping feet hurried down both sets of staircases as the Common Room quickly filled up. Most of the House had a mixture of sleep, fear and confusion on their faces. She sought out Marietta and was rewarded by witnessing
the girl’s face drain of color when she caught sight of Luna standing behind the group of friends.

“What the bloody hell is going on here, Potter?” one of the Prefects asked.

“Ravenclaw has failed their Housemate. Ravenclaw has failed their duty. Ravenclaw has failed their school. Ravenclaw has failed their honor,” Daphne said, holding her head high. She formed the perfect picture of an Heiress to a Noble House.

“What are you on about – ” Marietta tried to sneer but was cut off as Neville snapped a *silencio* at her.

“As Daphne was saying,” Harry said calmly gesturing to his partner, “Ravenclaw House has been grossly negligent and we are here to ensure you understand that and make certain it doesn’t happen again – either to our friend or to anyone else in the future.”

“Whatever Loony told you – ” Lisa started before she too was cut off by a silencing spell, this time from Tracey.

“Ravenclaw has systematically bullied a young girl,” Harry said. To most he appeared merely angry. To Luna…Harry was holding on by a thread. She saw his hands clenched tight enough to turn white, his breaths coming in short bursts, his tone carefully neutral yet dripping with contempt, his magic fluttering around him in little arcs and sparks only noticeable if one was watching for it. She realized he had called for the Professors as much to ensure he didn’t go too far as to make certain that her Housemates were reigned in.

“You have degraded and derided her. You have insulted her and her parents. You have stolen her things. You have forced a *12 year old into the corridors at night in just her underwear*!” Harry said.

“I was 11 when that started,” Luna interjected. She barely prevented her grin when Marietta paled even further at that.

“She was assaulted tonight because you…people…tipped off Marcus Flint!” Harry growled. He flicked out his hand and Luna watched Marietta fly across the room towards them. Lisa followed immediately after. A few wands were raised in reply by some of the older years, but the majority was either too stunned or fearful to do anything. “Luna, please point out the third ringleader.” She raised a hand to answer Harry’s question and that girl was soon on the ground beside the other three.

Daphne took over since Harry was visibly vibrating now and his teeth were clenched. “Su Li, Padma Patil, please stand aside,” the two singled out glanced at each other but nodded at the group and moved against the wall of the room between the two groups. “All the rest of you have insulted and trod upon the Noble House of Lovegood. In doing so you have also insulted the Noble Houses of Potter, Greengrass, Longbottom, Davis, Bones – ”

“If they did what you said, add Patil to that!” Padma snarled walking over and standing beside Neville. “I’ve brought shame on my own family by missing this. I’m sorry, Luna.” Luna nodded to her in reply.

Su Li walked over to stand beside Tracey. “The Li family also takes offense. I apologize as well, Luna. Rest assured, my family will endeavor to make reparations for allowing abuse to go unchallenged.”

Daphne nodded calmly at both newcomers as the door behind them swung open. “As I was
saying, You have insulted eight Noble Houses through your actions, inactions and tacit approval. If any of us were so inclined, we would be perfectly justified by calling for an Honor Duel right here and now.” Luna couldn’t stop a slight upturn to her lips at Professor Flitwick’s intake of breath behind her. “Consider this your one and only warning. Do not mess with our friends. You should count yourselves lucky we are holding back tonight. I doubt any of you could stand against the Slytherin Slayers.”

“Mr. Potter,” the quiet voice of Shiva sounded. Luna turned to the professor and smiled, giving her a very small almost unnoticeable nod. “Please explain why you and these others are in the Ravenclaw dorm at night making threats.” Flitwick just nodded along apparently a little too dazed and confused to risk speaking.

“Professor Babbling, Professor Flitwick,” Harry said. His magic was getting back under control and Luna could no longer hear the venom dripping from his voice. “Marietta Edgecombe, Lisa Turpin and this girl stripped Luna Lovegood to her underwear in the Common Room just prior to curfew and ejected her from the dorms. They also informed Marcus Flint that she would be alone around this time. He found her and assaulted her. Luna got away and came to us for help. Flint is currently half frozen outside the Gryffindor Tower and I have his wand for proof right here.” Harry handed over the wand. “We came up here because Luna has informed us that, with the sole exception of Miss Li and Miss Patil, the entirety of Ravenclaw House either assisted, approved or ignored her treatment. This is merely the latest – ”

“And last,” Tracey interjected.

“And last,” Harry agreed, “incident. At minimum we intend for Luna to sleep at one of our Houses tonight. We will discuss options going forward tomorrow morning with the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress.”

Flitwick blinked several times and looked to Luna horror plain to see across his face. “Miss Lovegood? Is this all true?”

“Yes, Professor,” Luna said with a sad smile. “I did try to tell you at first, but you didn’t quite understand.”

“You said you were being harassed by…wrack…spurts…oh Merlin…” he wiped a hand over his face and Luna shrugged.

“I could have perhaps been clearer but that is not my way, Professor.”

Shiva nodded at the assembled group. “Very well. We’ll take it from here. Everyone please return to your dormitories. Miss Li, Miss Patil, if you two wish you may accompany Miss Lovegood in alternate sleeping arrangements for the evening.” The two girls nodded and Harry’s Slytherin Slayers headed out of the Ravenclaw Common Room. As the door was closing Luna heard Flitwick start shouting loud enough to hurt her eardrums.

Luna just smiled and skipped along after her friends. The wrackspurts had been dealt with.

Harry walked into breakfast the next day glancing over at the Ravenclaw table with an acid glare. There were very few Claws sitting down and those that were looked exceedingly glum. Only the few first years appeared at all upbeat. Nodding to himself, Harry moved to sit with his friends. Luna was happily chatting away with Tracey while Hermione looked on in exasperation at whatever they were discussing. Ginny kept looking between Luna, the Ravenclaws and Harry but she never said or asked anything.
Hedwig showed up with the other owls clutching a small piece of paper. Harry’s good mood increased exponentially as it was clearly not the same letter he had sent off with her. “He replied! I told you she could find him!”

Hermione and Daphne’s jaws dropped open as Hedwig settled down, puffed up her chest and held out her leg. She twisted to each girl surrounding Harry and gave a pompous hoot.

Neville laughed and fed Hedwig a slice of bacon. “Careful now, girl. No one likes a show off. You did well.” Hedwig hooted and bobbed her head in reply before taking wing and heading back out.

Harry had gotten his letter opened and growled crumpling the thing into a ball.

“That good huh?” Tracey asked.

“It’s a paw print. A paw print!” Harry glowered at the offending piece of paper. “Signed, Mr. Padfoot! Who the hell does he think he is?! A paw print. Arsehole.”

“Well people have said he and your father were rather big on pranks,” Hermione said sighing. “I suppose this is his idea of a good laugh. And language, Harry. I told you it wouldn’t work.”

“Well, she did manage to find him so he was correct on that part, Hermione. Hedwig is very impressive indeed.”

“Or Black’s an idiot and didn’t throw on a mail ward,” Daphne commented shrugging. “I seriously doubt that Hedwig knows him personally to be able to see through that sort of thing. Crookshanks I could see being buddy-buddy with Black, but that owl barely ever gets out and about when Harry’s not around.”

“You know, what if Hedwig does know him? That was awfully fast to both deliver and return a letter. Where would she have met him…I wonder if…” Harry’s train of thought was interrupted as Shiva came up and tapped him on the shoulder. Blinking he looked up at his guardian. “Yes?”

“Headmaster’s office as soon as you’re done. Anyone that had a direct hand in last night’s activities.”

“Will my father be attending as well, Professor?” Luna asked. The table quieted down immediately.

“I’m sorry, Luna. He’s out of the country. We tried to contact him, but there’s no telling whether he’s receive the notice and Headmaster Dumbledore felt this needed to be resolved immediately. Unfortunately this is something I actually agree with him on; the events of last night really do need to be addressed as soon as possible.”

“Very well. Would you and Professor Flitwick be willing to stand in for him if needed?” Luna said nodding.

“Me?” Shiva stared back at the blonde.

“Harry trusts you so, so do I,” Luna stated losing a lot of airiness. “And between the two of you the conversation would be a lot faster and simpler than if my father attended anyway.” Harry frowned at his friend and Tracey reached over to squeeze her shoulder.

“Sure, I guess I can stand in for your interests…” Shiva said sighing a bit. “I’ll see you all up there in a few minutes then. Password is Ice Pop this week.”
She moved off towards the exit from the room and Harry glanced to his friends. All nodded that they were done and got up to attend the meeting. Before Harry got further beyond the Entrance Hall though he was waylaid by the Weasley twins. “Harry, a moment, please.”

“Guys, I have to go meet with Professor Dumbledore. Can this wait?”

“We’ll be quick,” George said holding out a blank piece of folded parchment. “This is for you.”

“A piece of parchment? You shouldn’t have,” Harry deadpanned. He flipped the paper open but still saw nothing special about it.

“We heard about the problems last night, Harry. Hell, half the school has heard about it,” Fred said frowning. “Can’t say we’re fond of your choice in names but that’s beside the point. The point is: that right there should hopefully help in the future if you have any further problems and need to track someone down.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked examining the parchment closer.

“You do this,” Fred leaned forward and tapped the paper with his wand, “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.” Ink spread out on the paper resolving into a map as Harry watched wide eyed. “This is the Marauder’s Map, Harry. We found it years ago and it has served us well. Shows the hidden paths out of the castle which we’ve put to good use. These four are blocked or caved in but these three are open. Don’t use this one. It’s under the Whomping Willow. Right dangerous that one is.”

“More importantly,” George continued, “this also shows the locations of everyone on the grounds.” He pointed out the little feet with labels under them. “If someone gets attacked again and they can’t tell you where they are, just whip out this Map and search them out.”

“Also, feel free to use it to pull pranks whenever you want,” Fred said trying to grin a bit. “Just be sure to pass it on to the next generation of worthy successors as we are doing.”

“Thanks guys…” Harry said staring in wonder at the Map. “This is amazing! I promise we’ll put this to good use. How do you blank it?”

“Mischief managed,” Fred said tapping the parchment again and the ink disappeared. “Now run along Harrykins. Treat the Map with respect and it shall respect you!”

Harry waved to them both and took off after his friends catching up just as they reached the stone gargoyle. He mumbled a quick, “Later,” to the questioning glances sent his way before they stepped onto the rotating staircase.

They walked into the Headmaster’s office to find a veritable crowd waiting. Lisa Turpin and her mother, Marietta Edgecombe and her parents, the third ringleader and her father, Snape, McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, Dumbledore, Shiva…and Marcus Flint and his father. “Good morning,” Harry said nodding to the assembled group.

“Ah, Harry, thank you for coming so quickly. I don’t believe so many of your friends needed to come,” Dumbledore said with a slight twinkle to his eyes. Harry barely repressed his snort.

“I was told everyone involved in the incident last night should be here, Sir. Frankly, I’m surprised that Padma Patil and Su Li weren’t invited. Or Amelia Bones for that matter.”

“This is merely an inquiry, Harry,” Dumbledore replied though his smile was now strained. “There is no need to involve the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.” Harry smirked at the
old man noticing how he completely ignored the statement about Padma and Su. Harry waved a hand at Luna who raised an eyebrow at him and stepped forward.

“Actually Headmaster, I intend to press charges so having a representative from the DMLE present would certainly expedite matters.”

“Miss Lovegood, surely that is not required. I understand Mr. Flint has already paid for his mistake and is quite apologetic.”

The predatory grin on Flint’s face threw that statement out the window but Dumbledore either didn’t notice or didn’t care. Flitwick on the other hand raised a step in Harry’s opinion as the diminutive teacher looked ready to murder the boy where he stood.

“I guess we’ll just have to talk to Aunt Amy later on then, Luna,” Susan commented sweetly. Flint’s grin dissolved into a scowl while the rest of teachers nodded approvingly. Surprisingly, even Snape showed approval of the idea.

“That works I suppose,” Luna said airily.

“Well then, shall we begin?” Dumbledore said attempting to regain control of the situation. “Miss Lovegood if you could please explain the circumstances that led to the others entering the Ravenclaw dormitory last night...”

“Certainly, Professor,” Luna said. Her next sentence dropped all pretense of levity or disinterest and she turned a hard glare on the three older Ravenclaws. “Marietta Edgecombe, Lisa Turpin, and...her...started insulting me over my articles at 9:55 pm. They claimed that I was a harlot who was muscling in on Harry Potter and that my delusions should never see the light of day let alone become words on a page. They continued with the insults for an additional 10 minutes. After that they forcibly stripped me at wand point until I was left in only my underthings. They forced me into the corridor and sealed the door. I tried to get to a room that I knew had the most wonderfully comfortable couch as I have been forced to use it previously.”

Luna turned her stare onto Marcus Flint and her hands clenched. “Unfortunately Marcus Flint waylaid me claiming that he had been informed I would be around. He accosted me and tried to have his way with me. I struck him and ran for the Gryffindor Tower knowing that Harry could help. I made it there shortly before being caught again. Harry then stopped Flint and learned of the abuse by my Housemates.”

“I was...displeased,” Harry spoke up. “Your House is supposed to be your family, no? I don’t have much experience with a real family but that certainly didn’t sound like familial behavior to me.”

“He called for us,” Daphne said glaring at Dumbledore almost daring the old man to read her mind. “We answered. He also contacted Professors Babbling and Flitwick. While we waited for the Professors to arrive, we told the Ravenclaws how what they did was wrong.”

“Don’t you mean threatened?” Marietta muttered.

Daphne turned to the girl and flashed her a large grin. “Edgecombe, if I threatened you, you would know it.”

“Very well.” Dumbledore leaned back and steepled his fingers. “Miss Edgecombe, Miss Turpin, Miss Randle, your version of the events?”

Marietta shrugged. “We’ll admit we insulted her a bit and that we sent her outside the Common
Room. Usually she wanders back in after an hour or so. We admit that we tipped off Marcus but –

“I will certainly not admit to that!” the third girl, Randle yelled. “You two did that one all on your own! I may not like Lovegood at all, but I certainly did not call Marcus Flint. Pranking, stealing and insults are one thing, but I would never sic that brute on anyone. Especially not a girl! I have some standards thank you very much!” Marcus sneered in response. Luna nodded in response. "Traitor..." Marietta mumbled. She continued louder, “Fine, me and Lisa told him that Lovegood would be out and about. We just expected him to toss her in a broom closet for a few hours. Not try to rape her.”

“I believe your words were ‘teach her to keep her crazy quiet by any means necessary’, Mari,” Marcus spat.

Harry leaned over to Susan. “Do they realize memories can be used as evidence?”

“It certainly doesn’t seem like it,” Susan whispered back.

Tracey leaned in and commented, “Or they’re all just too interested in screwing each other over to bother caring at this point.”

“...I believe we have a clear picture now,” Dumbledore said speaking over the squabbles. “Now we must determine the path forward. Miss Randle, I believe three weeks detention and 50 points deduction is appropriate. Miss Edgecombe, Miss Turpin, five weeks detention and 75 points deduction each. Mr. Flint, you are suspended until the end of this year. If you wish to finish your education at Hogwarts you will need to either schedule your NEWTS by the end of the day, or return – again – next year.”

“You can’t be serious,” Flint’s father scoffed. “Do you have any idea who I am?”

Snape sneered at the man and Harry found himself in the odd position of rooting for one of the men he utterly despised. “A somewhat connected individual. Nothing more. Your son has already been held back once for failing his exams and has started numerous fights with many complaints leveled against him. He is a disgrace to Slytherin House and you should count yourself lucky that he has not already seen his wand snapped! And seeing as how he has managed to earn the ire of several Noble Houses – including the Head of the DMLE – I would not expect such an oversight to continue for long.”

“Severus,” Dumbledore said softly.

“Albus be quiet!” McGonagall thundered. “You have already used your authority to prevent us from acting against these women, you cannot protect that boy. He is of age and will be brought to task. You, sir,” the Scott turned her withering glare on the elder Flint, “would do well to keep your tongue from wagging. Count how many witnesses are in this room before you attempt to bribe or threaten your way out of this and ask yourself if he is worth it!” The man scowled but remained quiet.

Dumbledore sighed. After a short uncomfortable silence he said, “Very well. If there are no further complaints...”

“You’re seriously only giving them three and five weeks of detention?” Hermione asked incredulously. “That’s it?!?”

“Miss Granger I have taken a great many points from – ”
“Oh the bloody point system is a joke and everyone knows it!” Hermione snorted. “They assaulted a younger student and stole private property multiple times. They admitted it! You’re barely even slapping them on the wrist!”

“Everyone deserves a second chance, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore intoned sadly. “I am disappointed that you do not understand this.”

“Don’t bother, Hermione,” Harry sighed. “It’s worth wasting your breath. He’s not going to listen.”

Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed. “Miss Edgecombe, Miss Turpin, Miss Randle, Mr. Flint, you may leave. If the others will please stay for just a bit longer.” The Headmaster waved the rest out of the room and as they left, he looked at Luna with a tired gaze. “I am sorry for what you have experienced, Miss Lovegood. I urge you not to harden your heart, but to allow them the chance to redeem themselves.”

“Only people who repent deserve the chance for redemption, Headmaster,” Luna said. “Before we depart I request a re-Sorting.”

Dumbledore jerked back in his seat and Sprout flinched. Flitwick sadly nodded having obviously expected this as had Shiva and McGonagall. Snape scowled but didn’t say anything.

“That seems rather extreme, Miss Lovegood,” Dumbledore tried to plead with her.

“Not really. Extreme would be calling Susan’s Aunt on the other three as well as the majority of the House.” Dumbledore paled at her calmly delivered threat. “No, all I want is to feel safe in a House that wants me. Any of the other three would work. I have two allies in Ravenclaw now. In Gryffindor, I have at least six but likely far more. In Hufflepuff I have at least two but again, likely more. Even in Slytherin I have at least four allies.”

“Five. Don’t forget my sister,” Daphne said softly.

“My apologizes, five.”

“This is a most unusually situation, Miss Lovegood...” Dumbledore said.

The choice was taken from him a moment later as the Hat spoke up from its perch. “Well, little Luna Lovegood, I stand by what I said two years ago. You would do well in any House. Your loyalty is beyond reproach, your cunning is quite impressive and your bravery is commendable. Feel free to choose for yourself.”

The teachers were looking at the Hat in awe. Shiva was the first to shake her head and chuckle, “You know I really shouldn’t be surprised to hear you speak. You did help Harry last year after all. Of course you’d help another friend of Hogwarts.” The Hat bobbed its brim at her and went back to senescence.

“Thank you, Hat.” Luna beamed at her friends who all smiled back. “I think I would like to go to Gryffindor. Harry was the first to be nice to me besides Ginny and I would enjoy spending more time with him.”

Dumbledore could only nod. “Very well, Miss Lovegood. I will ensure your things are moved to the 2nd Year dorm in Gryffindor Tower.”

“Welcome to the Lion’s Den, Miss Lovegood,” McGonagall said warmly.
That evening around curfew Harry was sitting on his favorite armchair looking at the Marauder’s Map. This map was amazing and he really wished someone could tell him how the enchantments had been added to it. It was only the first time he had activated it himself, but he didn’t want to take the time to examine it in detail at the moment. It had been a long day and all Harry was looking to do was ascertain that his friends were all safe – that no one was going to try anything against any of them in reprisal for the hornet’s nest they had stirred.

Harry checked the Slytherin dungeons and nodded, seeing Daphne, Tracey, Millie and Blaise all sitting in their beds with no one slinking up the stairs. Glancing at the Hufflepuffs, he saw Susan and Hannah also in their beds without anything suspicious nearby. He breathed a sigh of relief as he found Ravenclaw and saw Su and Padma both in bed as well. With an amused thought Harry turned to Gryffindor searching for himself.

And he froze solid forgetting even to breath for a few moments.

Peter Pettigrew was lying in bed with Ron Weasley.

_**A white rat about this big.**_

_This is Scabbers. He’s my pet. Been in the family for ages._

Scabbers. Pettigrew. Scabbers was Pettigrew. Ron’s pet Scabbers...was...an...animagus...

_Sirius was a large black dog somewhat resembling a Grim._

_He’s a dog Shiva. Not an evil mastermind. If he was an animagus trying to kill me he could’ve done it when I first ran into him the other night._

_Okay, Snuffles it is._

_His sorta pet Snuffles was Sirius Black._

“Well, bugger...”

Chapter End Notes

*The Atlantean Micro-dragon is a creature from ‘Luna’s Animal’ by erbkaiser.*
Harry suddenly understood how Dobby felt whenever the little guy tried to hurt himself. Harry definitely deserved a few good knocks around the head for being so blind. He had been living with Sirius Black for most of summer and visiting with him for the entire school year. He had been sleeping in the same dorm as Peter Pettigrew for three years! Remus had specifically told him what both looked like in their animagus form two weeks ago!! If Harry allowed himself to stop and truly consider how much of an idiot he had been he likely wouldn’t have hair in the morning.

So he did the smarter thing. He acted.

“Comm on, emergency protocol 01. Everyone, this is Harry. If you’re sleeping wake up, grab your wand and get dressed. We have a priority situation. I have found Peter Pettigrew and I know where Sirius Black is. Meet in…um…”

“The Meeting Room?” Daphne said sounding fully alert and awake.

“Hmm, too far,” Harry said shaking his head. He noticed Hermione running down the stairs of the girls’ side with only one arm through her shirt and coming to halt as she saw him. She took a deep breath, visibly forced herself to relax and walked over laying a hand on his shoulder. Harry smiled up at her and continued, “Sirius is a dog currently and we’d have a hard time getting a dog up to the seventh floor unnoticed.”

Luna bounced down the staircase and wandered over as well. To someone who hadn’t known her the girl would look as carefree as normal. Harry though could see the narrowed eyes, downturned mouth and tension in her shoulders.

“Entrance Hall then?” Susan asked. “It would also make it easier to meet up with Aunt Amy.”

“No, Susan,” Amelia herself said over the link. “I am not about to meet a fugitive in the Entrance Hall.”

“How about my office?” Shiva asked. “It’s on the fourth floor so it’s at least a bit closer to the entrance.”

“There are multiple unused classrooms on the second floor immediately after the Grand Staircase in the West Wing. We use the second on the left. Best of both worlds,” Hermione said.

Harry nodded along, “Any objections?” The link was quiet. “Alright, Madam Bones, Tonks, how quickly can you both get here?”

“Less than five minutes. Don’t move on Pettigrew until we arrive,” Amelia replied.

“Won’t work, sorry, ma’am.”

“Harry, listen if he’s the traitor he’s dangerous and – ” Tonks said the frown evident in her voice.

“And,” Harry said cutting her off, “he’s currently sleeping in the Gryffindor dorm.” Harry scowled at Neville’s curse. “Dammit, Nev, stay quiet! Don’t let him know we know!”

“Scabbers!” Neville spat. “He’s Scabbers isn’t he?!”
“Yes. Now don’t do anything yet! Madam Bones, we’ll stun the rat and bring him to the classroom. Tonks, I need you to stop by the Three Broomsticks and pick up the large black dog there. He’ll answer to Snuffles. If he gives you trouble, tell him Harry didn’t find the paw print very amusing. He should follow after that.” Shiva was now the one cursing over the line. She wasn’t alone as Daphne was muttering as well with very choice invectives. “Alright, look people we have to cut this off now before the Comm Stones break. They aren’t designed to handle this level of connections. Five minutes, second floor classroom, West Wing, second on the left. Someone grab Professor Lupin on the way. Disconnect emergency protocol.”

Harry stood and looked to Hermione and Luna. Luna cocked her head at him. “What’s the plan, Harry?”

“Go up, ask Ron for Scabbers. Stun them both. Go to the classroom.”

“That simple?” Hermione asked in shock.

“Complicated seems to backfire on us. Let’s try simple and wing it if things go sideways,” Harry said shrugging.

Hermione rubbed her forehead and glared at him. “We are going to have to have a serious talk later about acceptable levels of risk and ‘winging it’ when confronting evil magicals.”

“I’d suggest waiting until the evening is over, Hermione,” Luna said. “That way you can yell at him for nearly dying at the same time rather than yelling twice.”

“Who’s nearly dying? With any luck Pettigrew will just be sleeping,” Harry asked, casting a scared glance at Hermione. He was suddenly very thankful that she didn’t share abilities with a basilisk because her look certainly would have been enough to kill him if she had.

“From what I understand you always nearly die at the end of these adventures, Harry. I’m just being prepared.”

“No one is nearly dying tonight,” Hermione growled irritably. “No one is dying at all for that matter. Let’s get the rat.”

The three walked up to Harry’s room and cautiously entered. Thankfully the room was empty except for Ron, Neville and Pettigrew. As soon as the door had opened, Neville jumped off the bed raising his wand towards Ron’s curtains. Harry gestured for him to come closer and stay on the opposite side of the bed. Luna moved to the foot and Hermione grabbed the curtains. Harry held up three fingers counting down. As he finished the count, Hermione tore the curtains open, revealing Scabbers clinging to Ron’s chest and the redhead reading a Quidditch book.

“Hey! What’s the – ” Ron’s shout was cut off as Neville stunned him. Harry meanwhile flashed off a stunner at Scabbers striking the rat as it squeaked and tried to run. Pettigrew slumped and Harry picked him up by the tail scowling.

“Part one complete. Let’s get to that classroom.” The group left the tower with Pettigrew clutched in Harry’s hand inside his robe pocket. They hurried but didn’t run. It wouldn’t due to get stopped and questioned at this point.

Finally arriving in the second floor classroom, a glowering Shiva immediately walked over to them with a half raised wand. “You four okay? You have him?” Remus was behind her in his night clothes and looking confused.

“We got him, Shiva. No problems.” Harry held up Pettigrew and dropped him onto a table casting
an Incarcerous on the rat. Remus’ eyes narrowed on the rat and his nostrils flared.

The ropes had barely finished tying up the rat when the door opened again and Amelia, Susan, Daphne, Tracey, Tonks and ‘Snuffles’ walked in. Snuffles had the decency to whine quietly and stare at the ground after Harry and Shiva cast him a withering glance. Remus’ mouth just dropped open as he stared between Snuffles and Scabbers.

“All right, Snuffles, jig is up,” Harry said crossing his arms. “Everyone in this room believes you’re innocent. You should already know this since you’ve sat with me and Hermione the last several Hogsmeade trips while we discussed this.” He dimly noticed Hermione’s soft gasp as her hand went to clutch at her throat. ‘Time Turner. Right, Sirius knows about that too. Great.’ He sighed and started tapping his foot. “Seriously, Sirius?” The dog looked up at that and wagged his tail hard enough to shake his whole body. “Yes, that was completely intentional. Now change back and make a crack about it so that we can get on with dealing with this situation before it goes arse over teakettle.”

“Language, Harry,” Hermione muttered grabbing his hand and squeezing softly.

Snuffles gave one final dejected sounding woof before suddenly, in place of the large black dog, there was a slightly worn looking Sirius Black. Sirius gave a sad little grin and rubbed the back of his head with one hand. “Uh, hey everyone,” he gave a small little half-hearted wave. “Sorry for pranking you all...Harry, you and Shiva in particular...I really didn’t mean for it to go as far as it had. I never expected you to take me in, I just wanted to make sure she was treating you well...but then there was food and it was good food and...”

Harry rubbed his scar and groaned. “I’m honestly far more annoyed that you never said anything afterwards even knowing we figured you innocent. But we can deal with being pissed at you later. We have far more pressing concerns currently.”

Sirius glanced around the room. “It’s a veritable war council in here. You know James never had this many friends this early. Good job, pup.”

“Sirius?” Remus took a hesitant step forward. “Is it really you?”

“Yeah, Remus, it’s me,” Sirius shot the Professor a roguish smile. “I’m innocent by the way. Sorry for suspecting you were the leak originally, Moony.” Remus laughed and lunged forward to pull the man into a hug.

Amelia cleared her throat drawing everyone’s attention. “As heartwarming as this is, Harry was correct in that we have larger issues. Seeing as how everyone appears to be present, unharmed and in somewhat good moods I assume Pettigrew was captured successfully?”

“What!” Sirius exclaimed.

“Yeah, he’s over there, tied up and stunned,” Neville pointed to the table. His eyes had never left the unconscious rat.

“It’s really Wormtail, Sirius,” Remus said shaking his head. “These teenagers managed to find not only you, but Wormtail as well. On the same night!”

“Let me kill him,” Sirius growled. He pulled away from Remus and started walking towards the bound rat. “I want to finish what they threw me in there for. Move, Harry. This little rat – ”

“I have a very good idea of what Pettigrew did, Sirius. But you can’t kill him just yet.”
“He was Secret Keeper. Move so I can kill him,” Sirius said again with Remus stepping up behind him.

Shiva stepped up beside Harry and crossed her arms too and Hermione stepped forward as well. Tonks shifted uncomfortably while Daphne looked torn between which side she should be standing on. Neville and Luna were too involved watching the rat and Tracey was just shaking her head. Amelia Bones seemed to be the only one willing to try to broker peace. “I’m going to attempt to ignore that you just threatened murder in front of the Head of the DMLE, Lord Black.” A loud gulp was the only response. “Sirius,” her voice had dropped into something soft and sad. Harry had never heard that tone come from Amelia before and he noticed Sirius pause for a long moment as some of the tension in the man loosened slightly. “We all want Pettigrew to receive justice but be reasonable for a moment. Your allies consist mostly of the people in this room and only a few others. Let us interrogate him and get the truth on record prior to taking to vigilantism.”

“If it’s any help, Cousin,” Tonks said with a small smile and a shift of her hair to a dull purple, “if you had actually had a trial where you were convicted of killing him we all probably would’ve just stood aside and let you have some fun.”

Sirius turned to her and gaped for a second before laughing and shaking his head. “Nymphadora? You seriously need to work on what you consider to be positive points.” The remaining tension in the room bled out.

“She’s going to get you back for using the Name Unutterable by the way, Sirius,” Harry said grinning. His prediction was obviously spot on as Tonks’ hair had shifted to red before switching back to purple.

“Alright, all personnel maintain a protective circle around the suspect,” Amelia said, using a hard tone again and taking charge of the situation. The group moved into formation around the rat as Amelia shifted him to the floor and moved the tables aside with a few flicks of her wand. “I’m going to force him back into human and resecure him. On three; one, two, three.” Amelia said an incantation Harry hadn’t heard before and Scabbers shifted into an overweight, squirrely looking man missing tufts of his hair and a large chunk of one of his fingers. The ropes binding the rat had been dispelled but were quickly reapplied before Amelia reawakened the man.

Pettigrew blinked and turned his gaze around the classroom his face growing progressively paler and paler as he found the ropes binding him and the multitude of people surrounding him. “I...I...” his voice was all scratchy and hoarse and hurt Harry’s ears.

“Peter Pettigrew,” Amelia said with a scowl, “you are looking rather lively for a dead man.”

“I...I was hiding!” the rat shouted. “I was scared! I was scared Black was going to get me or the Dark Lord’s supporters would find me! I had to hide; it was the only thing I could do! He’s right there! Arrest him!”

“Does he really think we are that stupid, Boss?” Tonks asked genuinely bewildered.

“I’m not sure what’s sadder, Auror, that this man thinks we would believe that or that our dear Minister just might have. Pettigrew you have exactly one minute to explain what actually happened November 3rd, 1981. After that I stun you and bring you to the Ministry to receive Veritaserum questioning.”

“Please! I didn’t mean for...I couldn’t...I can’t! He’ll kill me!”

“I’ll kill you, traitor,” Sirius growled.
“We’ll kill you, Peter,” Remus added also growling. “Did you really think that you could simply hide from us forever?”

“Please!” Harry almost laughed at the way Pettigrew tried to crawl towards the two, the ropes making it very difficult. Tonks shot a spell directly in front of him causing him to fall back onto his arse.

“30 seconds,” Amelia intoned flatly.

“Alright! He was winning,” Pettigrew sobbed. “He was winning and he found I was Secret Keeper. He was going to torture me until I was insane and would give him their address anyway! What was I supposed to do?”

“Let him kill you, Peter! Just like any of us would have done for you!” Remus shouted.

“I was never as strong as you three...I’m sorry!”

“November 3rd, 1981.” Amelia’s fingers had gone white around her wand.

“After the Dark Lord fell I ran. Sirius caught up to me and I cursed the street. It hit something and exploded. I cut my finger, changed and ran. I’ve been hiding ever since! Please, don’t kill me! Please, I can give you names! I can give you safe houses!”

“How would you know safe houses if all you did was give Voldemort the Secret of the Potters’ address?” Daphne asked. Pettigrew’s eyes widened and he tried to push back from her.

“I...I...”

“Just how long were you working for them, Pettigrew?” Hermione asked scowling. She was clutching Harry’s hand so tight he could barely feel it anymore. He wasn’t complaining though as it gave him something to focus on beyond wanting to join his godfather and teacher in murdering the rat.

“I don’t know what you – ”

“Answer her question or I will make sure you beg for the Dementors,” Shiva said with a scowl.

“Please...I can help you,” Pettigrew sobbed. He was cut off from saying any more as a “meow” sounded outside the door.

“Cat?” Sirius asked looking in the direction of the sound. “Wait, I know that meow...”

“Students! Students out of bed! Students in the corridors!” Filch charged into the classroom with a mad grin on his face. The door banged against the wall and the man came up short as he saw not just a group of students but two professors, two Aurors and an escaped madman as well. His grin dropped and Mrs. Norris meowed again behind him.

The damage from the distraction had already been done. Before anyone could move, Pettigrew changed from human to rat and back again. The change left the ropes slack against the floor and he jumped at Luna. Wands turned to curse him but the man was quicker than his stature implied. Pettigrew didn’t even try to grab her wand, or use her as a hostage. He just levered the small blonde’s arm up, aimed it at the window and let her reflexive spell shatter it. Neville just missed bowling Pettigrew over as the rat jumped to the window changing in midair. Five spells crossed in the space he had been and the white rat dropped out of sight.
“Damn it!” Amelia shouted at the same time as shouts of rage and frustration echoed from nearly everyone else present. “After him! Quickly!”

Harry and the others barreled out of the classroom bowling over a still gawking Filch. They charged down the stairs, Sirius having retaken his dog form and outpacing them though he slowed as he charged around the corner of the entrance to sniff around below the blasted open window.

Shifting back, Sirius shouted, “That way! Amelia, Remus, he went that way!”

Amelia turned to Tonks and Shiva barking orders, “Split up, and flank him. One group stays behind to make certain the fugitive doesn’t double back. Tonks, take Harry and Hermione. Babbling, Luna and Neville. Remus, Daphne and Tracey. Susan and I’ll stay with Sirius. Move people!”

The group split, spreading out to run across the grounds towards the forest in the direction that Sirius had indicated. Shiva, Luna and Neville stayed near the castle while Harry, Hermione and Tonks took the left side with Remus, Daphne and Tracey on the right. Amelia, Susan and Sirius were barreling down the center lane with Sirius periodically shifting to Snuffles to regain the scent. The plan was good. Harry realized it had neglected one major detail only after it was too late.

The air turned cold and his breath frosted. The phantom screams started playing in his head. The horde of Dementors surrounding the school had converged en masse on the separate groups, drawn by the commotion and Sirius’ human presence.

“Everyone back! Back to the Entrance Hall!” Tonks yelled. Harry could barely hear her over his mother’s phantom screams. He stumbled and was only saved from falling by Hermione grabbing his shoulders.

“Tonks! We need a Patronus!” Hermione yelled as she brought her own wand to bear. Harry whimpered, the screams in his head growing louder. The Dementors were barely a hundred feet away. There were more than had come to the Quidditch game. They seemed to blackout the entire area.

“Expecto Patronum!” Twin shouts rang out behind him. Silver mist vaguely otter shaped burst from Hermione’s wand and a koala loped out of Tonks’. Their passage left Harry’s head slightly clearer. Enough for him to try his own spell. The Silver Spirit still didn’t work and he hadn’t managed to get the spell itself clear yet. He had to try anyway.

“Expect – Expecto Patronum!” Harry yelled trying to clutch the memory of his first night at Shiva’s apartment. For the first time, his Patronus came out with a form. A large catlike figure seeping silvery mist leaped forward towards the horde.

Finally able to think for a moment Harry risked a glance behind him towards the others. Daphne, Tracey and Remus were surrounded with a silver Dire Wolf prancing around them, but it was losing coherence rapidly. Susan was dragging Sirius back while her Aunt’s silver dog yapped at the Dementors coming closer. Shiva and Neville were back to back with a silver wolf and bear holding off the Dementors nearest them, Luna huddled at their feet holding her arms around herself and shaking.

Harry shuddered as Hermione’s Patronus split up into mist and faded into the night. She fell to the ground beside him and Harry’s concentration wavered. His Patronus gave a last yowl before also falling to the Dementors. Tonks held on only slightly longer. As her defense died under the weight of the mass of Dementors, the screams started up again in Harry’s head. He managed to
just barely hang onto consciousness. In the next few moments, he almost wished he hadn’t.

Tonks was knocked down and grappling with a Dementor while Hermione was pushed down beside him with one on top of her as well. A third Dementor grabbed Harry and started pulling him close, a horrible sucking void visible beneath its hood. Harry yelled and struggled. He tried to force another Patronus but he knew his connection to the memory wasn’t strong enough since the Dementor was leaching that power just by being near.

‘Connection. That’s why the Silver Spirit doesn’t work. It’s not connected to the caster. Well fat lot of good that does now.’ If he and his friends weren’t about to be de-souled, the revelation of finally figuring out the problem inherent with his rune cluster would’ve had him laughing. As it was, it only served to help the Dementors increase his sense of uselessness and depression. The Dementor leaned close and all Harry could do was push back his mum’s screams and silently call for help in his mind.

A…presence…responded to his plea. It felt like a small puppy waking up and searching for its master. Harry desperately traced the feeling to the source and pulled. With an inarticulate yell, Harry yanked the presence to him and the Sword of Gryffindor materialized in his right hand. Thrusting the Sword up into the Dementor, Harry yelled louder and drew the blade up through the creature’s chest into its face. A horrible screeching cut through all other sounds in the area and the Dementor imploded. It folding into itself, seeming to be sucked into the Sword. The screech cut off and the Dementor was gone, leaving just a gleaming sword and a gaping teen behind.

Shaking his head, Harry pushed himself off the ground and turned to Hermione. He thrust the Sword forward into the Dementor over her as well and a second screech shattered the night. The blade thrummed in his hand and drank the Dementor into itself. The silencing of the Dementor’s screech let a scream from Tonks take its place. Harry panicked. He didn’t think and he didn’t turn to his older friend. He dropped to his knees besides Hermione who shakily clutched at him. Harry ignored her hands and grabbed the Time Turner hanging free outside her robes. One more piercing screech rang out behind him as Harry slipped an arm through the chain and twisted the little hourglass. Hermione cried out and grabbed for his arm and the world spun around them.

Harry felt himself being pulled to the side as if he had been caught in a gigantic undertow. His arm started slipping through the loop he had tried to form under the chain. Hermione’s grip tightened into a vice as she pulled his arm up, holding onto him amidst the torrent. Harry’s arm felt like it was going to be pulled out of its socket as the current tossed his body around. He only barely managed to prevent the Sword from nicking either one of them. Finally, the world slowed and the current died. Everything slotted into place around him and Harry collapsed on top of Hermione panting and whimpering at the pain in his head and arm.

Hermione wrapped her arms around him and started sobbing into his chest. “You idiot! I can’t believe you did that! I told you Time Turners were dangerous, Harry! I told you! You could’ve been swept away and lost in the aether! Why would you do that?!”

“Sorry, Mione,” Harry murmured. “I didn’t exactly have much time to think about it, I just...did it.”

“You are in so much trouble!” Her tears were slowing but she was still holding him tight enough that it was hard to breath. “I don’t even – I am going to kill you if you ever do something like that again, Harry James Potter!”

“Yes, Mione. Sorry, Mione.”

Abruptly Hermione released him and pushed them both into a sitting position. “What were you
thinking? It doesn’t even matter, Harry! Yes we’re away from the Dementors but everyone else is still going to lose their soul in – how many times did you turn it?”

“You have to specify how many times?” Harry’s eyes widened and he looked at the little hourglass and the falling sands in horror.

“Of course you have to specify how many times!” Her face was reddening not unlike a Weasley’s.

“I only flipped it once. I figured that would send us back six hours like you said...”

“One hour per turn, Harry,” Hermione snarled. She took a breath and got her anger under control. “But it doesn’t matter anyway. We can’t change anything. I told you this! You can’t change the past with a Time Turner without risking breaking physics!”

Harry’s stare hardened. “Then we won’t change anything,” he said nodding to her.

“What?”

“We don’t have to change a bloody thing, Mione. I figured out why the Silver Spirit doesn’t work just before I killed the Dementor. I was hoping to have six hours to make more but with an hour I should be able to fix two, maybe three. The rune stones won’t fail no matter how many Dementors there are. We can use them to beat the creatures back and save everyone.”

“I just told you, Harry, we can’t change anything,” Hermione said slowly as if she was speaking to a child.

“Hermione, we just have to wait until the instant before we leave. Shiva, Neville and Luna were holding out fine, as were Amelia, Sirius and Susan. Daphne, Tracey and Remus were in trouble and Tonks was struggling with her Dementor. We should have just enough time to get to them all with at least two Silver Spirits.”

“Harry, Tonks was...” Hermione choked off a sob and couldn’t finish her sentence.

“You didn’t see her lose her soul and neither did I, Mione! All we heard was a scream and then another horrible screech. We didn’t see her lose her soul so we can stop her being hurt or desouled because we aren’t changing anything that happened. It can’t have happened if we didn’t see it!” Harry said shaking his head defiantly.

“I...I don’t know if that’s the correct interpretation of the observer effect, Harry...or if it even applies here...” She wasn’t outright shooting down the idea but it did certainly sound rather farfetched.

“It’s magic. We routinely ignore the laws of thermodynamics and violate Newton’s Laws all the bloody time. We just have to be fast. I am not going to let Tonks lose her bloody soul!”

Slowly Hermione nodded. “Okay, Harry, we can try. But if we wind up scattered, into little pieces across all of time and space don’t come crying to me.” She suddenly narrowed her eyes at him and slugged his shoulder with her fist.

“Oww! What was that for?” Harry asked holding his shoulder.

“That, Mister Potter, was for nearly dying right next to me. Twice!” She then grabbed his shirt in both hands, pulled him into her and kissed him. Harry’s brain froze as her lips smashed against his and her hands clung to his shirt. She pulled back after a few moments breathing deeply. “And that, Mister Potter, was for saving my life. Again.” Harry just dumbly nodded. “Now, you said
something about fixing the *Silver Spirits*?"

Harry nodded again finally kicking his brain into gear and standing up beside her pulling her up with him. “Yeah. Right. It needs a connection to the caster. The Patronus works by being powered by a powerful positive emotion right? Well I can’t inject a memory into the cluster; they don’t work that way. But I can make it connect to who is using it and have it search for a feeling, memory or emotion to use as the power source on its own.”

“How?”

“I add in a *Soul* rune. Most *Soul* runes or runic clusters don’t have any effect at all. They’re basically a completely useless branch because you can’t manipulate a soul – unless you happen to be a Dementor I guess. But I’m not going to use it to do anything beyond facilitate the connection aspect.”

“Well let’s grab a side classroom and do it then. We have less than forty minutes for you to get this right and test it.” She started marching ahead of him. “Remember, don’t be seen – especially by your double. And what is with this ‘Mione’ thing?”


“Whatever, you want a pet name for me? Fine. Use it. But only you and preferably when we are either alone or with close friends. And if you shorten my name to ‘Herms’ or ‘Hermi’ I will castrate you Harry James Potter, and you don’t you believe for a moment that I don’t mean that!”

“Yes, Mione,” Harry dutifully replied. He smiled as she pulled open the door in front of them. “You know you’re really cute when you’re annoyed?”

“I’m not going to dignify that with a response until after we have saved our friends’ lives.” Her tone sounded disgruntled, but Harry caught the slight smile at the edge of her lips. He had had his back luck for the evening it was time for his good luck to pop up.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Hermione whispered as she watched a glowing silver panther prowl around the edges of the room before striding back over and nuzzling her hand. “It feels solid. I didn’t think Patroni were supposed to be solid…”

“It’s not technically a Patronus,” Harry said. He set aside the *Silver Spirit*, the panther fading away as he let the cluster go. He moved to pick up his spare *Silver Spirit* and started to modify that one the same way he had done to the first. “It’s more connected to the caster than a regular Patronus is. A regular one is just emotions forced through a wand. This is more like part of the caster directed outward. I think. Soul runes are weird. I didn’t even think they existed at first.”

“Is it tied to just you now? You’ll have to tie the second one to me if it is,” Hermione said frowning. “We’re going to need to split up to help both groups.”

“It’s open ended. Whoever picks it up will form the connection and only as long as they have it activated,” Harry sighed distractedly. “Good thing too. This is taking a lot longer than I had hoped.”

“We have less than ten minutes, Harry.” Hermione twisted her hands and paced back to the window looking out at the grounds. The tension was evident in the way her voice was cracking. “Are you going to be able to finish it? We might be able to make do with just the one…you could always use the Sword…you said the Dementors seemed to affect you less while you were holding it?”
“I think so. At least after I killed that first one.” He cast a quick glance at the Sword lying on the table beside him. He could still feel its presence in the back of his mind. “I thought Dementors weren’t supposed to be killable?”

“They’re not. You can starve them if you can lock one away for long enough, but no one has ever directly killed one before. You really are making a habit of performing impossible deeds, Harry.”

“Yeah, well bending Time over my knee will just get added to the list then yeah?” He let out a sigh and picked up the rune cluster blowing off the stone dust from the pattern. “Here, try this out, Mione.” Harry handed her the stone and she studied it for a moment before holding it up.

“Is there an activation phrase?” she asked.

“No, figured these should be able to be used as quickly as possible. Just channel a bit of magic into it.”

Hermione nodded and furrowed her brow in concentration. An instant later, an otter flew from the stone and floated around the room. It was just as substantial as Harry’s panther had been. With a smile Hermione let the magic flow cut out and the otter vanished.

“Sweet!” Harry pumped his fist into the air. “I wish we had time for more but we’ve got to go. Neither of us was looking to Entrance Hall so we don’t have to use the Ninjas. We’ll just run through. You go towards Daphne, Tracey and Lupin. I’ll get Tonks. If Amelia, Susan and Sirius need help than I’ll send my Spirit towards them and hold off the Dementors with the Sword.”

“Agreed.” Hermione turned to him and pulled him into another kiss. This time Harry’s brain didn’t switch off and he leaned into her, returning the kiss. He felt his face grow a little hot as her arms wrapped around his neck and his around her waist. All too soon, they parted casting soft smiles at each other. “Don’t you dare die on me, Harry. You’ve already used up your quota for near death experiences this night. And I want to be able to kiss you more in the future.”

“Yes, Mione,” Harry replied smirking. “Come on. Let’s go save our friends.”

If someone had told Neville three years ago that he would be back to back with a Professor in the middle of the night surrounding by over a hundred Dementors watching some of his best friends probably lose their souls while he held off a group of the demons with a giant bear Patronus he probably would’ve told them to head to St. Mungo’s. And yet that was exactly what he was doing right now. Luna was whimpering beside him and Shiva was pushed up against his back. Both his bear and her wolf were still holding against the onslaught, but once the others fell he knew that would change.

He could barely even see his friends. The Dementors had practically formed a wall around both Harry’s group and Daphne’s. Lupin’s wolf Patronus had pushed them back enough that he could catch a fleeting glimpse of Tracey curled into a ball on the ground while Daphne tried to help Remus though her Patronus kept failing after barely a second each time she managed to recast it. Tonks’ koala died after Hermione’s and Harry’s failed. There were just too many of the creatures clustered for her to hold off on her own. Neville felt tears falling from his eyes as he saw the three brought to the ground. He couldn’t even try to send his bear towards them because then Shiva and Luna would be overwhelmed by the ones around them. At least Susan was being protected by her Aunt. Amelia seemed to be managing to hold them off well enough for his girlfriend to drag Sirius back towards Neville and Shiva.

A horrible screech split the air. Neville grimaced and held his free hand against his ear. It
sounded as if the very night itself was screaming bloody murder. The Dementors all stopped and turned towards the sound of the screeches. It was like someone hit pause on the battle for survival. Abruptly the sound cut off, only to be replaced by a second screech a moment later. Neville followed the gaze of the demons and saw one of the creatures draped over Hermione folding into itself. There was a glint of metal and a brief view of Harry standing over her. Before Neville could do more than stare in astonishment, a second Harry and Hermione flew out of the castle doors. Harry charged towards his double while Hermione sprinted past Neville and aimed for Daphne.

Both raised their arms and glowing Patroni leaped out. Harry’s panther was beautiful and strong and it leaped toward the Dementor holding onto Tonks. The cat’s mouth opened in a silent roar and then closed onto the throat of the Dementor. A third horrid screech filled the night as the versions of Harry and Hermione lying on the ground vanished into thin air and the Dementor caught by the panther was torn to shreds leaving just a fluttering robe behind and a bit of sticky black residue on the ground around it and Tonks.

Hermione’s otter was just a hair slower, but no less effective. It charged at the group around Daphne but they seemed to take heed from their fellows and parted letting the otter sail through almost unmolested. One Dementor wasn’t quite fast enough and got caught by a tail whip by the otter. A screech resounded and that Dementor was left as just a fluttering cloak. “Daphne!” Hermione shouted. “Catch!” Neville watched her pull her arm back and saw a small stone sail through the air. Daphne jumped and caught the stone, an instant later a silver hedgehog charged out of her hand and slammed into two of the surrounding Dementors sending more dying screeches reverberating through the night.

Neville twisted back to Harry and saw his panther leaping from Dementor to Dementor while Harry swung the Sword of Gryffindor in his other arm at one that strayed too close to Tonks’ prone body. Less than a minute after Harry and Hermione had ran out of the Entrance Hall every Dementor in the vicinity was running. Or floating. Or whatever they did, in retreat. Neville just gaped at the Dementors high tailing it away from the silver Patroni like bats out of hell. He lowered his wand and let his bear fade as he felt Shiva behind him also drop her wand and step to his side.

“Did you just see Harry and Hermione in two places at once?” Shiva asked.

“Oh good, that wasn’t just me,” Neville replied a little dumbstruck.

“Did they just kill Dementors?”

“With a sword, first. Did you catch that?” Neville asked.

“Must have missed that part. Luna you alright?” Shiva looked down at the blonde who nodded up at them. “Cool. Neville stay with her. Excuse me while I go check on my ward.” She started numbly walking towards Harry and Tonks.

Neville leaned down and helped Luna to her feet. She looked over at Harry then Hermione and Daphne. “I think I have new material for the next Quibbler article now…”

“Tonks…Tonks…Tonks!” Tonks could hear someone shouting and holding her shoulders. Blinking, she tried to focus. Harry’s messy hair, lightning bolt scar and bright green eyes swam into view above her. Dimly she realized that her head was lying in his lap and his hands were on her shoulders.
“Harry?” Tonks groaned. “Where’s the fire?”

“Tonks!” Harry’s eyes widened and stopped shaking her. Instead the teenager pulled her up into a bone-crushing hug. “Thank god, I thought I was too late for a minute! Are you okay?”

“Besides you bruising my ribs I’m okay, squirt.” Harry let her go and Tonks shook her head trying to clear the cobwebs. “There were Dementors here weren’t there? What happened to the Dementors? I thought getting my soul eaten would hurt a bit more…”

“I killed a few, Hermione killed a few, Daphne killed a few, they ran,” Harry said shrugging. “I think we scared them off.”

“You killed a few.” Tonks nodded like that made any kind of sense at all.

“He’s not lying, Tonks,” Shiva said walking up to the two. She knelt down and pointed to some black ichor on Tonks’ robes. “That’s Dementor goo. Its cloak is over there. Harry, you okay?”

“Fine, Shiva,” Harry smiled at the woman. Tonks just poked a finger into the black ichor with wide eyes.

“Being in two places at once is a new trick. That didn’t hurt at all?” Shiva said. Tonks caught a bit of a desperate laugh at the end of that deadpan question. She was too busy trying to wrap her brain around a dead Dementor to care. And that fact that it had been rather nice to wake up seeing Harry. She shut that part of her thoughts down fast and tried to focus on the far more important issue of a dead Dementor. She darn near choked as what Shiva had said finally registered. Two places at once?

“Nope, didn’t hurt. A bit hard to get the timing right but both Hermione and I were really distracted the first time around so it could’ve been a lot worse. I was mostly worried I wasn’t going to get to Tonks fast enough,” Harry sounded far too cavalier for whatever craziness had just happened.

“Someone –” Tonks asked but her voice cracked before she got further. Swallowing and taking a deep breath she tried again, “Someone what to tell me what the hell I missed?”

“I think we’d all like to hear that story, Mr. Potter,” Bonesy said sounding tired as she walking up with the rest of the group in tow. Tracey looked to be clinging to Daphne’s hand with a death grip while Luna was doing the same to Hermione.

“Tonks was overwhelmed after Hermione and I lost control of our Patroni. I killed the Dementor over me with the Sword of Gryffindor,” Harry said waving to the sword off to the side. “Then I killed the one over Hermione.”

“Swords can’t kill Dementors,” Daphne said staring at the blade like it was going to get up and start floating around in the air. A not entirely unreasonable assumption in Tonks’ humble opinion. “Not even goblin made swords.”

“Hey I’m just telling you what happened not how it happened,” Harry said shrugging.

Luna chuckled softly. “Daphne, you have been friends with Harry long enough that you should know not to try and apply logic to events surrounding him. It seems to be worse than trying to apply logic to me.”

“Anyway,” Hermione said shaking her head, “Harry then had the monumentally stupid idea of trying to use my Time Turner to take us back. Don’t look at me like that, I have permission to use
one from the Deputy Headmistress to attend my classes.” Hermione scowled at Shiva and Bonesy when they stared at her. “I’ve already berated him over it several times. We arrived back an hour earlier, Harry fixed his Patronus rune cluster alternative and we rushed back out to help with the defense.” She paused and looked embarrassed. “While we knew the Sword apparently killed Dementors – or absorbed them I guess is more appropriate – we had no idea until a few minutes ago that the Silver Spirit Patroni could do the same.”

“Well I’m certainly not complaining,” Neville said. “If they hadn’t retreated we’d probably all be de-souled.”

“So let me get this straight, pup,” Sirius said staring at Harry. “You killed a Dementor; which is impossible. Made time your bitch; which is impossible. Made a rune cluster that can also kill a Dementor; which is impossible. And scared over a hundred of the demons off in under a minute with zero casualties?” He whistled and sat down. “Congratulations. You’re officially a Marauder Harry. Seven years we were here and the best we got was a cool map, rumors of a haunting, excellent pranks and animagi. You’ve surpassed us in one night.”

“You should hear what the kid’s done previously,” Shiva muttered shaking her head.

“He’ll need a name,” Remus commented.

“Did anyone see what happened to Pettigrew?” Tracey asked finally letting go of Daphne’s hand.

“He’s long gone by now,” Bonesy sighed. “There’s little point in searching the forest right now with the Dementors still nearby. Even if they’ve been scared off for the moment, there’s no guarantee how long that will last. Let’s go back inside and arrange to get you to a trial Lord Black. We can use the memories of the previous conversation as evidence. Harry, Hermione, considering the extreme circumstances of the past few minutes I’ll…” she trailed off, shook her head and sighed. “I don’t even care anymore. Both of you swear never to abuse a Time Turner again?” The two teens nodded. “Fine. Good job saving us. Don’t do it again. Warning delivered. Nobody mentions that part in official reports.”

“Works for me, Boss,” Tonks said. She turned to Harry and raised her eyebrows. He took the cue and helped her to her feet. “To the Batcave.”

“The Batcave?” a demure voice asked from behind the group. Harry groaned and Tonks felt her hair shift to red before she forced it to a neutral black. She turned to see Headmaster Dumbledore walking towards the group from the castle. He was far enough away that he had probably only heard her final comment.

“Headmaster,” Bonesy said, her voice coated in ice. “How nice of you to turn up after the danger has long passed. I would’ve thought Argus would’ve informed you that Sirius Black was located and that you might have hurried a bit.”

“Sadly these old bones don’t move as quickly as they used to, Amelia,” Dumbledore replied, his eyes twinkling. Tonks’ snort was echoed by Shiva beside her. “I can’t help but notice that the fugitive is unrestrained and does not appear to have any wands covering him.”

“So, Dumbledore isn’t in on the innocence thing then?” Sirius asked cocking a thumb at the old man.

“No, Lord Black, the Headmaster was not to be brought into the fold until proof was attained. Something which we only accomplished earlier tonight,” Bonesy said. She walked past Dumbledore aiming for the doors inside. “Let’s move this inside in case those horrid creatures
decide to try their luck again.” Dumbledore’s flash of frustration was quickly hidden though Tonks took note. She also saw Daphne and Tracey both quietly pocket some of the Dementors’ robes. That was an unpleasant reminder that she’d likely have to burn her own robes. Dementor ichor was not something she wanted to leave bouncing around her washing machine.

“Amelia, the Minister is en route. If you would please present your proof perhaps we can resolve this before he arrives,” Dumbledore said as everyone moved to sit down at the table in the Great Hall. Most of the teens looked utterly exhausted. Tonks was pretty wiped herself though she could at least use her abilities to avoid looking like she felt for the most part.

“Ah so you had enough time to stop and run to Cornelius rather than checking on the safety of your students. Good show, Albus,” Amelia said raising her eyebrows. “I believe we’ll wait for the Minister to arrive himself before we start. I would rather not go through this again. Your pensieve might be required as the court one can’t be removed from the Ministry.”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary, Amelia,” Dumbledore said. Tonks noted that the customary twinkle in his eye had vanished. “Perhaps we could move this to my office.”

“Here is fine. It’s far easier for Cornelius to walk here than all the way up to your office, Albus,” Amelia replied with the ghost of a smile. Dumbledore just frowned at her.

The group sat in uneasy silence for the next few minutes. The only thing of note was Harry’s scabbard for his sword materializing on the table when he idly wondered about it. Those house elves sure were prompt. Harry carefully put away his sword and everyone went silent again. The quiet was broken rather abruptly as the Entrance Hall doors were thrown open and the Minister strode in flanked by Scrimgeour and Dawlish. Tonks bit back a groan as she saw both of them. Of course he had to bring those two.

“Where is he?!?” Fudge shouted. “Where is the madman? Where are the Dementors?! Has he already been Kissed?”

“Calm yourself, Minister, before you give yourself a heart attack,” Amelia commented dryly. “Lord Sirius Black is right here.” She waved her hand and Sirius flashed the man a grin and gave a little wave from his spot at the table beside Remus.

“Ah!” Fudge proved his intelligence by screaming and jumping back. It was all Tonks could do to not slam her head into the table. She couldn’t believe this man had ever been elected. “Aurors! It’s Black! Kill him, quickly!”

“Really, Cornelius?” Amelia groaned and shook her head. “Drop your wand, Dawlish. Stop being an idiot. If Lord Black was going to injury anyone don’t you think he would’ve done so long before you arrived? Scrimgeour wipe that scowl off your face!”

“Madame Bones, I don’t know what Auror Tonks has told you or how she convinced you of the filing error but we need to take that man into custody to deliver the Kiss immediately.”

“This, Harry,” Sirius said with a shrug, “is why I didn’t tell you sooner who I was. Nothing much has changed since they tossed me away and I rather like having my soul.”

“Give Amelia a chance, Sirius,” Harry said giving him a tired grin. “She and Tonks are good at their jobs at least.”

“Thanks, squirt,” Tonks said. She leaned over to ruffle his hair earning an annoyed glare from Harry and a snort of amusement from Shiva and Daphne.
“Head Auror Scrimgeour,” Amelia said drawing herself up. The woman may not have been tall, but she was certainly intimidating. “The situation is under control. Auror Tonks informed me of your lack of investigation into the ‘filing error’. A ‘filing error’ that would have proven impossible to occur had you taken the five minutes required to talk to personnel in either the Wizengamot or Hall of Records. Be that as it may, I and these witnesses – with the exception of Albus Dumbledore – personally all heard the testimony of Peter Pettigrew earlier tonight.”

“That’s impossible!” Fudge shouted turning an impressive shade of red. Tonks only managed that color when she was using her powers.

“Mr. Pettigrew is very much alive, Minister. Or we have a worrying case of a new breed of Inferi that can talk. I prefer the former don’t you?” her smile was all teeth. “Pettigrew informed us that he was the one who betrayed James and Lily Potter as well as being the actual culprit behind the murders of the Muggles on that street. Lord Black was falsely accused.”

“There is no proof of that,” Fudge snarled. Scrimgeour at least appeared to be cowed as he sighed and hung his head. Dawlish simply nodded along with Fudge.

“Pettigrew did escape during the confusion of the mass Dementor attack. I will be bringing up the lack of oversight of those creatures with you later by the way. That the Quidditch incident wasn’t enough for you; now you nearly had seven soulless students, two soulless professors and two soulless Aurors to explain,” Amelia snarled. Tonks shifted back slightly. This was the first time she had actually seen her boss lose her temper. “But that conversation is for later. In private. For the moment, I assure you we all have memories of the confession which we are able to submit either upon return to the Ministry with the use of the court pensieve or right here borrowing Headmaster Dumbledore’s.”

“Impossible!” Fudge scoffed. “He’s obviously confounded you all. Scrimgeour, Dawlish, arrest Black and stun the others until the curse can be lifted from them.” Tonks gaped at the man. Did he honestly believe that or did he just not care?

Before anyone could react to Fudge’s order, seven wands were pointing at the three men. All the school students were on their feet with wands in hand. Tonks’ eyes widened, Harry had been right when he told her off months ago – these teens were not kids. “Madam Bones,” Harry said his voice quiet but dangerous, “we’ve tried your way. Would you let me try mine?”

Amelia sighed. “Please don’t hex the Minister of Magic, Mr. Potter. I can’t overlook an attack like that.”

“I have no intention of starting a fight, Madam Bones,” Harry replied.

“Your actions are pointing to the contrary, Harry,” Dumbledore said as if he was commenting on the weather.

Harry completely ignored Dumbledore and made to step forward. Shiva laid a hand on his shoulder. “Harry, don’t get yourself arrested.”

“Like, I said, Shiva,” Harry said, “none of us intend to start a fight. Only if we are attacked first will we start sending spells back.” She let go of his shoulder and Harry stepped forward. Daphne fell into place on his right, while the others took up offset positions in formation behind them. The Auror in Tonks was impressed. It was a good battlefield formation, able to provide both cover and support as needed.

“Minister Fudge,” Harry said, “Sirius Black is my sworn godfather. He is the Lord Black. We
have both circumstantial evidence and physical proof in the form of memories and/or veritaserum testimony to his innocence. On top of that we have proof from the Ministry itself that he received no trial and has been unlawfully held in Azkaban for the past 12 years. I don’t know why you are unwilling to admit to this error and I don’t particularly care.”

Harry shrugged nonchalantly and grinned at Fudge. Tonks was glad that grin wasn’t directed at her. It sent shivers down her spine. “I am Harry James Potter. I am The-Boy-Who-Lived. I am Heir to House Potter. I am allies with House Longbottom, House Greengrass, House Davis, House Bones, House Lovegood, House Abbott, House Patil, House Li. I have the backing of the Heir Zabini, Heir Bulstrode and Heir Brown. I call several of House Weasley friends and allies. If you truly wish to bury my godfather for crimes he is innocent of then I will call on my allies and bury you for crimes you are guilty of.”

“I am the Minister for Magic boy!”

“Crimes such as,” Harry continued completely ignoring Fudge, “abuse of power, subversion of justice, attempted murder of a Lord, attempted Line Theft…should I go on?”

“How dare you,” Fudge was practically spitting at this point. Scrimgeour had subtly moved to the side, separating himself from the man. Dawlish on the other hand only scowled and tightened his grip on his wand. Everyone else just watched.

Daphne smiled at the man and took up where Harry had left off. “Even if only one or two of the charges stick, Minister, your career will be over. We aren’t asking for much. We’re simply asking that you finally see justice done,” she said shrugging. Then she held up the carrot in place of the stick. “After all, this miscarriage of justice certainly wasn’t done on your watch was it? All you’ve been doing was pursuing an assumed madman, an escaped fugitive. Now that you know the truth of the matter…well it would certainly reflect well on you to have righted such an old wrong. A wrong perpetrated against a Noble House at that! You aren’t the responsible party here; that would be former Minister Millicent Bagnold and former DLME Head Bartemius Crouch.”

Fudge stopped sputtering and looked at the girl. He started twirling his bowler hat in his hands and narrowed his eyes. “Yes, yes it was them wasn’t it…” he muttered. “Amelia, you are certain, Black is innocent?”

“As I have repeatedly said over the past several months: yes,” Amelia said, her voice strained. Tonks was surprised the woman wasn’t hitting someone at this point. Hell, if she hadn’t been so drained, Tonks would probably have been hitting someone – or at least standing up with Harry and his group.

“Hmm, well it appears that the Ministry of Magic owes you an apology then, Lord Black. An official pardon – ”

“Dropping of charges,” Daphne cut in.

“Excuse me?” Fudge asked looking affronted.

“He was never convicted so there is no need for a pardon. You officially drop all charges, Minister.”

Fudge scowled at the correction but nodded. “The Ministry officially drops all charges by my order. The paperwork will be filed post haste. I will contact you with the date for the apology ceremony,” Fudge said nodding to Sirius.
Sirius just raised his eyebrows. “Thanks, Minister. I look forward to your owl. I’d appreciate the Dementors being called off too. And, you know, an article in the Prophet first thing so that people don’t keep trying to kill me or turn me in for a reward.”

“Actually,” Shiva said speaking up, “shouldn’t Harry and his friends get that reward anyway for finding you?”

“Of course, of course. I’ll have the galleons deposited in Mr. Potter’s vaults,” Fudge said waving the issue away. “If there is nothing else pressing I must leave and begin this work.”

“The Dementors, Minister,” Amelia said glaring at him. “Remove those abominable things first. I don’t appreciate them attempting to eat the souls of those under my protection and care.”

With an annoyed nod, Fudge turned and practically ran from the room, Dawlish hurrying to keep up. Scrimgeour turned to Tonks before following. “Auror Tonks, come with me. We have… much to discuss.”

Tonks closed her eyes, trying to get her brain in gear enough to think. Was it worth it? Was there really any point anymore? She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up to see Harry’s green eyes staring down at her in concern. Tonks smirked at him and switched her hair to pink. “Nah, I don’t think so.”

“That was not a request, Auror,” Scrimgeour glared at her. Tonks considered flipping him off but figured it was too much effort.

“Consider this my resignation, boss,” Tonks said firmly.

“Auro – Tonks,” Amelia said turning to look at her. “Are you certain about this?”

“Been thinking about it for a while, ma’am,” Tonks patted Harry’s hand and smiled at her mentor. “Being an Auror is not what I thought it would be and the others only seem to care about my abilities not me or my skills or my brain or my opinions. I think I can do more good elsewhere.”

“I understand. It’s a shame to see you go, but I understand.” Bonesy looked genuinely sad, which was nice. Mad-Eye was going to kill her. Or buy her a firewhiskey and salute her bravery. She never could tell with that crazy old guy.

“Your badge, then,” Scrimgeour said, his scowl firmly set. She tossed it to him. “Good evening to you all.” And just like that, he turned and walked out.

Tonks slumped in her seat. “Well I don’t know about you all, but this metamorphmagus is utterly knackered and seeing as I’m now jobless I need to take a nap or something and find a new prospect in the morning.”

“Well cousin, I’ve been out of the game for a decade or so. If you’re interested, I could use someone to help me clean up the old house from whatever horrible little beasties and curses Mother left behind. I can make the pay pretty good if you’re willing to bring me up to speed,” Sirius said.

“You want to hire me as a maid?” Tonks asked completely deadpan.

“Yup!” Sirius’ smile stretched from ear to ear. “Only the best for my cousin! I’ll even throw in being welcomed back into the Black fold for you and Andi! Since I’m apparently the Lord Black now and all.”
“Can we just throw him back in prison?” Tonks whined. Everyone but Dumbledore started laughing. The old man just scowled, staring daggers at Sirius.

The next day, Harry was meeting up with his friends again in the seventh floor room. It seemed comfier than normal. The customary table was surrounded by armchairs and couches this time rather than the stiff backed chairs. Harry frowned as he walked in. “This definitely wasn’t here last time. Hermione, we’re going to have to experiment with this room I think.”

“I agree, it is most unusual,” his girlfriend nodded.

“Do you think it can provide us with the vista of a snorkack’s natural habitat?” Luna asked.

“Somehow I doubt it works that way, Luna. But sure if you want to try for a snorkack habitat, feel free next time. Just please have one of us with you just in case it actually works, okay?” Harry said chuckling at his friend.

“I promise, Harry. Hello, Tracey. How are you today?”

“Better than last night,” Tracey said shrugging. “You feel better, Luna? Neither of us managed to get back at those arseholes like the others did.”

“True, but I am satisfied to still have my soul and not having to remember that day with mum,” Luna said losing a bit of her levity. She perked back up almost immediately. “It was quite entertaining to see the Dementors splattered, mauled and beaten. Daphne, your hedgehog had very impressive aim and was quite adorable as it went bowling for Dementors.”

Daphne blushed, “Err, thanks, Luna. I’m not sure whether to be embarrassed by the hedgehog thing or not.”

“I think it’s perfect for you,” Tracey said grinning and kissing her on the cheek. “Prickly on the outside, soft and cuddly on the inside.”

“Technically it’s soft and cuddly on the bottom,” Hermione commented.

“She’s soft down there too I imagine.” Gasps sounded at Tracey’s comment followed quickly by laughter though it had at last successfully succeeded in driving Daphne speechless for the first time that Harry could remember.

“So, Harry,” Neville said as they settled into the circle. “Have you figured out how the Sword was able to kill the Dementors?”

“Remus said that it was probably something involving the basilisk venom, the goblin steel, and whatever else the Sword has imbibed over the centuries. We’ll probably never know for sure. And now the thing can probably suck souls too so there’s that. That’s one scary sword. Hell, I’m almost afraid to touch the darn thing now!”

“Being able to summon it whenever you want is useful though.”

“Still a scary sword,” Harry muttered. Hermione patted his arm in commiseration.

The door to the Room opened again and Sirius and Shiva walked in. Shiva frowned at the couches surrounding the table but moved to sit beside Harry and kicked her feet up. Sirius was wearing a grin large enough to split his face in half and handed the Daily Prophet to Harry before claiming his own armchair.
The front page story was: *Sirius Black proven innocent! Mass murderer and master manipulator Peter Pettigrew still at large!*

“‘Master manipulator’?” Harry commented raising his eyebrow. “Yeah he pulled one good trick, but I hardly think that counts as a master manipulator. He wouldn’t have had to hide as a rat for 12 years if that was true.”

“That’s Rita Skeeter for you,” Neville said shaking his head. “The woman’s a menace but she sells papers well.”

“I really don’t care what they say, I’m just happy to be free,” Sirius said not dropping his grin.

“Lord Black, may I get an interview with you for the *Quibbler*?” Luna asked him flashing him with puppy dog eyes even better than Sirius’ actual dog eyes when he was Snuffles.

“Well...” Sirius tapped his chin, “I don’t know...I make it a policy not to talk to reporters after all...” the gleam in his eye belied his teasing.

“Ah, then there is no problem,” Luna smiled at him and made a grand flourish. “I am no reporter, Lord Black. I am an explorer!”

Sirius burst out laughing. “Good for you, girl! Reporters are evil, explorers are fun. I’ll answer almost anything you want in a little bit. And no more of this Lord Black thing everyone. It’s Sirius. Or Padfoot if you want. I’ll answer to Snuffles in dog form too I suppose. But no more Lord Black. Before I was tossed onto that tropical island I was sure my parents had disinherited anyway so I’m just as uncomfortable with the title as you are.”

“Tropical island?” Tracey asked wide eyed. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to have Azkaban on a cold, miserable spot not the tropics?”

“Nope, I was never in Azkaban. According to the Ministry I was ‘unlawfully detained’. They never specified where,” Sirius said still holding his grin. “So since they didn’t bother to specify I can go along thinking I was having a prolonged vacation on a deserted tropical island!”

“Ugh...” a few of the teens stared at the man blankly.

Sirius just sighed and shook his head. “You kids need to loosen up. It’s a joke guys, I know I was on Azkaban I just prefer not to remember that horrible little hell-hole.”

“Were there snorkacks on the island?” Everyone turned to look at Luna who just stared back with her head slightly sideways and a dreamy smile on her face. Laughter flowed out of everyone and she just smiled back at them all far more lucid than her comment would have made it seem.

“Sirius, you said Padfoot earlier and mentioned a map last night,” Harry said as he calmed down. He pulled out the Marauder’s Map and held it up. “You wouldn’t have happened to be talking about this would you?”

“Hey so you do have it! I was worried that you didn’t actually have it and never figured out my message.”

“What message?” Harry asked.

“My response when you sent the letter with Hedwig a few days ago,” Sirius shrugged.

“It was a paw print, Sirius. A paw print. Do you know how annoying that was?” Harry
deadpanned. Hermione nodded along beside him and Daphne huffed her agreement.

“Well yeah, but the paw print wasn’t all, pup. ‘I solemnly swear’ like with map? That’s why I signed Padfoot…you didn’t figure that out?”

“I only got the damn map yesterday morning,” Harry glowered at the man. “High marks for security, but failing marks for assumptions.”

“Oh. My bad. It was still pretty funny though yeah?” the former fugitive smiled at Harry utterly ignoring the death stare from the teen.

“What map are we talking about?” Shiva asked holding up a hand. “Anyone care to share with the class?”

“Yes, please do tell, Harry,” Daphne said taking the blank paper.

“I solemnly swear I am up to no good,” Sirius said reached over the girl and tapping the parchment. The Map sprang to life and everyone crowded around to look at it.

“Wow,” Shiva murmured. “That is impressive. Harry, this is how you found out about Pettigrew I assume?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I was checking on everyone to make sure nobody was getting back for the thing with Luna and I saw him with Ron. That’s when I remember that Scabbers looked like how Remus described Pettigrew and put two and two together. I take it he was Wormtail, Sirius?”

“Yup, and Remus was Moony with your father rounding it out as Prongs.” Sirius paused and looked fondly at the Map. “It was a lot of fun running around and filling this thing in. We thought we had found every room in the castle, but obviously we missed a few. Look, this room apparently doesn’t show.”

“Neither does the Chamber,” Daphne said nodding. “Harry, I think we should try to improve on this next year.”

Harry shrugged. “Sure, assuming no one tries to kill us again I’m all for improving it.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up and Harry could hear her breathing quicken slightly. “Mr. Black –”

“Sirius,” he corrected.

“Sirius,” Hermione quickly said, “can you tell us some of the charms you used to enchant it? It seems quite advanced to be able to track people even in an animagus form.”

“Well,” he scratched his chin again, “I didn’t really do much of the charm work. Remus did some but Lily was really the genius when it came to charms. She was the one who ended up doing most of the enchanting. I can pass along a few notes though to get you guys started. You might want to start fresh though so you don’t risk messing up this one.”

“Oh,” Hermione’s dejected expression had Harry hugging her shoulders and promising to let her check his mum’s old notebook to see if she put anything about the Map in there.

“Actually, Harry…” Sirius shuffled around in his seat a bit before sighing and leaning forward. “I wanted to talk to you and Shiva about this summer.”

“What about it?” Harry asked. Beside him he saw Shiva tense slightly and drape a protective arm
“Uh, you sure you want to talk about this, you know, now?” he glanced at the others causing Harry to sigh.

“I’m just going to tell them later anyway. Might as well skip the middleman as it is. What did you want to say?”

Sirius sighed again and nodded at that. “Right. Okay. So look, you know I’m your godfather right? Well, I kinda screwed that one up royally. I was supposed to take you in after…that night. I saw a bit of what happened with the Dursleys during the summer and I was going to offer to let you stay with me from now on. Now that I’m free and all.” He held a hand to ward off Shiva when she opened her mouth to say something. “I want you to know that my home is always open to you. Well, when my home is habitable that is. I have very low opinions of the old Black house, but that that’s neither here nor there.” He shrugged and looked a bit sad. “I hung out with you guys as Padfoot long enough over the summer to know that you’re happy with Shiva so I understand if you want to stay with her. I wasn’t there for you; she was. Both of you are welcome to stay with me should you need a place in the future.”

Shiva smiled a bit and relaxed back into the couch. She batted her eyes playfully at the man, “You’re a little old for me, Sirius. Sorry old dog.”

“Old?” he held a hand to his heart and Neville and Tracey shook their heads laughing. “Me? Oh, you wound me woman!”

“Thanks for the offer, Sirius,” Harry said grinning at the two. “We’ll certainly come visit, but yeah, I would like to stay with Shiva.”

“I understand. I’m sorry for not being around when you needed me, pup. I’d still like to be a part of your life though.”

“You keep doing right by him and you will be,” Shiva said all serious again. “But you abandon Harry again to go off on another revenge quest and I neuter you.”

“No you won’t,” Hermione commented. She shrugged at the raised eyebrows that comment received and continued, “Simply because I will have done it first.”

“You may be the girlfriend, Hermione, but remember that I am the Slytherin Slayer,” Daphne said sitting up straight and thrusting her chest out pompously. That set off another round of laughter. “Actually, Harry, speaking of that, do you and Shiva mind meeting me at Gringotts sometime early this summer?”


Daphne just grinned evilly. “Well, I finally got a good idea of the going rates. I believe we have a basilisk to render.”

“That’s...I can’t believe I didn’t think of that before...” Shiva said with a note of wonder in her voice.

“But don’t worry; I started looking into selling prices and commission fees as soon as we all left the hospital wing last year. If we go with the goblins we should turn the highest profit. They take a hefty margin but they also are the only ones to actually be interested in eating the meat of the snake. They’ll take most of the meat as acceptable payment so it works out largely in our favor.”
“Sounds good to me. We can negotiate terms there right?” Harry asked and she nodded. “Okay then. Just let us know when.”

Sirius looked between the group members like they had gone crazy but didn’t find any signs of pranking at all and his eyes widened. “I’m going to need that story, pup…One more thing first though. I, err…may have gone to talk to Gringotts earlier…” he ran a hand through his hair and shifted a bit in his seat. “And I…might have gone and made you my Heir…”

Neville and Daphne’s mouths dropped open and Tracey whistled. Luna just nodded as if she had always expected this while Shiva groaned and shook her head ruefully. Tonks leaned back into her seat with a large sigh. Hermione narrowed her gaze at Harry and fell into her ‘I’m deep in thought. Disturb me at your own peril.’ look before eventually giving a large sigh and nodding her assent. Harry felt like he was missing something that the rest of the room got implicitly…

“Um, okay…thanks I guess?” Harry said fishing for more clarifying input.

“I got a quick checkup last night after the attack. Looks like my chances of having kids are pretty low now after my island stay. So I figured the least I could do was give my House to you. It will hopefully make up for some of the problems I caused.” Then he grinned and wiggled his eyebrows, “Also it should be bloody fun for you, pup.”

Harry shook his head. “I really need to look up more things concerning pureblood politics don’t I?”

“Probably a good idea, Harry,” Shiva said. “You do seem to be acquiring quite a bit of power as the years progress, kid.”

“Yeah about that,” Sirius said with a snort. “Just how much of that thing with Fudge last night was a bluff? That’s quite a bit of pull you’re starting to amass.”

“Probably about half and half,” Harry said shrugging.

Daphne picked up the conversation. “While all the families he mentioned are personal friends, their parents may or may not actually go against the Minister if we asked. I know my father would not – at least not unless he was offered a very good deal with very few downsides. The Li’s and Patil’s would likely consider it repayment for their mistake with Luna and reclaiming their honor, but…” she shrugged.

Neville took over. “Once we all actually take the Lordships we’ll be able to make some real changes. Until then, though, it mostly comes down to what we can convince our parents and guardians to do. I’m a little surprised Fudge caved like that. You would think that a politician would’ve been a bit savvier.”

Tracey snorted. “I’m amazed the idiot manages to tie his own shoes in the morning. How did he get elected?”

“Daddy blames the Rotfang Conspiracy.” Luna said bobbing her head.

“Rotfang Conspiracy?” Sirius asked.

“Wake me when we return to sanity, Harry.” Hermione groaned, laying her head against Harry’s shoulder. He smiled and patted her head as Luna launched into her explanation about gum disease and the takeover of the Ministry.
“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me Harry,” Dumbledore said with a smile as he leaned back in his office’s chair. Harry was sitting across from him petting Fawkes who had come over to perch on Harry’s shoulder. Harry had thankfully missed the flash of annoyance on Dumbledore’s face as the familiar made his allegiances clear.

“Well it didn’t particularly seem like I had a choice in the matter, Sir,” Harry shrugged. “Is this something I need to call Professor McGonagall or Professor Babbling for?”

“Of course not, Harry,” Dumbledore replied with a twinkle in his eyes. He gave a grandfatherly smile down at the boy. “I merely wished to inform you of some sad news.” He saw Harry’s expression harden. “I know that Sirius Black is your godfather, Harry. I understand he offered to let you live with him over the summer months as well.” Dumbledore paused as he saw Harry’s expression lighten. He had to proceed carefully so as not to lose the child completely. There was still a chance to salvage all this. “I am afraid that at the last Wizengamot session, it was determined that Lord Black is not a suitable guardian for you. His residency in Azkaban – unjust as it was – has affected him. He has been directed to consult with Mind Healers before being allowed to accept any sort of responsibility position for you. The period of adjustment is expected to take between two to three years.”

Harry’s expression had gone from annoyed to entertained. That was not right. Not right at all. The boy should be despondent and pleading. Begging for some sort of loophole. Dumbledore frowned. He had missed something. “I am very sorry, Harry. But you must return to the Dursleys again for the foreseeable future.” Harry burst into laughter and Fawkes trilled along with him. Dumbledore dropped the twinkle entirely and only barely managed to prevent his confusion from showing.

“You think – you think I’m going to the Dursleys?” Harry wheezed out between his laughs. “You seriously think I’m going to Dursleys? Wow, you have got to be the single worst magical guardian in existence!”

Dumbledore had to bite his lip to avoid scowling at the child. “My boy, I assure you that it is the safest place for you. Attempting to stay with Sirius would only see the man back in trouble with the law. I will speak with the Weasleys and see if you can stay with them towards the end of the summer.” Harry’s laughs only increased.

“Headmaster,” Harry finally said after calming enough to speak, “you are an uninformed idiot. I’m sorry, Sir, but seriously, either you just don’t care or you are way too busy. The Dursleys haven’t been my legal guardians since two weeks into the summer!” He started laughing again and Dumbledore frowned. The boy had to be bluffing. Surely no one had…Babbling…what had that fool of a woman done now? “Even better, the Dursleys were never really my guardians to begin with! They never filed any sort of paperwork for it and they didn’t bother trying to fight for it when it got challenged. The next time I see the Dursleys will be in a courtroom or police station!”

Panicking slightly, Dumbledore glanced at one of the many instruments in his office. His eyes widened as he saw that it had indeed stopped spinning. From the amount of dust on it, it had probably stopped months ago! “Harry…who…why…?”

“Why?” Harry asked a note of frustration and anger creeping into his voice. “Seriously? Let’s see, emotional abuse, psychological abuse, some physical abuse, starvation, isolation…so many reasons to choose from, Sir. The list goes on and on. Of course physical proof is a little lackluster, so I can’t quite bring them up on charges yet. But I’m sure you get the picture. As to who, I’m surprised you don’t know.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore implored the boy. “Professor Babbling is nowhere near old enough to be a
suitable guardian.”

“And yet she’s the first one who gave two wits about me in my entire remembered life. And it’s entirely legal so there is nothing you can do about it, Headmaster. No magic, no bribes, no compulsions or trickery were involved. Just plain old solicitors. As soon as I can manage it I’ll be free of you as well. Sir.” Dumbledore’s scowl slipped across his features before he could school it back into grandfatherly disapproval. He had to try one more time. For the boy’s late parents.

“Harry, I can understand your dislike of your family – ”

“Oh no, Sir. I love my family,” Harry said with a grin. “I just consider Professor Babbling to be my family. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia and Dudley are my relatives. Nothing more.”

It took all he had to maintain the persona. “I can understand your dislike of your relatives, Harry. But they were the safest place for you. With the blood wards intact you were safe from Voldemort and his minions.”

“Voldemort is a disembodied spirit and his minions have stayed quiet for over a decade. We’re setting up good wards at Shiva’s place and have other options as well. Those blood wards certainly never protected me from my relatives or from Aunt Marge. I’ll take my chances, Sir.”

“Harry you must listen to my counsel.”

“No. I really don’t have to. All you’ve done is lie, misdirect and manipulate my life. I’m fine on my own thanks.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore closed his eyes. This was his final attempt. “I am…concerned. The actions you have taken recently…assaulting classmates last year, continually insulting Professor Snape, befriending two Dark families, injuring an older student, threatening the entirety of Ravenclaw House, seeking out a fugitive, threatening the Minister himself! Harry, I am worried you are walking a path that others before you have treaded. A path far too easy to stumble down. You are heading down a Dark road, my boy. I implore you to please, listen to me when I tell you it is not too late to turn back.”

Harry growled at him. “Dark? Seriously? How much of an idiot do you think I am, Headmaster? Every single thing you just listed I was perfectly justified doing. And I have no idea who you are talking about with Dark families – unless you mean Tracey and Daphne in which case you are blinder than I thought. Headmaster Dumbledore I am no more Dark than Professor McGonagall or Shiva. I defend myself and my friends. That’s it. I think we’re done here, Sir.” Harry scowled and stood up walking towards the door.

“I am sorry, Harry. I am truly sorry,” Dumbledore said softly as his office door slammed, Fawkes riding out with Harry leaving Dumbledore alone with his thoughts.

Harry was lost. He had fallen far enough that he no longer saw the danger of his actions or the damage resulting from them. Dumbledore’s initial plans were no longer viable. He had seen this with Gellert and refused to act out of love. He had seen this with Tom and refused to act out of naivety. He would no longer refuse to act with Harry Potter. It broke his heart, but…sacrifices had to be made for the Greater Good.
Chapter 15: Spoils, Wives and Plots

The gang had met back up at Shiva’s flat again shortly into the start of the summer for another movie night. This time Remus and Sirius had joined them as well as Totally-Not-A-Maid Tonks. Hannah, Susan and Amelia – surprisingly enough – came over as well. With the addition of a few extra conjured couches and armchairs there was just enough room for everyone.

“If we end up adding any more people to the group we’re going to need to find a new place to hold these meetings,” Neville said with a chuckle. He was sandwiched between Susan and Hannah who had each grabbed one of his arms to drape over their shoulders.

“I’d volunteer my home but none of our rooms are much bigger,” Amelia commented shrugging.

“Don’t look at me,” Sirius said from the seat next to Amelia. “Black Manor isn’t nearly suitable for company yet. You’d be more likely to die from some random curse flying off the silverware or have your hand eaten by a book.”

“Eaten by a book?” Hermione asked looking utterly horrified at the possibility. Harry chuckled at his girlfriend. She had been leaning against him far more than usually and the sheer audacity of a book that harmed its reader was the first thing to get her to shift enough for him to feel his arm again.

“Yeah and that’s one of the tamer ones. I tell you, mum had some nasty volumes in that library. I swear I found one that will literally turn someone inside out if you don’t open to the correct page first!”

“Wow it’s really that bad at your old place, Sirius?” Harry asked.

Tonks shuddered. “You have no idea, Harry. Hell, just yesterday I found an innocent little locket that felt all sorts of wrong and I swear the thing was whispering to me. We tried to toss it but that crazy house elf damn near had a coronary and started sobbing his eyes out. Something about belonging to ‘Great Master Regulus’, Sirius’ brother. We let the poor thing keep it eventually as long as he promised not to give it to anyone.”

“I still can’t believe he stopped insulting us after that,” Sirius said shaking his head. “Kreacher hated me pretty much since I could talk and he sure didn’t seem fond of you at all Tonksie.”

“Yeah, well I’m not complaining. I figure if that house hasn’t driven him insane yet then leaving him the whispering locket for another few years won’t make him any worse. You know I think I’ve gotten more injuries from that house than the entire time I was with the Aurors. Though that may be more of a knock against them in some ways...” Tonks shrugged.

“So what horror show are you subjecting us to this week, Harry?” Daphne asked. “It’s not another crazed robot assassin is it? I admit a naked Schwarzenegger is yummy but that endoskeleton,” she shivered and Tracey rubbed her back.

“Aww, don’t worry. It’s better than a ghost that literally haunts your dreams, hon,” Tracey said trying to avoid thinking about Freddy.

“I figured one final horror movie that I’ve always wanted to see and then we go to science fiction,” Harry said.
Hermione leaned back against him again and nodded. “Back to the Future is a good choice. What was the horror one?”

“Alien,” Harry said.

Tonks perked up at that and widened her eyes. “Alien? Yeah I’m moving.” She left her armchair and budged Harry over to muscle into the space on his other side, pushing Shiva off the couch.

“Hey! I was sitting there!” Shiva grumbled.

“Yeah well this movie scares my hair white. The second one is great fun, but this one is scary as hell. So I’m sitting next to the one who suggested it so he’s the one going deaf with my screams and taking the brunt of my arm clinging.”

Hermione twisted to eye Tonks. “You do realize I am also sitting right here so you will be screaming me deaf as well?”

“Your problem for associating with the boy, Hermione,” Tonks stated matter-of-factly. Hermione shook her head in exasperation, but couldn’t dispute that fact.

“Well that certainly doesn’t bode well,” Susan muttered. “Is my boggart going to end up changing after this?”

“Don’t worry, Susan,” Hannah said with a rueful smile, “Neville will protect us.”

“Yup, that I will.” Neville puffed his chest out causing a round of laughter.

Luna looked up from petting Crookshanks. The little part-Kneazle was curled up on the girl’s lap and purring contentedly. “Tracey, I was not here for the last round of movies so I am not certain of proper procedure. If I get scared may I hide with you? Harry seems to be taken already.” Tracey chuckled but nodded.

“Alright all, let’s start this thing,” Shiva said as she hit play.

A little under an hour later almost everyone was glaring at Harry. Hermione’s head was buried in his chest and Tonks had dug claw marks into his other arm. Daphne growled low. “Harry, your movie choosing privileges are hereby revoked. I am going to have nightmares about that chestburster thing until the day I die.”

“Didn’t you fight a basilisk though?” Luna asked from the other side of Tracey. Her voice was muffled since she was currently burrowing into the older girl’s side much like Hermione was with Harry.

“Give me a thousand year old basilisk over that thing any day.”

Tracey shrugged as best she could. “I still say it’s better than Freddy.”

“I could’ve sworn I remember it being bigger from when Dudley was watching it,” Harry muttered sullenly.

“I would really rather it not get much bigger than that,” Remus muttered. “Imagine something larger jumping out of someone’s chest.”

“Just keep watching,” Tonks said finally loosening her grip a bit. “It gets bigger.”
“Oh god, is that the chestburster?” Shiva said gaping at the 7 foot tall creature on the screen. “Talk about your growth spurts...”

“No wonder my parents didn’t let me watch this movie,” Hermione said from Harry’s chest. “Next time we watch Jurassic Park. Everyone loves dinosaurs. Even when they’re eating you everyone loves dinosaurs. Please tell me they kill it with fire Tonks? Everything dies when you torch it with fire.”

“Not everything,” Tonks muttered.

“Yeah, okay. That was one intelligent monster,” Harry said shaking his head. “Tonks how the hell did they ramp up the sequel without making it as scary?”

“Tons more aliens, plus Marines, plus a kid too smart for her own good – ”

“Like Harry,” at least four voices said at the same time. Hermione, Neville, Luna and Daphne all looked at each other and laughed.

“Yes, like Harry, and lots more action with a smidge of horror. It’s really good. We will have to watch it. Oh and the Queen is badass. Total BAMF. Also like Harry.” Tonks grinned at them all.

“BAMF?” Harry asked.

Shiva groaned and pointed her finger at Tonks. “Guardian verdict. Don’t explain that acronym. They know enough curses already.”

“I’ll tell you later, pup,” Sirius said with a cocky grin. Shiva threw a cushion at him and Amelia reached over to slap the back of his head.

Tonks groaned as she collapsed on the bed in her flat with her arm over her eyes. “What am I doing? What the bloody hell is wrong with my mind!?”

She had slipped up. A perfectly reasonable excuse to tease Harry for picking one of the movies she both loved and hated had somehow turned into something that ended with her clinging to him like a lovesick teenager. With Hermione on his other side! What had she been thinking?! Yes he was now Heir to two Houses so he was technically still available – but that shouldn’t matter! He was Harry Potter! He was barely 14 and she was almost 20!

‘That age gap isn’t going to matter by the time he graduates,’ a traitorous corner of her mind whispered. ‘Your mum and dad are eight years apart after all.’

“Not helping conscience,” Tonks growled at herself. “Great now I’m talking to myself. I need a freaking drink.”

She knew what the problem was, which ultimately just made things even worse. Tonks’ abilities had been present since she was a toddler. She’d been changing colors to blend in with the furniture since before she could remember. It had all started out so fun. Changing bodies and colors like most people changed clothes was her favorite game. Then she started school at Hogwarts.

At first the others had been weirded out. Then they got annoyed. Then scared. She’d been called a freak and a deviant for nearly three years. At the time she had learned to brush it off. She’d met Charlie and Bill and Shiva and things hadn’t been so bad for the most part. People were idiots and she could have fun with the idiots. All it took was a quick change to do some revenge with their
face and boom! Problem solved.

Then she’d hit puberty and suddenly people stopped disliking her. It seemed most of the males in the castle had all at once realized that they didn’t have to date their Veela supermodel. They just had to date her. Tonks could look like anybody. And if the boys hadn’t had a picture of their perfect woman then all they had to do was sculpt one. A bit of a breast expansion here, a waist tuck there, a hair bob up top...on and on and on. At first she’d loved the attention. Boys liked her. They wanted to be with her, to talk to her. By the time she realized what had been going on she’d already had a reputation of being easy to date. None got further than a kiss but all had tried. The only exception had been Charlie but Charlie was only interested in dragons. Hell, Tonks was half convinced if he could find a dragon willing, he’d marry her. Or maybe he was just into guys. It didn’t really matter, he never looked at her beyond giving her prank advice.

Once she figured out that the boys at school were only going out with her for her powers she had stopped dating. A lot of the girls still hated her since she could still be more beautiful than them without trying and their boyfriends still wanted to go after her instead. By the time she’d graduated, Tonks had managed to get a far different rep. She was known as one of the most dangerous people in school and hardly anyone had had the guts to go up to her by the end for fear she’d snap.

The Aurors were supposed to be different. She’d been one of the few accepted, one of the youngest ever. She’d been Mad-Eye Moody’s protégé. His very last before he retired last year. She had excelled at everything except the stealth portions. And yet it was school all over again. If they didn’t see her as just an asset to be used thanks to her powers than she was simply an upstart with lofty, unattainable ideas. Never mind that her ideas would’ve improved the security of a dozen checkpoints for half the cost. Or that they still didn’t have animagus wards installed anywhere. Or that she had managed to take out three gangs by posing as one of the captured members and going to the meets. None of that mattered. All that mattered was that she could shift to become whatever they currently needed.

And then there was Harry.

Tonks plopped down onto her couch with Muggle tequila in hand and scowled. Harry. The teenager who had never once said anything about her abilities beyond that she ‘needed to keep her hair colorful.’ Which hadn’t even been about her powers but about her stupid mood! Tonks downed the glass of alcohol and poured herself another. Harry had never cared about her powers. He looked on it as something funny and cool but that was it. And she knew he wasn’t gay since he was with Hermione. And she’d caught at least Daphne and sometimes Luna eyeing him as well. And now her bloody cousin had to go and make him another bloody Heir so he was back on the market!

Tonks finished her drink and glared at the glass. When had she finished the bottle? Not important. She had more. She needed to drink enough to forget about the teenager with beautiful eyes and an even more beautiful personality. She needed to drink enough to remember that she couldn’t let herself fall for him. She needed to drink enough to hope that he’d still be available when he was older and she wouldn’t feel like a cradle-robber.

Now where was that extra bottle of tequila?

Hermione sat down to dinner with her parents smiling at Crookshanks as he hopped up into his place at the table. It might not be totally normal to have a place setting for your cat but Crooks was practically a member of the family. He was certainly smart enough to warrant a bit of extra consideration and if it made him less likely to ‘accidentally’ claw her shirts or robes well...it
seemed like an easy enough concession.

“So, Hermione, when are we going to meet this boyfriend of yours?” her father, Richard, asked.

“Dad, you already met him,” Hermione said shaking her head in exasperation. “The summer before my second year; remember?”

“That doesn’t count,” Emma interjected. “That was simply saying hello to your best friend and putting a face to a name. We have yet to meet him as your boyfriend. They are far different circumstances, dear.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Dad, Mum, remember how I told you about some of our adventures? And about some of Harry’s circumstances – specifically regarding his upbringing?”

“I remember you carefully evading telling us about how dangerous your school actually is and only admitting to it after we threatened to pull you out. Are those the adventures you’re talking about, honey?” Richard asked. His smile was somewhat strained though Hermione was slightly relieved that he was at least cracking a joke about it and teasing her instead of the riot act she had received last summer.

“Err, yes, Dad,” Hermione mumbled. “Those would be the adventures...At least last year wasn’t as bad right?”

Richard groaned and shook his head. “I hardly call you nearly getting your soul eaten by a giant skeletal mouth in a robe ‘better’, Hermione.”

Hermione paled a bit as Crookshanks gave a sound reminiscent of a croaking laugh. “It really wasn’t that bad, Daddy. I was surrounded by my friends and several adults and...”

“Hermione,” Emma said raising her eyebrows, “while we may not be heavily involved in your world we are still somewhat resourceful. If you really don’t want us to know what is going on you should never have introduced us to that lovely Shiva woman or Amelia Bones.”

“And you really shouldn’t have told us the name of that magazine your friend writes for,” Richard said. He chuckled. “Honestly, honey, getting yourself in the paper is a rather poor way of staying quiet about these things.”

Hermione groaned. “I didn’t realize Luna had printed a story about that...Ugh, well that sucks.”

“It could be worse. To be honest, the only reason we aren’t tearing down that school at the foundations to get you out is because it appears your adventures are considered rather extreme even by their standards! I doubt us simply moving you to a new school would curb this wild child we’ve apparently raised. I’m actually a little impressed.” Richard beamed at his daughter. “From what I’ve read, those Dementor things were considered unkillable before you and your boyfriend figured out a way to take them out. Good show, dear, good show!”

“It was mostly, Harry,” Hermione said blushing. “I just yelled at him for nearly getting himself killed. Again...I really do need to stop freaking out when he gets into dangerous situations like that – I truly should be used to it by now...” Hermione finished in a mutter. Shaking her head she turned back to her parents. “Anyway, that feeds nicely back into my original point. Dad, Harry is not going to be intimidated by you. You’re a dentist. He’s faced a 60 foot snake, a troll, an evil madman, said soul-sucking affronts to nature...you’re far too nice to worry him.”

“Oh?” Emma said. Her mouth quirked up as Richard mimed holding his heart in pain. “I’m sure we can come up with something, honey. There is a natural progression to these things after all.”
“Mother, please,” Hermione groaned resisting the impulse to slam her head onto the table. The last thing Harry needed was her parents trying to harass him. She paused for a moment as she considered whether or not she should be bringing up the more...unusual aspect of her developing relationship now or put it off til later. Much later. Years later.

“Honey,” Richard said cocking his head. “You’re thinking about something far too hard again.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she deadpanned.

“You might as well just tell us now, Hermione.”

“I’d really rather not. You’re not going to like it. It’s taken me some time to get used to it myself,” Hermione sighed. It was a losing battle trying to fight her parents. It was like fighting a brick wall.

“Hermione, what is wrong?” Emma asked her concern evident.

“Nothing’s wrong, mum.” Hermione shrugged. “It’s just...unusual. It’s not quite what we’re used to.”

“There’s a lot of that in the wizarding world from what I understand,” Richard said slowly.

“Yes, but this is a situation that doesn’t come up very often even by their standards. It will likely happen quite a bit more though in my generation if only because of how many families were brought to the brink of dying out in the last war...”

“Hermione, daughter, honey, stop evading.” Her dad gave her his patented ‘I am your father, do what I say’ look.

She caved. “Fine. I’ve told you how Harry is the last of his family, yes? And I’ve told you that his godfather was recently cleared of all charges? Well Sirius was also the last of his family, except Sirius has encountered issues due to his imprisonment so he’s effectively sterile. He nominated Harry to carry on his line. Going by the archaic rules of wizarding culture, Harry needs to keep the two lines separate.”

“Please tell me that doesn’t mean what I think it means?” Emma said leaning back into her chair with a deep sigh.

“It does actually, mum,” Hermione said grimacing. “Surprisingly it does make some sense and I can actually understand the initial rationale. It wasn’t because the leaders wanted harems, it was because they wanted to avoid killing themselves off. Purebloods are a notoriously small community; many of them are related to each other in some way. If they allowed two or more lines to merge then you’d quickly wind up with even less suitable partners and a great deal of inbreeding. By splitting the lines and having half-brothers and half-sisters instead of full siblings they could continue on intermarrying without worrying about much more than cousins marrying cousins. There wouldn’t be as many problems with genetic disorders that way. So it makes sense for a small community.”

Hermione shrugged. “I’m just glad that I found out about this type of situation earlier so I had time to get used to it. Now that Harry is in this boat I can honestly say I’m not particularly surprised...everything that happens around that boy is odd.”

“You’re still planning to continue dating him knowing he’s going to have a second girlfriend?” Richard asked with wide eyes.
“Yes, I do,” Hermione said simply. “I care about him a great deal, Daddy. Harry is sweet, caring, dependable, powerful, smart and ambitious. He doesn’t care for his fame but he will use it if he has to in order to help a friend and he routinely risks his own life to save ours. He always puts me and his other friends first – even though I can be...a bit bossy. He understands I only really get that way when I’m stressed and he’s learning how to calm me down without calling any attention to it. He is everything I’ve ever hoped for in a boy and I have no intention of letting him get away.”

“And the second woman in his life doesn’t matter to you at all?” Emma pressed.

“While I admit it’s not ideal per se nor is it what I grew up imagining...I’m not above admitting it could be...um...err...interesting,” Hermione said with a blush.

“Oh, really?” Richard said his eyebrows climbing into his hairline.

“Yeah...two of our friends are proceeding in that direction and I can see some of the appeal. Actually,” Hermione admitted, her face deepening to a dark red, “it’s a bit of a shame really. The girl I’d primarily try to steer Harry to is already taken unfortunately. Daphne is a good match for him both in intelligence and skill. She’s already become something like his right hand. But she’s with Tracey – at least for the moment – so I’ve made a list of other suitable prospects. The real trick is going to be convincing both of them that the age difference is acceptable I think...I’m still working on how to bring up.”

“You’ve made a list of potential girlfriends for your boyfriend...” Her mother sounded both impressed and incredulous.

“Well of course. If Harry is going to be forced into having a second wife then I am bloody well going to be sure that I like this girl and that she is well suited for him.”

“He can’t just say no?”

Hermione sighed. “Technically he could – and knowing Harry he probably would. But in practical terms it would be a very bad idea. If we intend to remain in the wizarding world then a deliberate snub like that would make life very difficult.” Hermione paused and gave a small smile. “It would also be horribly unfair to Sirius. He seems like a nice man and he doesn’t deserve to have his family name die out just because I wasn’t willing to share.”

Richard groaned and ran a hand over his eyes. “So how does Harry feel about all this?”

Hermione frowned and Crookshanks made his little laugh again. “Laugh it up fuzzball,” she muttered, then continued louder, “Actually, I’m not sure. Now that you mention it, Dad, he really would’ve talked to me about it before we left school.” Hermione’s eyes widened and she chewed on her bottom lip. “Oh I hope he understood what Sirius had meant. If he doesn’t realize that he’s expected to have another girlfriend...”

Emma looked at Richard and laughed. “That’s our girl. She’s ten steps ahead yet still skipping the very first step!”

“I think I need to talk to Harry this weekend...” Hermione muttered.

Gringotts loomed ahead of Harry and Shiva as he walked towards the large white building. It still caused him to smile; he found it one of the most impressive buildings in Diagon Alley. Seeing Daphne standing just beside the steps leading up, Harry waved. She nodded back to him though the man beside her didn’t do much beyond blink.
“Hello, Heir Potter,” Daphne said giving a slight curtsy as they came up and raising her eyebrows at him.

Harry took her cue and bowed back. “Hello, Heiress Greengrass, Lord Greengrass.”

“Heir Potter,” Daphne’s father calmly said nodding his head. “Professor Babbling, good morning. We haven’t had the pleasure of meeting before. I am Lord Marcus Greengrass. I’ve heard you have some skill at warding and rune crafting similar to your ward.”

“I’m better with wardings, yes, but I’m not as good with the rune crafting as Harry, Lord Greengrass,” Shiva said shaking his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Before anyone could say anything more a small bundle flew around the corner nearby and jumped into Harry’s arms. “Harry! You made it! How are you? Daphne said I should leave you alone for a while, but I said she was being boring. I mean, you killed a Dementor! How cool is that! And you guys have a nickname now! I heard how you guys stood up to Ravenclaw and then to the Minister! You totally need to take her as your second wife! I can help. I know all her favorite jewelry so I can totally help you bribe her and – ”

“Astoria!” Lord Greengrass snarled. “We have business to discuss. Don’t you have shopping you are supposed to be doing?”

“But, Daddy...” Astoria pouted. Harry was still trying to figure out how he was supposed to be reacting. The girl was adorable but she seemed to have a knack for rendering him somewhat speechless.

“No buts Astoria,” Greengrass sighed and shook his head. He patted her shoulder then gently pushed her back the way she came. “We have quite a bit to discuss and it wouldn’t due to give the wrong impression.”

“Fine. You never let me have any fun. Bye, Harry. I’ll come find you later so we can plan.” Just as suddenly as she had appeared, the youngest Greengrass disappeared back into the Alley.

“I think she’s gotten even more energetic than the last time,” Harry said staring after her.

“You have no idea,” Daphne groaned. “I can barely get her to shut up at home. I’m completely amazed that she keeps trying to set me up with you when she’s the one who’s obsessed.”

“Please ignore my youngest,” Greengrass said sighing. “Now I believe we have business to get to.” He gestured towards Gringotts and the others nodded heading up the stairs. Shiva next to Marcus and Daphne hanging back with Harry.

As they walked up into Gringotts Daphne said softly, “Sorry about the extreme formality, Harry. Father can be...difficult to deal with. It’s best to just humor him for a bit. We can drop the titles and everything pretty soon.”

“It’s fine, Daph,” Harry whispered back. “Neville’s grandmother was similar at first.”

“Marcus Greengrass is no Augusta Longbottom,” Daphne muttered scowling. Neither of the teens noticed the goblin guards they passed bowing their heads or butting their weapons against the ground in a salute. “Just follow my lead, if he says anything insulting try to ignore it and whatever you do, don’t sign something he gives you without reading everything and preferably getting a solicitor to look it over too. The last thing I need is to get locked into a marriage contract before I hit 15.”
“Well you can’t get into one with me anyway,” Harry said grinning at her. “You already know I have that one with Ginny putting me into a nice limbo.”

Daphne frowned at him. “For House Potter, yes, but not for—”

“Lord Greengrass and Heir Potter, goblin. We have a meeting with Halfclaw,” Marcus’ voice cut through their discussion. Harry turned from his friend grimacing. Insulting the goblins wasn’t going to get them anywhere fast.

Looking up at the teller, Harry mouthed a silent, “Sorry.”

“Wizard,” the goblin sneered. He turned to the other three in the party and continued in a gruff voice, “Welcome to Gringotts, Professor Babbling. Warrior Potter, Warrior Greengrass, may your gold ever flow.”

“May your hoard be increased,” Harry responded with a bit of a bow. Beside him Daphne was blinking repeatedly and Harry had to nudge her to get her to respond.

“Oh, may your hoard be increased, Master Teller,” Daphne finally said giving a small curtsy.

“Warrior Potter, Warrior Greengrass, your meeting is expected. Vault-runner Griphook will escort you to the location.”

“Thank you,” Daphne said nodding at the goblin.

Marcus’ eyes narrowed shifting between the teller and Daphne though he held his tongue. Griphook again exchanged greetings with Harry and dropped them off in a room with a large table in the middle and several chairs on either side. Harry and Daphne took the center seats with their respective guardians on either side. After they were left alone, Marcus turned to Daphne and asked, “Warrior? What have you done to the goblins, Daphne?”

“It’s a respectful term, Lord Greengrass,” Shiva said rolling her eyes. “Your daughter and my ward apparently impressed them with the description of the battle with the basilisk last year. They were awarded titles in recognition.”

Daphne raised her eyebrows at Harry. “A little heads up would’ve been appreciated.”

“I assumed you knew about it,” Harry said running a hand through his hair. “I figured you’d have already been back in the bank before we met up again and it didn’t ever really come up in conversation.”

“We will discuss this later, Potter,” she grumbled. Marcus nodded though he was still staring at his daughter.

Ten minutes later they were still waiting. “If this is what we can expect from prearranging a meeting than I should simply show up unannounced next time,” Marcus grumbled. “Such a waste of time.”

“Well that’s what happens when you piss them off,’ Harry thought sighing. He caught Shiva’s eyes and had to avoid laughing as he saw her rolling her eyes at the older man.

Thankfully Halfclaw showed up shortly and after exchanging greetings he shifted right into business. “Warrior Potter, Warrior Greengrass, I understand you have a proposition for us?”

Harry nodded to Daphne who bobbed her head and started talking, “We do. We are interested in
contracting the Goblin Nation to render a basilisk corpse and sell the useable parts.”

“This would be the basilisk slain in early April, 1993?”

“It would,” she agreed.

Halfclaw settled back into his chair and laced his fingers. “You understand the Nation will of course require a processing fee.”

“We do. We request that payment be in the form of the edible meat.”

“All edible meat plus 20 percent of the profits,” the goblin said immediately.

“Half the edible meat plus 5 percent,” Daphne replied just as fast.

“Three quarters meat plus 15 percent.”

“Three quarters meat plus 10 percent,” Daphne said with raised eyebrows.

Halfclaw gave her a toothless smile and a nodded. “Very well. We will agree to that. Stipulations on the rendering?”

“Harry?” Daphne asked turning to her friend.

Harry looked at the group and considered. “I would like to keep enough of the skin to have 15 suits of armor made.” That statement set off three quick intakes of breath beside him which Harry ignored. “I’d also like to keep two of the fangs large enough to be sculpted into hilts for blades. Finally, I want the skeleton intact.”

Halfclaw had nodded appreciatively at the first two items but he paused at the last. “Why do you wish the skeleton left untouched, Warrior Potter? It would be far simpler to debone the carcass as we go.”

“I want to hang it in my entrance hall at some point whenever I actually move into my manor,” Harry shrugged. Four sets of mouths dropped open and gaped at him. “What? I killed the stupid thing, and I’m starting to understand that half of Pureblood politics is intimidation. How much more intimidating can you get than hanging a 60 foot basilisk skeleton in your hall with the mouth pointed at the door and saying nonchalantly ‘oh that, I killed that with my friend when I was 12’?”

Shiva groaned and shook her head at him while Marcus’ eyes had widened and Daphne just looked at him with a curious gleam in her eyes.

Halfclaw started laughing so hard he had to hold his stomach. “I see now why Snapfist thought you worthy of the Warrior title! It will be done. I assume you want replicas of the teeth as well?”

“Yes, please,” Harry nodded.

“Very well,” Halfclaw said. “When can the Nation start rendering?”

“Shiva?” Harry asked turning to his guardian.

“I can let us into the school whenever; though it’s probably best to get it done prior to next weekend.”

“The Headmaster will be out on Wizengamot business at that point, no?” Marcus asked, the hint of a smile on his face.
“Why yes, I do believe that coincides with his absence. Funny that isn’t it?”

“Indeed.”

Shiva turned back to the goblin, “Harry will have to be with us at least initially as the entrance has a double parseltongue lock on it.”

“Understood,” Halfclaw said waving that problem aside. “We will contact you via owl with the date and time. Warrior Greengrass, do you wish notification of the rendering as well or simply a statement of the end balance?”

“I will attend the rendering with Warrior Potter. Father?” Daphne asked turned to Marcus. He just shook his head. “A simple statement is all that is necessary for me.”

“Very well.” Halfclaw reached over and pulled a contract from his stack of papers. He filled in several spots and slid it over to the humans. “Sign on the indicated lines. Excellent. The arrangements will be made immediately. Warrior Potter, Account Manager Snapfist is expecting you for a private meeting immediately following our conclusion. Professor Babbling, as your guardian, may attend. May your enemies fall before you Warrior Potter, Warrior Greengrass.”

“May their blood wet your blade,” Harry and Daphne both said standing. Marcus and Shiva followed suit and Halfclaw left the room.

“Well,” Marcus said, “that went better than I had expected. Heir Potter, Professor Babbling, good day to you both. Come along, Daphne.”

“Coming, Father,” Daphne said. As she walked out she flashed Harry a grin and waved goodbye.

Shiva shook her head at her ward and snorted. “‘I want the skeleton so I can freak everyone out.’ Nice, kid. A little heavy handed there don’t you think?”

“ Probably but you gotta admit, it’ll be bloody awesome!” Harry said smiling up at her.

“Sadly it probably will be.” She paused and tapped her chin in thought. “That was a good idea with snagging a lot of the skin for protection. You can’t get much better than basilisk hide. It’s even more spell resistant than dragon-scale. 15 suits of armor seems a bit of overkill though.”

“Well it’s not all for me,” Harry said rolling his eyes.

“Not what I meant, kid,” Shiva said snorting.

“I’ll get one for me, you, Hermione, Daphne, Luna, Tonks, Tracey, Neville, Susan, maybe Hannah, and we’ll see if Amelia wants one. It’s better to have some extra left over if we need it. And I probably won’t have them made until we all stop growing anyway.”

“Smart move,” Shiva nodded appreciatively. “Alright, let’s go see what your accountant has to say. Maybe we’ll get lucky and you can finally get rid of Dumbledore as your magical guardian.”

“Warrior Potter,” Snapfist said as everyone sat down around the goblin’s desk, “you will be pleased to know that the mail ward following your person has been dispelled as of several hours ago. You should start receiving all held packages shortly.”

Harry frowned and cocked his head at the goblin. “All held packages? As in 13 years worth of mail will be heading my way?”
“Yes.”

“That…seems a bit much,” Harry said slowly. “There wasn’t any way for you guys to maybe send a few loads at a time instead of all at once?”

“I don’t believe we ever specified that,” Snapfist said with a grin. Just because he liked Harry Potter did not mean the warrior was going to be immune to a bit of fun on the goblin’s part. “I am certain that a Warrior of your caliber can handle a little bit of fan mail.”

Harry scowled and gave a nice little growl. “Low blow, Snapfist,” the youngling sighed. “Fine, whatever. At least I get my mail and can start sending off replies and apologies. I don’t suppose the dangerous ones were sorted out?”

“Cursebreaker Weasley was contracted to include that item. None of the mail will have anything beyond words or gifts. Any dangerous artifacts, compulsion charms, potions or portkeys will have been removed,” Snapfist said with a nod. That concession had been difficult to swallow as it was normally a service they could charge quite extensively for. However his own rash proclamation of taking care of the issue had forced their hand.

“If the mail was redirected away from Harry then how did you find it to send it back to him?” Shiva asked. “I had expected you to just get rid of the redirection charm.”

“It was a simple charm,” the goblin said waved a claw in disinterest. “No elegance, merely powerful. All letters and parcels were being kept in a large storeroom.”

“And was it Dumbledore who placed it?” Harry asked back to scowling.

Snapfist gave a throaty chuckle. “Indeed. Your assumption had proven correct, Warrior Potter. Headmaster Dumbledore has been charged… a very hefty fine. In fact I believe it may have relieved him of nearly half his vault.” Snapfist tapped his finger on the desk. “Quite a shame he had enough to avoid dragon cleanup duty. Ah well, perhaps next time we can be so lucky?”

Harry and Shiva both gawked at him for a moment before laughing. “Okay, that works. Thanks, Snapfist. It’s much appreciated.” The goblin nodded. “Anything else you needed us for?”

“Three things,” he pushed some papers across the desk to the humans. “This is the status report for Potter Manor. The restoration work has been nearly completed. The escape tunnel is the largest remaining item. We expect the project to be complete early September.”

“Cool,” Shiva said nodding. Harry was looking at the plans and trying to pretend like they meant something to him though it was exceedingly obvious in his perplexed grunts that the blueprints were gibberish.

“The second item pertains to your new status as Heir Black,” Snapfist continued. “After you assume the Lordship for both House Potter and House Black, you should endeavor to be careful with which name you sign documents under. Both will of course be binding, but they would carry down the lines separately. Gringotts has been authorized by Lord Sirius Black to allow you access to the Black Family vault. Here is your key.”

Harry frowned. “What do you mean, carry down the lines separately? Will I have to give my second kid the surname Black?”

Shiva turned to him with wide eyes. “Shite, I keep forgetting you weren’t raised a Pureblood,” she muttered.
Snapfist raised his eyebrows at the boy. “I mean your second wife, Warrior Potter.”

“My second…wife…” Harry said in shock. Then he groaned and turned to Shiva. “He’s serious isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” she shrugged and gave a sheepish grin. “I’m afraid he is; sorry, kid. I assumed you understood that part when Sirius brought it up at the end of the term.”

Harry’s groan grew louder and he covered his face in his hands. “Hermione’s going to kill me… Bloody hell, I wish Daphne had stuck around to explain this shite. Wait,” he sat up straight with wide eyes, “that’s what she meant on the steps about avoiding a contract. Shite! Snapfist, can we prevent a marriage contract with me in House Black like we did with Potter?”

“As there is no current contract for a member of House Black no, that legal loophole is not available,” Snapfist said with a shrug. “The point is moot though as Lord Black would have to sign for it regardless of your official magical guardian.” The goblin gave another toothless grin and twined his fingers. “Though from my limited dealings with Lord Black, you may have even more to worry about from his direction than from Dumbledore’s.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, Harry,” Shiva said with a chuckle. “I’ll neuter the dog if he tries to set anything up for you.”

“Thanks.” Harry sighed again and slumped into his chair. “I need to talk to Hermione. And figure out how to bring this up without her tossing out spells…there’s no way around this?”

“Well you could certainly combine the two families,” Snapfist said unconcerned. “However you’d likely end up with worse relations amongst your people than my own have with them.”

“Wow…I really hate this world sometimes. It seriously needs a kick in the pants to drag it into the 20th Century.”

“Now, Warrior Potter, the final issue relates to that of your magic guardian,” Snapfist grimaced and pushed some papers around his desk. “Unfortunately the Wizengamot was very careful with their wording. Sirius Black is not eligible to take the guardianship nor to designate a responsible proxy. As of this time, we see nothing short of emancipation or being declared an adult by your Ministry to get you away from Dumbledore’s hand.”

“Shite. Well I can’t say I’m surprised, but it does still suck,” Harry shook his head. “Well thanks for checking.”

“We’ll just have to see if there is a way to get you declared an adult at some point, Harry,” Shiva said. “Maybe we can slip an addendum onto some new law or something. People use riders to bypass all sorts of things in the Muggle world, might as well try to steal a page out of their book.”

“That is a potential solution, Professor Babbling,” Snapfist said nodding to the female. It was both conniving and elegant. It would never work, but he saluted her effort at least. It was nice to see that at least some humans had a bit of cunning in them. Though from the whispers he’d heard from Halfclaw about Warrior Greengrass, she was quite impressive on that front as well. “I believe this concludes our business for the day. May your enemies fall before you.” The humans exchanged parting words and walked off.

Sirius Black waltzed into Shiva’s apartment shouting, “I’m rich!” He threw his hands up in the air and expected some congratulations yet was only rewarded by a slap on the back of his head by
Amelia who came in behind him.

“Stop grandstanding, Siri,” the woman said.

“What happened to the fun loving, prank playing Amy?” Sirius whined, rubbing his head.

“She grew up. And she got annoyed after your Great Hufflepuff Panty Raid in Seventh Year,” Amelia replied deadpan.

“Hufflepuff Panty Raid?” Shiva asked sticking her head around the corner. “I thought that was just a myth. The girls treated it like an urban legend. That was you guys? That’s really impressive. You actually got around the charms on the stairs?”

“Third Year!” Sirius said puffing up his chest.

Tonks snorted behind him. “Let me guess, you had someone levitate you to the landings.”

“Well, it doesn’t sound nearly that awesome when you put it that way…” Sirius mumbled. “And how come nobody cares I’m rich?”

“Weren’t the Blacks already rich?” Shiva asked heading back into the main rooms.

“Well we were pretty well off though Mother was apparently rather free with the spending while I was on my island. I’m talking about back pay and wrongful imprisonment compensation now though. I got 12 years of Auror payment all in one lump sum! And the compensation stuff is coming directly from the accounts of Crouch and Bagnold!” He rubbed his hand on the back of his head and grimaced a bit. “I do feel a bit bad that I’m basically bankrupting both but…well they did toss me on that tropical paradise without a trial so…”

“Are you still on about that island thing?” Tonks said shaking her pink hair and walking past him. “Wotcher Harry. Whoa.” She stopped dead and stared at the piles and piles of letters and boxes littering the room. Harry was at the table writing and Shiva was sitting on the floor opening up some of the packages and moving them to different piles. “Just a bit of mail then? Are these the fan clubs for ‘I Killed A Dementor’ or ‘I Killed a Basilisk’ or are they the typical ‘Marry Me I’m Hot’ options?” She picked up one letter that drifted off the top of a pile at snickered. “Gaining some pretty young fans there, squirt. I’d recommend at least waiting until they are out of the crayon age.”

Harry snorted. “Thanks for the advice, Damsel-In-Distress.”

“Damsel-In-Distress? Ouch, that hurts me right here,” she said faking a wince and holding her heart.

“Better than Battle Maid,” Shiva commented grabbing another package.

Tonks opened and closed her mouth a few times before finally regaining her voice. “I may be a Battle Maid but I am not going to put on a French fufu apron for you, Harry.” She paused and her hair briefly shifted to bright blue before turning back to pink. “And I actually do kinda prefer Battle Maid over Damsel. I may not be an Auror anymore, but I’m still a hell of a fighter.”

“Battle Maid, do me a favor and grab me a few more of those crayon letters,” Harry said waving to a pile. “They’re all my backed up mail from when I was toddler. I’m trying to respond in somewhat chronological order. Sorta. Mostly.”

“You’re writing all the replies by hand, pup?” Sirius asked grabbing a seat.
“Yeah. Seems the best way to apologize for taking a decade to get back to them.”

“You realize you wouldn’t have known how to write for the first few of these anyway,” Shiva said cocking an eyebrow at him.

“ Doesn’t matter.” Harry shrugged and shook out his hand. “I’m going to get carpal tunnel before I finish these…”

Amelia grimaced in sympathy and leaned against the counter near Sirius. “I feel your pain; paperwork is awful. I recommend localized numbing potions – they are a godsend. It’s nice of you do this, Harry.”

“What are we doing with the toys and the animals again?” Shiva asked holding up a stuffed dragon that gave a cute little roar.

“Oh I like that one!” Harry said grinning. “Keep the cool ones to the side. The rest we’ll send to an orphanage.”

“Can I have this panther one, Harry?” Tonks asked holding up a stuffed panther that was prowling around her leg.

“Sure.” Harry leaned back and shook out his hand again. “Sirius, if I could feel my hand right now I’d probably be slugging you. Just so you know.”

“Little old me?” Sirius asked grinning wildly. “Whatever have I done to warrant such abuse?”

“You mean this time?” Amelia muttered.

“Oh I don’t know, maybe ropes me into becoming a polygamist without bothering to ask?” Harry said with raised eyebrows.

Shiva snickered and Tonks almost dropped her new panther. “Wait, you didn’t know about that, Harry?” she asked.

“Everybody keeps assuming I understand everything about wizarding politics,” Harry said with a sigh. “Reading books and being friends with several Heirs will only get you so far you know. I found out from the goblins the other day.”

“Oh…” Sirius grimaced. “Sorry, pup. I figured Neville had told you. There’s really no one else I can leave the Black name to. Remus has refused flat out to accept it, Frank is in no condition, most of my other male friends are dead or not close enough to me…I’d give it to Andi or Tonks if I could, but some of the inheritance laws only allow for males. It can be changed for the next generation but that doesn’t help at the moment. If I didn’t leave it to you than it would probably end up passing to Draco,” he snorted at that. “There is no way a Malfoy is taking control of the Black family.”

“Yeah, I know,” Harry sighed. He gestured to Shiva. “Shiva explained that much. If you do something similar in the future though please tell me beforehand. Also don’t you dare establish any sort of marriage contract or I will let my friends and family neuter you. Deal?”

Sirius gulped and hurriedly nodded. “Deal.”

“Good. Oh, on an unrelated note, I’ve been meaning to ask you something. How did you go about becoming an animagus? Seems like a really cool thing to be able to do,” Harry said.
“It’s mostly a meditation exercise at first. There’s a potion that helps you connect to your inner animal and then you just need to get good with self-transfiguration. The actual final step is a combination between self-transfiguration and a charm so you have to be decent at both to finish it. The charm is what makes it different. Self-transfiguration by itself would wear off after a bit and you wouldn’t really be able to think right in your form plus you need a wand. An actual animagus though is a one form, wandless deal,” Sirius shrugged. “Some foreign countries prefer the former because it’s more versatile, but I figure the indefinite nature of animagi and the ability to keep thinking like a human is the better deal. Plus you can get a bit of a glimpse into your own inner nature. Animagus transformations reflect a bit of what makes you, you.”

“I read there was a ritual you could use to do it basically overnight,” Harry said tapping his chin. “Is that what you, Pettigrew and my dad used to do it so fast?”

Harry looked up and saw Sirius and Amelia’s faces were white. Tonks’ hair had shifted to pure black and she collapsed onto the ground next to Shiva. Shiva’s face had gone almost as white as Sirius’ and she hurriedly pushed to her feet striding over to Harry. “Give me whatever book you found that thing in right now, Harry!”

“Shiva?” Harry asked taken completely aback by the reaction of the people around him.

“Harry,” Sirius said slowly and quietly, “do not, under any circumstances use that ritual. That is not what we did. We worked hard for our transformations. That ritual is not something to play around with on a lark. It is dangerous.”

“The ritual you mentioned, Harry, leads to at least three or four deaths per year,” Amelia said. Tonks nodded in agreement, still at a loss for words.

“I don’t understand…” Harry said looking between the others and shrinking a bit into his chair.

“Harry,” Shiva knelt down next to him and put her hand on his shoulder, “the requirements for the ritual are extremely specific. The problem is that the actual knowledge of the ingredients prior to starting the thing is very vague. You could start it knowing you need a mammal of some sort but find out halfway through that the animal is an elephant and you brought a mouse. At that point you’re deep enough into the thing that stopping it would kill you from the magical backlash. And continuing would leave you – at best – stuck as an animal for the rest of your life. At worst, you’d be turned inside out as the magic tried and failed to finalize.” She squeezed his shoulder and held his gaze. “Promise me, kid, that you will never do that ritual.”

“Okay, I promise,” he said softly.

“Good,” she sighed. “Good.” Pulling Harry into a hug, Shiva continued softly, “Don’t scare me like that, kid.”

“You didn’t see the warnings surrounding the description, Harry?” Tonks asked, her hair had shifted to a deep blue instead of black.

“All it said was to be sure to get the separate components right. It didn’t say anything about dying or getting stuck as something else if it was done wrong…”

“Never play with rituals,” Amelia said heavily. “Almost all rituals can go horribly bad if done even slightly incorrectly.”

“Yeah,” Harry said leaning his head against Shiva’s shoulder. “Good to know.”
Dolores Umbridge had a fly-eating grin plastered across her face as she sat in the chair across from Cornelius Fudge. She had just come from the her recent meeting with the most exciting idea she’d had in some time. It would be perfect! It might even be enough to finally convince Cornelius that she was available!

“Dolores, you said this was urgent?” Fudge asked looking up at the Undersecretary.

“I just left a meeting with Albus Dumbledore, Cornelius. It was,” she gave a little giggle, “most enlightening.”

“Oh, how so? Normally Albus would come to me personally with such things…” Fudge said frowning.

“You were busy, Cornelius. There didn’t seem a reason to interrupt you,” she said. “Dumbledore had mentioned that Crouch was in the process of restarting the Triwizard Tournament prior his dismissal. That was such a beautiful maneuver by the way. I did so love watching his little mustache quiver as he realized you were painting him as the patsy for the entire Sirius Black affair!”

“Well it certainly wasn’t hard,” Fudge muttered. “The man was at fault initially. All I had to do was make certain that Skeeter and her colleagues ignored how much I had pushed things after Black’s escape. Lucius was only too glad to help me ensure that the blame was properly directed.”

“Yes, such a fine upstanding citizen he is,” Umbridge smiled wider thinking of Lucius Malfoy. Such wonderful breeding in that family. Truly enviable. “Anyway, apparently Dumbledore wants the Tournament to be cancelled due to the high death toll.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Fudge said nodding. “The last thing we need right now is more bad publicity.”

“Ah, but, Cornelius, you aren’t thinking high enough.” Umbridge took out a picture of Harry Potter and laid it on the desk. “If you name me as the official to this Tournament it should be a relatively simple matter to include the boy in the games. A game which has a nasty little habit of killing off its contestants.” Her grin grew even larger. “The old fool even made the mistake of casually mentioning how he was glad that the current round of Tasks were far tamer than in the past.”

Fudge’s eyes widened and his mouth set into a predatory smile before drooping a bit. “That’s delightfully underhanded of you, Dolores. I admit I want the boy to be taught a lesson about jumping into waters far out of his depth but…setting him up to die seems a bit extreme.”

“The little menace not only insulted you to your face, Cornelius, but he did it in front of multiple witnesses. He insulted the very Ministry itself! The foundation of our society!” Umbridge simpered.

“Still…well I suppose it’s not like his death would be assured…he would of course have a chance to survive though he would likely walk away with injuries…And it could drum up some popularity for the country…” Fudge thought out loud. He shifted his bowler hat and slowly nodded. “If we move forward with this Dolores we’d need to make certain that the Ministry looks good either way. Having a national hero maimed or killed in a Ministry sponsored event would reflect rather poorly.”

“Of course, of course,” Umbridge hurriedly agreed. “Put me in place as one of the judges and I can ensure that the brat is picked as Champion. If we state previously that no underage contestants can enter then Potter would look like the villain as everyone would assume he cheated in order to
enter! We could subtly encourage Skeeter to pander to that sentiment fanning the public against the boy even more. Plus with the restriction to legal adults we could even spice up the events to a level where there is proper danger involved. I was thinking we might even add an extra event or two. Durmstrang is notorious for including Dark Arts in their curriculum – the savages,” she said with a disinterested offhand wave. “It would certainly spell trouble for the little menace should he have to say…face off against of them in a duel. And there is this delightful little invention that Dumbledore mentioned in passing. Something from Russia that is being banned in most countries as the ‘safety measures’ are disturbingly ineffective.”

Fudge considered, eventually nodding his head. “Yes, yes I think that might work. Potter would appear the villain and, however it turns out, he would be suitably cowed for threatening me. I doubt the boy would actually die, not with his record. But he will certainly be made to look a fool and come out the other side damaged. Make the arrangements, Dolores.”

Dumbledore stepped out of the Floo and into his office nearly happy enough to whistle. While dealing with Umbridge tended to leave him deeply desiring a shower this last meeting was an exception. How the woman had risen so high he had no idea, she certainly didn’t possess much in the way of tact or subtlety. Not like he did.

Dumbledore mentally patted himself on the back for a job well done. Umbridge had been easy enough to maneuver in the direction he wanted. She would no doubt take his ideas to Fudge – fully believing they had been her own. With Harry’s display against the Minister still raw, Fudge would go along with the plans. The Triwizard Tournament would proceed – with the inherent danger increased. As Umbridge was horribly incompetent with magic Dumbledore had no doubt he’d end up having to ‘assist’ her with ensuring that Harry was entered; but that would be easy enough. No, the true trick would be ensuring that she kept taking his…admonitions against safety concerns. Harry would need to be deprived of his crutches to ensure that he lost and lost badly enough that Madam Pomfrey was unable to save him.

With a sigh Dumbledore sank into his chair, his good mood dissipating slightly. When had he taken to plotting the death of a child? A boy the same age as Ariana had been? Was this truly the correct course? His eyes fell onto the books secreted away on his private shelves, the ones detailing Horcruxes. Yes. Yes, this was the only way. Harry’s scar contained a Horcrux and it had already started to corrupt him. Ensuring the boy stayed at the Dursleys’ despite the many required Obliviations, bribes and subtle threats over the years hadn’t been enough. Harry’s will had never hardened sufficiently to resist the Dark Lord’s whispers. His actions since arriving at Hogwarts were proof enough of that. Harry had to die. Both to ensure that Voldemort was mortal and that another Dark Lord was removed from the board before he could ascend. The Tournament would accomplish that, one way or another.

Nodding to himself, Dumbledore took solace in the fact that his mind was still sharp enough to deduce the truth of matters. That he was still strong enough to make the hard choices.

{But, mama I want to go watch the game too!} Gabrielle pouted her arms crossed and her lip puffed out.

Apolline Delacour shook her head. {No, Gabrielle. We are not taking you on an international portkey for a game. You can come to the next one.}

{But Fleur gets to go!}

{Fleur is nearly 17. She will be in England anyway during most of the year so she can use this
chance to brush up on her English a bit,} Apolline said. She had been having this same argument with her daughter for nearly a month now.

{You don’t even like Quidditch that much, Gabi,} Fleur commented from the couch.

{Neither do you, Fleur,} Gabrielle shot back.

{No, but I want to visit with Celeste. It’s been ages since I’ve seen our cousin. She moved to Bulgaria and basically dropped off the map!}

{Fleur, you know very well that Celeste travels quite extensively as one of the team’s cheerleaders. That certainly doesn’t count as dropping off the map.}

{She could at least send something more than a postcard,} Fleur said rolling her eyes.

{I am not having this argument again,} Apolline said throwing up her hands. {Fleur go finish your packing. Gabi, Marcel will be over at 8 tomorrow morning. Please, don’t try to use your Allure to get him to let you stay up late again.}

{I was five! That was practically eight years ago!}

Fleur snorted as her sister and mother kept arguing and she headed upstairs. Despite seeming indifferent to the trip she was actually looking forward to it. She was just trying to keep Gabi from getting too jealous. She loved her sister, but until the girl went through the Change Gabi really shouldn’t be around as many people as would be present at the stadium. There was far too much chance that she could lose her tentative control and attract the wrong sort of attention. Granted that’d happen anyway afterward but at least then Gabi would be able to protect herself if she was separated from her family. Fleur shivered slightly remembering what had happened to her when she had snuck out and lost control.

Brushing off that bad memory, Fleur thought instead of Viktor Krum. The Seeker wasn’t that attractive, but his skills were amazing and she loved to watch him fly. She did also look forward to getting to see a bit of the country she’d be spending months in. Not all of her attitude concerning the trip had been faked though. She figured most of the trip would end up being a bit boring. It wasn’t like anything truly exciting was going to happen at the game anyway was it?
“Hey, Hermione,” Harry said giving her a quick kiss as she came into the apartment. “Thanks for coming early. I have something I need to tell you.” He ran a hand through his hair and moved to the couch.

“Wotcher, Hermione!” Tonks called from the kitchen. “I’m making the popcorn and apparently I got drafted to play bodyguard. So no harming the guy, yeah?”

“I promise, Tonks,” Hermione said rolling her eyes. She got a little gleam in her eyes and continued playfully, “Though if he tries to start bragging about his accomplishments or discusses his latest scheme to defy death I make no promises!”

“I can understand that. Yell if you two need anything,” Tonks finished and the teens heard the microwave start.

“She got here early as well?” Hermione asked sitting down next to Harry.

He shrugged. “I think she got annoyed with Kreacher and Sirius mostly. She came storming through the Floo muttering something about a horrible painting that refused to properly burn, an annoying house elf that seemed far too eager to get his head chopped off and a dog that kept making inappropriate comments.” Harry paused and laughed slightly. “Which must have been pretty bad if they got Tonks riled up.”

“Yes, well it is Sirius,” Hermione said shaking her head and grinning slightly. “So what did you want to talk to me about? I actually have something to tell you as well.” She shifted so that she was looking at him instead of leaning against his side.

“Oh, what?” Harry asked.

“You first, Mister Potter,” Hermione said with a raised eyebrow. “You were the initial one to say something after all.”

“Right,” Harry gulped and shifted his eyes so that he was staring above Hermione instead of at her. “Err, this is kinda awkward. Well, more than kinda. I um, I stopped by Gringotts a while ago and um…well the thing with being Sirius’ Heir is a tad bit more complicated than I had expected. And err…I kinda…haven’t marry at least two people now,” he finished in a rush.

Hermione blinked. “I’m not going to pretend I understood that last bit, but from the beginning of it I take it that you already know you need to have a second girlfriend for House Black now?”

Harry nodded dejectedly. “Yeah. I’m sorry. I understand that you want to break – ” He cut off mid-sentence as her words caught up to his thoughts. Then he gaped and stared at her. Stared at her very amused expression. “You knew too, Mione?!”

“That was actually what I was going to talk to you about as well today, Harry.” Hermione said with a slight laugh. She patted his cheek. “Harry, you’re sweet, but you really need to look more closely at politics in the wizarding world. Did you ever bother to read those books that Neville, Daphne and I gave you? As soon as Sirius proclaimed that you were his Heir I knew immediately that you’d have to have a second girlfriend and eventual wife. Everyone present did. We all just assumed that you knew already so we didn’t bring it up.”
“Yeah,” Harry muttered, “I figured that the others knew. I actually just sent off a letter to Neville, Daphne and Luna saying ‘Thanks for the heads up guys. You all suck.’ Amelia was carrying the message to Susan personally and I figured Tracey would’ve actually had a good laugh about it and purposefully didn’t say anything. I didn’t think you’d know too…”

Hermione leaned over and kissed him softly. “Harry, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. My parents asked about some things a little while ago and I only realized then that you probably hadn’t realized that implication. I apologize for not talking to you sooner and for you having to find out via the goblins. I’ve been trying to think of a good way to bring it up.” She reached into her bag and pulled out three sheets of paper, presenting them to him one at a time. “I’ve made some lists. This one is a list of partners I feel are most suitable for you in order of compatibility.”

“Daphne?” Harry asked squinting at the top name. “What? She’s with Tracey.”

“She is yes. But this list disregards all prior existing relationships. Besides I’ve seen how she looks at you sometimes, Harry. She already stands beside you on most things as well. It’s just something to consider. Moving on, this list contains partners that I would prefer to be with.”

Harry took the second paper from her looking slightly shocked. “That you would…wow…”

“Oh, Luna is on that list somewhere by the way. The girl may be a bit odd but she can be somewhat adorable at times. I’m not sure whether she’s interested in you or sees you as a brother though. You’d have to talk to her. I’ve seen that she does seem somewhat attached to Tracey as well so it’s possible she’d be open to that sort of relationship too.”

“Wait, you’d be okay with Luna? The same Luna that you shake your head at every time she brings up something off the wall?” Harry asked incredulous.

“Just because I don’t find her particular method of evasion and distraction personally appealing doesn’t mean I can’t deny the benefits and effectiveness,” Hermione shrugged. “I’m also somewhat convinced that she plays it up a bit sometimes just to watch me squirm. Two can play at that game,” Hermione chuckled at that.

“Oh,” Harry said still trying to catch up. He accepted the third sheet of paper from Hermione.

“This list is a set of people who I feel like you might want to date while still taking into consideration existing relationships and continuing to date me. It’s probably the most relevant one at this time.”

Harry nearly choked on his tongue as he stared at that list. “Tonks?! he said in a strangled voice.

“You call?” Tonks asked poking her head around the wall.

“No! No, we’re good, Tonks!” Harry hurried to call back, his voice breaking a bit.

“Actually, Tonks, you might want to come in here. I was intended to bring this up after the movie, but since you’re here already…” Hermione said shrugging.

“Oh, sure,” Tonks said furrowing her brow at the teen. She came in and plopped down onto the chair across from them with popcorn in hand. Harry’s head was rapidly shifting between Tonks and Hermione. How in the bloody hell had he lost so much control of the conversation so quickly?

“Tonks, as you are aware, Harry is now the Heir Black in addition to the Heir Potter,” Hermione said turning to Tonks.
“Yeah. I was there when it was brought up,” Tonks said sounding amused.

“Well, I’ve been spending quite some time thinking about who might be suitable for Harry’s second partner,” she paused and her face got a bit red. Tonks just waved her along. “I um, well I’ve been watching how he interacts with the women around him as well as how they interact with him and…” Hermione took a deep breath and pushed on, “And I’ve seen how you both look at each other and I think you would make a very good match. It certainly helps that Harry has never shown any preference for a specific form you take and that you have never really seen him as a boy but as a young adult. I think two would balance each other nicely.” Hermione finished her speech with bright red cheeks and wringing hands. Harry was trying to burrow into the couch to disappear while Tonks was gaping like a fish.

“I…I…what?” Tonks finally squeaked. Her hair had flashed through a rapid rainbow of colors before settling on a fluorescent orange and her cheeks had also turned bright red despite her best efforts to damp it down.

“Well obviously, nothing has to happen yet. Harry *is* only 14 after all so of course it’s not something super urgent. But by the same token, I wanted to bring it up now to get everyone thinking about everything and…well I just wanted to make sure that there’s no dancing around the issue and that we’re all open with each other so that no one feels awkward or anything,” Hermione rapidly said not stopping to breath. She seemed to have lost much of her earlier confidence.

“I feel awkward,” Harry said raising his hand.

The two girls ignored him. Tonks got her breathing under control and her blush lessened. “You realize I’m six years older than him?”

Hermione shrugged. “I’m a year older than him myself and once we all graduate the age difference really won’t be much of a factor.”

“Yeah maybe then, but like you said, Harry is 14. You’re about to be 15 –”

“Technically I am 15. Time Turner,” Hermione said her voice settling back into a quiet assuredness.

Tonks nodded. “Right, 15. Point is I can’t even let myself think about him that way, Hermione. I feel like a cradle-robber,” Tonks said raising her eyebrows.

“Feel, not *would* feel?” Hermione asked with a bit of a wry grin. Tonks cursed softly and leaned back her hair staying bright orange.

“Fine. Feel. So maybe I have thought about it,” Tonks muttered.

Harry’s eyes widened. “You have? When? Why does nobody tell me anything?!”

“I’m supposed to tell a 14 year old that I started valuing his opinions more than my boss?” Tonks asked cocking her head at him. “Or that he was giving me more respect than anyone outside my parents? Or that you were literally the first non-asexual male to treat me like a normal person and not like a sex doll?”

“But…you were…I was…”

“I think you broke him, Tonks,” Hermione said. She shook her head and lightly patted Harry’s cheek again. “Don’t worry, Harry, just us talk now. Whenever you reboot, you can rejoin the conversation.”
“Look, Hermione, I’m flattered that you think we’d fit well but my point still stands. Sure, the age won’t mean a thing in a few years, but right now I feel like a pervert for even thinking it. Bloody hell, I drank two bottles of tequila when I finally admitted it the other week!”

“Alcohol is never the answer,” Hermione said. She paused and blushed a bit. “Well, okay sometimes alcohol is the answer but not a long term one. You know, I’ve looked this up, Tonks. While it’s not largely practiced it’s still considered acceptable and legal to get married as young as 12 in the wizarding world. In fact, the most recent case of this was just five years ago in a suburb of Westminster.”

“What?!” Tonks asked with wide eyes.

“I know, I was rather shocked myself. But that’s beside the point. Like I said originally, nothing has to happen yet. I just wanted to put it onto the table.”

“Hermione, I’m not an idiot. Harry is surrounded by beautiful girls who would jump at the chance if he showed any interest in them at all. I’d put a lot of galleons on Tracey being willing to share Daphne and even if she doesn’t then Luna is likely going to end up entangled with you two soon instead. Barring either of them, the castle is full of eligible young women more appropriate than me. There is no possible way that Harry is still going to be available by the time I feel comfortable entertaining anything with him,” Tonks finished with a sad smile. Her hair had shifted to a darker blue.

“Besides Luna and Daphne, Tonks, there’s not really anyone in the castle I’d even think about dating…” Harry said quietly. He finally seemed to have gotten his wits back and he shrugged. “Some of them are nice enough but most either see me as The-Boy-Who-Lived or just the guy with the awesome hobby. I’m really only ‘Harry’ to a few people. You were one of the first in that group along with Hermione and Neville.”

Tonks leaned back and drew her feet up. “What about Daphne, Tracey and Luna? They think of you that way too, Harry.”

“I barely spoke to Luna before last year. Daphne and Tracey, I didn’t become friends with until halfway through Second Year. I met you before I met any of them. You were my friend before them and you made a pretty bad situation a lot more fun and interesting just by staying positive and distracting me. It…made an impression,” Harry said. He was blushing as bad as a Weasley and couldn’t look at either girl.

“I...hadn’t realized that,” Tonks said. Her hair had changed to a dark brown and a lock of it dropped in front of her face as she shifted positions. She held up a hand to scowl at it. “Stupid hair. I hate my natural color.” She concentrated for a moment and it shifted back to pink.

“Tonks, Harry,” Hermione said softly, “I’m not trying to play matchmaker or be your pimp.” Hermione paused and rolled her eyes at her weak attempt at lightening the mood. Humor was not her strong point. “This is a very unusual situation and I’m just trying to do the best I can to make things easier for everyone. I’m…not very good at social situations – though I am improving. I truly think you two could be happy together. You’re both very good compliments to each other. Harry is far more mature than his years would indicate and Tonks – please don’t be offended as I mean this as nicely as possible – you are not quite as mature as your age would suggest. Harry is introspective and likes to plan –”

“I do?” Harry muttered frowning.

“Well just because your plans tend to fall horribly apart rather quickly, it certainly doesn’t discount
the fact that you do make your plans before attempting most actions,” Hermione retorted with a smirk. Harry opened his mouth to refute that but ended up sighing and nodding his assent.

“Anyway, Harry likes to plan and you are somewhat impulsive.”

“I plan,” Tonks muttered sounding much like Harry had just done with his comment. The three paused for a moment as they realized that and then all of them snorted. “I really do try and plan things though.”

“Is that your first instinct or have you had to train yourself to do it?” Hermione asked. Tonks considered for a minute before conceding the point.

“Hermione,” Harry said softly. “I’m not a guru on relationships by any means but I don’t think you can just talk someone into a one. It’s not supposed to work that way.”

Tonks shook her head and held a up a hand before Hermione could say anything. “That’s not what she’s doing, Harry.” Her hair flashed through a few colors before settling back on pink. “She’s trying to talk me into accepting that neither of you would feel like I was taking advantage of you.” She stood up and her hair shifted back to her natural brown, lengthening to lie just above her shoulders. “I need to think for a bit.” Tonks gave them a smile and heading towards the back of the house.

“Tonks,” Harry called. She stopped and looked back over her shoulders at him questioningly. “Promise me you aren’t going to go and drink, Nymphadora?” he asked no hint of teasing or sarcasm in his tone.

Tonks gently shook her head smiling wanly. “Promise, Harry. I’ll talk to you guys in a bit. Let me know when the others get here.”

As Tonks walked around the corner of the hallway she noticed Shiva leaning against the wall with her arms crossed. “How much of that conversation did you overhear?”

Shiva shrugged. “Nearly all of it. For what it’s worth, I agree with Hermione. You are well suited for Harry and he’d be good for you. I teased him about it for a while, but I noticed after a bit that when he wasn’t thinking of her he was thinking of you. It’s been that way for a long time. He leans on the other girls around him a lot, but he defaults to you two when things hit the fan.”

“He’s fourteen,” Tonks said. It came out sounding like a plea instead of a rebuttal.

“And thanks to how he was raised he’s mentally been an adult since before he left single digits, Dora,” Shiva sighed and pushed off the wall. “I’m not trying to tell you what to do any more than those teens are. I’m just saying, don’t discount the possibility.”

“You’re two years older than me, Shiva,” Tonks said wrapping her arms around herself. “It’d almost be like he was dating you.”

“Now that is bullshite,” Shiva walked past Tonks and squeezed her shoulder. “There’s a quote by a Muggle writer, Twain something, ‘Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.’ Think about it, Dora.”

An hour later, everyone was gathered around the living room again, curled up on their various couches and chairs. Luna had claimed Harry’s side snuggling into him while Tonks had dropped into an armchair in the middle of the room.

“She’s not pulling away from you, Harry,” Luna said softly as the movie started. Her voice was
quiet enough that only Harry would be able to hear.

He glanced down at the blonde with a questioning look. “What?” he whispered back.

“Tonks.” Luna met Harry’s eyes with her disturbingly piercing gaze. “You two talked about something very important before we all arrived. It was a conversation that did not go as smoothly as it could have.” It wasn’t a question. “Look where she has placed herself, this evening: she is distant, but not far; apart, but not separate. She is open to what you discussed, but she is trying to hide it. She is not as skilled at that as I am.”

“Luna…” Harry floundered for something to say and came up empty.

Luna just sighed and leaned further into him. “She needs to accept herself before she will be able to adequately reply to your conversation, Harry. In the meantime try to act normal. Your friendship will not suffer even if perhaps the hugs and teasing might.”

Harry stayed quiet for over a minute considering what his friend had said. Finally he hugged the girl closer and whispered, “You know, you are scarily observant sometimes, Luna.”

“I know,” Luna chuckled. “I get that from my mother. Now, shush. I want to see the dinosaurs!”

That weekend saw Harry walking up to the gates of Hogwarts with Shiva and waving to his friends. Most of his core group had ended up deciding to come see the rendering of the basilisk. Luna was present with a camera borrowed from Colin Creevey to take some pictures. Neville wanted to see the thing since he had been so close to being involved in the battle. Susan and Hannah were mostly just curious. Tracey wanted to ‘spit on it and kick it in the bollocks’. Daphne wanted to face it one more time. Tonks wanted to get a look at an actual basilisk. Hermione needed to see what Harry had faced down to avenge her injury.

Harry was mostly ambivalent about this adventure. He was more worried he was about to be swamped by people concerned for him and Daphne in the next few minutes than anything else. The slight tension between him and Tonks was more disconcerting than anything the Chamber could throw at him now. Harry nearly tripped as he went over that last thought. Hurriedly he reached out and knocked on the wooden Entrance Hall doors. And crossed his fingers. And, just for good measure, conjured some salt and tossed it over his shoulder.

“Harry?” Hermione asked raising her eyebrows at his antics.

“Just had an errant thought, Hermione,” Harry said letting out a breath. “Better to be safe than sorry in case the universe happened to have been listening.”

“I find it’s always safer to let the universe play as it will rather than daring it to play with you,” Luna commented with a smile.

“Yup, see, this girl knows what I’m talking about,” Harry said gesturing towards his friend.

In front of Harry, Snapfist gave a deep laugh. “Ah, Warrior Potter, the best battles always come about after daring the Forge to toss more challenges at you!”

“I’m good for the moment, thanks,” Harry snorted. “How come you decided to come, Snapfist? I thought we’d just be meeting the renderers?”

The goblin shrugged. “I named you Warrior. I want to see if I was justified in that and that the beast was worth the hunt.”
Shiva shook her head and led the group of humans and goblins up to the second floor doing her best not to laugh at her ward. She nearly ran into Snape as they turned the corner to Myrtle’s bathroom. “Shite. Sorry, Snape.”

“Watch where you are going woman,” the man muttered in an absent, disinterested tone. His eyes widened as he noticed her entourage. “What are all these…people doing here, Babbling? School is not in session and goblins have no business on these grounds.”

“We are here on contract,” the lead renderer, Crag, said with a distinct snort. “So yes, actually, we do have business on these grounds.”

“The Headmaster did not inform me that any contracts would be in effect today,” Snape said sounding less certain than a moment ago. “And that does nothing to explain Potter or his lackeys.”

“Lackeys?” Daphne said with raised eyebrows. “I’m a lackey now am I?”

“Snape,” Shiva said with a sigh, “we are here claiming Harry and Daphne’s right via conquest with our chosen renderers. I informed the Deputy Headmistress that we would be on the grounds for a few hours doing exactly that. I don’t know, nor care, why you feel you should have been personally informed. Kindly move out of the way or take up the responsibility of paying the goblins for their wasted time.”

Snape glowered at her for another moment. He stepped aside with swish of his cloak and stalked off towards the dungeons.

“Well there goes the lack of anonymity,” Tracey muttered. She continued louder, “So who wants to take bets on how long before Dumbles shows up?”

“No bet,” Harry said immediately.

“Fifteen minutes!” Luna said jumping up and down with her hand in the air, smiling happily.

Snapfist raised his eyebrows at the perky blonde before turning to Harry. “You maintain very interesting company, Warrior Potter.”

“You should see her when she starts going on about crumple-horned snorkacks.” Harry shook his head. “I really, really hope she finds one someday.”

“Crumple-horned snorkacks hmm?” Snapfist said rubbing his chin.

“Here we are,” Shiva said opening the door to the bathroom. “Myrtle? Ah, not here. Well that does make it a bit dryer at least. Harry? You’re up.”

Harry nodded and headed over to the sink. He got the passage open and the staircase extended. On a bit of lark Harry hissed, ~Remain open.~ Surprisingly he heard a dull click resound. “Huh. I didn’t actually expect that to work…”

“What did you say?” Shiva asked cocking her head at the hole in the floor.

Harry shrugged. “I just told it to stay open. Remember it shut on Daphne last time? I didn’t really want to keep coming back up and down to open the door all the time if we have to make multiple trips.”

“Yeah but now Dumbles can follow us,” Tracey said frowning.
“The Headmaster has no part in this contract,” Crag said stepping onto the staircase. His voice echoed back up as he headed down. “Whether he arrives or not is immaterial. The location of the battleground doesn’t matter in the slightest when dealing with Rights of Conquest.”

Snapfist followed the renderers into the passage with a predatory grin. “I would enjoy Dumbledore attempting to interfere with the contract. Then perhaps I could fine him enough to claim that… duty we discussed previously, Warrior Potter.” Harry snorted at the goblin’s humor and headed down with his friends.

As they reached the first corridor at the bottom of the stairs, Harry and the others found Crag and his team examining the shed skin nearby. “Warrior Potter, Warrior Greengrass. This item was not in the initial contract, but is still suitable for sale. We would be willing to add it in exchange for an additional four suits of basilisk armor.”

“Six,” Daphne said coming up beside Harry and nodding to the goblin.

He considered and held up a finger. “Five.”

“Deal,” both Harry and Daphne said. They gave each other a wry grin.

“Merlin, you fought this something this big, Harry?” Tonks said hesitantly reaching out to touch the skin.

Daphne laughed and shook her head. “This is tiny compared the real deal, Tonks. Come on everyone; let’s get to the real prize.”

Crag nodded and left one goblin to start processing the skin before following along. Harry opened the second door to low whistles from some of the group and muttered comments about elaborate doors for secret underground bases. As the door slid open, the torches lining the Chamber lit up and illuminated Slytherin’s statue eliciting another round of comments about too large egos.

Then the light fell onto the corpse of the basilisk. And everyone present besides Harry, Daphne and Tracey drew in a sharp breath and froze solid.

The silence was broken when Hermione uttered a short scream before burying herself into Harry’s chest. Neville gave a soft, “Merlin’s balls…I wanted to fight that?” and was promptly engulfed by Susan and Hannah who were both trembling.

Shiva muttered several choice curses before wrapping Harry and Daphne both in a hug. “I can’t believe I let you two go against this thing alone…”

“If it’s any consolation, Professor,” Daphne said, “had any more people been here we likely wouldn’t have walked away without casualties.”

“Doesn’t change the fact you fought a monster alone,” Shiva said with a sniffle. Harry patted her back as best he could with Hermione still wrapped around him.

Tonks was completely dumbstruck, merely blinking at the 60 foot snake in front of her. “Morgana’s tits…”

“You okay, Tonks?” Harry asked his friend.

“I…I just…you said you weren’t a kid a long time ago but…even with the Dementors thing I don’t think I really understood until just now…” her hair had drifted back to its natural brown and her eyes were wide.
A flash illuminated the Chamber and Harry turned to see Luna holding up her camera with a huge smile splitting her cheeks. “Hermione, I need to borrow Harry for moment! Harry, Daphne, come over here! I need some shots of you both by its head for the *Quibbler*. Harry can you summon your sword and stick it back in its mouth? Please, please, please?”

Hermione carefully let go of Harry and pulled back, wiping her eyes. She sniffled but nodded at Harry’s look. “I’m fine, Harry. I was just a little overwhelmed that you fought this thing while I was lying unconscious. Go. Go give Luna her shots.” Harry leaned down to kiss her lightly before nodding and moving away with Daphne following behind.

Tracey had moved over to Crag and was talking to the older goblin. “So do you know where the bollocks would be on this thing? I’m not actually sure whether snakes have them or not…”

Crag let out a deep laugh as did the other goblins in earshot. “Come, youngling. This way.” After Luna got her photos, Tracey got her kick and Crag’s team started their work, Snapfist sidled up next to Harry and Daphne. “You two, are certainly worthy hunters.” His voice had lost almost all of the normal gruff tones that he usually used talking with humans. “I admit, I thought the story inflated. A basilisk is worthy prey true, but this specimen is of a different caliber. This beast would give many of Gringotts own guardians a worthy fight. It almost makes me wish the Nation had a higher honor to bestow than Warrior.” Snapfist turned to the teenagers. He considered for a long moment before bowing to them. “Warrior Potter, Warrior Greengrass, the Goblin Nation officially congratulates you on your deed. Should you require our assistance in the future we will give the request its due consideration irregardless of your species. We will treat it as it befits your status and the respect you both command.”

Daphne blinked several times before shaking her head. She hurried to curtsy and Harry followed suit with a bow. “Thank you, Account Manager Snapfist. Warrior Potter and I recognize the honor bestowed and promise to treat the concession with the same gravity that it is offered.”

“We won’t abuse that, Snapfist,” Harry put in. Neville standing nearby rolled his eyes at Harry’s lack of formality.

After that Harry and the other humans started to wander around the Chamber proper. There hadn’t been time to explore during the first visit and he never had managed to come back prior to this. Finding most of the Chamber to be empty they did end up stumbling across one large tunnel out and a grate blocked by another parseltongue door. A quick sojourn showed that the tunnel opened up relatively deep into the Forbidden Forest which at least partially explained how the snake had been able to survive for so long down there.

Hermione was far more interested in the second find: a small room behind the statue which held several ancient tomes – at least three of which were written by Salazar Slytherin himself. “Harry! Harry, look! This is Salazar Slytherin’s own personal diary! And this is a book on Hogwarts! And this is…well I don’t know what this is but look! This is amazing!” Harry chuckled as he moved over to his girlfriend’s side.

“It’s parseltongue, Hermione,” he commented checking her book. “Seems pretty boring actually. It looks like it is just descriptions of different kinds of snakes both magical and mundane. It has some notations on which ones are smarter, which ones are poisonous or have special properties and which ones make the best pets. Oh, apparently one of them can fly. That’s both terrifying and awesome.”

“I can’t believe I’m reading one of the Founder’s diaries…” Hermione said softly. She reverently turned the page with her wand. Tracey came up beside her and reached out to hold the book only
to be batted away by the brunette. “Don’t touch it! It’s ancient! You could damage it!”

Tracey held up her hands and backed off laughing. “Whoa, sorry, Miss Bookworm. My bad. I promise not to hurt the awesome book.”

Daphne shook her head and moved past Tracey to squint down at the book. “You did deserve that one, Trace. This is amazing.”

“Daphne, look,” Hermione said pointing to a section. “Is that what I think it?”

“Yeah, it’s why he left…” Daphne’s eyes widened and she stood up. “Wow. That is not what history teaches.”

“Anyone care to share?” Shiva asked coming up behind them all.

Hermione nodded absently. “According to this account, Salazar Slytherin was never against Muggle-borns in general. He was against magics being hunted and slaughtered. He advocated for raising Muggle-borns with other wizarding families so that we could hide our existence better. The other Founders disagreed with removing children from their families despite the staggering amounts of young ones who were killed before they ever reached Hogwarts for fear of being possessed by the devil when they exhibited accidental magic. The dispute grew until Slytherin could no longer remain with the others.”

Daphne picked up the story. “It looks like the basilisk was left with the primary purpose of guarding the school. Slytherin felt that the attitudes of the other Founders would eventually lead to a war with the Muggles and he wanted to make sure that at least the children here would be protected…wow, that’s actually rather sad what happened to the poor thing now…”

“I did try to talk to her,” Harry said glancing at the corpse. “Yet another thing good thing that Voldemort destroyed.”

Tonks shook her head, her hair long since returned to a black and gold pattern reminiscent of the basilisk’s scales. “I doubt that, Harry. This thing was alone for a millennium regardless of whether or not it was asleep for the majority of that time. Even if Riddle hadn’t convinced it to start trying to kill the students it likely wouldn’t have been sane enough to be a decent guardian anymore.”

“It still seems like a shame,” Neville said. He sighed. “I preferred hating the monster. You’re not supposed to feel bad for things like this.”

“That’s what makes us different from…Him,” Susan said setting her mouth in a thin line.

“Agreed,” Hannah nodded. “If we can feel bad for a giant monster that tried to kill us and a man who wanted to break up thousands of families than that just proves that we are better people than those like You-Know-Who and his followers.”

“Yes,” Luna said with a smile. “We few no longer are infested with nargles unlike most of the population.”

“Nargles?” Hannah asked. Everyone else just laughed.

The goblins had managed to complete almost half the work before Snape and Dumbledore strode into the Chamber. Snape stopped dead upon seeing the corpse and his mouth dropped open. Dumbledore continued on as if he had seen this sort of thing every day.

“Ah, Harry, my boy, I see you are conducting a bit of Spring Cleaning. A few months late for that
isn’t it?” he asked a twinkle in his eyes.

Harry raised his eyebrows and glanced at his friends. Most just shrugged though Hermione’s eyes narrowed as she stared at the old man as did Shiva’s and Tonks’. “Hello, Headmaster. I thought you’d be away on business.”

“We concluded the session early,” Dumbledore said with a wave of his hand. “I am surprised you didn’t think I should be informed of this…”

Shiva stepped in front of her ward. “Actually, Headmaster, I did inform the Deputy Headmistress that we would be conducting the harvesting today.”

“Indeed? Minerva must have forgotten to mention it.”

“She must have.” Shiva flashed a wry grin. If he wanted to be difficult she could be too.

Dumbledore stayed quiet for a moment before continuing, “When may the school expect to see the extra income from the sale of the materials?”

That comment drew the laughter of nearly every goblin in the room as well as snorts from many of the humans. “By Right of Conquest,” Snapfist said when he got himself under control, “Warrior Potter and Warrior Greengrass have claimed this corpse. A contract has already been struck between them and the Nation. Should they wish to donate any of their profits to the school that is their business. I rather doubt that you will be seeing anything like that anytime soon in my humble opinion, Albus Dumbledore.”

Dumbledore’s mouth set into a deep frown and he turned from the goblin back to Harry and Daphne. “Surely this is a school matter, Harry.”

“Dumbledore,” Shiva said raising her eyebrows, “just because the beast was under the school doesn’t make it school property.”

Daphne shrugged. “We can however, offer to donate several tomes penned by Salazar Slytherin to the school with the understanding that any and all rights to reproductions lie with us as the discoverers.”

“Us?” Dumbledore asked.

“Harry, Tracey, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Susan, Hannah, Tonks, Professor Babbling, the goblins present and myself. Basically everyone who was here before you and Professor Snape arrived, Sir,” Daphne clarified. Crag looked over at her with a surprised expression. He nodded to the girl and went back to his work.

“A Founder’s tome you say…” Dumbledore slowly nodded. “Very well. I will have to go over these books to ensure that there is nothing dangerous in any of them prior to release.”

Tonks shook her head. “No you won’t, Headmaster. That is not your right at all. We found these. We own them until we hand them over. You’ll receive the originals in a few days after we get some master copies made. If you’re just going to sit there and whine you might as well head back up into the school, Sir.”

Dumbledore pulled back as if he had been slapped. Snape finally seemed to snap out of his stupor. He looked over to the group and strode towards them at a pace just under a run with his cloak flapping behind him. “Greengrass, this is what you faced in your second year? This?!”
“I told you not to insult Harry or myself, Professor,” Daphne shrugged. “I told you that we had not been exaggerating.”

Snape just gaped at her. He turned back to the basilisk and started muttering, “Impossible. Potter was useless. An idiot and a bully. How could his spawn have…”

Shiva growled low and moved to step toward Snape but Harry reached out to pull her back. “Don’t, Shiva,” he whispered. “Let him have his identity crisis and keep trying to justify his hate. It’s not worth fighting it and he has been at least slightly better the past year.”

She scowled but backed down. The group slowly spread out again. Dumbledore tried several more times to gain rights to the basilisk or at least the books discovered yet was soundly rebuffed each time. It was early evening by the time the assemblage headed back up out of the Chamber with their parcels in tow. Hermione was clutching her box with the ancient tomes like it was filled with diamonds and Shiva and Tonks were helping the Goblins to transport the skeleton back above ground.

They had almost reached the Entrance Hall when Dumbledore asked one final question. “Where are you taking the skeleton? I would have assumed it would be rendered as well.”

“Oh, I’m going to hang it up in my Entrance Hall,” Harry said with a grin. “Should be pretty cool, huh?” Harry and the others laughed and continued out. Dumbledore stayed rooted to the ground with his mouth open and an expression of pure horror splashed across his features.

“Oww,” Harry moaned from the ground near the Quidditch World Cup underneath several grumbling bodies a few weeks later. He had only himself to blame for these circumstances. Like seemingly every other method of wizarding transit, Harry was apparently horrible with Portkey travel. Everyone but him had remained standing as they arrived at the grounds. Harry, however, had managed to stumble and fall as soon as the magic let him go. He’d tumbled and proceeded to drag down Luna, Hermione, Sirius and Shiva on top of him.

“I hate magical travel,” Harry muttered as his friends and family picked themselves off him and helped him up.

Shiva dusted him off and laughed. “It really seems to hate you too, kid. One day maybe we’ll figure out why you suck at it so much.”

“Or I’ll just invent a new way to travel instead,” Harry said sullenly. The others laughed and he scowled deeper. “You think I’m kidding. Not this time. This getting really old. And Portkeys suck.”

“Eh, Apparation is more uncomfortable at first, kid,” Shiva shook her head with a smile. “Come on people. Let’s go find our tent. Luna, you said your father is going to be set up nearby right?”

The Quidditch World Cup tickets from Sirius had been a bit of a surprise but in hindsight, they really shouldn’t have been. The Ministry kept trying to bribe Sirius so that he wouldn’t try and crucify them for his wrongful imprisonment and had given him box seats to the game. Sirius managed to con them into a few extra tickets so he’d gotten enough for Harry, Shiva and Hermione to attend as well. Everyone had been somewhat surprised when Harry had asked his godfather to get seats for Fred and George to join them too. His only explanation had been ‘business’. A few others from Harry’s group were around but were in general seating and Luna was going to be joining her father in the press box. They were supposedly almost as good as the ones that Sirius had.
Harry admitted to himself that he was greatly looking forward to this game. While he enjoyed playing Quidditch as much as the next bloke it was really just the flying itself that made it fun. Getting to watch the professionals practice their skills though…that should prove to be amazing. He loved his Firebolt, but he had no illusions that the pros would know how to handle one far better than he did. Viktor Krum in particular should be prove to be impressive. Harry was hoping his side bet with the twins would work out – he really didn’t want to make a set a rune stones that forced someone to sing “I’m a little teapot”.

When Harry entered the top box he scowled. Of course the Malfoys would be here. And the Minister too. “Why did I let you talk me into this again?” Harry asked Sirius.

His godfather chuckled and led the group towards the front of the box. “Hey, we get to thumb our noses at them, pup. Perk up!”

“Harry!” one voice belonging to a tall red-head sounded.

“Our friend! Our pal!” a second red-head grinned.

“Our partner!” Fred yelled clapping the messy haired young on the back and dropping into the seat next to Hermione. She just shook her head at the twins’ antics while Shiva looked at Sirius who shrugged.

“Hey, guys,” Harry said nodding to the twins. “Owl order form set up then I presume?”

“That it is partner, that it is,” George said grinning like a loon. “Products will be ready to ship at the beginning of the term. You sure we can’t convince you to ramp up production on your end yet?”

“Not just yet, guys,” Harry said with a laugh. “It’s going to be hard enough keeping up with the special orders. You sure you can handle the one time use ones?”

“Don’t worry, Harry, we got it covered. Tested it out over the summer. Instructions worked fine.”

Shiva tapped Harry’s should. “What are you up to, kid?” She was smirking apparently already having a good idea.

Harry smiled at her. “I’m starting my business. Potter Runes are currently only offered via owl order through affiliation with Weasley Wizarding Wheezes. Part of the deal was getting them box seats.”

“Nah, that was just a joke clause. Never actually thought you’d do it, Harry,” Fred said lounging back. “Seriously, thanks, this is awesome. The rest of the family has some rather terrible seats somewhere down there.” He waved towards a section of the crowd towards one of the hoop posts.

“We tried to convince Ginny we’d smuggle her up here, but she apparently got conned into following Luna to the press box instead,” George continued.

Hermione peered between the three teens. “You three are actually starting that business you’ve been discussing off and on?”

“Well we don’t have a place yet,” Fred said with a shrug. “It takes a lot of seed money to open a physical shop on Diagon but we have enough products ready that we can at least start an owl order. Harry’s inventory is far more limited since he won’t let us sell a lot of the more impressive ones.”
“More dangerous ones you mean,” Harry said shaking his head. “I’m reserving some of those for Susan’s Aunt and a lot I’m just not willing to sell. Do you really want a magical grenade to be available on the open market?”

George nodded. “We’re not criticizing, Harry. It was just a comment. Whatever happened to those Reflector Robes you had talked about a while back by the way?”

“The what?” Sirius asked.

Harry just grimaced at the memory of that abortive attempt. “Yeah. Those are not happening. You know the rune on my glasses, Sirius? The one that bounces back spells? Well I tried making some robes with that stitched into them. It…was scary.”

Shiva quirked her eyebrow. “Oh? How so? And why didn’t I hear about this?”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. “I…sorta swore Daph to secrecy.”

Hermione laughed. “Okay, now I seriously need to hear this story, Harry.” The other four nodded their concurrence as well.

“Fine,” Harry sighed muttering a curse under his breath. “I made the robes, we used that room to test whether they worked or not since the walls seemed to absorb spells for some reason. Daphne shot some stinging hexes and stunners at me and a few other things. It reflected almost everything, but the spells went everywhere. It’s a good thing she hadn’t thrown anything dangerous because she got hit by a ton of the ricochets. The design was interesting but it would just end up being a huge hazard in any sort of combat situation where you had allies remotely nearby. Plus it had…a minor problem…”

“Do tell,” Sirius said grinning wildly at the scent of weakness.

“Cloth isn’t a good magical conductor…” Harry sighed as Hermione just raised her eyebrows at him and motioned for him to go on. “The robes disintegrated after Daphne tossed out a few too many spells at once. And I had neglected to wear my pants that afternoon…”

Shiva started laughing uproariously and the others in the group quickly joined in. Harry turned bright red. “Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. Like I said, those are not happening again.”

Hermione shook her head with a large smile on her face. “I feel somewhat jealous of her now. Daph has gotten to see something that I, as your girlfriend, have been so far denied.” Harry just groaned as everyone laughed even harder.

Shiva clapped Harry on the back and wheezed out between her laughs, “Kid, that is impressive! Next time you try out new robes don’t forget the underwear.”

“You guys suck,” Harry said though he had a slight upturn to the edges of his lips.

“Getting delirious from the altitude Granger, Weasels?” Draco drawled from across the aisle. “I can’t say I’m surprised. None of you could possibly be used to such a lofty view seeing your meager means. Who did you have to bribe to get these seats? Offer any…alternative favors?”

The twins scowled but before they could say anything Shiva subtly shook her head and wagged her eyes at Hermione. The younger girl took the hint and leaned over to smile at Malfoy. “The problem with a pedestal Malfoy is that when you get knocked off one, you tend to break everything once you hit the bottom.”
“Is that a threat Mud – ” he cut off glancing around the inhabitants of the box with a scowl. “Is that a threat, Granger?”

“Merely an observation. We are in a box after all, not a pedestal,” Hermione chuckled lightly. “I admit I’m impressed with your restraint. You managed to stop before finishing your customary slur and you have yet to say ‘My Father’ once!”

“Don’t give him too much credit, hon,” Harry commented waving towards a reddening Lucius Malfoy next to Draco. “He probably doesn’t think it’s necessary to say it since his father *is* right there.”

“Shut up, Scarhead!” Draco shouted.

“Wow is that best he’s got?” Fred asked. “Rather weak of a comeback there.”

“Ah, brother, not everyone can approach our brilliance,” George said shaking his head.

Fred smiled and nodded. “Too true, brother. Too true. I wonder which side of the family had the lack of grey matter?”

“Could be either,” Sirius commented rubbing his chin. “My family certainly wasn’t known for their stability. Besides Andi and me we’re pretty much filled with oddballs and arseholes.”

“I thought my grandmother was a Black?” Harry asked.

Sirius grinned. “Yeah but she married a Potter so my point is proven.”

Shiva and Harry both laughed at that. Lucius’ scowl had deepened the entire time and Draco eventually lost his cool. He jumped up and started to draw his wand before Sirius casually glared at him. “You really want to curse the Lord of the Noble House of Black, little Draco?”

Draco’s expression darkened even further but Lucius jerked him back into his seat. “I would ask you not to antagonize my family, Lord Black,” Lucius said in clipped words.

“Well, I consider not dissolving your marriage and reclaiming my family’s dowry to be pretty non-antagonistic,” Sirius said with an evil grin. He nodded towards Draco. “Control your son.”

The Bulgarian Minister next to Fudge snorted and said something to his bodyguards who started laughing. Fudge just glared at everyone present except his counterpart and tried to shift his one sided conversation back to the upcoming game. How he was failing at that when the Bulgarian wasn’t even speaking English made things even more entertaining.

“Oh, quiet guys, here come the mascots!” George suddenly said leaning forward. “Veela! Sweet!”

“Veela?” Harry asked as he reached for his omnioculars. “Whoa, they all look really similar.”

“Oh, is that all, Harry?” Hermione asked far too casually.

Harry could sense a trap though he had no idea what the trigger was. “Umm, yeah?” Hermione made a noncommittal noise of acknowledgement.

Sirius laughed. “She’s fishing to see if you think they’re beautiful, Harry”

“Oh,” Harry just shrugged and looked askance at Hermione. “Sure, they’re pretty and that silvery hair is ethereal but none of them are as amazing as you.”
Hermione smiled and patted his knee. “And that, Harry, is why I care for you so much.”

Fred and George gave Harry a thumbs up before George started talking. “Veela beauty isn’t entirely natural, Harry; it’s partly magical. They have an aura, an Allure, that draws in most males and some females.”

Fred continued, “They’re pretty sexual people. We don’t know much in depth stuff though. Not too many Veela in England. There’s a whole enclave though in Bulgaria and another really big one in France.”

Sirius was grinning into his own omnioculars as the women moved into the center of the field. “Never piss off a Veela, pup. They have a self-transfiguration ability that lets them become harpyesque. And they can throw fireballs from their hands when really mad.”

“That’s pretty cool,” Harry commented. Besides him Shiva nodded in agreement.

The Veela started to dance and a quiet fell over the stadium. The more they swayed and sang the more charged the air felt. Harry found it a bit hard to breathe initially but he felt Hermione and Shiva’s hands on his legs and shook his head. Whatever had been affecting him seemed to mostly dissipate and Harry turned to ask what had happened. His eyes widened as he saw Sirius practically drooling into his lap and the twins were on their feet seemingly torn between sitting back down and going straight up to the railing. Draco was insensate on the floor of the box and Lucius was slumped over in his chair along with Fudge, both had their eyes completely glazed over. “Bloody hell,” Harry muttered.

The two girls on either side of him started and looked at him with wide eyes. Though Hermione’s were a bit hazy, they cleared as she tried to focus on him. “Harry?” Shiva asked. “You’re alright?”

“I’m fine. What’s going on with the others?”

The Bulgarian Minister looked over at him and gave a polite smile and head nod. “They will be fine in short order. Our Veela can overdo it bit much sometimes. Not many unaffected. You are of strong vill young man. Bravo.”

Harry frowned but thanked the Minister for the information before his eyes were drawn to a commotion in the stands below. He raised his omnioculars to check it out and saw Ron Weasley trying to leap over the edge of the stands to get to the Veela. Arthur and another redhead – who he assumed was Charlie from the resemblance – had their arms around him and were dragging the youngest brother back towards his seat.

The Veela song stopped and Fred and George shook their heads and turned to each other before sheepishly dropping back into their seats. “We didn’t do anything too embarrassing did we?”

Harry grunted. “Well neither of you tried to jump a hundred feet down to the stadium floor like your brother so I’m going with: no.”

George groaned and covered his face with his hands. “Bollocks, Ron…really?”

“Yeah. Saw him through the omnioculars. Your father and – I think – Charlie pulled him back though.”

“Makes sense Charlie wouldn’t care,” Fred muttered. “Charlie never seems to care about relationships or stuff like that at all.”

Sirius shook his head and finally snapped out of his trance. “What’d I miss? Where’d the girls
go? Amy?”  Harry, Hermione and Shiva all just stared at him for a moment before bursting out laughing.  Sirius still dumbfounded looked to the twins who both shrugged as well. The three of them quickly joined their friends in laughing along at whatever joke had been made before turning back to watch the game.

Fred and George had left to find their family and tease Ron about his failed attempt at unassisted flight after the game ended leaving Harry with the other three. They had chatted about the game for a while with Sirius attempting to give Harry pointers on how to use some of Krum’s moves and include them in his own strategies.

“Absolutely not!” Shiva yelled smacking the back of Sirius’ head. “Harry, it’s bad enough you try to use the Wronski Feint please, for love of the Goddess, do not do that turn!”

“It really didn’t look that hard though, Shiva,” Harry said shrugging.  

Hermione groaned and slapped her head with one hand. “Of course it’s not hard at normal speeds, Harry. You do that at full tilt though like Krum did and you’re likely to lose your arm if the angle is even a fraction of an inch off.”

“But imagine how much faster I could turn if I hook the poles like that!” he wasn’t going to give up that easily. Flying was the only thing he could do half as well as runes.

Shiva glared at Harry but then got a scary grin and looked to Hermione. The girl cocked her head and let out a soft, “Oh.” A moment later she smiled at Harry and moved to sit right next to the boy. His alarm bells were ringing again. She moved both hands to his cheeks and said, “Harry, you like kissing me right?” He nodded. “And you like when I hug you?” He nodded again. “If you want me to keep kissing you, you won’t lose your arm while playing Quidditch. Deal?”

“Can I still try the move at lower speeds?”

“As long as you promise to remain intact,” she said after giving it some consideration.

“Deal.” He hurriedly agreed. Hermione smiled and pulled him down for a kiss. They broke off as screams sounded from a short distance away.

Sirius and Shiva frowned and stood, moving to the front of the tent. “You two stay here. We’ll see what’s going on,” Shiva said. The screams increased in volume and number. “Scratch that. Head towards the forest, guys. Sirius?”

“I got your back,” he said all levity and playfulness gone from his voice.

“Shiva,” Harry started but was immediately cut off as his guardian shook her head.

“Harry, please. There are too many people here and you could be a target. This could just be a lure to draw you towards them. I’ll catch up, but I need to know what’s going on first. Please.” Harry scowled but nodded. “Thank you. Hermione, make sure he goes. Both of you protect each other. Worst comes to worst, head to the nearest Floo and get back home, then send off Hedwig to us if we aren’t back an hour after you return.”

“If he’ll listen to you, send my elf. I don’t want to call him with this many people around…he’s still not exactly stable,” Sirius said.

Shiva gave Harry a quick hug and pushed him towards the flap. “Go. Sirius, this way!”
The four split as they ran out of the tent, Shiva and Sirius heading towards the group of panicking attendees while Harry and Hermione ran towards the forest.

Harry and Hermione had made it nearly three quarters of the way to the trees when the tent in front of them exploded. Little balls of fire rained down on them and the two jumped out of the way. With a loud crash a giant piece of the wood used to construct the stadium crashed to the ground. It fell between the two teens separating them and blocking Harry’s way forward. He rolled back away from the smoking barrier yelling out, “Hermione! Mione, are you all right!?”

“I’m okay, Harry!” came a coughing reply. “Cut through the next lane of tents and circle around to me okay?”

“On it! Don’t move, Mione, I’m coming!” Harry pushed himself to his feet still coughing. ‘Got to do something about breathing runes soon. Smoke and toxic fumes are not healthy.’ Harry ran through the nearest tents and picked up his *Reductor* from his utility belt as he hit the back wall, using it to blast a hole through and into the next lane. Thankfully that section was clear of debris so he ran a few tents down before cutting back towards where he had left Hermione. He was still a short ways away as a piercing scream rent the air.

Fleur was quickly learning that tempting fate was probably the stupidest thing she had ever done in her short life. The quick tour of the country had been interesting – especially the ancient magical sites such as Stonehenge and the supposed burial chamber of Merlin and Morgana. Even the World Cup itself had turned out to be more fun than anticipated. Celeste and her group had performed exceptionally, almost too exceptionally. They had grabbed the hearts and minds of nearly every male that Fleur had seen. One particularly sad red-head member of the crowd had actually tried to leap onto the field. She’d been rather amazed that the boy had been coordinated enough to get as far as he had – considering how little blood seemed to be in his head at that point…well, the head on his shoulders at least. For the game itself, Viktor Krum’s flying skills had proven exceptional just as she’d hoped. While it was disappointing that Bulgaria lost she hadn’t much cared for the results either way. It was just exciting getting to see the skill with which all of the participants were competing.

Afterwards, she had been invited to stay with the group of her people for a short afterparty that had quickly turned into a far more intense experience than she had anticipated. When many of the Veela began partnering off with the Bulgarian teammates, Fleur had called it a night. It wasn’t that she was *opposed* to such activities – it was after all, part of her very nature – but she did prefer to at least know something about her potential partner. She was not some floozy who would just jump into bed with the nearest warm body simply because she was aroused. Now if Celeste had been interested the night might have proceeded differently, but her friend had been otherwise occupied. So Fleur had left.

Which led her straight into the current predicament...and cursing herself for tempting fate by expecting a boring trip. In her inebriated state, she hadn’t noticed that the screams in the distance hadn’t been simple shouts of delight but were in fact sounds of panic. By the time that had penetrated her mind it had been too late. She’d been surrounded by five men in black robes and white masks. She knew enough of recent history to recognize Death Eater garb when she saw it and it had sent a chill down her spine. Fleur tried to grab her wand but an ever so slight fumble was all it had taken.

Her first spell missed by a fraction of an inch and the man behind her slammed something into her head. Fleur went down with the world spinning. She tried to pull herself together enough to transform into her avian battle form or even just ramp up her Allure but...between the alcohol and
the head injury she wasn’t able to concentrate well enough. Whoever had reached down and
grabbed Fleur succeeded in unintentionally further complicating matters. He pulled her torso up
and locked her arms behind her back with his knee between her shoulder blades lewdly pushing her
chest forward.

“Ne me touche pas! Lâche moi, espèce de pourriture!” Fleur screamed. The position of her arms
and his leg effectively limited her ability to shift as her wings weren’t able to form and that
prevented the rest of her from changing as well.

One of the men grunted from behind his mask and reached a hand into his robes near the groin.
Fleur screamed, fighting as hard as she could against her attackers. Another of the masked men
sent a spell into her side knocking the wind out of her. The world swam in front of her eyes and
Fleur sucked in a deep breath. This was going to be it. This was how her life was going to end:
beaten, raped and killed by arrogant rioting terrorists who had had the good fortune to be lucky at
just the right time…

Or perhaps, not such good fortune after all.

The man standing in front of her with his robes parted and his manhood swinging was suddenly hit
in the chest with a bright red disarming spell. His wand shot away and his body was thrown
backwards nearly ten feet from force of the spell, crashing to the ground in front of his other
companions. The four men, plus Fleur, simply gaped for a moment as the prone attacker gave a
shuddering gasp and fell still.

Spells flew past Fleur, streaking towards two of the other men, but they sufficiently recovered their
wits enough to start blocking. Fleur felt her arms released as her captor shouted from behind. She
twisted out of the way, trying to kick or punch the man but he had already started to fall to the side,
a mass of brown hair riding his back into the ground. Fleur blinked. Whoever her rescuer was, the
girl – for she looked to be a teenager only slightly younger than Fleur herself – had delivered a
flying knee into the rioter’s back and latched onto his shoulders as he fell to the ground. The girl
rolled off the man as he hit, her elbow driving into his neck – and quieting all his flailing – before
her maneuver was finished. She turned just in time to raise a shield around Fleur and herself as
spells came flying at them.

“If you can stand, get ready to run!” the girl yelled. Fleur tried to nod but it was still hard to focus
and she only succeeded in grimacing as the world swam around her again.

“I don’t zink I can,” Fleur hissed between her teeth as she blinked away the pain. “But I can fight
from ‘ere.”

“You don’t have your wand!” the girl shouted back. Her shield cracked as more spells impacted.
“Here! It’s a Concussor,” she tossed a small stone at Fleur who stared at the little engraving
dumbly. A rune stone? “It launches confrigos, point it at them. On my mark, three, two, one – ”

Before the girl could finish her count the battlefield erupted again. Another small stone hexagon
soared into the clearing and almost immediately exploded into a shower of light and raw magical
energy. Two of the attackers were caught in the blast, one dropping unmoving ten feet away from
where he started while the second was pushed into the wall of a nearby tent dazed but still
standing. He had no chance to raise his wand to counterattack though. An arm’s length stone
spike at least 14cm thick shot through the air and embedded itself in his chest.

Fleur shifted her eyes and saw a messy haired young man with blazing green eyes charging into the
space between the tents, fury and panic written across his face. His right hand was clutching his
wand while his left was holding a rune stone. Spells shot from his wand while another spike
formed, shooting from the rune and streaking towards another one of the remaining attackers. That man managed to shatter the stone but the brown haired girl dropped her shield and launched a cutting hex. He turned at the last moment and instead of striking his arm, her spell hit him in the chest and caused a spray of red to blossom, the rioter collapsing to the ground. The green eyed man jumped towards Fleur and the girl completely missing the final attacker now positioned just behind him. The girl tried to shout something and the man started to turn back but the attacker had already raised his wand to curse them.

Fleur snarled. She didn’t have time to fully transform, but she was angry and scared enough to force the shift in her arm. A light downy sprinkling of pure white feathers sprouted along her right arm as the fire formed above her palm. Fleur drew her arm back and launched the ball of liquid flame towards the final rioter. She coalesced a second fireball before the first had even impacted but it turned out to not be needed. Despite her condition, Fleur’s aim had been true. Her fire hit the attacker dead center and flowed over him. He dropped his wand and screamed but a Veela’s fire was not as simple as normal flames. These were hungry. Before her two saviors could do anything beyond raise their wands the masked man, dropped dead to the ground, his clothes still burning.

Breathing hard, the green eyed man and the brown haired girl turned to each other. “Are you okay?” They asked simultaneously. Both nodded and replied, “I’m fine.”

The girl turned to Fleur and dropped down beside her. “Are you okay?”

"Oui, je ne suis pas blessée. Est-ce que tu vas bien?” Fleur said levering herself into a sitting position and attempting to ignore the spinning sensation.

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak much French,” the girl said with a frown.

“Ah, oui, of course,” Fleur said with a groan. “Apologies. I am mostly fine. Are you ‘urt?”

“I’m okay. A little bruised, but fine,” she said turning to the man who came up and put his hand on her shoulder still looking around the clearing. “I’m, Hermione and this is Harry. If you can stand we should leave before more of them come.”

“I…may need some assistance with zat. Ze hit me on the ‘ead and I am still a leetle dis…dis…I do not know ze word. It iz spinning.”

“Disoriented. Harry?”

“Got it,” Harry said. “Take the Spiker, Mione. But…be careful…I knew it wasn’t exactly a nonlethal cluster but…” His voice faltered slightly before hardening again. “Nevermind. If they’re going to wear Death Eater robes and try to kill you then they deserve it.” Handing off the rune stone to Hermione, the boy moved to Fleur and helped her to stand. She groaned and held her free hand to her head, waiting for the world to calm down again. Her other arm was draped over Harry’s shoulder as he supported some of her weight.

“Alright, let’s move,” Hermione said holding her wand out and leading the way. Thankfully they made it into the trees without further incidents and Harry carefully let Fleur slump against one of the trees a short ways into the woods.

“Merci, vous m’avez sauvée. Je vous dois la vie,” Fleur said smiling at the two youths. Harry cocked his head at her and Hermione was about to say something before Fleur waved her off. “Sorry, I meant, zank you. You both saved, at minimum, my virtue and more likely my life az well. I owe you a great debt.”
Harry blushed. “Don’t worry about it. Saving people seems to be a habit of ours…”

Hermione sighed and rolled her eyes. “More like a habit of Harry’s that we all just keep getting dragged along with. Do you know any healing spells…?”

“Oh, where are my mannerz…I am Fleur Delacour,” Fleur said with a wry grin. “And no, I not know any of ze healing spells. I will be fine in a few minutes zough. I imagine I am quite sober by zis point and the world has been spinning far less for some time now. Ze head injury was not bad, merely frustrating.”

“You should still get it looked at,” Hermione said frowning. “Concussions are never something that should just be brushed off.”

“I will. I promise, ‘ermione,” Fleur said nodding. She was quite pleased when there was only a dul twinge of pain at that movement.

“Good. Harry, are you alright?” Hermione said turning to her companion.

“I’m fine, Mione,” Harry’s eyes narrowed as a burning green and black skull shot into the sky with a snake curling through its mouth. Screams rang out anew and distant pops heralded a retreat by the remaining rioters. “That’s the Dark Mark right?”

“Yes, it is,” Hermione said growing pale. “You don’t think…?”

“I doubt it,” Harry said. “Voldemort’s not that stupid. He’d never attack something this big without a ton of followers and he’d probably be more organized about it.”

“I hope you’re right, Harry,” Hermione said softly.

“Voldemort? I zought he was dead?” Fleur asked looking between the two. “Wasn’t he killed over a decade ago?”

“He’s only mostly dead,” Harry said sighing and rubbing his forehead. “It’s complicated and now’s not really the time to explain. Hang on a second and let me see if I can contact Shiva or Sirius. Comm on, contact Shiva.”

Fleur’s eyes widened as she turned from Harry to Hermione. “He can do wandless, long distance voice throwing charms? I didn’t zink that was possible!”

Hermione chuckled. “It’s another rune cluster just a miniaturized version.” She turned her head and tapped her earring. “See? Harry’s quite skilled with runes. We all have a Comm Stone so that we can contact each other in emergencies. I think his guardian rather forgot about it in the heat of the moment earlier when she told us to send an owl after her if she was missing,” Hermione finished with a soft grin.

“Don’t worry about it, I promise not to tease you. Yeah, we’re fine but we found an older girl and she’s hurt. Not badly, but someone should still take a look at her…By the pink flaming tent and about two rows further north and a hundred feet in…err, I’d prefer to talk about that at home, Shiva…no, I’m fine…yes, really…yeah, I did…I’m okay. I do want to talk about it but not over a rune line, Shiva, that’s why I said I’d wait til we got home…Hermione am I in shock?” Harry asked shaking his head in exasperation and turning to the brunette. Fleur just peered between them utterly lost. Hermione shook her head and gave him a thumbs up. “Hermione says I’m fine. Oh, I see you guys. Hang on,” he took out another hexagonal rune stone and held up it. A second later the most beautiful silver panther jumped out of it and prowled through the trees towards the tents.
“Mon Dieu...Is zat a Patronus? From a rune stone?” Fleur asked, gaping.

“Like I said, Harry is good with runes.” Hermione sighed. “It’s not technically a Patronus. We’re not entirely sure what it is to be honest. He’s kind of breaking new ground with the Silver Spirit. Oh, there they are.”

Hermione stood and waved to two adults striding up to them following the silver panther as it loped back through the woods toward the teens. The woman appeared a few years older than Fleur though the man was quite a bit more mature – perhaps mid-thirties? As soon as she caught sight of Harry and Hermione, the woman sped up from a quick trot into a full out sprint with the man only slightly slower behind her. She crashed to a stop as the panther dissipated and pulled Harry into a bone-crushing hug.

“Shiva, I said I was fine,” Harry muttered pushing her back and running his brilliant eyes over her critically. “You’re hurt though.” He reached out a hand to gently touch a burn on her right arm.

“It’s nothing, kid,” Shiva said brushing off his worry. “I have a paste at the house and it’ll be gone in a day.” She eyed him. “And your ‘fine’ tends to translate to ‘I almost died a few minutes ago but everything’s cool now; excuse me while I bleed out over here’.”

The other man – Sirius? – came forward with concern also evident in how he checked over all three of the teens. Fleur noticed his eyes slightly unfocus as he looked at her. Cursing inwardly, she reigning in her Allure not realizing it had been leaking out. Her injury must have been greatly diminished now going by that. Sirius’ eyes refocused and he nodded at her before pulling Hermione in a quick hug. “You guys are really alright?”

“Yes, Sirius,” Hermione said with a sigh. “After the adrenaline wears off I doubt we will be okay for long, but yes for the moment, Harry and I are uninjured beyond some bruises. None of their spells hit. Fleur has a concussion though she said the dizziness is abating. I believe she also has several bruises, but we managed to reach her before they had much of a chance to go further than that.”

“And the attackers?” he asked.

Harry and Shiva both scowled while Hermione grimaced. Before either of the youths could say anything Fleur cut in, “Ze have been dealt with. ‘Arry and ‘ermione saved my life. They were quite impressive and quite...determined?”

“I’d say decisive not determined,” Hermione sighed. “They’re dead. Five bodies back near the flames.”

“Better than you,” Sirius said and Shiva nodded her agreement.

“Is anyone going after the others that got away?” Harry asked.

“Sorry, kid,” Shiva sighed. “They used portkeys to escape when someone sent off the Dark Mark. No way to track them now unless they were stupid enough to use Ministry registered keys which seems very unlikely.”

“You can’t track portkeys?” Harry asked looked incredulous. At the shaking heads he scowled. “Another thing to add to the To-Do List,” he muttered.

“Kid...”

“It’s just folded and overlapping spaces. Tracking it will be easier than making the Silver Spirit.”
“Harry!” Shiva said tone harsh. He looked up and shut his eyes before taking a deep breath and nodding.

“Right. Sorry. We should get Fleur to a Healer,” he said.

Fleur pulled herself to her feet. The world stayed perfectly still this time. “My muzzer has some basic healing skills. Our tent was near ze stadium with ze Veela mascots from Bulgaria.”

Hermione nodded. “Oh, that would explain how you could throw that fireball then.”

Fleur grimaced but nodded. She hesitantly turned to the four but surprisingly none seemed to care about the revelation. She blinked at that. Fleur and her mother had been facing prejudice somewhat regularly since entering this country. Yet another good reason for leaving Gabi at home.

“That’s pretty cool,” Harry nodded. “Did you have friends in the cheerleaders then?”

“Yes,” Fleur said still shocked. “A distant cousin once or twice removed…”

“Nice. Hope she got you good seats then.” He pulled away from Shiva and walked towards her offering his shoulder again. “Need help still?”

“I...oui. Zank you,” Fleur almost shook her head but caught herself before starting the movement. As the group started towards the tents to find her parents, Fleur couldn’t help but wonder just who these people were.

“Bloody cowards. Pathetic, weak, despicable, little bloody cowards,” Barty Crouch Jr. muttered as he limped through the alley. His father had been distracted and lax ever since the truth about Sirius Black came out and his control had been steadily slipping for weeks. Barty had used the confusion in the riot at the game to fully shatter the control. He’d killed his father right there but Winky had banished him before he could steal the man’s wand. Stupid house elf. Wouldn’t even come when he called now. Knocking his father’s body towards her shouldn’t have counted as giving her clothes. She was a fanatical little beast and she wouldn’t have wanted that to count. Whatever. He didn’t need a house elf. He had done fine on his own long before getting chained.

At least he’d managed to steal that fool redhead’s wand. The boy had left it in his back pocket of all places! Did he want to get his arse blown off? That sister though...she was a sharp one. She’d seen Barty slip the wand and managed to get a cutting curse off at him. A powerful one at that. He’d just barely gotten the Dark Mark up before her wand came up and he’d had to immediately apparate away in order to try and dodge her curse. The little bitch had still managed to get his leg pretty good. Barty grunted that in actuality it was a nice shot. After binding his wound and despite the danger, he’d been unable to stop himself from dipping back into the World Cup grounds for a short kip. He found it deserted of his kin – the Death Eaters having run as soon as the Mark appeared.

With a scowl Barty had left to start his plan. Finding his master had been deceptively easy. Riddle Manor was not really the most secure of hiding locations though it was true next to no one in the ranks had been trusted enough to be told of the significance of the building. Barty was relatively certain that only he and Bella had been told and even then it had only been after enough magical rituals that little if any of his master’s birth father’s genes remained in the body. Seeing the coward rat, Wormtail, attending his master was shameful. Oh how he longed to torture the fool! But no, his master had forbidden it...for now.
The plan to infiltrate the upcoming Tournament was both simple and ingenious. Taking his father’s place would certainly have worked better, but Black had closed off that option. He was forced to go with the second best solution. Alastor Moody. The man was known as horribly paranoid with those he didn’t trust implicitly so it wouldn’t look odd when Barty kept drinking from his own flask of polyjuice instead of school supplies. There was even once a time that Barty had enjoyed acting so playing a curmudgeonly old veteran skilled at both Dark defense and Dark offense should be simple enough. It might even be fun. The decision to willingly give up the use of his leg for months was made far easier after the damage that girl had done to him.

No the real trick to this plan would be keeping Harry Potter in a position to win the Tournament. The boy may be more competent and powerful than originally anticipated, but Barty had heard the rumors about the Tournament being far more intensive than the original plan. Dragons had been difficult enough and he didn’t relish finding ways through the newer challenges. Assuming he even bothered...if the boy died during the Tournament his master would be disappointed certainly but...there was a large assortment of enemies who could be used for the solstice ritual. Harry Potter didn’t need to survive to bring his master back...

Eh, he’d wait and see how things progressed. Perhaps the boy would surprise him anyway. Right now, Barty had a paranoid old man to kidnap.
Chapter 17: An Angry Witch

Shiva hovered near Harry as he walked in the rows between the tents with Fleur leaning on his shoulder. Hermione walked on her other side watching carefully in case the younger girl was needed. Sirius flanked Hermione maintaining a lookout in case there were any stragglers involved in the riot.

Eventually they came to the grouping of tents housing the Veela contingent. Fleur caught sight of her mother arguing with a man in the British Aurors robes near the entrance to the cluster of tents. She silently pointed them out to the others and they shuffled closer.

“…I do not care what you zink happened, little man!” Apolline’s snarling voice carrying through the air caused Fleur to wince. She was exceedingly thankful that her mother had managed to control her rage enough that a light coating of feathers was the only manifestation visible. It had been a very long time since she’d seen her mother quite so incensed. The last time, fireballs had ended up raining from the sky. “You have tree witnesses zat those men assaulted my daughter. If you wish to avoid an international inzident you will stop arguing about zese idiots and FIND HER!”

“Let me speak to her,” Fleur said quietly to the others. “When my muzzer regains her accent, you know she is…tense.”

“Ma’am there are many injured,” the Auror said in a condescending voice. “These citizens were the only fatal casualties. Of course we are searching for your daughter. She is a material witness and will need to be questioned.”

“Are the ‘citizens’ you speak of the group that azzaulted me?” Fleur asked speaking loudly as they came up behind the two.

“Fleur!” Apolline shouted. She pushed past the Auror and swept up to her daughter quickly running her eyes over the younger girl. “I do not zee blood or wounds. Why are you leaning on zis man?”

“I was hit in ze head, maman. Most of the…disorientation?” Fleur asked looking to Hermione who nodded back. “Disorientation has passed but I am still a leetle unsteady. ‘arry is helping. ‘e and ‘ermione saved me from ze men you were discussing.”

Apolline nodded. She gave Harry and Hermione a critical glance then took in Shiva and Sirius. She took a deep breath and the feathers covering her arms started to be absorbed back into the skin. “You are unharmed otherwise?”

“Oui. Zey came before zose ‘orrible men had a chance to do much of anyzing beyond leave a bruise or two.”

The Auror came up with a scowl on his face. “Fleur Delacour I am going to have to bring you in to the Ministry to answer questions about the recent deaths.”

Sirius’ eyebrows raised and his posture stiffened. “Really? It’s Scrimgeour, right?” At the Auror’s nod, Sirius continued, “Well if I may be so bold, we overheard that you had some witnesses. Why are you taking Fleur and not Harry or Hermione? They were involved in the fight
as well, you know. For that matter why do you seem to be treating this girl as if she’s a criminal
instead of a victim?”

“I’ll thank you not to tell me how to my job,” Scrimgeour snapped.

“Fleur!” a shout rang out. Fleur turned and saw her father hurrying forward with a monocle clad
woman following behind him. “You are alright!” He pulled up short as he noticed the others near
her and his eyes widened. “Mon Dieu. Lord Black, Monsieur Potter, I assume you were the ones
to find my daughter? I cannot thank you enough.”

“Actually, papa, ‘arry and ‘ermione were ze ones who assisted me,” Fleur said. A moment later
what he said registered and she gasped twisting to look at the young man who was supporting her.
“Potter? ‘arry Potter?”

Harry winced but nodded. “Guilty.”

“You could ‘ave said somezing…” Fleur said shaking her head.

Harry just closed his eyes is resignation. “I really prefer just Harry,” he muttered.

Fleur frowned and barely managed to stop from slapping herself. Of course he would hate his
fame considering its source. “Of course. I will just stick to ‘arry then, yes?” His head jerked back
up and his eyes widened as he stared at her, slowly nodding.

“Harry, Hermione, Professor Babbling, Lord Black,” the monocle woman said as she came up
completely unhurried. “Miss Delacour. Perhaps we should all sit down.” She waved her wand
and several chairs were conjured. Shiva and Sirius quickly moved to sit down with a snort of
amusement and Harry and Hermione both helped Fleur to sit. Her mother knelt in front of her and
began muttering diagnostic and healing spells while her father sat right next to her and grabbed her
hand.

“I am not a child, papa. I am fine. Just a leetle dizzy at times,” Fleur said sighing at her father’s
protectiveness. It was nice to know he cared so much though. “That might not even be a result of
ze injury at zis point.”

“You are not fine,” Apolline said with a small scowl. “You will be, but you are not currently fine.
How hard were you hit?”

Fleur shrugged. “Enough that I found it very difficult to force ze Change. Ze effect ‘as mostly
dissipated now.”

Apolline sighed. “Yes, that would make zense. I have done what I can. You will need a potion
when we return to ze hotel but you are not in danger of complications.” Fleur heard her father give
a quiet breath of relief and she wasn’t above admitting that some of the tension she had been
holding gave way as well.

“Director Bones,” Shiva – said addressing the monocle woman. “Head Auror Scrimgeour
mentioned something about questions?”

“Yes, the girl needs to come in to answer what happened tonight,” the Auror said looking smug
again now that his boss had arrived.

Bones groaned and shook her head. “Scrimgeour do yourself a favor and shut the hell up. You
may be decent at your job – when you aren’t shoving your head up Fudge’s arse – but I really don’t
want to have to protect you if you are stupid enough to piss off one of the more powerful men in
the French Ministry.” Fleur’s father gave the Auror a predatory grin which caused the other man to pale slightly. “Now, if we’re all done displaying our dominances with this little pissing contest, Miss Delacour, Harry, would you both care to explain what happened a few minutes ago?”

“You can’t seriously expect them to explain the Death Eater attack, Amy!” Sirius said.

She sighed, glaring at him. “Sirius, you shut up too. I am not asking about the riot I am asking about their own fight. Injuries were abundant tonight but the only confirmed dead were discovered in the vicinity of those two. Scrimgeour may have been heavy handed, but he is not wrong in that we do need to know what occurred.”

“Three,” Hermione said quietly.

“I’m sorry?” Bones asked.

Hermione hung her head. “The confirmed dead were near ‘those three’, Madam Bones: Fleur, Harry and myself. I was first to kill one. I didn’t mean to. I heard a scream, saw Fleur held with her arms behind her back, a man in front of her with his robes open and a mask on. I was…rather angry at that,” she said. Fleur saw the girl’s face drop into a scowl briefly before returning to a neutral expression and she set her shoulders looking directly into Bones’ eyes. “I launched a disarming spell at the man. It must have been exceedingly overpowered because it knocked him back several meters and I think broke several ribs. I don’t know if he was still alive at that point. I hadn’t meant to kill him, merely to take him out of the fight. Five against one with a hostage involved are not good odds. Especially when the five are all adult wizards and I haven’t even entered my fourth year yet."

Fleur’s eyebrows rose at that. This girl wasn’t finished with Fourth Year? Someone so skilled, lithe and impressive was so young? And from what she remembered Harry Potter was also barely 14…

“While I would counsel you to attempt a stunner next time instead of a disarming charm I certainly can’t fault that reasoning, Miss Granger. Please continue,” Bones said waving her on.

“After I sent off the disarming spell I jumped onto the man holding Fleur to get him to release her. I used to take some self defense classes before I attended Hogwarts. I…came down on his neck. It was partly intentional, but I think I misjudged my weight. I…am relatively sure I broke his neck as we hit the ground,” Hermione’s shudder was subtle but visible to Fleur. She reached around Harry and squeezed the young woman’s leg. Hermione looked up and gave her a small smile.

“Zank you for zat ‘ermione,” Fleur said. “Zings would likely have gone far worse had you not acted as you had.” She couldn’t help the shudder at the horror show playing in her head at where things would have gone if the younger girl hadn’t intervened.

“That’s about when I got there, Madam Bones,” Harry cut in. He had draped an arm around Hermione and pulled her closer to him. “I tossed one of Feedback stones into the grouping. The one Hermione knocked down first and another of the attackers were taken out by the blast. A third guy was knocked back and I sent a stone spike at him. I had expected him to put up a shield or something but he didn’t. The spike killed him,” Harry’s voice was carefully toneless. “I sent a few spells towards what I thought was the last guy and Hermione got a cutting curse off while he was distracted. He saw it coming, but moved too late and it caught his chest instead of his arm.”

Fleur took over the story. “Zose deaths were all unintentional, Madam. The final one was not. I saw ze final man about to curse ‘arry and ‘ermione while zey were distracted. I did not have my wand and I did not fully understand ze implement zat ‘ermione had given me. I forced a partial
Change and sent a fireball towards ze man. I knew what ze result would likely be, but I was far more concerned with protecting zose helping me zen with safeguarding a man who had been assaulting me.”

“Change?” Bones said looking between Fleur and her mother. “Ah, Veela?” The two nodded.

Scrimgeour muttered darkly, “Why do you think I want to bring her in for questioning?”

Bones narrowed her eyes and turned to the Auror. “Do you remember what happened to the last person who worked for me that had the gall to presume prejudice trumped reality? Or that a favored politician would protect them? From what I understand, Mafalda is working as a paper pusher for the *Prophet.*” Scrimgeour grimaced, nodded and remained silent. Bones turned back to Fleur and continued far kinder, “Your heritage would certainly explain the burns. Very well. Anything else?”

“No, Madam Bones,” Harry said shaking his head. “We ran for the woods after that and met up with Shiva and Sirius then came here immediately afterwards.”

Bones nodded and stood up. “Your explanation matches what I’ve already heard from the other witnesses as well as the observed injuries. No crimes were committed on any of your parts, merely self-defense. Miss Granger, I would recommend some training to ensure that you either learn to not overpower your spells quite so much – when unintended – or learn to instinctively use other spells instead. A cutter can be just as lethal as a killing curse under the right circumstances after all. Mr. Potter, while I certainly understand your actions, restraint is generally the better option if possible.” Both teens nodded their understanding. Fleur schooled her features to avoid snarling. Those men had gotten what they deserved as far as she was concerned. “I consider the matter resolved and apologize for the ordeal. Obviously the Ministry cannot be held responsible for the actions of rioting terrorists, but the aftermath could certainly have been handled more tactfully.” She glared momentarily at Scrimgeour who gave an annoyed nod in acknowledgment. “If any of you require additional medical assistance, St. Mungo’s is the most suitable facility. Scrimgeour, come with me. We have to find just how those criminals obtained portkeys.” She gave another nod at all the assembled before heading off with the Auror in tow.

As the two walked away Sébastien Delacour turned to his daughter with a wry grin. “So, you helped the local hero to take out five attackers with a head injury, eh? Well done, Fleur.”

Fleur rolled her eyes in good humor. “Yes, zank you, papa. ‘arry, ‘ermione, I truly cannot zank you enough for zis evening.”

“It’s fine, Fleur, don’t worry about it,” Harry commented waving her off.

Hermione shook her head ruefully. “You’re welcome, Fleur.”

“Neither of you will ‘ave problems from zis will you?” Apolline asked.

Shiva leaned forward and sighed. “She may not have seemed like it, but Amelia is a friend. It’s good that your husband went to get her as Dawlish can be a bit of a stick in the mud. Amelia is fair and she trusts us as well. She won’t let anything get blown out of proportion and nothing will come back to haunt your daughter or these two.”

Sirius smiled widely. “Amy probably enjoys having five less Death Eater wannabes around anyway. She’ll be more annoyed at the paperwork, but that’s what Dawlish is around for.”

“If it’s all the same to you,” Shiva said standing. “Now that Fleur is being taken care of I need to
get my ward home.”

Sébastien nodded and rose. “Of course. If you are ever in France, feel free to stop in at Château Delacour.”

“We just might take you up on that, Sir,” Harry said stepping forward and shaking the man’s hand. “Fleur, it was nice meeting you though the circumstances sure could have been better. Let me know if you need any help with anything in the future.” He gave her a quick hug and stepped back towards Shiva.

Hermione came forward and hugged her as well. “The same goes for me. Take whatever your mother gives you. Remember, concussions should not be taken lightly.”

Fleur rolled her eyes. “Yes, ‘ermione. Keep in touch?”

The two teens smiled and nodded. Sirius shook hands with her parents, gave her a grin and followed the other three as they headed off.

Fleur sighed and turned back to her mother and father. Both were giving her matching expressions of amusement. “Do not start.”

“Ze were cute, were they not,” her mother commented.

“Yes, they were,” her father agreed. “And from what I hear, he is quite available at the moment.”

Fleur groaned. “Let’s just go ‘ome. Please? Just because my saviors were attractive in mind, body and mannerisms does not mean – ” she scowled as her parents broke into full out chuckles and blushed at her admission. “It ‘as been a long night. Let’s just go.”

Sirius had volunteered to take Hermione home with a promise to speak with her parents about the evening’s events. It left Shiva and Harry alone in her flat sitting around the table, drinking tea. There had been silence for the past ten minutes, Harry fiddling nervously with his cup. Finally Shiva set down her mug and peered at her ward. “So…you want to talk about it tonight or would you rather tomorrow morning?”

“Don’t suppose I could put this off to ‘never’?” Harry mumbled.

Shiva smirked. “Not a chance, kid.”

Harry sighed. “Probably better to just do it now then.” He set his mug down as well and looked down at the table. “I don’t feel bad about killing them…But I do feel bad that I don’t feel bad. Does that make sense?”

“It does actually. That’s a good thing, kid.” Shiva shifted chairs so that she was next to Harry and laid her hand on his shoulder. “The fact that you recognize you should be feeling bad for something makes you different from them.”

“But shouldn’t I feel horrible that I killed someone? I mean, I know I killed Quirrell a few years ago but…he was possessed by Voldemort and was basically dead anyway. These guys weren’t possessed…they were just people.”

“People who were assaulting a stranger and attacking someone you care about very much,” Shiva said gently.
“That shouldn’t be an excuse though, should it?” Harry shrugged still looking into his mug. “I had nonlethal options. I could’ve tried stunning them, or disarming them, or any number of other jinxes. Hell, I could’ve just tossed a Freezer at them. But the first thing I went for were the stronger and more dangerous things…did I tell you that at the end of term Dumbledore had accused me of going Dark? What if he was right?”

Shiva leaned forward and wrapped Harry in a hug. He stiffened slightly but after a few moments relaxed and settled against her. She ran a hand through his hair and said, “Kid, if I had been in your shoes, my first response would have been a reducto aimed at either the head or chest. Neither would’ve been survivable. Sirius would’ve gone for something even more lethal and borderline Dark Magic. You actually showed more restraint than most would. Hell, if Amelia had been there protecting Susan then there wouldn’t have been enough of a body to identify them. You didn’t do anything wrong, Harry. You protected the girl you love from people who were trying to kill her. That’s all you need to think about.”

“I still feel like I should feel bad about it,” he said into her shoulder.

“I know, and I doubt that feeling will ever go away, kid, which is definitely a good thing,” she said quietly. “Just know that I am proud of you for defending yourself and others. I wasn’t lying in the woods when I agreed with Sirius that it was better them than you. I’d take a hundred dead Death Eaters over you, Harry.”

“I’m not that special…”

“You are to me, kid. And you are to your friends.” She pulled back a bit and smiled at him. “Come on, let’s watch something upbeat and then get you to bed.”

A few days before the new school term started Harry was reading a book when the doorbell rang. Getting up to answer it his eyes widened slightly at seeing Bill Weasley in the entranceway. “Hey, Bill. What are you doing here?”

“Long time no see, Harry,” Bill said flashing a grin. “I’m here to talk to Shiva actually. She around?”

“Yeah, she was just throwing some laundry on I think. Come in,” Harry said stepping back and waving the older man inside. “How have you been?”

“Can’t complain. The goblins found some intriguing ruins a while back that they sent me to check out. It took a while to get through the wards around the structure but we got in eventually.” Bill grabbed a drink out of the fridge and sat down at the table across from Harry. “I have never seen so many mummies in one place before. It was like something out of one of those Muggle thrillers. Thank god they didn’t all start getting up and ambling towards us!”

Harry and Bill shared at a laugh at that image before Bill continued, “Love the earring by the way. That’s that Comm Stone thing right?” Harry nodded. “Sweet idea. Fred and George said you guys were going into business together. Make sure you sell some of those once you get it fully beyond the prototype phase.”

Harry smirked. “You just want more people to go around wearing earrings and piss off your mum.”

“Hey you can never have too many people with good fashion sense!” Bill said wiggling his eyebrows. “Oh, by the way, how’s that mail ward working out for you? Nothing weird or crazy
“Oh, right, Snapfist did say you were the one who helped out with preventing the malicious things...” Harry shrugged. “Well I haven’t gotten anything mean, but there’s certainly weird and crazy. What teenager would want to see nude photos of a senior citizen?” He shuddered at that while Bill just laughed. “I am sooo glad that Shiva opened that one. Most aren’t that bad though thankfully.”

Shiva walked into the kitchen then shrugging into her jacket. “Hey, Bill. You ready to head on over?”

“Just waiting on you, gorgeous.”

“She’s so cute,” Shiva said laughing and patting his cheek. “Come on, hun, let’s head out so I can finish up before the shop closes.” Harry looked at her questioningly and she shrugged. “Just a quick warding Harry. I asked Bill if he had any jobs he could use some help on for a bit of an extra paycheck and he pointed me in this direction. I should be back in about three or four hours. Try not to burn the house down while I’m gone, kid.”

Harry frowned, ignoring the jibe. “Extra paycheck?”

His guardian winked at him. “Tell you later, Harry. Gotta run!” She walked out of the flat waving to Harry and waited for Bill to catch up.

“You didn’t tell him?” Bill asked pacing her. They headed towards the alley to apparate to the house she’d be working on.

“It would kind of ruin the surprise.” She shrugged. “And he doesn’t need to feel guilty that I’m getting him something expensive.”

“You realize you just ruined that chance by telling him you needed the money right?” Bill said raising his eyebrows.

Shiva frowned and cursed. “Shite. You’re right. Well I’ll downplay the expense.”

Bill rolled his eyes and held out his arm for her to grab onto. Once she had, he apparated them to the site and led the way. “This is the McKinnons’ place. Like I owled, they’re not looking for damaging wards. They just want something secure and pervasive. Apparently they’re big on herd critters and they specifically want perimeter wards that will let them know when any of their animals leave the grounds. If you can get a ward that will throw a tracking spell on the wayward creature they’ll pay double. Triple to keep them from leaving to begin with.”

Shiva nodded and considered the requirements. “Hmm, I doubt I’d be able to do the last one. Not without a far more extensive setup than you had said they were comfortable with. The tracking spell and notification shouldn’t be too difficult though. Can you show me the anchor stones?”

Bill nodded and headed towards the first of the anchor points. “No problem. I do appreciate this. I know you’re mainly here for the paycheck but I like these guys and it’s been annoying that I couldn’t help them with this.”

“Well you always were better at tearing wards down than putting them up,” Shiva said crouching down and inspecting the stone. “They do have a good base but this section is horribly sloppy with a ton of holes in the setup. No wonder their critters get away.” She took out a notebook and started writing several corrections to the existing runic scheme. She smirked thinking of how Harry would handle this. He’d probably do something horribly elaborate that most professionals...
would barely be able to follow. She planned to stick with a simpler, but just as effective method. She’d also be done far quicker than the kid would’ve been.

“So…I heard about the World Cup,” Bill said frowning.

Shiva sighed. “Arthur tell you? Amelia managed to keep it out of the Prophet amazingly enough. I suppose it helps that only one of the arseholes the teens took out was anyone of importance.”

“You class Goyle Senior as important?” Bill asked incredulous.

“Well he ran in the same circles as Lucius Malfoy.” Shiva propped her pad up and started wiping out the bottom portion of the runes on the anchor stone replacing them with the updated versions. “He wasn’t the brightest flame in the fire pit but he had powerful friends. I’m going to have to watch out for the kid this year just in case his son or Draco tries anything.”

“They aren’t that stupid,” Bill said. He didn’t sound particularly convincing.

Shiva shrugged. “Never underestimate the stupidity of teenagers. Especially that group of teenagers. I have no doubt that Harry and his friends would kick their arses, but I’d just as soon not give Snape or Dumbledore any excuse to go after the kid.”

Bill nodded. “I can see that. Hey what is that rune? I haven’t seen that one before.”

“It’s a Charm variant. I modified the basic version a while back, but never had a reason to use it before now. This focuses on animals and coupled with the rest it should induce a mild compulsion to have them take a nap shortly after leaving the perimeter. Hopefully it’ll prevent them from wandering too far afield before the McKinnons can collect them.”

“Nice.” Bill smiled approvingly. “You know there’s always a job open for you if you decide to leave Hogwarts.”

Shiva smirked. “Sorry, man. Not going to happen until at least Harry and his friends graduate. Someone’s gotta at least attempt to watch over the little menace.” She stood and dusted off her hands. “Alright, done with this one. Where’s the next anchor?”

It was dark by the time Shiva got back home. As she shut the door and heading inside, she caught Harry lying on the couch with his eyes peeking over his book at the entrance way. She waved to him and he blushed at being caught looking out for her.

“Stay entertained without me, kid?”

Harry let his book fall to his chest as he raised an eyebrow at her. “I lived with the Dursleys for over a decade. I can keep myself busy.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Brag all you want,” Shiva said rolling her eyes.

“So….” Harry said drawing the word out and sounding rather smaller than usual. “Um, Hogwarts doesn’t pay you enough with me being here?”

Shiva choked on the drink she had pulled out. She coughed a few times before finally clearing her airway and looking back at Harry incredulously. “That’s what you thought? No, kid, jeez. Sure, Hogwarts pay doesn’t rake in the galleons, but it’s more than enough to support the both us, Harry.”
“Oh,” he shrugged not moving from his position on the couch. “Then…why?”

Shiva sighed and moved over to claim the armchair near him taking the bag she was carrying with her. “You really need to learn to let things go sometimes, Harry. I wanted to get you something nice. I know it’s pretty late for a birthday present and all and I totally missed using the anniversary of the guardian thing but…” she trailed off and had a small sad smile on her face. “Well, Sirius got you the Firebolt last year and he’s been in prison for a decade. I wanted to give you something also. Hogwarts pay isn’t bad but it wasn’t quite enough for what I was looking at.”

Harry sat up looking torn between a smile and frown. “You didn’t have to do that, Shiva. Just agreeing to be my guardian is way more than enough. Bloody hell, that takes you right through until I hit 17; beyond that even!”

“I know, kid, but I still wanted to.” She shook her head and reached into the bag. “And since you’ve already dragged it out of me I guess I don’t get to wrap it. Here,” Shiva drew a glass ball out of the bag. It was sitting in a three clawed, wooden stand and was slightly larger than a closed fist. There were shifting whitish clouds drifting throughout the interior and a small rune cluster on the bottom of the sphere.

“What is it?” Harry asked reaching out and carefully taking the item from her. “It looks a bit like Neville’s Rememball.”

Shiva smiled and leaned forward. “The Rememball is actually the base component. This is a modified version. Rememballs just change color if you forget something. Useful after a fashion, but not very impressive overall. This is a Memoryball. It’s a bit fancier. It’s supposed to lock onto the happiest memories of whoever holds it and play a short scene of them. It cycles through each memory scene the next time you hold it. Memoryballs only display the scene for about a minute or so after you stop channeling magic into them so I further modified that one a bit. The rune cluster on the bottom will act like a Muggle battery. Charge up the cluster, fire up the ball and the memory will keep playing for a few days. It’s sort of like a changing picture I suppose. I figured it’d let you maybe see your mum and dad too since it can work on subconscious memories instead of just actively recalled ones. The Occlumency you’ve been working on could help you direct which scenes to play also.”

Harry just stared at the little glass ball with his mouth open. He stayed like that for almost a minute before Shiva started fidgeting. “I know it’s not really that much, kid. You’re kind of a hard person to shop for though and I wasn’t really too sure of what else to – ”

She cut off as she found herself fully enveloped by Harry. The Memoryball was set carefully on the table while he had wrapped her up in an embrace. “Thank you,” Harry whispered. “I love it.”

Shiva patted his back. “No problem, kid. Getting kind of hard to breathe though,” she said with a small chuckle.

Harry responded with a laugh of his own and pulled back to sit on the couch again pulling the glass ball close to him again. He concentrated for a moment and charged the magical battery cluster before shifting his thoughts to the memory to call up for display. After a few moments, the clouds resolved themselves into an image of Shiva walking away from the kitchen table and waving at the sections of the flat. Harry slowly got up from the table as well and looked around the room with a huge smile on his face.

Shiva squinted at image. “What was that memory? I haven’t worn those shorts in…a year and a half I think.”
“It was the first time I got here. The night that Aunt Marge drove me out,” Harry said quietly. “It was the first time I ever actually felt like I was home…”

Shiva blinked and turned to Harry. She had to force back tears as she pulled him into a hug. “You will always have a home here, Harry.” The two stayed like that for a long time before pulling apart.

Harry shuddered a bit as he walked through Hogwarts’ Entrance Hall. Seeing the thestral on the carriage ride up to the school had been slightly unnerving – even if the animals had been nice enough in a weird zombie pegasus way. After Luna had explained why he and Hermione could suddenly see the previously invisible, skeletal, winged horses Harry had stopped asking questions. He still wasn’t entirely comfortable with how he felt about the deaths he had caused during the World Cup. He was thankful that the others hadn’t pushed for more information beyond the basic “result of the World Cup” explanation.

Harry and his group of friends sat down to the Welcoming Feast knowing to expect big news. Daphne had given them a heads up on the Express that something was coming though she had refused to say what. Even Tracey hadn’t been able to get the specifics out of the girl. Harry was looking forward to seeing what new horror show was in store for this year. Neville had joked that whatever was going on, it certainly couldn’t be worse than Dementors trying to eat their souls or basilisks trying to kill them with a look.

Privately, Harry completely agreed with this sentiment. Not that he would ever say that out loud. Or even truly let the thought fully coalesce in his head. The young man had most definitely learned the hard way not to tempt fate in such a fashion.

“And for my final two announcements…” Dumbledore paused for dramatic effect. Harry rolled his eyes at the show. “First, allow me to introduce our newest Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, retired Auror Alastor Moody.” The doors to the Great Hall banged open and in stumped a heavily scarred individual. Harry’s eyes widened as he looked at their new teacher. The man had a peg leg like a pirate and one of his eyes was a blue, magical construct that practically never stopped revolving around. The eye focused on Harry momentarily before shifting to several others in the Hall as Moody stumped up to the staff table.

“Wow, I can’t believe he got Mad-Eye to teach,” Neville muttered.

“People seriously call him Mad-Eye?” Harry asked.

“Yeah. Gran said he’s legendary around the Auror offices. Huge Dark Wizard hunter and really, really good. Best they’ve had in a generation from what she said.”

“I think Tonks mentioned something about Moody being her mentor,” Hermione said.

“Huh,” Harry said running a hand through his hair. “Well maybe he’ll be more like Remus than Quirrell if we’re lucky. Though looking like that somehow I doubt we’ll end up being that lucky.”

“Well he’s really paranoid,” Neville shrugged. “So he’d probably salute you for thinking he was going to try and kill you.”

As the polite applause died down Dumbledore raised his hands and gestured for quiet. “In addition…this year, Hogwarts will be hosting a recurrence of the Triwizard Tournament!” There were some cheers sounding through the room but a larger section looked either confused or simply curious. “As I am sure many of you know, the Triwizard Tournament is a competition between the
three main European schools: Hogwarts, Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. A Champion for each school will be selected and compete against the others in Tasks designed to test their ingenuity, their bravery, their competence and their skill. The prize is one thousand galleons and eternal glory!” Murmurs of approval filled the Hall as Dumbledore paused again. “In the past however, the Tournament has proven somewhat dangerous.”

Harry heard Hermione muttering beside him. “More like exceedingly deadly.” He looked at his girlfriend but she just waved him off.

“As a result,” Dumbledore continued, “this year, the Tournament entries have been restricted. The Ministry of Magic has decreed that only persons of the age of 17 prior to September 2\textsuperscript{nd} will be allowed to submit their name.” Shouts of annoyance rang out forcing Dumbledore to send off a spell to quiet everyone. Harry’s face shifted from entertained indifference to a predatory smile. “Now, now, I know that many of you are disappointed, however this is for your own safety. The other schools will be arriving tomorrow and the selection process will be begin immediately. I wish you all luck!”

As the students started to file out of the Great Hall, Harry’s grin had yet to fully dissipate and he carefully avoided looking at Shiva. Hermione noticed something was going on and hovered back with him. They had almost reached the Grand Staircase when Daphne came up from behind and grabbed Harry’s elbow.

“Excuse me, Hermione. I got this,” Daphne said narrowing her eyes at Harry.

Hermione frowned but nodded. “Very well. I’m not entirely certain of what’s going on, but if you’re sure...” Daphne nodded at Hermione’s question. “Okay. If you need me to tap in afterwards comm me.”

“Will do. Harry, come with me.” Daphne pulled Harry out of the stream of students and directed him into an unused classroom a little ways away. She pulled out her wand and cast several privacy charms around the perimeter.

Harry raised his eyebrows at her, halfway between glaring and exasperated. “Are you going to tell me why you dragged me in here, Daph?”

Daphne finished her spellwork and turned to him scowling. “You stupid, idiot!” Harry took a half step back at the vehemence in her voice. “You think me and our friends have spent the past two years keeping you alive just to watch you kill yourself in this Tournament? What are you thinking, Harry?!” She closed on him and stabbed her finger into his chest. Harry had backed up until he was pushed against the desk and had nowhere to escape to. “You think I didn’t notice your crafty little grin? That you were being sneaky or careful? That Shiva is the only one who would care if you had a crazy idea like entering this death trap?” Daphne’s mouth was curled and her hands were shaking. Her hair was flapping about her face as she shook her head. She was almost as mad as when she had starting going after Lockhart. Harry winced and tried to shift back into the desk even further.

“Will you please explain to me how you could possibly think that getting yourself into this would be a good thing? I am trying and failing to understand your reasoning, Harry,” Daphne snarled. “I know you haven’t grown up with a wizarding background, but even Dumbledore admitted that this is dangerous! The man who makes his career out downplaying everything from a malevolent possession of staff members to a 60 foot death monster admits that this is deadly! And you’d be between two and three years behind the other contestants! WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?!” She threw up her hands and stalked away beginning to pace in the center of the room, breathing
Harry slowly and carefully walked to the nearest desk and sat down. He dropped his face into his hands and curled up slightly to present a smaller target without being too obvious about it. “I know. I’m sorry…” he said softly.

Daphne growled and pulled out the desk nearest him. She sat down heavily and took several large breaths. Finally regaining a semblance of calm she said, “Look, I’m sorry for yelling. I know you don’t take that too well from your friends, but, Harry, seriously…help me out here. How could you think for even a moment that trying to get yourself into this Tournament is something remotely intelligent?”

Harry kept his head down as he muttered, “The Ministry has apparently said that anyone participating is an adult. I can’t get away from Dumbledore. Shiva can’t find any loopholes. Amelia can’t find any loopholes. You can’t find any loopholes. The goblins can’t find any loopholes. He’s too good at looking good…he’s too practiced at manipulating and directing things. I can’t get away, Daph. He accused me of going Dark last year, partly because I’m friends with you and Tracey…I just…”

Daphne flinched back at that. “He what? That bloody arsehole!” She fumed for a minute before reaching out to grab Harry hand and pull it away from his face. “Harry, look at me.” Slowly he lifted his eyes to meet hers. “I’m sorry that our friendship has caused you problems. If I was a better person I’d probably try to distance myself from you. But I’m not a better person. I’m selfish and not above admitting I can be a bit of an icy bitch. In barely two years you’ve risen to be the high point in my life tied with Tracey and Astoria. So no, I’m not going to back down. And I am not going to let you get yourself killed in this Tournament just to get you away from the bearded old man!” Her hand tightened on his and she sighed. “Harry, if things get bad enough then we will get you out of the country to where he can’t touch you. Dumbledore’s reach is long and pervasive, but it is not absolute by any means. If you truly decide you’ve had enough then tell me and I will work with my mother, Hermione’s parents and Shiva and get you shuttled off to Australia or America or Timbuktu. You don’t have to get involved in a gladiatorial death match at 14 to escape, Harry.”

He shrugged. “I know. I just…I thought it would be a good way to stick it to them all. The Ministry are arses and Dumbledore is an idiot. I thought…I thought I could show them what I could do and…I know it’s stupid.”

Daphne sighed and rubbed her temple with her free hand. “It’s no secret that you seem to get involved in some sort of deadly event every year, Harry. I – ” she scowled and held up her hand to him. “Tracey, I told you, I had to talk to Harry. Yes, I’ll be down a few minutes. No I won’t be caught, I have a Ninja on me like always. Fine. Okay, talk to you soon.” She let out an annoyed breath as the connection cut out. “Sorry, about that. Now, as I was saying, Harry, whatever deity or anthropomorphic personification of an elemental force you pissed off, it obviously likes playing with you. Please don’t help it along by actively trying to participate in this thing. I’d…” she paused and looked off to the side shutting her eyes in resignation before turning back to him. “I hate this, but I’d be willing to bet that somehow or other your name is going to end up being entered. It would fit the pattern of your life unfortunately.”

Harry frowned. “It really would, wouldn’t it…I hadn’t even realized that.”

“Yes, it would,” Daphne nodded. “So let’s make some plans in case that does happen. I can work out a statement for you to make as a magical vow to get people on your side if it occurs. I’ll ask mother to send a copy of the rules and Tournament Charter as well so that we can go over it with a
“fine toothed comb. Maybe if we’re really, really lucky you could just sit on the starting line of the events and the magic involved would consider you satisfying the letter if not the spirit.”

“That…isn’t really what I had hoped for, Daph,” Harry said frowning.

“I know. But I also know I’m not alone when I say I’d rather have you alive and getting mocked by the idiots of our world than praised and dead,” she glared at him. “Do you think Hermione would be happy with that? Or Tonks? Or Shiva? How about Luna? She looks up to you as her hero you know. How do you think she’d take it if you died for your pride?”

Harry’s shoulders slumped. “Okay, okay, you made your point. I’m sorry.”

Daphne squeezed his hand again. “I don’t intend to wrap you up in a cushioning charm, Harry. I’m just trying to be realistic. When I found out about this Tournament a week ago I did a bit of research. It has a nearly 68% casualty rate.” Harry’s head jerked up and he stared at her with his mouth open. “See? That’s why I don’t want you in it. Sometimes it’s the Champions who die. Sometimes it’s the hostages that get involved. Sometimes it’s just spectators when events go out of control. In the 32% of cases without a death there is still a 12% chance of some sort of permanent harm.”

She paused and moved to kneel in front of him. “Harry, if you do get dragged into it I swear I will do everything I can to see that you survive even if everyone else leaves you. I highly doubt any of our friends will abandon you, but I need you to know that I am serious about this. I am willing to swear a vow on my life and magic to guarantee I will be there for you.”

“Please don’t do that,” Harry said quietly staring at her wide eyed.

“Okay, I won’t. Just know that I am serious. I don’t intend to lose my best friend to a blood sport. Please, just promise in return that you will not willingly enter yourself into the Triwizard Tournament. If you get pulled in by someone or something else I promise not to berate you, but please promise me you won’t go looking for trouble like that.”


She chuckled into his shoulder and he felt a bit of wetness through his shirt. “Just don’t be an idiot and I’ll accept your apology. And be glad I’m the one who knocked some sense into you rather than Shiva. Or Hermione. That woman is scary when she gets pissed off.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah. You should’ve seen her during the World Cup.”

Daphne pulled back and smiled at him. Both of them ignored the slightly wet sheen in her eyes. “I’d like to see that one day. If either of you ever feel comfortable lending me the memory to view let me know.”

“But you don’t have a pensieve or anything,” Harry said confused.

“True,” Daphne paused and smirked playfully. “Well you could always just let me into one of your mindscapes so that I could see it firsthand.” Harry gulped and she stepped away from him. “Okay. Are you sufficiently cowed and convinced that entering yourself in the Tournament is a bad idea?”

“Yes, Madam Ice Queen,” Harry replied monotone, saluting smartly.

Daphne raised her eyebrows at him. “I prefer Mistress, not Madam. Madam makes me sound so
old. And Mistress is far more commanding of respect anyway.”

Harry snorted. “Yes, Mistress.”

“Much better.” Daphne smiled and turned to the door raising her wand and cancelling her privacy spells. “Thanks, Harry. I…thanks. I’ll see you in the morning.” With that said she waved over her shoulder at him and walked out.

Harry sighed and shook his head at his own stupidity from just a few minutes ago. Resolving to try and avoid telling the others just what Daphne had talked him out of, Harry heading out of the classroom and back to his dorms.

September 2nd dawned bright and clear. The students were assembled on the lawn to watch the arrival of the two foreign schools. They were due in any minute. Harry was standing next to Millicent had had quietly shifted into place as Luna jumped forward towards the front of the crowd to get a better view.

“Hello, Harry,” the larger girl said softly, her voice pitched so that only Harry would be able to hear.

“Hey, Millicent. How are you?” Harry responded just as quietly.

“Better than some Slytherins. I wanted to thank you.”

“For what?” he asked. This was probably the longest conversation he’d had with the girl outside of helping her during Ancient Runes class.

“The World Cup.” Harry’s eyes widened and he shuffled a bit from foot to foot. Before he could say anything though Millicent kept going, “One of the people you and Hermione took out was a wizard who my father had been in talks with. I know I’m not particularly attractive and my parents know it too. With that man dead, it’s going to take them some time before they can find anyone else willing to pay what they want for my hand.” She smiled at him. “With any luck, it’ll be long enough that I can find a suitor on my own. So thanks. You guys may not have meant to, but you ended up saving me from being a broodmare. I’ll thank Hermione later too. If you ever need a favor or a bodyguard just me know.”

Harry was almost too stunned to respond. He just barely managed to grab her shoulder before she moved away. “You’re worth more than just a bodyguard, Millie. And I’m glad that you don’t have to worry about…that anymore.”

The Slytherin nodded her thanks. “Thank you for the sentiment, Harry. After we all graduate I’d appreciate it if you remember me when hiring for your shop. I’m really growing to like working with runes and it’d be a fun way to earn a living.” Harry nodded and she moved off to stand near Blaise.

Neville shifted closer to Harry and asked, “What did Millie want?”

“Nothing. Just wanted to say she’d love a job in my shop when I get a physical location in a few years.”

Neville eyed him but nodded after a moment. “Okay.”

“Look! They’re flying in!” one of the younger students shouted pointing up into the sky. Harry shielded his eyes and glanced up searching the sky. He noticed the approaching carriage almost
immediately and whistled in appreciation. It was huge and being towed by a collection of flying horses almost as large. Unlike thestrals, these horses looked very healthy and had beautiful manes. In place of bat-like wings these had wings more like a bird’s and were covered in feathers. The carriage drew closer and gently settled to the ground.

Harry cocked his head and said, “Nev, do you think they have it enchanted to be bigger on the inside? That’s big but there’s no way there’s enough room for their entire sixth and seventh years…”

“It’s almost definitely enchanted,” his friend agreed. “I doubt they brought the entire upper classes though. Likely just the people interested in trying to participate in the Tournament. Otherwise they might as well have brought the whole school.”

Harry nodded and watched as the French students started to climb out of their carriage following behind a woman as large as Hagrid. Harry scanned the students but his attention was quickly pulled to a disturbance in the Black Lake. Neville nudged him and started panting mildly but Harry ignored him trying to figure out what was causing all the bubbles. He barely even noticed as almost all the men around him twisted to follow the Beauxbatons progress into the Great Hall.

“Bloody hell, it’s a ship,” Harry breathed out as the prow of a large Viking ship broke the surface of the water. “Nev, Hermione, look! Durmstrang came in a bloody submarine Viking ship!”

Besides him, Hermione shook her head and turned to follow his hand. “Wow. I think that’s even more impressive than the flying carriage,” she said.

Neville frowned. “I didn’t think the lake was connected to anything…”

Luna popped up in front of the trio with a dreamy smile plastered on her face. “Myrtle says that there is an underwater passage that leads to the sea near that copse of trees, Neville.” She gestured towards the far side of the Lake. “The mermen and the grindylows stay away from it as the current gets strong though the kelpies love to play in the eddies.”

“When did Myrtle tell you that, Luna?” Tracey asked glancing down at the blond.

“Last year. She was quite perturbed when she got sucked out to the ocean by accident. Oh my,” Luna’s widened and she giggled slightly. “Those men are rather large are they not? I wonder if the – oh yes, yes, the women are quite impressive as well.”

Tracey made a noise of agreement while the others chuckled.

“It’s Viktor Krum!” an excited shout came from a few meters down. Harry groaned recognizing Ron’s voice. The red-head had been going on and on last night about the Quidditch star coming with the school. “Look, everyone, it’s Viktor Krum! He was amazing at the Cup! Did you see him? I was there! I almost touched him!” Harry idly wondered if perhaps Ron had actually been trying to leap over the barrier at the game to get to Krum instead of the Veelas.

“Settle down, settle down,” Dumbledore said calmly. His fellow Headmasters, Karkaroff and Maxime, remained seated on either side of him. “Now before we start the feast or introduce the method of choosing the Champions, allow me to introduce the Ministry judges for this momentous event.” He gestured to the side and a jovial man stood. Harry was a bit wary of him – in his experience very few people who were that happy were genuine. “Ludo Bagman, Director of Magical Games and Sports!”

Bagman took a small bow and said loudly, “And former Quidditch star! Happy to be here
everyone. I look forward to a fantastic competition between our schools and our nations!”

Dumbledore waited for the clapping to quiet before he gestured to his other side. “And standing in for the Department of International Affairs, Madam Umbridge.”

The plump woman stood and gave the semblance a large grin. Her mouth was wide and despite her bright pink clothes, she bore a striking resemblance to a toad. Enough that Harry found himself wondering if perhaps she had been the victim of a bad transfiguration accident. “Why hello, my dears. I am Madam Dolores Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic of Britain. I am here as his direct representative so I expect great things from all of you. This competition is simply a wonderful idea and I expect Britain to put on a fabulous showing. These proceedings are such a delight to witness. And such showy arrivals by our guests! My, my I so look forward to seeing the…effort put forth in the Tasks.”

As the woman sat back down Harry frowned at his friends. “Did she just insult the other schools after declaring herself a direct representative of the Minister?”

“Yeah,” Neville said grimacing. “I’ve heard stories about Umbridge. Gran may not tend to like most people, but there are very few she actively hates. Umbridge is one of the people with that distinction.”

“She certainly seemed to be rather daft,” Hermione snorted. “What even is a Senior Undersecretary?”

Luna looked over and cocked her eyebrow. “You don’t know Hermione? It’s the highest position that a nargle or wrackspurt can achieve while still maintaining the human cover. Daddy originally suspected that the Rotfang Conspiracy utilized the office as a headquarters but he quickly discarded that notion as The Umbitch was obviously not intelligent enough to lead such a widespread coup.”

Hermione’s mouth worked soundlessly while Harry struggled mightily not to laugh. After a moment he failed horribly while Hermione finally regained her voice. “Luna, did you just call the Ministry representative Umbitch?” she sounded torn between shock and admiration.

“No, Hermione,” Luna said shaking her head and still maintaining her smile. “The Umbitch. The article is very important as it is a title.”

Ginny leaned over and slapped Luna on the shoulders a wide grin on her face. “I agree, Luna. My dad has truly repulsive stories about the Toad.”

Harry managed to get his chortling back under control as the muttering from the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students died down. Both foreign headmasters were glaring at the pink toad woman who completely ignored them all. Harry frowned a bit as he realized she was staring right at him with a predatory little gleam in her eyes. Well at least he had found a likely target for who would be attempting to murder him this year if Moody proved to be a decent person as Neville had said.

“Hmm, yes, well now that introductions have been performed,” Dumbledore smiled with his ever present twinkles shining in his eyes, “allow me to bring forth… the Goblet of Fire!” With a flash, a golden cup appeared on a stand in front of the head table with a small red-orange flame sprouting from the center. “This is the Goblet of Fire. If any wish to enter the Tournament, simply add a slip of paper you’re your name and school to the Goblet. Tomorrow afternoon at dinner, it will choose the most worthy individuals from each school and I will announce them at that time. Remember, only students have reached 17 years of age prior to this morning are allowed entry. I will personally inscribe an Age Line around the placement of the Goblet to ensure that this rule is
followed. Now, the feast!” With his piece said, Dumbledore sat back down and food appeared on the tables.

There appeared to be a nice assortment of English, French and Russian food laid out. “What is this? Why’s they give us crappy French food?” Ron’s voice drifted down. “The Beauxbatons are sitting over with the Ravenclaws. Why bother sending their food here too? Waste of good food space.”

Ginny muttered a few choice curses under her breath before turning to her brother. “Ron, we’re supposed to try and get along with the other schools. Part of that is trying their food. You might like it. Merlin knows, you eat everything else.”

“It’s French. I’m not going to like it, Gin.”

Harry for his part was trying to ignore his dorm-mate. “Hermione, Luna, Nev, is the Toad still glaring at me?”

Luna made a show of carefully inspecting the entire room while Hermione shook her head at the younger girl in amusement. “No, Harry. The Umbitch has started insulting Madam Maxime. Do you think the larger woman will squash her? I can probably spin it into a nice editorial in the *Quibbler* if she does.”

Harry was too busy laughing to respond. He felt a tap on his shoulder and a soft, familiar voice asked, “Excuse *moi*, are you finished with ze bouillabaisse? Ze platter by me was empty.”

“Sure, feel free,” Harry moved to grab the plate indicated and pass it over. He dimly noted that most of the males at the table were just staring behind him. As Harry turned to hand the plate to the girl his eyes widened and his face broke into a grin. “Oh, hey, Fleur! I didn’t realize you were coming!”

The Veela blinked several times before laughing happily. “’arry? A small world, no? ‘ello, ‘ermione, eet is a pleasure to zee you az well! I should ‘ave realized you both would be here. Zis is the British school after all.”

“You get a pass,” Hermione said with an answering smile. “Would you like to sit with us?”

“You do not mind?” Fleur asked cocking her head. Harry noticed the slight hesitation in her question. It reminded him a lot of how Luna had first reacted when asked to sit with them. Harry took Fleur’s hand and guided her down to sit beside Hermione.

“It would be our pleasure to sit near you, mademoiselle,” he said with a polite bow.

Fleur laughed and was quickly joined in by Hermione, Luna and Neville. Almost like a switch was thrown, the conversation at the Gryffindor table started back up again.

“Harry,” Daphne’s amused voice came from his *Comm Stone*, “I see you have acquired a new friend. I hope that you will find the time to introduce us to her tomorrow. That’s the Veela girl you mentioned earlier yes? Tracey is practically drooling that she’s sitting with you.”

Harry heard a distant, “I am not!” through the connection.

“Yes, you are Tracey,” Daphne said laughing. “You’re also cursing that Harry is gobbling up all the beautiful women. You know, you can start your own harem if you want. It just might be a bit more difficult.” She laughed again.
Harry barely avoided snorting out his own pumpkin juice. “Tell Tracey I’m happy to introduce Fleur to her tomorrow. I make no promises concerning her attempts at a harem though.”

“Will do! Oh and apparently Millie has said that if you manage to add Krum to your growing collection she would like to ask for dibs.”

Harry lost his battle with holding in his juice at that point.
Chapter 18: Choosing of the Champions

After dinner the group of friends split up. Luna wandered off with Ginny while Fleur followed her schoolmates back to their carriage. Harry waved goodnight to his companions in the other houses and walked up the stairs towards the Gryffindor Common Room. When they hit the seventh floor though Hermione stopped him.

“Harry,” she said chewing her bottom lip. “Would you mind coming with me for a bit?”

“Sure, Hermione,” Harry said curious. “Nev, we’ll catch up in a few minutes.” His friend nodded and kept going while Hermione led Harry towards the corridor with their meeting room. “How come you wanted to see the Room, Mione?”

“A few reasons…” she said quietly. Hermione pulled to a stop near the tapestry and asked Harry to stand against the wall while she opened the Room. Pacing nervously in front of the tap dancing trolls, Hermione eventually got the Room’s door to materialize. “Okay,” she paused hand on the knob and let out a long breath, “come on, Harry.”

His brow furrowed at his girlfriend, Harry followed her inside and promptly stopped dead, eyes wide. “What the…” The Room was not the meeting room he was used to. Harry had long since figured out it subtly changed each time they used it but it had always been primarily the council chamber with a few extras. Now…now it was basically as far from a conference room setting as was possible to get. In place of the round table and chairs there was a writing desk against the wall and a bed in the middle of the room. In place of the comfy easy chairs surrounding a small fireplace, there was a beanbag chair and a recliner in the corner. Almost every wall was consumed by bookshelves filled with everything from Jules Verne to romance novels. The ceiling had several different posters including, Harry noticed blushing slightly, one of him and Daphne made from the photo Luna had taken over the summer as they stood in front of the dead basilisk.

“Mione…what the bloody hell…”

She stood near the desk nodding slowly. “Well, that answers that I suppose.” Turning to Harry she smiled and gestured for him to sit on the bed and she took a seat next to him. “I started thinking about this Room over the summer, Harry, and I came up with several conclusions. It’s obviously not a normal castle room. Even magical locations can’t generally alter themselves on the fly like we’ve seemed to do at times with this place. I got to thinking about how the older members of our contingent all stumbled across it in different…configurations I guess would be the appropriate term: Shiva with her supply cache, Amelia with her bedroom, Susan with her secret meeting area. When you mentioned at the World Cup about the walls suddenly being able to absorb spells when you needed a training area I started to put two and two together.”

She shrugged as Harry stared at her in amusement. “I figured that there were two primary explanations. Either the Room existed in several primary setups that could be subtly changed in small ways or it quite literally molded itself to whoever opened the door. Either way, the requirement to walk past it three times envisioning what you want would be how it latched onto the configuration to display.”

Harry looked around the small bedroom with an intrigued eye peering more closely at the subtle touches that gave it life and character. “It’s the latter isn’t it? This is a copy of your bedroom.”
Hermione smiled at him and patted his leg approvingly. “Yes, it is. I thought it would be excellent for accomplishing both purposes of this evening. The first was of course testing to see if we could create new schematics for the Room, which obviously was a resounding success.”

“Agreed,” Harry said turning to Hermione with a grin. “It’s very you, Mione. I can’t wait to see it in real life. The poster is a cute addition by the way.”

She blushed and muttered, “Yes, well it was a good picture and you were both rather dashing in that pose…” Hermione shook herself and continued slower and more confidently, “I would very much like for you to see it when we next return home, Harry. I still need to introduce you to my parents in a better manner than the harried meeting at Diagon a few years ago.”

He nodded dutifully. “So, what was the second reason you wanted it to become your bedroom, Mione? Just to show me?”

Hermione started ringing her hands and blushing even more fiercely. “Harry…I um…I’m not sure how to…oh blast it all!” She took a deep breath and looked up at him determination blazing in her eyes. “Harry, I would like to try and progress our relationship a bit.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open and his mind stuttered. “P-progress our relationship? Err, what exactly do mean there, Mione?”

Hermione rolled her eyes and put a hand on his cheek. “You know what I mean, Harry. We’ve been dating for nearly a year and haven’t done anything more than snog. I know I’m not pretty or beautiful or –”

Harry vehemently shook his head and cut her off. “Mione, you are beautiful. I don’t care that your teeth are a bit big and your hair gets a bit fluffy when you don’t use that shampoo Lavender recommended. You are beautiful and don’t deny it.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you, Harry. I’ll perhaps admit that you find me attractive at least. Which is horribly sweet of you, by the way.” She held up her hand to stop him from arguing. “Regardless of which of us is correct on the subject of my physical qualities, Harry, I am a girl. I will never think I am as pretty as you as a boy would see me. Besides, compared to someone like Daphne I am almost plain. Compared to Fleur with her supernatural beauty and Tonks with her ability to fix anything she finds annoying I might as well be invisible.”

“Hermione,” Harry said frowning, “you were basically my first friend. Whether or not you are as attractive as other girls doesn’t make an ounce of difference to me.”

“I know. Well – I know that here,” she said tapping her head. “But this is all besides the point. Harry, you are surrounded by women now with only five real male friends and two of them are practically triple our age – even if they are less mature than either of us most of the time. I know it’s stupid to feel insecure, but between that fact and that you are not only more or less required to be in a multiple relationship, but that I am actively pushing you towards that…I can’t help but feel like I might end up on the sidelines. Stop,” she said shaking her head when he opened his mouth. “I know what you’re going to say, Harry. And I understand and agree with it. I just can’t help but feel this though. I am smart. That’s my primary asset. I…want to feel like I am a woman also though. I want to know that you find me attractive. Not to just understand it intellectually. And I’ve known ever since we started this that I’d likely be the one to take the lead considering your childhood…I…” she wrung her hands again and finished softly, “we don’t have to go very far. But I would really like to at least maybe…as the Americans would say, get to second base?”

“Err,” Harry fumbled. He wasn’t quite up to speed on American slang. “Um, okay. But I’m not
entirely sure what that means, Mione…”

Her head jerked up to meet his eyes and suddenly she started laughing. Her laughter set Harry off and they fell back onto the bed shorting hysterically. After a minute or so Hermione’s laughter quieted and she pushed herself up so that she was hovering over Harry with a smile on her face, both of their expressions far more relaxed than a few minutes ago. “Let me put it in terms that you might understand better, boyfriend of mine. I would be delighted if you would touch my quaffles.”

Harry peered at her for a moment before his eyes widened and he snorted again. “Wow. That has got to be one of the lamest Quidditch puns I’ve ever heard, Mione. Though…oh god Dean and Seamus have used that before!” He laughed again and she smiled with him shaking her head good-naturedly.

“I assumed they would have. I don’t think there’s a good Quidditch reference for third base but we’ll approach that when the time comes. I would assume you’d understand if I said catching my snitch though yes,” she asked eyebrows raised.

Harry’s face turned red though he nodded hurriedly. “Not really ready for that, Mione.”

“Neither am I, love. Neither am I,” she said leaning down to lightly kiss him not noticing how he had stiffened slightly at her appellation. “Though I admit to being selfish and wanted to be your first when we are ready for that.” She pulled away from his lips and peered down in confusion. “Harry?”

“You love me?” he asked softly. His arms came up and wrapped around her waist.

Hermione’s mouth dropped open as she realized what she had just said and the implications it would have for Harry. Blushing she nodded. “Yes, Harry. I do love you. I have for a while now.”

“That’s…” he paused and leaned up to brush a kiss against her lips. “That’s the first time someone has said they love me.”

Hermione blinked rapidly. “Surely Shiva would’ve said that at some point?”

“No,” Harry shook his head with a rueful grin. “She’s actually been pretty careful not to say it. It came up a few months ago and she said that she didn’t feel right telling me that yet. She felt like if she told me that she loved me, it’d be like she was taking my mum’s place or something. And she’s been doing everything she can to avoid replacing my mum – even if I don’t remember her at all beyond one or two hazy scenes. Shiva uses other terms of endearment; like when she calls me ‘kid’, I know what she really means. Both of us agreed this is better for the moment.”

“Oh,” Hermione said softly. “I hadn’t realized.”

“I love you too, Hermione Granger,” Harry said his voice quiet but powerful in its emotion.

Hermione smiled and leaned down to claim her boyfriend’s lips with her own. The snog was deep and long. When they finally came up for air, she smirked at him. “Sooo….about my quaffles…”

Harry looked in her eyes and paused for a long moment. “You’re really sure, you’re okay with this?”

Hermione rolled her eyes and lightly patted his cheek. “Harry, I’d be willing to bet my house that I am the more adventurous one in this relationship and that I am going to be ready for things long before you are. So to bluntly answer your question: yes. Now, do want me to take off my shirt or
not?” She smirked at him as she sat up and lightly rested one hand on her stomach so that her t-shirt rode up ever so slightly.

Harry groaned. “You don’t play remotely fair when it comes to me you know that?” Hermione just nodded sagely. “Yes, Mione, I would very much enjoy you taking your shirt off.”

Hermione’s smirk widening into a full on grin, she reached down with both hands and grabbed the trailing edge of her shirt. Hesitating for only a moment, she lifted it over her head in one smooth motion leaving her upper body clad in just a scarlet bra. Her face was slightly red but most of the awkwardness seemed to have been thankfully bled off earlier. Carefully, Hermione reached behind her with one arm and popped the clasp to her bra letting it fall to the bed beside her.

Harry tried not to stare. He really did. He failed. His Mione was perfect and her breasts even more so. They were about average size and so perky he idly wondered why she even needed the bra. Her nipples were small but clearly visible against her white flesh.

“Harry,” Hermione said with a playful tone, “you need to breathe, love.”

Harry heard what she said but it didn’t really process for another moment. When it did, he took a reflexive gasp and finally managed to tear his gaze away from her chest. Looking up to Hermione’s face he grinned sheepishly and said, “Mione, I don’t care what you or anyone says. You, are beautiful.”

She gave him an adoring smirk and crawled across the bed so that she was straddling him. Leaning down to his ear she whispered, “Prove it.”

Harry walked into the boys’ dormitory that evening with a smile plastered over his face that he doubted even Voldemort would have been able to knock off. As he moved over to his bed, his current mood did not go entirely unnoticed. Neville cocked his head at his friend and raised his eyebrows. “Harry, you’re in a horribly good mood tonight.”

“Yup,” Harry said succinctly.

“Anything you want to share?” Neville asked laughing.


Neville fell back onto his bed holding his sides as his laughing increased. He wiped his eyes after a bit and still chortling softly he saluted Harry. “Way to go, mate. I was wondering just how long she’d wait before kicking your arse and moving things along.”

“Hey! Who said Hermione was the one to push?” Harry asked feigning holding his hand over his chest as if struck in the heart.

“Oh, please, Harry. We all know that you’re never going to be the one to take the first move. Oh wait, it still counts as the first week back. Yes!” he pumped a hand into the air as Harry looked at him inquiringly. “I got to see Tracey in the morning. You just won me five galleons, Harry!”

Umbridge paced around the Goblet of Fire close to midnight and fought the urge to giggle. It had been so easy. All she’d done was write the horrible little half-blood’s name onto a slip of parchment and tossed it into the Goblet. There weren’t even any protections against her simple subterfuge! The stupid thing had accepted her entry without a single hiccup or burp. Such a foolish old man. Why anyone could just submit any name to the artifact! A quick compulsion
charm on the thing so that it would choose her paper and that was that!

Losing her inner battle, Umbridge let out her giggle and took one final look around before starting to walk away. She hummed to herself and envisioned the brat’s death at the hands of the monstrosity she had acquired for the First Task. That would teach the boy to disrespect his betters!

Barty Crouch Jr. resisted the urge to slap his forehead. That pink toad was a representative of the Ministry? Things had certainly changed since he had been imprisoned. Just because Barty hated his late father didn’t mean he thought the man had been incompetent. On the contrary in fact. Bartemius Sr. had been exceedingly good and ruthless at his job. If Umbridge was the cream of the current crop…well even the pathetic fool Wormtail would’ve had a good shot at taking over!

A compulsion charm? On an inanimate object? How had she passed her OWLs let alone her NEWTs? And just simply writing Potter’s name down herself and submitting it? By Merlin, if he decided to be smart and not compete she’d lose her magic since the paper was tied to her and not the boy! Barty was strongly tempted to go and finish the fool off. It wasn’t even worth subverting people like that. All they did was pollute the gene pool.

Shaking his head in pity for her poor mother, Barty used his new magical eye to take a quick look around. He was still getting used to the horribly awkward double vision, but was quickly growing to love the thing. It had taken some time to figure out the X-Ray functionality, but now that he had…well walls certainly weren’t the only thing rendered see-through. Barty was greatly looking forward to his upper level classes. If the Frenchies joined in all the better! Even if they didn’t, there were always mealtimes to ogle. That was all he was getting with Babbling anyway. There was an attractive woman indeed – you could bounce a galleon off that arse! Barty couldn’t imagine how Moody had managed to avoid using the functionality. The veritaserum questioning had proven the man was above such things though even the potion had been unable to force the retiree to explain why. Well Barty had been in prison and then under the imperius for…a long time. He certainly didn’t have such hang-ups. The Death Eater did have some standards though; he’d restrict himself to just the sixth and seventh years.

Happily convinced that he was definitely alone in the Entrance Hall, Barty moved forward and dropped his parchment into the Goblet. This one had been torn off of one of Potter’s old assignments so that the name was written in the boy’s own hand. The school had been filled in above the name by Barty but that wouldn’t be enough to tie the magic to him. Only to identify the appropriate category.

He chuckled again at how ridiculous this task had become. A hydra and a manticore? He hadn’t even been able to find out the final monster these fools would face. No, Barty wouldn’t be assisting Potter through this. There wasn’t any point. If the Ministry was going to go all out on this gladiator game he’d simply sit back and enjoy the fireworks. His master would surely be satisfied with the boy’s spectacular death.

Finishing a short spell to add a fourth school’s name to the Goblet’s enchantments, Barty turned away smiling. He almost felt bad for Potter.

Dumbledore listened to the report from the portrait of Icarus the Winged. Icarus had a penchant for heights and his portrait was stashed away in the loftiest reaches of the Entrance Hall. It made for the perfect vantage point for spying on the coming and going of students. Tonight in particular it made watching over the plots of others laughably easy.

Umbridge’s foolish scheme hadn’t a prayer of succeeding and when she’d left secure in her own
superiority, Dumbledore had groaned thinking he’d have to go and take matters into his own hands. Then Alastor Moody – hehem – Crouch Jr. had stepped up to the plate. The young man had been good, Dumbledore could give him that. He’d managed to fool most and his performance might even take in Amelia in passing. But Alastor had been his friend for several decades. He had long ago established safeguards to ensure that people would be able to identify if someone was impersonating him. When Alastor had made Dumbledore memorize three different phrases that would be included in his initial address after some time apart he’d thought the man horrifically paranoid. Now that said precaution had proven correct…well he’d buy the old man a bottle of firewhiskey when the year was over and Crouch had been taken care of.

A simple check of the Castle wards had shown the list of personnel on the grounds and revealed Barty’s ploy. It wasn’t a bad plan all things considered. Dumbledore had initially tipped his hat at the man for coming up with it. Now Barty had proven worth Dumbledore’s blind eye by taking care of the little problem without Dumbledore ever having to dirty his own hands.

Just because Harry needed to die, it didn’t mean he had to personally participate in the killing. After all, that was what trials were for, were they not? To test one’s self and…if one was found unworthy…to punish.

Considering the evening for a moment, Dumbledore was only too happy that Umbridge was even more foolish than he had assumed. Merlin forbid, if she had actually managed to be even an iota more competent he might have had to worry about Harry’s name coming up twice! Or three times if Icarus hadn’t told him about Barty’s attempt as well! Shuddering at the thought of that potential disaster, Dumbledore popped a lemon drop into his mouth and started preparing to head to bed.

By the time lunch rolled around the next day, Harry had gotten over his annoyance that his friends were betting on his love life. That had probably been largely helped by the Weasley twins quietly confiding that the main pot had already been taken by McGonagall last year when Hermione and he had officially become a couple. Harry had barely been able to look at the Scott all during the morning classes after learning that little tidbit.

He ended up in a rather interesting discussion with Fred and George during lunch while the rest listened in. “I can’t believe you missed our beards, Harry!” George groaned. “They were so impressively long and everything!”

Fred nodded sagely and started stroking the air under his chin where his beard had previously been. “Aye, truly epic, mate!”

“Well they weren’t intentional so I don’t see why you’re bragging about them,” Harry said lifting an eyebrow at them. “Did you seriously think that a simple aging potion would get you over that line?”

“It seemed like a simple enough thing to try,” Fred said with a shrug.

Harry nearly choked on his drink he started laughing so hard. Fleur turned to Hermione and asked, “Is zis normal? Does ‘arry regularly have issues eating? Zis is the second time he ‘as nearly died at ze table in less zen a day.” Her mouth quirked up at the end of the statement trying to hide her grin.

Hermione just rolled her eyes. “You get used to the random bouts of madness. It’s a hazard of the Comm Stones,” the brunette gave her friend an evil little grin. “Just wait until you get your own. Then you’ll be the one interrupted by random insane comments you simply won’t be able to stop from laughing at.”
Fleur shuddered theatrically. Luna gave a dreamy smile and reached over to pat her hand. “Don’t worry, Fleur. Our whispers are far more entertaining than Blibbering Humdingers. They can be quite rude sometimes. We will simply harp on the amazing virtues of classmates and staff.” She paused and tapped a finger against her chin. “Though I may inquire every so often if you’ve come across a crumple-horned snorkack.”

Harry got his laughs quieted and smiled at Luna. “One day you’ll find them, Luna.” Turning back to Fred and George he lifted an eyebrow. “So you two wanted a simple solution to get your names in the Goblet and you went with an aging potion?”

Fred shrugged. “Granted it’s not our best idea ever.”

George continued with a solemn nod, “We’re convinced Dumbledore is having this selection so early in the year because he wants to ensure that we can’t figure out ways to cheat the precaution.”

“Downright conniving of the Headmaster, that is,” Fred agreed sagely. “Why it’s a right Slytherin move. No offense ladies.” He nodded to Daphne and Tracey who simply raised their eyebrows in response and acknowledged the point.

“You guys realize the age line is only two meters back from the Goblet right?” Harry asked.

The twins nodded. “Yeah, of course. What’s your point, Harry? Got a rune we could use to get across or extend our arms or something?” George asked.

Harry looked between all his friends. Susan, Hannah, Neville, Luna, Tracey, Daphne, Fleur, Hermione, Fred, George and Ginny all looked back with confused expressions. Ron was trying and failing to look like he wasn’t listening in but the neglected food on his plate was evidence against him. Katie, Angelina and Alicia all had their eyebrows raised as well. “Really? None of you have a clue what I’m getting at? Katie, you at least should understand, you’re a half-blood.”

“What does that have to…do with…” Katie began before trailing off and slamming her head into the table. “God. Harry, you don’t seriously think that would work?”

He grinned. “I’m sure Fred and George will let us know in a few minutes if it does or doesn’t.”


“You guys ever heard of basketball?” Harry asked innocently. Hermione made a squeak beside him and Dean groaned. Ron’s eyes narrowed and the rest just looked confused. Except for Luna. Luna fell off the bench holding her sides, laughing so hard she could barely breathe.

“Um,” George asked holding up his hand, “what’s basketball?”

Harry took up a napkin, crumpled it into a ball and tossed it at George’s face, hitting him between the eyes. “Imagine that was the Goblet.” At the stunned expressions of his companions Harry took another napkin and folded it into a small triangle. He held that in his palm and used his other hand to flick it toward the Slytherin table. The little paper flew across the room and struck Malfoy in the back of his head. Harry had already turned back to look at the others who were even more dumbfounded than before. “And that is from Muggle American Football. Bit different than regular footy but still entertaining to watch.”

“Who hit me?!” Malfoy screamed from the other side of the room. Harry completely ignored him. Fred and George looked at each other blinking owlishly. As one they reached into their backpacks
and tore out pieces of parchment. Hurriedly writing on their respective sheets and folding them up they turned to Harry and bowed. “Excuse us for a moment.” A little ways away, Ron balled up his own slip of paper and hurriedly followed his brothers into the Entrance Hall.

“No way is it that easy…” Tracey muttered staring after them.

Hermione sighed and shook her head staring into her plate. “Wizarding culture seems immune to logic to a scary extent. I have apparently been infected by whatever infliction they have. It certainly wouldn’t surprise me at all to see…oh yes; it worked.”

Three beaming red-heads returned to sit at the table. Fred and George bowed again to Harry. “Our liege. You are truly worthy of your greatness!”

“No problem, guys,” Harry chuckled. “Good luck. If you get chosen you better put forward a good show. I know you’re smart enough to do well.”

Daphne shook her head. She muttered just quiet enough for Hermione and Tracey to hear, “Merlin! Thank god I yelled at him yesterday before he had the chance to think about it.”

Luna picked herself up and sat back down smiling from ear to ear. “Harry, Tracey? Would either of you mind if I entered my name?” Matching expressions of horror blossomed across nearly every face within earshot. She let it ride for almost a minute of complete silence before devolving into more side splitting cackles. “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t want to upset Fate by throwing that large of a wrench into her plans!”

Dinner rolled around fraught with tension. Everyone from three different schools were waiting with bated breath for Dumbledore to end the meal and just get on with the Champion selection. Harry was sitting with just Neville, Hermione and Luna as the others had all decided this was important enough to stick with their separate Houses. His stomach was clenched and he had barely eaten anything. Whether he was hoping his name did still come out of the Goblet or if he was hoping it wouldn’t…even Harry couldn’t say. All he knew was that he felt like he was going to be sick and he just wanted this night to end so he could get on with his life one way or another. Hermione beside him was almost as nervous. She had his hand clenched so tight under the table he could barely feel his fingers.

“Attention please. Attention please,” Dumbledore called officiously as he stood up with arms outstretched. Immediate silence fell upon the crowd. Smiling Dumbledore waved his wand and the Goblet of Fire floated into place on its stand directly in front of him. “The Champion selection should begin momentarily. Headmistress Maxime, Headmaster Karkaroff and I all wish to extend our best wishes to all who entered and assure you that whether or not you are chosen as your school’s Champion, you are all worthy of respect.”

The Goblet’s fire blazed higher and shifted from orange to blue. “Ah it seems the Goblet is ready to deliver the name of our first Champion.” Dumbledore moved forward and caught a small folded piece of paper as the flames dropped back down into the cup. “The Champion from Durmstrang is…Viktor Krum!”

The Hall broke into applause as Krum nodded his determination and stepped forward. A very small smile on his face was the only expression he let out. The rest of Durmstrang was not so reserved though and they hollered and stamped their feet. The Hogwarts and Beauxbatons congratulations was almost as loud. Ron’s voice rang out over a good portion of the noise, “Wooohoooo! Go Krum! Go Krum!”
Krum was waved towards a side door near the back of the Hall and Dumbledore waved for the crowd to quiet down. The Goblet started flaring up again and when Dumbledore pulled his hand back he was clutching another slip of parchment. “The Champion for Beauxbatons is…Fleur Delacour!”

The applause from the Beauxbatons was not nearly as enthusiastic as Krum had received though the students from Hogwarts and Durmstrang were obviously pleased with the Veela girl’s selection. Fleur smiled widely as she walked to the door Krum had entered. Harry wasn’t sure if he imagined it or not but he thought she held her head a bit higher after Hermione had shouted, “Way to go, Fleur!”

Again the applause slowed and again the Goblet flared. “The Champion for Hogwarts is…Fred Weasley!” Dumbledore started clapping with the rest of the school for a moment before he blanched and looked at the note in his hand again. He grimaced and cast several spells on the parchment as Fred was bowing and glad-handing practically half the school during his way towards the back room. While the applause from the other two schools was similar to the earlier Champions, Hogwarts seemed almost evenly split between cheers and laughter.

Finally laying aside the piece of parchment with Fred’s name on it Dumbledore raised his hands for quiet. “Yes, yes, thank you one and all for your support.” There were many murmurs amongst the Hogwarts students though the staff reaction to Fred’s selection was varied. Flitwick apparently had won a bit of gold as he was happily counting galleons handed over from Sprout, Vector and Shiva. Harry smirked as he saw McGonagall shift, holding one hand to her face, her other hand surreptitiously slid over and deposit something on top of Flitwick’s pile.

“Now, we will—” Dumbledore cut off as the Goblet flared again. Harry groaned and squeezed Hermione’s hand. Daphne was right. He had never had to bother with considering entering on his own.

Dumbledore drew the paper back from the Goblet as the flames died completely. “Harry Potter.” All sounds in the Hall died. “Harry Potter!” Harry sighed and stood up. Hermione’s eyes had widened and she tried to tug him back down into his seat shaking her head.

“I’ll be back in a bit, Mione,” Harry said softly leaning down to kiss her cheek. “Gather everyone up into the Room’s Council configuration.” He stepped back from her and pulled his hand out of her grip and headed towards the back room. The students flooding the Great Hall all seemed to continue holding their breath. Harry glanced towards the staff table and saw that McGonagall and Flitwick were both leaning back in their seats with a resigned expression. Bagman on the other hand was looking ecstatic, Moody was completely unsurprised, Snape had an even darker sneer than usual and…Shiva wasn’t there.

Harry’s insides churned as he got closer to the Trophy Room the Champions had gathered in. He hadn’t had a chance to talk to Shiva about the conversation between Daphne and himself the other day. Would she think that he had entered himself into the Tournament? Would she care if he had? Would she take him telling Fred how to enter as proof that he had done it too? Would she call him a liar when he said he hadn’t? Would she kick him out? Would he have to go back to the Dursleys after everything? Would Daphne’s word be enough to convince her? Would Daphne decide he’d gone and been an idiot despite his promise? Would she leave him too? Would Hermione believe him? Would – Harry’s rapidly stumbling mind came to a grinding halt as he pushed open the door to the Trophy Room and found himself pressed up against Shiva’s shoulder.

Harry breathed out a shaky sigh and his guardian pushed him back. Her eyes were angry but whether it was at him or otherwise he couldn’t tell. “I’m only going to ask once and I will accept
whatever you say as the truth, Harry.” She said softly. Her voice still seemed to carry through the entire room. Fred, Fleur and Krum looked on with confused gazes. “Did you enter yourself?”

Harry shook his head. “No. Daphne talked me out of it the night we heard about the Tournament. I considered it but...”

Shiva pulled him back into her. “Okay, kid. Okay. We can deal with this.”

“‘arry?” Fleur asked. “What iz going on? Do zey want us back out zere?”

Next to her Fred sighed. “No. Harry’s luck is just acting up again I imagine.”

The door to the Trophy Room banged open and Dumbledore came in like a storm of fury. He started to reach for Harry but when he saw the teenager still next to Shiva the old man’s arm dropped and his gaze narrowed. Behind Dumbledore, Snape, Moody and the other Headmasters walked in.

“Did you enter your name into the Goblet of Fire, Harry?” Dumbledore said. His voice practically seemed to rumble with anger and power.

Harry scowled. “No, Headmaster. I did not enter my name.”

“He is obviously lying,” Snape said glaring at Harry. Harry and Shiva glared right back at the Potions Master. Maxime and Karkaroff nodded along with Snape. Fleur looked between Harry and the others.

“You are to compete ‘arry?” she whispered. “But zere are already three contestants.”

“Exactly!” Maxime said striding forward. Her bulk took up a large section of the corner of the room. She came close enough to Harry that Shiva raised her wand slightly at the larger woman. “Ze leetle boy is not only a liar, ‘e is a cheat!”

“Don’t you dare call Harry a cheater!” Shiva shouted back at Maxime. “If he says he didn’t enter, then he didn’t enter!”

“This is outrageous! How dare Hogwarts have two Champions! I will not stand for it!” Karkaroff shouted. “The boy will not be involved and if he is then Durmstrang will withdraw!”

“No ve vill not!” Krum said scowling. He strode forward. “My magic is tied to the Goblet and the Tournament now. I have no intention of withdrawing and losing my magic because somevon smart found a work-around of the enchantments. He is obviously skilled. Let him compete and show his skill.”

“I didn’t enter my name,” Harry hissed through his ground teeth. He turned to Krum and growled out in a slightly less frustrated voice, “But thank you for the support.” Krum nodded at Harry but didn’t seem quite convinced.

Harry turned to look at Fleur as the Professors resumed shouting at each other. His friend was frowning and talking to Fred who just kept shaking his head gesturing towards Harry. “Fleur?” Harry said softly. She appeared to hear him despite the ongoing arguments and turned to look at him. She gave a soft smile and a nod. Tapping her ear, she mouthed “Later” and went back to talking to Fred. Harry sighed and felt Shiva pull him against her tighter.

Turning his attention back to the debate he heard Umbridge say in her sickeningly sweet voice, “Well the boy has made his bed. Now he must lie in it. Regardless of anyone’s feelings he is a
participant and he will compete. Or we could simply bar him and he’d lose his magic. Either way would be a suitable punishment for a cheater I suppose.” She gave a little giggle that set Harry’s hairs on end. When had the woman even entered? For that matter when had Bagman entered?

Shiva snarled. “Oh really? And how do we know that you didn’t enter him? You certainly seem to be taking every opportunity to degrade Harry and our guests.”

Umbridge’s smile made Harry want to hurl. “I am a representative of the Minister himself little girl. I realize that may be a bit too complicated for you to understand.”

“Oh so ze Minister is in the ‘abit of insulting his allies zen?” Maxime growled. “Be quiet pink toad or you will see yourself squashed.”

“How dare you!”

“QUIET!” Dumbledore roared. The room fell silent. “The magic of the Goblet is absolute. Harry must compete or he will lose his magic. There is to be no more debate.”

“Actually I have a question about that,” Harry said raising his hand. All eyes turned on him. “Can I see that piece of parchment, Headmaster?” With a frown Dumbledore handed the slip of paper to him. “Well this is my handwriting.”

“He admits it!” Snape crooned.

“As I was saying,” Harry snarled, “this is my handwriting with my name. But the school above it isn’t mine. I’ve never even heard of…‘Salem Exchange’. And it looks like this thing is torn on the bottom. Look, you can even see a bit of the next line down…I think this was from an essay for History of Magic. Nothing else I wrote would have ‘goblins’ on it.”

Shiva sighed. “The ‘Salem Exchange’ school closed about five years ago. Guess we know how your name came out now.”

Moody grunted. “Aye, someone was smart about it.” Unnoticed to everyone present, Umbridge preened – apparently forgetting that she had not used Harry’s essay nor had she written a new school. “The guilty party obviously entered him under a fourth school with him as the only participant.”

“It doesn’t matter how he cheated to get in,” Karkaroff said. “What is important is that Hogwarts now has two Champions and Durmstrang and Beauxbatons only have one!”

“So just select two more of your own students,” Shiva said glaring at the man. “Goddess knows, it’s not that complicated of a solution!”

“What?!” Karkaroff yelled.

“Why are you even here, Babbling?” Snape shouted.

“As Harry’s legal guardian I have far more right to be in here than you do Snape! At least Moody has the excuse of being a retired Auror. What’s yours? Headmaster’s pet?” Shiva yelled back.

“We why!” Snape grabbed for his wand but Dumbledore pushed his arm down and stepped between the two Professors.

Harry stepped forward pushing Shiva behind him and tried to shift the argument away from an out and out fight. “Madam Umbridge, the Ministry has declared that only legal adults can participate
in this Tournament this year correct?"

“Absolutely, child,” Umbridge said with a little giggle on the end.

“I am not a child, Madam Umbridge,” Harry said. Behind him, he felt Shiva stiffen. “And I am
being forced to compete in this yes?”

“You have no other choice,” her smile widened.

Harry nodded slowly. “Okay then.” He turned to Karkaroff and Maxime. “You’re right, it’s not
fair that Hogwarts has two Champions. So if we can’t turn the Goblet’s fire back on why not
canvas your students to see if anyone wants to be a second contestant for your school to even things
out? If you want the same restrictions on them as are on the four of us then just have them sign a
magical contract or something.”

Fleur stepped forward. “Zat is not such a bad idea. It would remove much potential controversy.”

Krum also nodded. “I agree vith this proposal. It sounds fair.”

Fred held up his arm. “I also like it. We could rename the Tournament into the Hexwizard
Tournament too!” Harry grimaced at that contribution.

Maxime and Karkaroff turned to each other and considered. Before either could say anything
though Dumbledore spoke up. “I do not think that would be keeping with the spirit of the
Tournament unfortunately. I have to vote against it.”

Maxime sighed but nodded. “As distasteful as I find it, I agree. Risking one of my students is
already bad enough. I am in no ‘urry to risk a zecond simply to balance ze scales. Fleur can win
all on her own.”

Fleur’s eyebrows rose and she glanced at Harry before nodding at her Headmistress.

Umbridge gave a little giggle. “The Ministry will not accept such a drastic change at this stage.”

Karkaroff scowled. “Well I would have agreed to it but it appears I’m overruled. Viktor will be
more than enough to crush your contestants.”

Krum snorted and rolled his eyes.

“Okay, well if we’re all done fighting with each other?” Bagman said stepping forward with a
happy smile. The man’s expression was so out of place that Harry almost started laughing. “Now
the First Task is meant to test your courage and ability to think under fire. It will be on October
31st. Quite appropriate hold a frightening task on Halloween don’t you think?” Bagman chuckled
and whatever good mood Harry had managed to acquire from his minor Viktories just plummeted
straight through to China. He might as well just jump off the Astronomy Tower now because it
would be quicker and less painful than whatever was going to happen on Halloween. “We won’t
give you any hints to this except that you should be prepared for a fight! Good luck to everyone
and –”

“Wait,” Shiva said holding up her hand. “What are the restrictions?”

“I’m sorry?” Bagman asked confused.

“The restrictions. What can’t they bring into the area? What level of spells are they allowed?
Who can help them? What are the bloody rules you imbecile!”
Bagman frowned for a minute then chuckled again. "Oh yes, I did seem to forget that part didn’t I. Crouch was supposed to be the one explaining all this you, but with Miss Umbridge’s late replacement –”


“Yes, of course, with Madam Umbridge’s late replacement I’m not fully up to speed on specifics like that. Hmm let’s see, rules, rules, what were they…oh right!” Bagman snapped his fingers and nodded. “The Champions can’t receive any assistance from members of the staff of their own schools. They are allowed to bring in a single spell casting aide at the start of each Task as well as any items of clothing they prefer. They cannot use Muggle items. They are allowed to use any spell, rune or ritual they deem appropriate. Barring the use of Unforgivables of course. Lethal force is frowned upon, but not illegal. I think that covers most of it.”

Shiva nodded and remained quiet. After glancing around the room and seeing no one else about to comment, Bagman smiled and clapped his hands together. “Well then, good luck to our Champions! I’ll see you all next week for the Weighing of the Wands!”

The assembled students and teachers started to file out of the room. Fleur attempted to speak with Harry but was quickly steered outside by Madam Maxime. Krum just nodded to his competitors as he followed Karkaroff out. Dumbledore gave a small shake of his head and left with a scowling Snape following completely ignoring both Harry and Shiva. Moody went with them and Umbridge and Bagman left quickly as well. It was soon down to just Fred, Harry and Shiva.

“So,” Fred said with an air of forced joviality. “Looks like the Potter luck has struck again eh, mate?”

Harry sighed and nodded. “Yeah. You know it’s funny, I almost did enter intentionally. How hilarious would it have been if my name had come out twice huh?”

Fred snorted. “Yeah that would’ve been a great prank. I’m surprised no one bothered to yell at me for being underage.”

Shiva groaned. “Yeah, I’m sure McGonagall will grill you later, Fred. To be honest, most of us expected either you or your brother to figure out a way to get in so we weren’t really surprised. At least you’ll be 17 before the school year is out. And you were an official Champion so the Goblet deemed you worthy. The worst we can really do is yell at you for being an idiot and then praise you for being smart and getting around the restriction.”

“You know, Professor, Harry is the one who showed me and a lot of the other Gryffs how to enter…” Fred said frowning. Shiva’s eyebrows rose and she turned to Harry.

“Oh come on! It’s not complicated. All I did was fold some paper and show them how to toss it so they could lob it into the Goblet. It’s not like I invented the wheel, Shiva!”

Her jaw dropped and she just stared between the two of them. “No bloody way…He didn’t even bother to put up a kinetic ward or a repelling charm around the thing?” Two shaking heads answered her. “Oh for crying out loud. It’s like he wanted people to try and enter… Congratulations Fred. You earned your spot. I look forward to seeing how you do. Unfortunately I can’t help you since I teach here. However I don’t teach at the Salem Exchange and were you to sit in on some training sessions I have with Harry…well I can’t very well bar you from watching him now can I?”

“I might have to sit in on some of those, Professor,” Fred said nodding. “Harry, you want to head
“Yeah. But I need to meet up with my friends first. See how many I still have after this…” he muttered. “If you come with, I can show you the Room I’ll probably use for a lot of the training. Oh, Shiva, Hermione worked out a lot more of what the Council Room can do. It’s pretty neat and a lot more versatile than we thought.”

Shiva nodded while Fred bowed for them to show the way. Squaring his shoulders, Harry walked out of the Trophy Room and heading up to face his friends.

Harry walked into the Room with Shiva and Fred following behind him. He winced as he saw a divide down the center of the room. Hermione and Daphne were on one side while Susan, Neville, Hannah and Tracey were on the other. Luna was sitting next to Hermione happily playing with her hair but still obviously in the middle of the two separate groups. Tracey was glaring at Daphne while Daphne and Hermione were busy comparing notes and crossing things out on separate sheets of parchment.

“Err, hey guys,” Harry said raising his hand in a slight wave. He received huffs of “finally” from Hermione and Daphne, a happy smile from Luna and grunts from the others.

“Wow, tense in here,” Fred said shaking his head and walking forward. “So which side is the ‘Harry’s Luck Sucks But He’s Not An Idiot Like Fred’ side?” Snorts of amusement greeted him as Luna gestured grandly towards Hermione and Daphne. “Cool,” Fred smiled and plopped down beside Daphne. “So, Nev, you leading the ‘Seriously, Harry Why You Would Go Be As Stupid As Fred’ side?”

Neville groaned but nodded. “Apparently.”

“You guys really don’t believe I entered myself do you?” Harry asked quietly. He moved to sit across from everyone in the center of the table. Shiva took a seat beside him.

“We’re… reserving judgment until we had a chance to talk with you, Harry,” Neville said carefully. “We’ve been friends for over three years. None of us are about to throw away our friendship with you over this, but we do want to know what happened tonight.”

Harry turned to look at Hermione, Luna and Daphne. Daphne sighed and looked up from her paper. “I already told you two days ago, Harry. I’m not abandoning you and I’m not about to berate you for being dragged into yet another horrible situation for pissing off some elder deity by having the audacity to be born.”

Hermione sighed. “And I am certainly not about to let you deal with this with just Daphne. You people say I’m scary. If I’m not around to tone you both down, she’s going to have you practicing the blood boiling curse by the end of the month.” She shook her head and smiled at Harry. “And no, Harry, I certainly don’t think you would enter this on your own. I am sure you would have had good reason to, but I seriously doubt you would have wanted to annoy us all quite so much by not mentioning such a thing to us beforehand.”

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Luna spoke up. “I don’t particularly care either way,” she shrugged. “You are my friend and I will of course support you no matter what. You helped me when no one else cared and I will always do the same for you.” She cocked her head and her gaze grew a bit sharper with her tone slightly less vapid. “However I also know how badly you desire to be free of the chains binding you, Harry Potter. If you did enter the Tournament of your own choosing I have no problem with that. What would make me somewhat perturbed was if you had done so without telling me prior.” She
smiled, her dreamy look back and the cold edge gone. “Much as Hermione said, I don’t really think that you would do that though. You are far too noble to not tell at least one of your friends before you go and do something foolish.”

Neville sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Look, Harry, I know you didn’t do squat with the Goblet last night but you had some chances earlier today. And yeah the four of us,” he gestured to Susan, Hannah and Tracey, “agree with Luna and Hermione that you would have a good reason to get into it. You’re using it to get emancipated with the legal loophole the Ministry left right?” Harry nodded.

Shiva looked at him in surprise before laughing. “Wow, kid, I hadn’t even considered that before Umbridge started going on about it in the Trophy Room. You realized that loophole before?” Harry smiled slightly and ran a hand through his hair nodding again.

Daphne snorted. “You know, I’m not sure I really expressed just how impressed with that I was the other day. It really is rather Slytherin of you, Harry.” Tracey sighed and nodded her agreement from the other end of the table. “It is extraordinarily cunning to use their own rule against them like this without seemingly any of them realizing it. I think you’re really a Gryfferin.”

Harry laughed and several others joined in. Fred turned to Daphne questioningly, “A Gryfferin?” She shrugged, “A Slytherin hiding in Gryffindor. Or a Gryffindor with Slytherin tendencies. More or less the same thing I suppose.”

“Ah. Yup, our Harrykins is totally a Gryfferin,” Fred agreed happily flashing a thumbs up.

“I’ll agree that I’m a Gryfferin if you agree that you are a Slytherindor,” Harry groaned. At the questioning looks he expounded, “A Slytherin with Gryffindor tendencies. What true, full Slytherin would willingly run into the Chamber of Secrets to fight a basilisk with no backup beyond me?”

Daphne worked her mouth for a minute before the rest of the room agreed, Harry was right she was certainly a Slythindor.

“Harry,” Neville said drawing the attention back to him again. “Can you tell us what happened?” Harry sighed but nodded to his friend. “When Dumbledore announced it at the Welcoming Feast I thought about entering so I could get out from under his thumb. Daphne talked me out of it.” He blushed as he continued, “She made very good points and was not shy about expressing them.” Daphne nodded her agreement but steadfastly refused to look up from her sheet of parchment. “I didn’t enter my name into the Goblet. I can’t say I’m really all that surprised that I did get entered or even that I’m entirely disappointed by it, because I can still use it now to get complete control of my own life.” He shrugged. “However I can tell you that I did not put my name into that thing myself.”

Daphne slid one of her papers over to him. “If you want, that’s the magical vow. I had Hermione look it over too. It’s horribly specific but it’s always smarter to be as specific as possible with vows to ensure you don’t accidentally force yourself into anything because you missed a word or something.”

Shiva took the paper from Harry’s hands and smiled at the younger girl. “Thanks, Daphne, but it’s not necessary. We have some proof that Harry didn’t enter. The parchment with his name on it is in his handwriting but it looks to have been pilfered from an old essay and the school name isn’t in his hand.”
Neville, Susan, Hannah and Tracey all let out a loud relieved sigh and slumped back. Tracey saluted him. “Well, that’s good to know. I’d hate to have to call you an idiotic Gryffindor when you’ve been doing so well with being sneaky and conniving lately.”

“Thanks, Trace,” Harry said shaking his head in amusement. “I think.”

Susan rolled her eyes. “Seriously, Harry. It’s nice to know you didn’t enter yourself. We still would’ve stood by you if you did. But,” she shrugged, “I probably would’ve been annoyed with you for a while. From what I’ve heard this thing is a glorified blood sport if you’re not extremely well prepared and at least somewhat lucky.”

Hannah nodded. “Yeah, I agree. Fred, by the way, you’re a bloody idiot! Harry you get a pass for coming to your senses. Always listen to the girl. We’re pretty much always right. Fred, did you even bother to ask Alicia if she was okay with you doing this?”

Surprising everyone, Fred nodded. “Of course. George and I love to prank anyone and everyone but we’re not idiots. I’m not about to lose my girl just because I wanted to prove I’m more than just a prankster.”

Hannah’s mouth slammed shut with a clack. Hermione looked at Fred in a new light. “Wow. A Weasley twin wanting to be more than a prank master…I’m proud of you Fred. I may even convince Harry to introduce you to Padfoot and Moony now.”

Fred had been leaning his chair back on two legs with his feet up on the table. At Hermione’s mention of two of the creators of the Marauder’s Map he completely lost his balance and crashed to the floor. “What the bloody hell?!?”

As the group of Gryffindors trumped into the Common Room with Fred and Harry at the forefront they arrived to thunderous applause and proffered butterbeers. With wide eyes, Harry even saw McGonagall sitting in an armchair with a butterbeer in hand.

“Professor?!” Fred exclaimed. Harry vividly nodded along with the man.

“Ah, I was beginning to think you two had tried to run for the hills,” McGonagall said levering herself out of the seat. “First off, Harry, I’ve seen enough since you’ve arrived to recognize your misfortune when it occurs. As I’m sure Professor Babbling has already figured out, with you entered under a different school I would be more than happy to provide any assistance you require. Professor Flitwick has also extended his services. And I believe he mentioned something about ‘perhaps now Potter will regret not taking me up on those dueling lessons’. He seemed quite smug about it too so perhaps you should prepare a rejoinder before class with him.” Harry just stared as McGonagall cracked a large smile. Half the room’s mouths dropped at that.

“Secondly, Mr. Weasley,” McGonagall turned to Fred and sighed heavily. Everyone seemed to hold their breath. “Fred, you better bloody well put forth a good showing. I know you can do it. Make the same effort as you use in your pranks and you should have few issues. Make Gryffindor proud both of you!”

She walked past the goggling students towards the portrait hole. Just before opening the way though she turned to Harry and gave one final note, “I imagine you’ll be leaving the castle tomorrow to…obtain necessary items. Do try to ensure that Professor Babbling gets you back before curfew, Harry. Good evening everyone. Try not to stay up too late.”
Tonks was about to go to sleep for the evening when she was interrupted by an insistent tapping on her window. Trying to ignore it Tonks groaned and rolled over. Her bruises from the stupid doxies were aching and all she wanted was to sleep. The work in clearing Number 12 Grimmauld Place had gone a lot faster once Remus had started to help them. Unfortunately she was still doing a lot of it on her own between Sirius’ tentative dates with Bonesy and his appointments with the Mind Healer that Remus escorted him to. This Battle Maid job was getting old fast. It was interesting sure but she wanted to raise Walburga and Orion Black from the grave just to kill them again. How many Dark artifacts did one family need? Even the Malfoys probably had less than these people!

The tapping came again. Snarling Tonks sat up. “Fine! I’m coming you stupid bird!” Shuffling towards the window, Tonks glared at the offending messenger. The beautiful snowy owl fluttered inside and perched on the bedpost. Tonks groaned again and shook her head. “Sorry, Hedwig. It’s been a long day. Forgive me?” The owl twisted her head and hooted imperiously. “How about for an owl treat?” Hedwig turned to regard her before twisting away again. “I am not making you bacon at 11 p.m. I have some bologna left over from lunch though. Is that an acceptable compromise?” Hedwig looked at Tonks again and gave a quick head bob and hoot. Tonks smirked and got her sandwich bringing it back to the owl. As she gobbled up the proffered treat, Tonks laughed. “You are one spoiled bird, Hedwig.” Hedwig hooted agreement and lifted her leg to deliver her letter.

Tonks unwrapped it seeing Harry’s distinctive scrawl and smiled to herself.

Tonks,

So before I start this letter, let me first say: please don’t crumple it up and burn it until the end. Read everything before losing your temper Battle Maid.

Tonks blinked. That certainly didn’t bode very well.

Okay, so I don’t know how much you’ve heard or if Sirius knew beforehand or not. The Triwizard Tournament is starting up this year. Great fun right? A Tournament that apparently has a 68% death rate including hostages and spectators.

She’d heard talk about the Crouch having pushed for the Tournament to bring morale back up after the Sirius death hunt but had figured it would’ve died when he was forced out of office. This really didn’t bode well.

I considered trying to enter it for a bit.

She seriously considered Flooing to the school and slapping some sense into him. He’d listen to her. Probably. Or she could find Hermione and get the brunette to slap some sense into him.

But Daphne browbeat me into thinking straight. So that’s not happening anymore.

Tonks breathed a sigh of relief. Then she reread that line and laughed. Yeah Greengrass would be her second choice after Hermione. Shiva would’ve freaked out too much.

I figured this next part would probably be better in a letter rather than Comming you. The selection was tonight. Durmstrang has Viktor Krum as its Champion. Cool huh? The Beauxbatons Champion is Fleur Delacour. The same Fleur I told you about from the World Cup. Small world.

Tonks nodded agreement. That was a bit unexpected. It would be nice though that he and
Hermione got to hang out with Fleur a bit in a non-deadly setting. Well…as non-deadly as preparing for a Triwizard Tournament could be. A traitorous part of her mind seethed at the French Veela for being there while she was stuck in a house trying its best to kill her.

And from Hogwarts…it gets a bit tricky. Dumbledore just put up a stupid Age Line around the Goblet of Fire. It wasn’t even that far from the Goblet. I showed a few of the Gryffindors how they could make those little paper football things (American football not footy) and flick them towards the Goblet. So…yeah, Fred Weasley got chosen because of that.

Tonks burst out laughing. Oh, Harry. Poor guy probably just earned himself a servant for life after that. Good for Fred. He was resourceful enough to do fine during the events.

And everyone thought it was over, but well you know me and my luck. The Goblet flared up again and wouldn’t you know it, my name came out. Don’t light the letter on fire, Nymphadora. Either keep reading or Comm me.

Tonks snarled and had to set the parchment down before she tore it into little pieces. She let out a yell and slammed her fist into the wall of her bedroom. “Merlin’s balls! Bloody freaking fucking son of a goddamn it! Screw you old man!” Tonks’ hair kept shifting from fire engine red to her natural brown and her face nearly purpled. She shook out her hand and cast a quick healing spell to reset the bone using the pain to focus a bit. “Comm on, contact – ” she bit off the last word and took a few deep breaths. Not yet. She’d wait until she finished his letter first. She didn’t consider for a second that Harry had circled back around and entered himself into the Tournament. He had said he hadn’t, so he hadn’t. This was Dumbledore’s fault. She didn’t know how, but it was Dumbledore’s fault. She’d strangle the old man with his own beard the next time she got her hands on him.

Still reading? Wow. Okay, I’m a little surprised but thanks for not freaking out too bad.

“No dice, squirt. Just too mad to call,” she muttered.

Alright so Shiva helped defend me to the three Headmasters, Snape, Moody, Bagman and Umbridge.

“Umbridge! That bloody toady bitch is there?!” Tonks was sorely tempted to hit the wall again.

You probably know, but Umbridge is horrible. I’ve barely spoken to her for ten minutes and I already hate her. Luna’s dubbed her ‘The Umbitch’. Apparently it’s an honorary title for despicable human-toad hybrids in the Quibbler.

That got a snort of amusement out of Tonks.

I’m pretty sure she’s trying to kill me. If she was actually intelligent I’d probably be a bit worried. If her display of brains during that meeting though was any indication…well honestly I’m more worried that there is a second person trying to kill me who’s doing a much better job of it. My current bet is Moody but that’s mostly because he’s the Defense teacher this year and 2 out 3 murder attempts isn’t a good record so far.

Tonks frowned. Moody had trained her. He was weird and somewhat creepy sure. And if you got on the wrong side of his paranoia you’d probably wind up with a lengthy stay in St. Mungos and a phobia of something or other. But he shouldn’t have anything against Harry…

So, yeah, Shiva defended me, I’m using this opportunity to get something I’ve been searching for for years…if that’s too vague you can Comm me later. Fleur seemed to accept that I didn’t enter
myself, I don’t think Krum cared either way but he wasn’t against me taking part. Fred’s just happy to have a friend to practice with. I talked with the others afterwards. Hermione and Daphne were immediately on my side. Luna was also on my side but would’ve been quite angry if I had entered myself without telling her.

Tonks nodded again. Made sense. Those three were basically his right hands. Neville was close behind but he didn’t seem quite as tight as the three girls. And Harry was obviously going to claim emancipation somehow which could only be a good thing.

Neville, Tracey, Susan and Hannah were annoyed. I get the feeling that they were willing to listen but that they were ready to believe I had entered myself. You know, I honestly don’t blame them. Especially since I almost did. And they were all present when I had told Fred and the others how to enter their names. So while it’s frustrating I can’t blame them for being suspicious.

“Too bloody noble,” Tonks said shaking her head. Hedwig hooted her agreement.

We managed to convince them that I hadn’t entered myself. Going back to the Common Room was…interesting. McGonagall of all people was there drinking butterbeers with the Gryffs!

Tonks dropped the paper in shock. She hurriedly scrambled to pick it back up and keep reading.

I know, crazy right! And she wasn’t angry at all! She was actually more or less commiserating with me for my awful luck and offered to train me if I asked. Flitwick has also made the same offer! She didn’t even yell at Fred! She all but patted him on the back and praised him for getting in! I don’t know what the hell we did to make her loosen up but I love the old Scott!

Tonks would toast to that. “Congrats, Squirt. You have done the impossible yet again…well either you or Fred. Tossup there.”

And so we get down to the entire point of this letter. Well, the second point of this letter. Yes, I wanted you to find out before it’s in the papers but I also would like to ask a favor. Well I suppose more of job opportunity. I know you’re still sorting out your feelings and things (and I am too I guess) so I sure as bloody hell don’t want things to get awkward. But…I could really use a bit of help. Shiva, McGonagall, and Flitwick all have classes to teach. Fleur and Fred are both fellow Champions so I can’t do everything with them. Daphne and Hermione are developing a crazy schedule with some pretty advanced things but they still have classes too. I…you were the youngest Auror in decades and you were trained by a legend…I would really appreciate it if you’d be willing to help me train…I have an idea on how to get my utility belt into the Tasks but…well if it doesn’t work I really need to get better with my spells…please help?

“Yeah, screw that.” Tonks shook her head and turned to Hedwig. “Is he serious?” Hedwig gave a hoot that sounded suspiciously like the owl version of a laugh. “Yeah, he really is an idiot huh, girl? Comm on, contact, Harry.”

“Tonks? How far did you get?” Harry asked sounding wary.

“Eh, almost to the end, squirt. I need a new nickname for you by the way. Did you seriously believe I wouldn’t come help you train, Harry?” she asked sitting down on the bed and petting Hedwig.

“Well…I don’t know, Tonks. It’s been…a very long day.”

“Yeah I get that,” she sighed. “Harry, are you going to be at Gringotts most of the day tomorrow?”

“Oh you figured that part out. Good. Yeah, probably. McGonagall gave Shiva and me carte
“Seriously starting to love that woman…” Tonks muttered. “Okay. In that case I’ll take the day to get some things together, give Sirius and Remus the heads up and be to over to help first thing Monday. I’ll see if I can swing some quarters in the castle under a Private Tutor thing. If not, I’ll just bunk in Hogsmeade or something.”

There was a long pause. “Are you sure, Tonks? You really don’t have to do this…”

“Harry,” she sighed. “I’m sure that Hermione has already stated several times that she’s not going to let you get your arse kicked here. Well that goes double for me. I have a ton of experience that pretty much none of the others do. I…care about you, Harry. A lot. And I’m not letting you get hurt because I can’t get over myself.”

Another long pause. “I care about you too, Tonks. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Harry. Now get some sleep. I’ll see you in a day or two. Disconnect.”

Hedwig hooted and bumped her hand. “Yeah I know. I’ll take care of your human.” Hedwig hooted again. “Fine you stupid bird, I’ll let him take care of me too.” The owl preened. “Eventually.” An indignant hoot followed and Hedwig pecked her fingers eliciting a laugh from Tonks. The owl leaned over and picked up the letter again. Tonks took it back and finished up the ending.

If you’re willing to help, I really do appreciate it, but the last thing I want to do is push you into anything that would be weird or uncomfortable. You mean a lot to me, Tonks. So either way, thanks. I’ll talk to you soon.

Your friend,

Harry
Chapter 19: Freedom Fun

Harry and Shiva slipped away from the castle before breakfast had even started. The sun was just barely peeking over the horizon when they walked through the doors of Gringotts. Getting escorted to Snapfist’s office and exchanging greetings the trio got right down to business.

“So, what is your purpose here this morning, Warrior Potter?” Snapfist asked intertwining his fingers. “I wouldn’t have expected you to...what’s the human term – skive off classes – simply to come and see how your accounts are doing.”

“The Ministry just forced me to enter the Triwizard Competition. They’ve declared that only ‘of age’ magicals can compete. I have a memory to back this up – with the Minister’s personal representative essentially stating that I am now considered the wizarding equivalent of an adult. My magical guardian happened to be right beside her nodding his agreement,” Harry said handing over a vial with the swirling memory.

Snapfist blinked. He stared at Harry, down at the vial, back at Harry and then turned to Shiva. “Truly?”

She nodded and grinned. “Yup. The kid came up with the delightful little loophole all on his own too.”

Snapfist blinked again. He gingerly took the memory vial in one hand. “One moment. I will examine this and return shortly.” He twisted and came just short of running out the door leaving Harry and Shiva looking at each other with raised eyebrows. They only had to wait for about five minutes before Snapfist came back in roaring with laughter and tears streaming down his eyes. There was a second older goblin with him that was also chuckling. This goblin was garbed in a finely detailed suit of ceremonial armor that was stained blood-red. He had a retinue of three guards in full plate armor behind him.

Snapfist gestured from the newcomer to Harry and the goblin stepped forwards. Harry and Shiva both stood and bowed. “May your gold ever flow,” they recited.

The newcomer kept chuckling and waved away their formalities. “May your hoard be increased Warriors. I am Ragnok, Director of Gringotts. Don’t worry about the formalities, Potter, Babbling. You two have sufficiently entertained and impressed me that I am comfortable with dismissing them in private.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. Apparently the older goblin didn’t consider armed guards private but it wasn’t his place to judge so, sure, whatever.

“That was quite a fun little way around your situation you found, Potter. I do ever so love poking the Ministry. Even more so when I can use their own proclamations against them! Come, sit! Let us finish this emancipation immediately before they wise up to their mess!” Ragnok took the seat that Snapfist had vacated and the Account Manager pulled up his own chair to the side pushing several forms across to Harry and Shiva.

Harry looked at Shiva with a question in his eyes, but she seemed as clueless as to the importance of the new goblin as he was. Director sounded big, but just how big? Considering for a moment, Harry decided it wasn’t an issue worth bringing up.
Glancing over the papers he pointed at one section. “Ragnok, Snapfist, this says I still need a guardian until I hit 17. What’s the point of all this then?”

Ragnok waved a clawed hand. “It’s unimportant as you already have your legal guardian specified. That section is primarily for the Muggle side of matters. The Muggles are quite annoying to deal with – so magical emancipation and Muggle emancipation matters are handled separately. You will be freed of needing a magical guardian, but you will still require a legal one. Babbling is still willing to fulfill that role?”

She snorted. “I’d be a pretty evil person to back out at this point.”

“Then absolutely nothing changes beyond you gaining control of your person in the magical world.” Ragnok slapped his hands together and gave a greedy little smile. “I so look forward to the reports from the school and the Wizengamot after this becomes public! It will make my month!” He sighed slightly and gave a little grimace. “True, it is a blow to the Nation’s pride that we were beaten to the punch by a wizard…but at least you have proven yourself a capable Warrior, Potter, and Babbling has certainly shown she has more intelligence than the average witch by throwing her weight behind you. I was exceedingly impressed with the basilisk corpse. Are you certain you won’t part with it?”

Harry smirked. “Sorry, Ragnok. I’m really looking forward to that part of my house’s display.”

“Ah well, can’t blame an old goblin for trying.”

Harry finished signing the forms and handing it over rubbing the back of his hand. “How did that quill work without ink?”

Shiva tapped the back of his hand. “Blood quill, Harry. They’re only used in Gringotts and on extremely important magical documents. Blood bindings are powerful.” She paused and grimaced. “Also, the quills can leave scars if you use it for too long at once. So don’t ever let your paperwork pile up to that point. It really, freaking hurts.”

Snapfist grinned at Shiva. “Speaking from experience?”

“Hey, I was a teenager. Cut me some slack yeah?” Everyone laughed at that.

“Potter,” Ragnok said nodding after he put the form aside, “draw you wand, but do take care not to point it in my direction.” Harry nodded and slowly drew his wand leaving it aimed at the floor beneath him. “Now, repeat after me: I, Harry James Potter, Heir to House Potter, Heir to House Black, do hereby claim my right of emancipation granted to me by the Ministry of Magic. So mote it be.”

A flash of light lit up both the form and Harry as he finished the statement. A ring appeared on his finger and Harry lifted his hand to examine it as he put away his wand. The ring seemed to be a stylized version of his Invisibility Cloak with a beautiful black sapphire in the middle where the cloak’s hood would be. “What’s this?”

Ragnok shrugged. “Designation that you are recognized as Lord Potter, Head of House Potter. You are acquiring quite the collection of titles, little wizard.” He laughed again. “Now, as to your new status, do you have any requests of your Vault or family documents or finances?”

“Err,” Harry thought for a moment running his hand through his hair. “Keep the finances managed by whoever is best at investment stuff, I’d like the marriage contract between myself and Miss Weasley brought up here and I definitely want to read my parents’ wills.”
“Done,” Ragnok said nodding. He snapped his fingers and one of the guards left the room. “I took the liberty of retrieving your mother and father’s wills on my way up. James Potter’s will first?”

Harry nodded and accepted the proffered document. As Harry’s hand closed on it, the wax seal across the middle glowed briefly before splitting down the middle. Smiling, Harry opened the roll and started to read aloud:

_Last Will and Testament of James Charlus Potter_

Well if you’re reading this, I guess I’m dead. That seriously sucks. Bloody hell it sucks I had to write this to being with! I’m far too young and handsome to be writing this! That was supposed to be a joke. I really hope it’s not a goblin reading this because then all the humor would be lost through their monotone delivery. Though I suppose that could be entertaining in its own way…ah whatever. Onwards!

Okay, first things first, if Lily has been killed and Harry is still alive (He better be. If he’s not, Dumbledore, either me or Lily will be clawing our way back out of whatever afterlife we end up in to strangle you!) then before Lily is buried I charge the executor of this will to ensure that little Harry touches my wife while holding the necklace we left him. Don’t ignore this, my boy deserves a chance to say goodbye to his mother.

Now that bit of morbidity is over and done with, onto inheritance and bequeathment items. If Lily is alive, she and Harry split everything. If she didn’t make it, Harry gets everything. If both are gone…well then split up the Potter assets between Sirius Black, Frank Longbottom, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew and Andromeda Tonks. Unless we happened to die in our sleep or otherwise didn’t make it out of our hiding hole property. As much as I hate to admit it, if Peter didn’t think we could win…I suppose he might have been convinced to let them in if they hurt him. In that case, just make sure you investigate him before giving him any of my assets. Same with Remus. I don’t think Remus has switched sides but I’d rather be safe than sorry just in case.

Okay so final piece of business, Harry’s placement. If Lily is gone then this is the order of who gets custody:

-Sirius Black: Godfather. Siri, raise him with enough humor to have fun but make sure he doesn’t become as bad as you or me.

-Alice and Frank Longbottom: Godmother; House Potter Allies. Hey Harry and Neville can be basically brothers!

-Andromeda and Ted Tonks: Family friends of both the Potters and Sirius. Dora, take care of your little cousin.

-Amelia Bones: Family friend. Amy, I know you were sweet on Sirius so maybe use this as an excuse to finally lock the old dog down eh?

-Minerva McGonagall: Respected mentor. Min…try to loosen up with the boy, okay?

-Any orphanage or willing family. With the exception of any Death Eater family. Arm inspections in this case are mandatory.

.DO NOT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES LEAVE MY CHILD WITH PETUNIA AND VERNON DURSLEY! When Lily comes home practically spitting fire and disowned her remaining family there’s a bloody good reason for it. She may not have given me all the details but when someone practically demands you not have a baby because he’s liable ‘to be a freak like his mother’ then I
don’t need more details. Those people are lucky I promised a year ago not to hurt them. I’d sooner leave Harry with Marcus Greengrass at this point than Petunia.

So anyway, I think that about covers things. Hopefully this thing will be completely rewritten before it ever gets used. Tata, and good luck to those left behind. Harry, I love you, son.

Harry blinked away a slight sheen from his eyes as he finished the letter. Shiva gave him a small smile and a short hug while Ragnok and Snapfist just looked at each other mildly intrigued.

“Is it normal for wizards to request their spawn fondle the deceased? I haven’t attended many Will readings but that never seemed to come up in those I do remember,” Ragnok asked.

Harry frowned, fingering his necklace underneath his shirt. “Not in the Muggle world though people do tend to cry on the coffins a lot. Maybe it’s a Pureblood custom?”

“None that I’ve heard of,” Shiva said slowly. “What was that about a necklace?”

Harry pulled it out of his shirt and showed it to her. The little piece of gold jewelry with the intertwined L, J and H wasn’t particularly impressive or ostentatious. “Guess it means this. I think,” he shrugged. “This was in the box in the attic with my mum’s books. I only really take it off when I shower or sleep and it’s always under my shirt otherwise. I’m not surprised you haven’t noticed it. It’s not like I go waving the thing around.”

Shiva frowned and reached out to touch the necklace. “It doesn’t seem like anything magic or whatnot but I can’t imagine James specifically mentioning it if it wasn’t important. Do you think your mum used an interaction between it and herself to anchor whatever protection ritual she used on you?”

Harry frowned thinking it over as he slipped the metal back inside his shirt. “I guess it’s possible. I doubt there’d be anything left at this point though since it’s been so long...maybe we should try it?”

Ragnok cut into the conversation, “Do you wish Gringotts to exhume Lily Potter to complete this aspect of the will?”

Harry and Shiva both grimaced. He shook his head, “Shiva, Snapfist, Ragnok, you guys have been in this world a lot longer than me. Should we? I’d...really like to avoid desecrating my mum’s grave if there’s little point in it.”

Shiva sat back and crossed her arms. “Well, Harry, I’ve never heard of any type of magic that could stay in a ready, steady-state for decades after the caster’s death. Maybe Merlin or Morgana but no one in the past few hundred years. Even Dumbledore’s spells probably wouldn’t last longer than a week or two tops with the proper anchoring. Your mother was brilliant but I doubt she was brilliant enough to do that.”

“But the protection she cast still works?” Harry said frowning.

“It does, but as I understand it, it’s tied into whatever is carved into your forehead, Harry. It’s not a spell she cast – it had to have been a ritual of some sort. That’s a lot different than anything that could finish anchoring by touching her body with a catalyst,” Shiva said shaking her head. “Like the Egyptians. They used already anchored wards; nothing that was temporary.”

Harry turned to Ragnok and the goblin shrugged. “I make no claims to understand the particulars of wizard magic, Potter. I can however tell you that we have never seen something like this before in my years nor are there any stories passed down about a similar occurrence.”
Harry nodded and leaned back, running a hand through his hair. “Nobody’s ever survived the killing curse either though and Mum figured out how to make that work out. Okay. How about we do it over the summer holidays? If it’s something that lasted this long then another few months won’t make any difference. I need to focus on the Tournament right now and I’m not going to be able to do that if I keep seeing visions of my mother’s skeleton every time I close my eyes,” Harry said shuddering.

“You sure, Harry?” Shiva asked leaning over and squeezing his knee in support.

Harry nodded and scowled. “This wouldn’t even be an issue if Dumbledore hadn’t sealed the Will to begin with. Yet another thing I can lay at his feet. Let’s move on to her will.”

The goblins shrugged and handed over the second document.

*Last Will and Testament of Lily Evans Potter.*

Well this is just awful all around. I’m 21 and writing my will. Oh well, that’s the hazard of pissing off a madman I suppose. It could be worse after all. I can’t seriously believe I just wrote that… ugh, now it’s almost guaranteed to be worse.

Let’s move on. If Harry is still kicking and googoo-gaga-ing (he better be or I’m dragging someone to Hell) then at least part of my plan will have worked. I can’t say I’m too surprised most of it failed, I basically invented an entire branch of new magic to make it work and it’s not like it could be tested beforehand. Hiding like a rat in a sinking ship certainly removes most opportunities for appropriate experimentation. Oh well, at least I tried. Better than most people these days it seems.

As to distributing my assets. If James hasn’t gotten sick of me yet then split my stuff between him and Harry with 75% going to Harry. If he has, then everything goes to Harry regardless of which family my boy ended up in. If both are gone…I suppose I should give all my assets to Nymphadora Tonks. I always liked that girl and she adored Harry so she deserves it.

Now. Custody for Harry. Here’s the order:

-Sirius Black: Godfather. Sirius Black, if you raise my little boy to be as much of a prankster as yourself and James I will beat your arse after you cross and don’t think I don’t mean that!

-Alice and Frank Longbottom: Godmother; House Potter Allies. Alice, I know you’ll take good care of him. And you always said that you wished Neville would have a sibling one day.

-Andromeda and Ted Tonks: Family friends of both the Potters and Sirius. Nymphadora, take care of him and watch over him like you promised me a few months ago.

-Amelia Bones: Family friend. Amy, you’re one of the few Pureblood witches I’ve met who regularly uses logic. How scary is that? If we’re this far down the list you should probably see the writing on the wall and get the hell out of the country with Harry.

-Minerva McGonagall: Respected mentor. Min, same warning as Sirius but inverted. I don’t want Harry to be a strict disciplinarian any more than I want him to be a horrible prankster!

-Any orphanage or willing family with priority given to Squibs and Half-blood families. Zero family of any Death Eaters or Voldemort sympathizers. Arm inspections in this case are mandatory as are full financial checks to see where their money was funneled recently.

-DO NOT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES LEAVE MY CHILD WITH PETUNIA AND
VERNON DURSLEY! I swear to Heaven and Hell, Merlin and Morgana, God and Goddess I will tear limb from limb anyone who leaves my little boy with my sister! She is no longer any family of mine and I will see the world burn before I let that horrible excuse of a man touch my child! Jealousy is one thing but she has gone beyond the pale. She can have Harry the day I can eat a snow cone with the Devil!

Well, I think I’ve hit on the important points. Harry, honey, I love you and I know you’ll grow up to be a wonderful and kind man. Don’t listen to the bigots, baby. They’re idiots, the lot of them. Forge your own path and if people won’t let you…well you can always just go make your own island or something and invite your friends along. Magic is awesome that way. Take care of yourself, son.

Harry laughed softly as he put down his mum’s Will and wiped his eyes. “Sounds like Mum was getting rather annoyed and strained huh? I wish she was still around so I could see what she’d do to Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon.”

“And Dumbledore for leaving you there, kid,” Shiva said with a soft smile. “She sounded like a bit of firecracker.”

Ragnok nodded. “I actually had the pleasure of meeting Lily Evans shortly before her age of majority. She was one of the very few humans I liked. She tended to rant about certain wizards as much as any goblin did! I must say, Potter, it is refreshing to see you inherited that aspect from your parent.”

“Thanks…I think,” Harry said shrugging. The door to the meeting room opened again and the guard reentered holding the marriage contract. He passed it to Ragnok before resuming his position against the wall with his fellows.

Ragnok held up the contract and raised an eyebrow, “Shall I destroy this now, Potter?”

“Actually,” Harry said holding up a hand, “I’d like to take it back to the school with me. I have zero intention of signing it but I do want to ask Ginny if she wants the protection of making sure she can’t be entered into a marriage without her consent.”

Shiva frowned. “You sure, Harry? I’d recommend you just burn the thing now. What if someone potions you or something and convinces you to sign it?”

“It’s either going to be ash or back in the vault by the end of the night, Shiva. I like Ginny; I’m not going to decide this without her input.” His guardian sighed but nodded her acceptance.

Ragnok rubbed his hands together. “That should take care of most everything on Gringotts’ end. Potter Manor will be completed in time for the winter holiday season if you wish to inspect the work then.”

Harry nodded. “Okay, we might stop by. Thanks for your help, Ragnok, Snapfist.”

“No, thank you, Potter. I have not been this entertained in a very long time.” The old goblin’s smile was unnerving and Harry was extremely thankful it wasn’t directed at him. “Till we next meet. Potter, Babbling, keep the chaos going!”

He got up, chortling to himself and was almost at the door before he called back, “Oh and good luck in the Tournament, Warrior! Do yourself, your family and the Nation proud!” He walked out, followed by the guards leaving Snapfist and the humans alone again.

Snapfist breathed out. “It is not often, one obtains an audience with Ragnok the Bold. If you are...
willing to wait for just a bit longer I have something that I think you might be interested in, Warrior Potter. Both a bit of a gift and a business proposition.”

Harry furrowed his brow in confusion. “Uh, sure. What is it?”

“One moment,” the goblin snapped his fingers and a piece of paper flew out of the piles and through a slot in the wall. “It’s a…creature that you may be interested in. Their natural habitat tends to be near some of our cities. Many goblins consider them something of an entertaining pet. Normally we don’t bother talking about them with outsiders so they are quite rare above the surface. I thought you might be interested in purchasing one though for a mutual acquaintance.”

Shiva frowned. “What sort of creature? Is this a dangerous or controlled animal?”

Snapfist snorted. “It is dangerous to sweets, nothing else.” The door to the room opened once more and in walked a goblin escorting a small critter. It was on a leash and about the size of a small dog with soft brown fur. It was waddling around on four legs and idly inspecting the surroundings with its tiny wiggling nose. The muzzle seemed like a cross between a bunny and a dog. On the sides of it head, just above its small ears, were a pair of tiny curved horns. They reached around and just barely poked above the curve of its head seeming almost squashed in appearance. On the whole, the creature was one of the most adorable and cuddly things Harry had ever seen.

“What the heck is that?” Shiva asked staring wide eyed.

“This,” Snapfist said with a grin and a grand gesture, “is a crumple-horned snorkack.”

Harry walked into the Gryffindor Common Room with a huge grin on his face. Luna and Hermione looked up from their books while Fred, George and Neville narrowed their eyes in confusion. Luna couldn’t really blame them; whenever Harry looked that happy something momentous either had just occurred or was just about to and nothing earth-shaking had happened since the Champion selection last night as far as she knew.

Luna cocked her head as she saw Harry holding a small bundle which appeared to be shifting around under the blanket. She didn’t remember him leaving with a pet. Granted, she didn’t remember him leaving since he had been out far too early for most decent folk but she certainly would have noticed anyway if he had taken a pet. And Crookshanks was sitting right there by the fire so he hadn’t taken Crooks either. Had Harry bought a pet while he was out then? But why? And why was he only staring at her? She was the one supposed to stare, not the other way around!

“Hi, Luna. Good day so far?” Harry asked, his grin not dropping for an instant.

“Yes, Harry. It has been quite pleasant. What is in your arms?” Luna asked. People started quieting down in the Common Room as they saw something interesting happening. Luna resisted the urge to sigh. The Gryffindors may not be bullying wrackspurts like the Ravenclaws but they enjoyed their gossip far too much at times. She had honestly been rather surprised to learn that despite Lavender and Parvati’s reputations as gossip queens the two were some of the politest about their chosen hobby. It seemed to be largely the upper years and Romilda Vane who were the worst of the lot.

Harry lightly stroked the blanket which quivered again in response. “Oh, this?” His grin widened even further. Luna saw Hermione cock her head off to the side and Ginny plopped down near the twins looking around in confusion.
Luna nodded. “Yes, Harry. Your package appears to be alive.”

“It is,” he stepping up to her. He held out his arms. “Here, she’s a gift for you.” Luna’s dreamy expression faltered and she felt a frown of confusion slip through. A gift? Why would Harry be giving her an animal as a gift? She slowly reached out and pulled the blanket aside.

Luna’s eyes widened and she let out a scream of pure, unadulterated glee. Her hands shot forward to grab the small creature and started whirling around before abruptly stopping and bringing it into her chest to cuddle. The small animal made an amused sounding snort and a tiny tongue reached out and licked her cheek. Luna let out another whoop of delight and turned back to Harry. “Harry! You found a crumple-horned snorkack! You gave me a crumple-horned snorkack! A crumple-horned snorkack!” She jumped forward and kissed both his cheeks before pulling back and holding out the tiny snorkack. It wiggled its adorable little nose at her and seemed to grin in amusement. “Oh Merlin, it’s grinning at me! It’s grinning! Harry, you are amazing! You are the best! There are – I don’t even know enough words to describe this! I have to write a letter to Daddy immediately! It’s a snorkack!” Luna – and the snorkack clinging to her chest – tore off towards the stairs to her dorm desperate to find parchment and quill.

As Luna left, barely coherent, the rest of the room stared between where she had disappeared to and Harry chuckling softly as he took her vacated seat on the couch. “Well, that went a bit better than I expected actually. I had been wondering if she’d be able to talk after I gave her the critter.”

“Harry,” Hermione said slowly and carefully. “Was that animal… really a crumple-horned snorkack?”

“Yup.”

“Honestly?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“A crumple-horned snorkack.”

“Yes, Hermione.” Harry was grinning like a loon at this point and his girlfriend just looked increasingly astounded.

“At the actual imaginary creature?” she asked.

“Not so imaginary, it turns out,” Harry said nodding along.

Hermione made a noise that Harry couldn’t quite identify and drew herself closer to him. “Only you could go to Gringotts trying to get emancipated and walk away with a bloody imaginary creature,” she muttered into his chest sounding despondent.

Harry just laughed and pulled her into a hug. He kept holding her until her breathing slowed down again and Harry let her drift back to simply leaning against him as he ran his hand through her hair. “Turns out, they live near the goblins. Snapfist offered to let me buy one after he heard that Luna was looking for one. They’re really rare above ground and nobody ever thought to ask the goblins so most people didn’t think they really existed.” He paused and tapped his chin. “They’re utterly adorable aren’t they? I’m thinking of buying a few breeding pairs in a few years and starting to sell them to people too. Or I could just suggest it to Luna. Snapfist seems to like her too so she’d probably get a good deal.”

Ginny laughed and shook her head. “I can’t believe you found a snorkack for Luna. She’s never,
ever going to leave your side now and you probably earned a small, blonde attack dog now, Harry!” Ginny said grinning and holding her sides. “She’s been going on about snorkacks since before I can remember!”

“Bloody brilliant, mate,” George agreed shaking Harry’s hand.

“Thanks guys,” Harry said still grinning. “Though really, you should thank Snapfist. He’s the one who thought to get the critter to Luna.” Harry’s grin fell and he leaned forward, Hermione shifting so that she wasn’t pressed into him. “Okay, let’s get some privacy screens up now. I have some things I need to ask you, Ginny. Fred, George, you’re welcome to stay like last time. Nev, you’ve heard this stuff before too so you might as well stay to offer some advice.”

All four nodded as Hermione sighed and took out her wand to cast the spells. When they were done she looked to Harry. “I assume it went well then? The goblins didn’t give you any trouble?”

Harry shook his head. “Nope. Snapfist went to get a higher ranked goblin to talk to us too. Ragnok the Bold, apparently he’s the Director of Gringotts.” Harry was about to keep going but paused as he noticed Neville staring at him slack-jawed. “Nev?”


Harry leaned back and ran a hand through his hair. “Wow,” he said quietly. “I guess that explains why he had guards with him…yeah we did. Apparently he’s rather impressed with the chaos that surrounds me.”

Fred shook his head and whistled. “Emancipation, a snorkack and leader of the country’s goblins all in one morning. We have to up our game dear brother.”

George shook his head. “No, brother, I think we need to concede defeat. Harry Potter is a rival we cannot surpass.”

Harry chuckled. “I appreciate the votes of confidence guys. Let’s move on though shall we?” He held out the marriage contract form to Ginny who took the path with wide eyes. “Gin, this is the marriage contract. Now that I’m emancipated I can either destroy it or toss it back into my vault. Destroying it is my first instinct. I hate leaving something like this lying around and I really don’t like it when people try to control my life. However I’m not the only one affected by this. If your mum signed one once, then she could sign one again. Do you want me to put this back into my vault until I either get married or you turn 17 in order to protect you?”

The twins looked at each other. George nodded for Fred to go ahead. “You’d be willing to do that for her, Harry?”

Harry nodded but it was Hermione who spoke. “Of course he would, Fred. This is Harry we’re talking about. The boy would give his kidney to a friend.”

Neville considered and said, “It’s a tossup. Now that you can enter and leave the vault without issues, people could get you to sign the thing with the right spells and potions. It’s still difficult but it is possible now. However, you’re right. Ginny would be better protected with it still hanging around for a bit.”

Ginny finally stopped staring at the paper and scowled. She looked up at the group and vehemently shook her head. “No! No, I don’t want that! Mum can try to do whatever the hell she wants, but she’ll never get Dad to go along with selling me off like a two knut whore. If she tries
to lock in another of these things I can get Dad to annul it as Head of Family. Probably. And even if I can’t it’s not right! Destroy it, Harry,” she snarled handing the parchment back over to him.

Harry took the paper and looked at her with a concerned frown. “You sure?”

“Yes,” Ginny nodded. “I still want you, Harry. I probably always will. But I’m not a fool and I’m not desperate. I’m not going to potion you into loving me and I see how many girls already have a piece of your heart. As frustrating as it is, I don’t fit in that picture. Destroy the contract so I can move on. Please. If you keep it I can still delude myself into thinking I have a chance when I really don’t.”

George turned to his little sister and put a hand on her shoulder. “Gin, you have a chance. He’s only dating Hermione right now. And they’re still teenagers. Teenage romance doesn’t always last.”

Ginny shook her head again and smiled sadly. “No, George. I don’t have a chance. Harry loves Hermione. And if he broke up with her he has Tonks, Luna, Daphne and Tracey.”

Harry held up a hand. “Tracey doesn’t like boys.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Ginny said. “Hell, if I’ve been reading the last few meals correctly, the French Veela is interested as well.” Harry and Hermione both started at that and turned to look at each other with wide eyes. “She was practically tackling people this morning trying to find you when you weren’t at breakfast, Harry.” Hermione sighed and nodded at that. “Look, I just don’t want false hope. If I do have a chance then leave it in your vault, but…if I don’t then just destroy it now, Harry. I don’t want to force you into anything and I don’t want to pine after a boy that won’t ever be interested in me.”

Harry sighed and nodded to her. He considered for a long moment before pulling out his wand and casting a small incendio. The marriage contract quickly crisped and left behind just a small pile of ashes. Harry gave Ginny a small, sad grin. “I’m sorry, Ginny. Really, I am.”

Ginny shrugged. “I know. It’s not your fault. Thank you for telling me now. I’ll move on. There’s plenty of other boys in this school. I’ll see you all in the morning?” She said getting up. Ginny hurriedly wiped her eyes and walked over the stairs to her dorm.

The twins leaned back sighing. George saluted Harry. “Right kind thing you did there, mate. Most would’ve just gotten rid of it immediately. I’ll watch out for her to make sure she’s okay. You and Fred should concentrate on the Tournament.”

Harry sat down to dinner that evening with his usual group of friends and ignored the stares of most of the school surrounding him. The Gryffindors didn’t care one whit about rumors flying around since most had been in the Common Room when McGonagall had basically admitted that Harry hadn’t entered himself. It seemed that the vast majority of Hufflepuff was also supporting him. Susan had mentioned that she and Hannah and sat down everyone and more or less threatened to curse anyone who tried saying that Harry was cheating. They had pointed out several instances in the past that showed it was far more likely that someone was out to get him and the House had quieted down. Slytherin was split somewhat. Malfoy had a sizeable following mocking Harry and digging at Fred somewhat as well. The ones supporting him mostly consisted of quiet first through third years and Daphne, Tracey, Blaise and Millie. Ravenclaw…well Padma and Su supported him. The rest of the House apparently still hadn’t forgotten how he’d threatened them last year. There were a few first and second years that seemed to have his back but not many of the upper years.
Fleur entered the Great Hall and looked around. Spotting Harry she exhaled loudly and made a beeline for him claiming the spot to his right side and earning a raised eyebrow from Neville who moved over accordingly. “Finally! I ‘ave been looking for you all day, ‘arry! Where have you been? You have not been avoiding me have you?”

Harry smiled at his friend. “No, Fleur I haven’t been avoiding you. I was out of the castle for most of the morning and the afternoon. I just got back a little while ago.”

“Oh.” Fleur frowned and turned to her plate. “I…I am sorry zen. ‘arry, I…I wanted to tell you zat I do not believe you cheated to enter like Madam Maxime does. I trust you ‘arry. If you say you did not enter zen you did not enter.”

Harry smiled and bumped her shoulder with his own. “Thanks, Fleur. That means a lot.”

“If you wish, I would be willing to ‘elp you train for zis. I do not want to see you hurt, ‘arry.”

Hermione chuckled. “Well, Harry, you’re certainly collecting quite a few new tutors.”

“Yeah,” Harry said running a hand through his hair. “I sure am…Thanks, Fleur. I’ll take you up on that. I don’t tend to be too stellar at spells though just so you know. I…focus more on runes.”

She raised her eyebrows at him and grinned. “No, truly? I had not noticed zis.” She raised a finger and poked some of the rune stones on his crisscrossed utility belt harness. “Zat must be what zese are! Why zey are so inconspicuous!”

Harry laughed. “Alright, alright I get the point!” Fleur nodded happily and started to fill her plate. Harry rolled his eyes and moved to grab some food himself.

Daphne plopped down across from him sighing. The table jumped slightly when she dropped a giant tome she’d been carrying onto it. Harry raised his eyebrows at her and stared pointedly at the book. “Daph, that looks even larger than the book that Hermione checked out first year for ‘some light reading’.”

Hermione glared at him. “Some of us enjoy intellectually stimulating volumes of knowledge.”

Neville shrugged. “Yes, Hermione, and some of us prefer our back breaking labor to be in the greenhouse rather than of the library book variety.”


Daphne snorted and shook her head. “I’m with them on this one, Hermione. Your recreational reading tomes are rather extreme at times. But that’s besides the point. Harry, I told you I’d get a copy of the rules for this Tournament. I got them.”

Harry’s fork froze halfway to his mouth and he stared at the book that Daphne had flipped open. Very, slowly he lowered the utensil back to the plate and said toneless, “Daphne. Please, please tell me that is not the set of rules for this thing.”

“Sorry, it’s the comprehensive set of rules,” she said offhandedly. “Here, I’ve marked the important sections and took some notes on the cliff notes version.” She slid the book across the table and Hermione immediately pushed her meal aside as she shifted to read the highlighted sections better. Fleur also leaned across Harry to start reading while Harry just looked on blinking.

Fred whistled as he saw the size of the tome. “Wow. Hey, Greengrass, is there anything in there that I need to worry about?”
She shrugged. “I’d recommend listening in, but honestly you’re not a fourth year so you probably know more than enough to get through with at least most of your limbs intact. You are entertaining, Fred, but I’m helping Harry first and foremost.”

Harry gulped. “I…don’t think I’m going to be able to memorize all of this, Daph.”

“That’s what me and Hermione are for, Harry. Like I said, I made notes for you of the important items.” She paused and frowned, her hands curling into tight fists. Tracey leaned into her and gave her a hug which worried Harry even more. Hermione’s muttered curse certainly didn’t help things.

“What? How screwed am I?”

Fleur sighed heavily and reached out a finger to touch a section of the document. “Zis is what you are frightened of, yes?”

Hermione nodded as did Daphne after craning her head a bit. Daphne sighed and started talking, “Yeah. That’s the one. Harry, you’re only allowed to start the Tasks with a single casting instrument.”

“Bagman mentioned that last night…” Harry said not getting where she was going.

“That means either a wand or a single rune stone, Harry.” His face lost most of its color at her words. “You can’t take your utility belt into the Task. I’d recommend your wand as I doubt any of your inventions are versatile enough to function as a suitable replacement. And you’ll have to leave your Comm Stone behind as well.”

“Bloody hell,” Harry muttered.

“Yeah,” Daphne agreed. “The good news is that runes aren’t actually forbidden. So anything that you etch after entering the arena is perfectly acceptable.”

“I’m fast but I’m not that fast. If something is attacking me there’s no way I’d be able to carve something quickly enough to be useful.”

Hermione squeezed his leg. “So, like I said last year, Harry. We work on improving your spell casting. It’s not the end of the world. You’ll be fine.” Despite the surety of her words Harry knew Hermione well enough to hear the strain and worry underneath.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’ll be fine,” Harry said unsure of just who he was trying to convince.

Fleur frowned. “Is zere any restriction on summoned items?”

Daphne looked at her and blinked. Then a large grin split her face. “Delacour, I could kiss you. No there is not. Harry, first order of business: summoning charms. Like your Fishing Line but it doesn’t need line of sight. One of us will hold your utility belt in the stands and you can summon it.”

Hermione shook her head. “Yes, that’s a good plan but you need to focus on spells, Harry. I’m not leaving this to chance or luck. You need to be able to function well enough to survive without relying on your primary skill set. Whoever entered you knows your focus and they will likely take steps to stop you from having access to that.”

Neville frowned. “Yeah, but we know most people don’t really think of out of the box stuff. Do you really think they’d consider him summoning his runes when they couldn’t even think of Fred just tossing his name in from over the line?”
Fred shook his head. “They might. My method was distinctly Muggle. No magic involved. When it comes to magical solutions we all think much more roundly.”

“The summoning charm is still a good primary plan,” Daphne said shrugging. “If it doesn’t end up working in the Task well that’s why Harry’s getting several tutors.”

The group all nodded in agreement. Hermione reached out and pointed to another section. “Does this say what I think it says, Daphne?”

The Slytherin looked where Hermione was pointing and nodded. “Yeah. I like that part too. Harry, you’re allowed to skip any classes you want as long as it’s for ‘training and preparation purposes’. The only real restriction on that front is that teachers from your own school can’t assist but as it’s already been stated by others, that’s completely irrelevant for you since your official Tournament school doesn’t actually exist anymore. Oh and you’re also excused from any exams over the course of the year.”

Harry and Fred both smiled. “Cool, so we can avoid Potions if Snape gets too annoying and we can also skip History of Magic to keep studying.”

Fred nodded. “And Astronomy so that we can sleep more!” He shrugged when the others stared at him with looks of frustration. “What? This face needs its beauty sleep to keep looking amazingly rugged and handsome!” Alicia smacked him on the back of the head and the surrounding people all laughed.

Luna came up at that point and sat down next to Tracey with her snorkack still clutched in her arms and a smile plastered on her face. “Hello, everyone. I just finished sending off my letters.”

“Hi, Luna,” Harry said.

Tracey leaned down to peer at the creature cuddling into her friend’s chest. The snorkack leaned up and licked Tracey’s nose. She pulled back laughing and smiling. “What is that, Luna? It’s adorable!”

Luna beamed. She held out the snorkack so that everyone around could see. “She’s, Coco! Because her fur looks like hot cocoa. She’s my very own pet crumple-horned snorkack! Harry got her for me from the goblins! Isn’t she just the most beautiful and cute and cuddly and sweet and huggable thing you’ve ever seen!”

The non-Gryffindors around the table ceased all conversation and turned to stare between Luna, Coco and Harry. Tracey tentatively reached out a hand to touch the snorkack who nuzzled into her happily. Daphne twisted slowly to stare at Harry. “You got Luna an imaginary creature. From the goblins.”

Harry smiled. “Yup.”

Hermione groaned and slapped a hand to her face. “Don’t bother, Daphne. I already went through this. It’s apparently mostly subterranean and the goblins neglected to mention the species to outsiders. Harry has enough good will that his account manager made an exception.”


Hermione groaned again and Daphne joined her this time. Neville just laughed but Tracey looked over amused. “It’s a creature that Luna and her father have searched for for years. They weren’t really sure it existed before today.”
“It was our snipe hunt,” Luna agreed petting Coco’s head. It made a noise somewhat like a purr.
“We’re going to be printing a special issue of the Quibbler detailing everything! I had said that Daddy should probably have an issue with the Tournament coverage first but couldn’t quite get him to agree. So we instead compromised with two separate issues. I can give you a copy of the snorkack one if you’d like.”

Fleur just looked amused. “Yes, zank you, Luna. It is quite a cute animal.”

“Who cares about a stupid snorkack?” Ron said from a little ways down the table. “It’s probably not even real. Just a weird animal that Harry picked up and decided to have a bit of fun with you, Looney.”

The temperature around the table dropped several degrees and many conversations stopped. Harry, Luna, Tracey and Hermione all turned glare at Ron. Daphne, ever practical, packed up her research material and Neville removed the plates from in front of his friends. Fred turned to face his brother and George perked up from where he was sitting near Angelina. “Ron,” Fred said, “you should apologize to Luna.”

“Bloody hell now you’re taking their side too, Fred? It’s not enough that he helps my brothers get into the Tournament and not me is it? Now he’s got you as his attack dog too?”

“What?” Fred asked narrowing his eyes. “What the hell are you talking about, Ron?”

“Little brother, you were tossing your name in right beside us,” George said.

Ron scowled. “And yet it was Fred and Harry’s name that came out. You three just always have to be better than me don’t you? You can’t be satisfied with letting me have my own moment. No, you just have to go and ruin it! If you hadn’t put your name in, Fred, then I would’ve been chosen!”

Harry snorted. “Seriously? You’re barely passing any of your classes and you never do anything besides play chess and exploding snap or talk about Quidditch. You’re taking the easiest electives and all you do is insult people. You still refer to Daphne and Tracey as ‘the snakes’. You’re as bad as Malfoy just on the opposite side of the spectrum Ron. What the bloody hell makes you think the Goblet would think you deserved a spot as a Champion of Hogwarts?”

Ron’s face turned scarlet and he slammed his hands onto the table. “Oh you’re one to talk you bloody cheater! You attacked me second year! Your roommate! Why are you in this thing?!”

Fred shouted back at his brother. “You were stealing from him, Ronald! Of course he attacked you! We attacked you too! He’s in this because someone wants him dead, just like every other bloody year he’s been here. Sit back down and shut up before you make even more of a fool of yourself!”

Ron snarled. “No! Screw you, Fred! All you, George and Ginny do is take his side! Bill too! None of you care about me or about how I feel! You all listen to those snakes and Looney and you worship the ground Potter walks on! I’m done with taking that lying down. He’s a bloody cheater and an attention whore. All he wants is more fame and money and girls! He has everything and I have nothing! And you’re supporting him and helping him? You can all go to hell!”

“Ronald,” Fred said with an undercurrent of rage, “you have one more chance to apologize to us all.” George nodded, his face set in stone.

“Not going to happen,” Ron said his entire head approaching purple now. “Family first. You
people forgot that when you supported him over me. I hope this Tournament does kill him and maim you, Fred, because it’s what you both deserve!”

The few conversations still going in the Great Hall at that point stopped dead. If a pin had dropped it would’ve sounded like a cannon blast.

Harry shook his head and stood up. “Well, it’s nice to know where you stand, Ron. Excuse me everyone, I’m going to go put some extra wards around my bed to make sure I can sleep without having to worry about getting a spell to the back.” He walked out of the Great Hall.

Ginny, George and Fred all slowly stood and moved to stand together. “Ron,” Fred said, “congratulations. You’ve just gotten what you always wanted. Two fewer older brothers. I imagine Bill and Charlie will probably follow along with disowning you after this. Percy’ll probably still have you and we all know Mum and Dad aren’t about to kick you out of family for your temper. But us? It’s over. You are no brother of ours, Ron.”

George took up as his brother stopped. “Aye. Getting angry and jealous is one thing. Actively hoping that a family friend is killed and your brother is injured for life?” He shook his head. “I don’t care about your temper, Ron. This is low even for you.”

“I used to look up to you, Ron,” Ginny said glaring. “The only reason I haven’t cursed you right now is because the Professors are watching and I’m not going to give them that excuse to punish me. The brother I grew up with would never have said those things. I don’t know what happened to you, but I don’t really care anymore. You’ve insulted my friends and family enough. Stay away from me. And if you ever call Luna ‘Looney’ again…I’d watch your back.” The three family members followed Harry out of the room.

Ron sneered at their backs and sat back down, grabbing his plate of food again. McGonagall slowly walked up behind him with Shiva at her side. “Mr. Weasley, come with me.”

Ron glared at his Head of House. “Professor, if you had a problem with what I said you should’ve spoken up earlier.”

McGonagall mouth almost became invisible as her lips pulled into such a thin line. Her hand holding her wand tightened noticeably. “Mr. Weasley, I let that continue because your wands remained holstered and I was hoping that your family would make you see reason before you went too far. I was apparently rather overestimating your ability to understand long term consequences. Stand. Now.”

He stood and snorted, pointing at Shiva. “Yeah well, she doesn’t have any reason to be here. She’s just Potter’s attack dog just like the others.”

“You threatened my ward,” Shiva said with narrowed eyes. “I have the right to ensure his safety in his own House.”

Ron just snorted again and followed the two Professors out of the room.

Luna looked after the departing personnel with sad eyes. “It’s a shame things have come to this…” she clutched Coco tighter to her chest. The snorkack reached up and licked her chin.

Tracey sighed and leaned over to hug the blonde. “Don’t blame yourself for forcing this, Luna. Ron Weasley is an idiot who never thinks before he opens his mouth. He’ll regret what he said later and probably try to apologize in a few weeks.”

Daphne shook her head. “It won’t matter. He went too far this time.”
Hermione sighed and nodded. “I agree. I’m going to go check on Harry. Pleasant evening, all.”

As Hermione departed the group finished up and packed their bags. Fleur turned to Neville and asked, “Are all ze meals at Hogwarts zis…interesting?”

Neville shrugged. “Around Harry? Yeah, usually. Generally things spread out a bit over the year instead of all in the first few days though so this is a bit much.”

Fleur nodded. “Ah. Well zen I guess I will simply ‘ave to get used to it.”

Neville smiled. “I’m sure Harry will appreciate that.” He started to leave with the others but paused and smirked at the older girl. “Hermione is sure to like that as well.”

The next morning’s breakfast saw a very unhappy Ron Weasley eating his pancakes. Professors McGonagall and Babbling had berated him for nearly an hour the previous evening and he was given detentions until the Yule holiday. McGonagall had even gone as far as saying that the only reason he wasn’t suspended until then was that no wands had been drawn during the confrontation. Babbling had warned him that if anything happened to Harry in the dorm that he would be the first investigated.

Ron shoveled another piece of hash brown into his mouth and scowled. He knew he’d taken things a bit far. He’d apologize in a week or two after they’d had a chance to think it over and realize he had a point even if he’d been stating it wrong. Really, it wasn’t his fault that his family had abandoned him. Harry Potter had slowly managed to steal everything from him and then Fred had to go and make things even worse by getting into the Tournament in his place! It just wasn’t fair. How was Ron supposed to prove that he was just as good as the rest of his family if he never had the chance to show off his skills? Stupid Potter. Stupid Fred. Stupid school.

He tensed as he saw a red letter fly in the windows of the Great Hall. That was Errol. The old owl was immediately recognizable as it stumbled almost drunkenly through the air. How the poor thing was still alive Ron had no idea. It was headed in the Gryffindor direction. Of course it was. His mother must have heard about what he said and sent him a Howler…

The old bird dropped in front of Fred and Ron blinked. His face split into a grin as he realized that his mum hadn’t sent the Howler to him. It was to Fred! Mum was angrier with Fred than him!

Fred grimaced and reached out to open the Howler.

“FRED WEASLEY HOW DARE YOU ENTER THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT! YOU ARE UNDERAGE AND NOT NEARLY SKILLED ENOUGH TO COMPETE ON THE SAME LEVEL AS THE OTHER CHAMPIONS! I REMEMBER YOUR OWLS CHILD, DON’T THINK I DON’T. I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU WOULD DO SOMETHING SO FOOLISH! I HAVE NEVER BEEN SO DISAPPOINTED IN YOU! YOU ARE DRAGGING THE WEASLEY NAME AND THE HOGWARTS NAME THROUGH THE MUD, YOUNG MAN! I HAVE HALF A MIND TO COME TO THAT SCHOOL AND DRAG YOU HOME BY THE EAR, BOY! YOU WILL TELL THEM YOU RESIGN IMMEDIATELY AND LET THEM CHOOSE A MORE APPROPRIATE CHAMPION!”

Ron couldn’t keep his grin from spreading. That’s right, Fred and George had done awful on their OWLs. Mum always knew the right things to say. The Howler turned to Harry who just shook his head in annoyance.

AND YOU, HARRY POTTER! HOW DARE YOU! THE AUDACITY TO CORRUPT MY
SWEET BOY WITH YOUR LIES AND ARROGANCE AND CHEATING WAYS! YOU STAY AWAY FROM MY SON OR I WILL BEND YOU OVER MY KNEE, CHILD! AND SPURNING GINEVRA?! MY DAUGHTER IS WORTH 10 OF YOU, HARRY POTTER! YOU SHOULD BE SO LUCKY TO MARRY MY LITTLE GIRL! I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU WOULD THROW AWAY AN OPPORTUNITY LIKE THIS. TO BE MARRIED TO A PROPER PUREBLOOD FAMILY IS AN – the Howler abruptly cut off as two different spells hit it in midair and it vanished into ash.

Babbling was standing with her wand pointed at the offending piece of paper breathing heavily with a snarl plastered on her face. Ron’s jaw dropped as he traced the second spell to a vision of beauty. Her hair was bright, scarlet red and she was dressed in nearly skin-tight Muggle jeans and a t-shirt with fingerless gloves, a leather jacket and combat boots. Her face was twisted in fury as she stared at where the Howler had been. Ron idly wondered who this amazing woman was and if she was more or less beautiful than the Veela girl.

Harry raised an eyebrow in amusement as Tonks stalked through the room to stand behind him. “Why in Merlin’s name would you let that drizzle keep spouting off?”

“Honestly, I was curious to see where the rant would go. Hi, Tonks,” Daphne said shrugging while Harry smiled up at the woman and waved. Her hair shifted from red down to a hot pink and she sighed.

“You guys have the weirdest sense of humor.” Tonks ruffled his hair – causing Harry to scowl – and moved over to the staff table.

“I’m surprised you let that thing keep going, Shiva,” Tonks said as she nodded to Shiva.

The Professor gave an annoyed grunt. “It’s general policy to let the students take care of Howlers on their own. When the bint started going off about spanking my ward though…” she snarled. “We’ll see who spans who, Molly Weasley,” Shiva muttered darkly.

Tonks grinned and nodded her agreement. Turning to McGonagall she waved. “Wotcher, McG.” She mentally pumped a fist at McGonagall’s raised eyebrow. “I’m here as a personal tutor for Harry. Do you happen to have any spare rooms I could bunk in or do I need to grab a place in Hogsmeade?”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Nymphadora, I really –”

Tonks scowled. “The name is Tonks, Headmaster. Or Miss Tonks if you must. And I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to the Deputy Headmistress seeing as she is the one who controls room assignments.”

“Be that as it may, Miss Tonks,” Dumbledore said putting on his best grandfatherly grin. Tonks’ eyes narrowed as she felt a slight probe against her mental walls as she met the old man’s eyes. Thank Merlin she had finally started taking those lessons with her Mum. “I really don’t think young Harry requires a tutor.”

He was met with incredulous stares by everyone present except Snape and Karkaroff. Tonks snorted. “So a competition – specifically stopped because it was too deadly – where Harry is nearly three years younger than the closest competitor and where he is a Fourth Year going against Sixth and Seventh Years…he doesn’t require special tutoring? That’s what you’re saying Headmaster?”
“It would be inappropriate and against the spirit of the Tournament,” he said spreading his hands wide in supplication.

Tonks just shook her head. “You show me the exact sentence that says I can’t tutor him in techniques, skills and spells and I’ll leave. Until then stay out of my training. McG?”

McGonagall shrugged. “We have several open professor quarters, Tonks. Whenever you wish to inspect them just call for a house elf and they’ll show you the way. I will be covering Battlefield Transfiguration techniques and I believe Filius will be working on shortened charm casting as well as basic duel spells.”

Tonks nodded. “Okay. I’ll focus first on movement and speed casting in that case. I appreciate the heads up, Ma’am.”

“You can’t do that,” Dumbledore spluttered. “It is against the rules, Minerva! Young Potter cannot be assisted by –”


“But surely because Harry attends this school he –”

“Spirit vs. letter, Headmaster,” Tonks said cutting him off. “Unlike you it seems, most of us would prefer Harry has the best chance possible to survive this death trap.”

Maxime waved her hand in agreement. “I may not be ‘appy zat ze boy is competing but I have no wish to zee him harmed due to inexperience. Beauxbatons has no complaint with zis.”

Karkaroff scowled. “I wish I could dispute it, but I agree. There’s no leg to stand on for Durmstrang to lodge a dispute.”

Dumbledore frowned. Of all people to not dispute a Hogwarts Champion receiving extra help...Karkaroff? “Very well then. I suppose I will need to brush up on the rules myself. It is apparent I missed several items.”

“Your problem, not ours,” Tonks said. “I’ll catch you later, McG, Short Stuff, Shiva.” She nodded to the three teachers and walked back to Harry who was still watching her with amusement. “Come on, squirt. If you’re done with breakfast we have a training session to start.”

Harry grinned at stood up grabbing his backpack. Snape also stood and shouted out, “Potter has Potions this morning! You will have to wait!”

Harry just waved to Snape. “Sorry, Professor, I’m going to have to skip your class on account of ‘official training purposes’.”

Tonks tossed a Viktorious grin at the staff table as she escorted Harry outside.
“Alright, Harry, first things first. You got any workout clothes here?” Tonks asked her newest student as they came to a halt near the edge of the Black Lake.

Harry ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. “Err, no. Sorry. That’s one thing I haven’t bought yet…”

Tonks just shrugged and pulled out a small backpack to start rummaging through it. “No worries, I kind of expected that to be honest. Most wizards and witches don’t bother with regular exercise since potions and spells can regulate a lot of things exercise would help with. Ah, here we go,” she said pulling out a pair of shorts and a tank top, handed them over to Harry and stepped back. “Put these on.”

“Ugh…Tonks…we’re in the middle of the grounds,” Harry waved around him as his face grew red. Fred and Fleur came up walking down from the castle in time to hear and both started giggling.

Tonks rolled her eyes and waved her wand conjuring a small screen. “So modest! Better? Now hurry up!”

Sighing, Harry quickly switched out of his robes and into the gear Tonks had provided. “Wow, these fit well.”

“Well they better. I asked Shiva for your size before grabbing them. And I asked Madam Malkin’s to throw a fitting charm on them too,” Tonks said.

Fleur came forward. “Do you mind if we stay to observe some of ze training, Miss Tonks?”

Tonks looked her up and down, narrowing her eyes. “Fred can stay, but he needs to change as well. You’re Fleur right? The girl Harry and Hermione helped at the World Cup?”

“Oui.” Behind her, Fred saluted Tonks and transfigured his robes into something closer to what Harry was wearing as he stepped out from the curtain.

Tonks considered Fleur for another few seconds. The younger girl’s eyes strayed to Harry’s figure and Tonks couldn’t help the small feeling of annoyance that sprang to life watching this blonde eye him. But…it wasn’t fair to Fleur to get frustrated with the girl. Tonks had taken an intentional step back so she didn’t have the right to get annoyed with other girls not doing the same. Besides, she was supposed to be friends with Harry. “Fine. You can stay. Both of you though need to understand that my priority is Harry. If you keep up, you can keep working with us. But if you fall behind, that’s your problem.” The two other Champions nodded and Tonks let out a breath as she turned back to her charge. She had to blink a few times and consciously clamp down on her hair.

Harry had filled out. He wasn’t a gangly, too skinny kid anymore. He didn’t have much in the way of muscles but he was fit and somewhat toned. Probably a nice mix of Quidditch and getting decent meals during the summer finally. Shiva had mentioned something about the nutrient potion regime finally finishing up a month or two ago too…shaking her head Tonks snapped herself out of her ogling. Hell, no wonder, Fleur had been staring.

“Alright, first lesson, Harry.” He nodded to her and stood at attention. “What is the best way to
not get hit by a spell?”

“Cast a protego or a variant shield charm,” he said immediately.

Tonks shook her head. “Wrong. Try again.”

“Err, intercept it with something? Like a conjured rock or a precision spell?”

“Nope. One more guess.”

“Umm…” he paused to consider. After a few moments his eyes widened and Harry said with a smile, “Don’t be where it’s hitting.”

Tonks smiled back and nodded. “Exactly. Lesson number 1: Avoidance. You can’t be affected by a spell if it misses you. Dodging is probably one of the single most useful skills any wizard can learn. Most spells are stopped by shield charms but the Unforgivables in particular are not fazed by them. No Crucio or Avada Kadavra will hurt you though if they can’t hit you.”

“But we are not going against a person firing ze killing curse,” Fleur said frowning. “At least… I would certainly ‘ope we are not…”

Fred shrugged. “Being around Harry for more than five minutes you learn to expect the worst and be pleasantly surprised when it doesn’t happen.”

“Hey!” Harry shouted indignantly.

Tonks just rolled her eyes and addressed Fleur. “True, but the principle still stands. If you can dodge an AK you should be able to dodge most of what’s coming in this Tournament.”

Harry held up a hand. “What about area attack spells? Like fire or a ramped up version of my Freezer?”

“That’s the water and ice one right?” Harry nodded at her question while Fleur just raised her eyes, intrigued. “Area spells are harder. Dodging isn’t as useful against them so shields tend to work best. The best defense against someone tossing out area attack spells is a strong offense. Generally most area spells take a bit more power to cast and they will also drain your shields a lot faster. So you need to take them out quick. Going up against creatures that breathe out fire or something…doubly so. Attack and attack fast. Keep them off their game while you dance around the battlefield.” The trio nodded their understanding.

“Alright then,” Tonks said rolling her shoulders. “From now on, Monday through Saturday we’ll meet out here at 6 a.m. and go for a quick run around the lake and some fitness exercises afterward to build endurance. We’ll skip that this morning and just work on technique and dodging.” She gave an evil little grin. “Let’s get started shall we?”

Harry groaned as he slipped into the library seat next to Hermione. She started rubbing his back and he felt some of the knotted muscles loosen a bit. “Tonks work you hard?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “Lots and lots of jumping around. Quidditch is good for the arms and the thighs. Not so good for the lower legs or the back apparently. So what are we working on, Mione?”

She pulled over a book grinning. “Research.” Harry snorted and raised his eyebrows at her. “Okay, okay, creature research. Bagman may not have told you what you’re facing in the First
Task but 9 times out of 10, it’s been some sort of magical beast. Generally you have to kill it, get past it or steal something from it. So, we’re doing research and drilling into you as many different kinds of magical animals as we can, focusing on their strengths and weaknesses.”

“Okay, sounds good.” Harry said concentrating on her hand still rubbing his back. “What classification are we looking at first?”

Hermione chewed on her lip and Harry had to concentrate to focus what she said instead of letting his mind wander. “Well, I figure we should probably start with some of the five X creatures and move on to the four X creatures. I have a list of some of the more likely animals they might choose based on prior decisions.”

“Factored in Umbridge and her horribly blatant hatred of me?”


Harry reached over and squeezed her leg before kissing her cheek. “I’m going to be okay, Mione. I promise you, I will survive this thing. Now what are we looking at first?”

Hermione set her shoulders and nodded. “Right. Yes. Okay, so this is a chimera…”

Harry, Fred and Fleur met up with Daphne after lunch. Surprisingly Viktor Krum was present as well. “Hi, Viktor,” Harry said. “I didn’t think you’d want to join us.”

The Quidditch star shrugged. “I haff heard of the Greengrass prowess as vell as your own. I admit I don’t believe half the stories but…did you really slay a basilisk?”

Harry and Daphne both nodded. Fred grinned and just pointed to the two of them before saying, “They’re being modest. Just the two of these Slytherin Slayers went up a thousand year old serpent with just a wand, a few rune stones and a whole pile of attitude! Then Harry here pulls a sword out of a hat and stabs the thing through the mouth!”

“Fred…” Harry muttered running a hand through his hair.

Krum nodded appreciatively. “This is impressive. And I hear also you are good Quidditch player. Ve must play a game sometime. For now though, ve learn.”

Daphne took Harry aside before saying anything to the others. “Harry, I don’t mind teaching you, but…I’m not sure about the others. Most of what I plan to show you…well let’s just say that Hermione wasn’t exactly wrong.” She turned away from him and shuddered a bit. “I’m not proud of what my father has taught me and I hope that you never have to use these things, but I think you should know them anyway just to be safe.”

Harry put a hand on her shoulder and gently turned her around to face him. “Daph,” he said softly, “you don’t have to be ashamed of knowing darker spells. I don’t care. Hell I have a rune stone that launches a giant railroad spike at someone. I’m not exactly the pinnacle of light here.”

Daphne snorted. “True. I suppose neither of us shoot rainbows from our behinds. I’ll teach the others one of my first spells but afterwards I would prefer it just be you and me and any of our core group if they are interested.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll let them know.”
They walked back over to the group and Fleur smiled at the two. “So, what is zis grey spell Fred has been going on about so much?”

Daphne’s mouth lifted into a predatory grin. “Well, Fleur, funny you should ask. See there is a reason I’m referred to as the Ice Queen.”

Harry frowned. “I thought that was because you rebuff practically everyone in Slytherin.”

“Well that certainly helps reinforce it,” she shrugged. “The main reason though is a spell that is particularly useful on boys that get too uppity and decide to take liberties where they aren’t wanted. My mother termed it the Frozen Balls.” All three boys present gulped and subtly shifted a hand in front of their groin. “I don’t suppose I have a volunteer to demonstrate on?”

“Ah, Mr. Potter! Come in, come in!” Professor Flitwick exclaimed as Harry stepped into the classroom. All of the desks had already been push back against the walls and Flitwick was beaming at the student. “I heard from Miss Greengrass that you needed work on the Summoning Charm. I think we can do that at the end of this lesson as the charm is quite simple really and just takes practice. First I’d like to go over a bit of basic dueling strategy.”

Harry nodded. “Okay, Professor. I really appreciate you offering to help me on this. I know I’ve kind of turned you down previously…”

Flitwick laughed and waved the comment away. “Yes, bet you’re regretting that now, eh? Don’t worry though. You already know the spells I would’ve taught you and you’re proficient enough. No, what I plan on teaching currently is chain casting.”

“Chain casting?” Harry asked cocking his head.

The diminutive man nodded excitedly. “Yes. Spell Chains make any duel or battle far more intense and decisive. Some are more difficult than others but that doesn’t always translate to more effective. I’m only going to focus on the simpler ones for the moment.”

“Err…”

“Oh! I haven’t explained it yet!” Flitwick turned and pointed towards one of the walls. “Watch my wand, Harry.” Flitwick started waving his wand in intricate patterns and shouting out spells. Unlike every other casting Harry had seen, this time there was no pause or transition between anything Flitwick used. The professor’s wand was in constant motion shifting from spewing out flames to a lash to a jet of water to ice to a gust of wind to a banishing spell before he abruptly stopped.

Turning back to a wide eyed Harry, Flitwick smiled. “That is a chain casting. A series of spells that begin as the previous one ends such that with practice you never have to stop between each spell. Done well against an unskilled opponent, you can easily overwhelm them through sheer speed and combined effects. What I just used was the Off Balance Chain. One of the most basic options available.”

Harry just kept goggling at the man. “Holy…wow…”

Flitwick chuckled. “Let’s begin shall we?”

McGonagall smiled as Harry came into the classroom she had set aside with Fred following in. “Good afternoon, Mr. Potter. Mr. Weasley, I am afraid you will have to take a seat in the corner
over there.”

“Aww, the Corner of Shame,” Fred groaned theatrically holding one hand over his head and the other over his heart. He conjured himself a small hat saying DUNCE, donned it and took his seat.

The other two rolled their eyes at him and Harry took up a position near the Transfiguration teacher. “Now, what I’m going to show you is how to turn your battlefield against your opponent. I don’t imagine you will be able to accomplish quite as much as I will show you but if we can get you both up to the point of being able to raise obstructions I think that will be sufficient.”

McGonagall proceeded to make a little demonstration shifting several desks into birds that dive-bombed a mannequin in the back of the room. The birds exploded in mid air before several of the raining feathers turned into swords and spears skewing the target. More desks became suits of armor and started marching towards the dummy and when they threw their spears, those shifted into snakes that bit their target. Spikes rose out of the wall and floor skewing the dummy bringing the demonstration to a close.

Fred whistled and clapped slowly while Harry just stared at the destroyed target in awe. McGonagall smiled at him. “There is a reason I enjoy Transfiguration, Mr. Potter. It can be… quite cathartic to let loose every once in awhile,” Harry slowly nodded. “Now as I said, I don’t expect you to be able to do much of that at all even by the end of the year. Your father became quite good at it but it took him nearly five years of intense practice focusing solely on that. No, what I’m going to primary show you, Harry, is how to forge walls out of the surrounding ground. If your enemy can’t see you, they can’t hit you.”

Harry went to Fleur’s training session with Luna tagging along behind. She had a free period and wanted to see what the older woman could do. Well that and she had ‘wanted to show Coco the grounds.’ Privately Harry was half convinced the latter reason was the real one that she was following him out to the lawn by the lake.

Luna drifted off to the side as Coco stopped to sniff at the trees nearby and Harry moved up to greet Fleur. The Veela smiled back and motioned for him to sit down. “’arry, I zink before we begin training I should explain a bit about myself. ‘ow much do you know of ze Veela?”

“Not much,” he said shrugging. “There aren’t many books with quality information on them in Britain. Some of the stuff I did find was…pretty biased.” He scowled thinking about the prejudiced drivel he had read.

Fleur sighed and nodded. “Yes. I assumed as much. We are a private people as it iz and it does not ‘elp zat many dislike your country’s attitudes towards non-humans. Ze primary zing you must know is twofold. One,” she said holding up a finger, “iz zat we are nearly immune to mind magics. It iz part of ze benefit to ze Allure – I will explain ze Allure in a moment. Ze second thing is zat ze flames I can conjure are…not typical fire.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah I kinda figured that one out when you said at the World Cup that they were ‘hungry’. Seemed a bit more than regular fire.”

Fleur nodded. “Oui. Ze Veela flame is like a diluted form of a Fiendfyre in actuality.”

Harry frowned. “Wait, Fiendfyre is the thing that has a mind of its own and almost always ends up killing the caster too because they can’t control it or stop it from consuming everything around it right?”
“My flames are not zat bad, do not fear. A Veela fireball will only seek to consume ze target and
don’t worry. A Veela fireball will only seek to consume ze target and
zen behave as a regular flame. The conjuration imbues ze intent.” She paused for a second and
concentrated. Her arm sprouted a light coat of feathers and a fireball coalesced in her hand. “Zis
fireball iz intended to simply eat ze blanket laid out over zere. Should I miss ze blanket it will be a
normal fireball. Should I hit ze blanket zough…” she aimed and lobbed her fire. It hit the blanket
and the flames seemed to spread out to the ends of the cloth then curling back into the center as it
burned away. When the blanket had disappeared under the flames, the fire simply stopped moving
on its own and simply started to burn the grass around it. Fleur sent a short burst of water from her
wand to extinguish it.

“Zat iz ze Veela fireball. I can target it towards simply your shirt if I wished. Zough you would
likely have burns afterward it would not consume you az it did ze blanket.”

“Wow,” Harry muttered. Smiling at Fleur he said louder, “That’s really useful, Fleur. Thanks for
explaining that.” She nodded in reply. Both were interrupted by Luna.

“Does it have a name?” the younger girl asked innocently. “It seems like it should have a name.
Veela are people of love and passion. Can we call it passionfyre?”

Fleur’s mouth dropped open and Harry laughed. He had to hold his sides as he shook. Fleur took
several attempts but eventually responded. “We simply refer to zem as fireballs…I…passionfyre?”

Luna nodded with a large smile. “Oh, yes. It’s so appropriate don’t you think! Please can I call it
passionfyre? Please, please, please?” She clasped her hands in front of her chest and her eyes
widened with her lip turning down in a half frown. Harry shook his head. Fleur was goner.
Almost no one could resist Luna when she gave them that look.

True to his prediction Fleur caved. “Fine. Call it ze passionfyre. But when my maman complains
zen you will be ze one to explain to her!”

Luna hurriedly nodded and skipped back over to Coco giggling. Harry shook his head at the two.
“Don’t worry, Fleur. Luna is very good at these things. You mentioned the Allure?”

Fleur sighed. She turned back to Harry and nodded. “Oui. Ze Allure is primarily why Veela are
disliked. We subconsciously emit a magical field zat calls to zose around us. Primarily males but
can also attract certain females az well. Ze Allure does not brainwash anyone contrary to what ze
books say. It merely causes extreme infatuation. It iz a form of control, true but it cannot make
someone do anyzing more zan zey would normally do – albeit under extreme circumstances. Zey
wish to please us and if we turn zat desire up zen zey will do most of what we ask. Zis has been
abused in ze past, but it iz not somezing zat many of us would do intentionally. Extreme emotion
can make control harder. Zere tend to be very few zat are resistant or immune to ze effects. My
fazer iz one. And…”

“I’m another right?” Harry asked rubbing his chin and thinking back to the World Cup and when
she had first come to sit with them.

“Yes. You are highly resistant to my Allure, ‘arry,” she said smiling. “It is…nice to be around
someone zat I do not have to worry about constantly controlling myself near. Ze resistance tends
to be somezing innate. Our best guess iz it iz related both to a person’s desire for privacy az well
az their level of attraction to us wizout the Allure’s effects. I bring zis all up ‘arry because I want
to try somezing with you. I am particularly skilled with personal enchantments and charms. I
understand you already have a charms teacher so I would like to work on your resistance. I want to
‘elp you improve your natural ability and ‘opefully learn to block out zings more intense zan my
Allure.”

“Like what?” Harry asked.

“Zings like powerful sleeping charms, compulsions, Notice-Me-Not, perhaps even ze Imperius. I will, of course, not be casting ze Imperius on you. But I would like your permission to flare my Allure to work on improving your ability to resist zis zen move on to ze other items. If we progress far enough, fast enough zen perhaps we can work on improving your ability to function while on fire.”

Harry gulped. “Err, Fleur, please tell me you mean ‘under’ fire and not ‘on’ fire.”

She just smiled. “Why, ‘arry, I thought you realized ‘ow ze Veela flame works for a reason?”

Molly Weasley was sitting in kitchen making dinner Friday afternoon. Arthur had come home a few minutes ago but she’d sent him into the living room so he could relax after his long day like normal. The house was so calm and quiet now that all her children had either left or were at school.

Bill and Charlie were still out of the country in their far too dangerous jobs. No matter how often she berated those two to wizen up and settle down into a safer, more stable career neither ever listened! She had no idea where she’d gone wrong with raising those boys. Molly shook her head sadly at the foolishness of youth. All she could do at this point was keep trying and hoping this bit of rebellion would peter off soon enough.

Percy was doing fabulously though! He’d even gotten a job with the Ministry! Oh she couldn’t be more proud of her perfect son!

Thinking of her youngest four though...Molly frowned and nearly burned her stew. The nerve of Fred to cheat his way into the Triwizard Tournament! She was only thankful that dear Ron had had the good sense to inform her before she read about it in the papers. That the twins had managed to con him into the attempt as well! When those two got home she’d make sure they took the lesson to heart for once.

And poor, poor Ginny. She’d felt it as the contract between her daughter and the Potter boy had been destroyed. The goblins had been only too happy to inform her that he had taken the document with him when he left. She didn’t understand how Harry Potter could have possibly damaged the contract on his own without the approval of Dumbledore. She’d have to ask the Headmaster about that when she visited the school next. How it had happened wasn’t nearly as important as the fact that it had though. Harry Potter declaring her daughter unworthy?! She could only hope he’d taken her scolding to heart. It wasn’t enough that he was pushing her sons into even worse behavior than usual, but now he was saying their family wasn’t worth his hand!

Harrumphing, she scooped out two bowls of stew and called her husband to the table.

“Are you alright, Molly? You look upset,” Arthur asked as he sat down.

“It’s nothing, dear. I’m just still a little frustrated with the boys.”

Arthur reached over to pat her hand. “Fred will be fine. I’ve always known that if he applied himself, he’d go far. You just watch this will be the best thing to ever happen to him.”

Molly started to reply but stopped as an owl came into the room and dropped off a smoking red
letter. “A Howler?” she said blinking in confusion as she stared at the letter. “Who could possibly send me a Howler?” She reached out to the letter and as soon as she touched it, it sprang to life.

HOW DARE I ENTER THE TOURNAMENT?! Molly froze as Fred’s voice reverberated through the room. George’s followed immediately after. WE BOTH ENTERED THE THING, MOTHER! AND SO DID PRECIOUS LITTLE RONNIKINS OR MAYBE HE FORGOT TO MENTION THAT TO YOU. Fred and George were definitely switching lines now and her face grew red. MAYBE HE FORGOT TO MENTION SOMETHING ELSE? LIKE HOW HE SAID THAT I DESERVED TO BE MAIMED AND HARRY DESERVED TO DIE IN THIS COMPETITION? AND JUST SO YOU KNOW, MUM, FRED IS MORE THAN CAPABLE ENOUGH TO DO THIS. AND I’M TRAINING WITH HARRY AND THE OTHERS. AND WE TRIED TO ENTER THIS LONG BEFORE HARRY SHOWED US AN EASY WAY THAT NO ONE HAD CONSIDERED. HE DIDN’T ‘CORRUPT’ US; HE PROBABLY PREVENTED US FROM HURTING OURSELVES BY GOING FOR MORE IMPRESSIVE OPTIONS! AND JUST SO WE’RE CLEAR, MUM, IF FRED DID FOLLOW YOUR STUPID ADVICE TO BOW OUT HE’D LOSE HIS MAGIC. SO KINDLY STOP TALKING ABOUT THINGS YOU DON’T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT, MUM!

The Howler curled up and vanished into a ball of ash. Molly slammed her fists onto the table and stood. “Why those two! I’m going to that school immediately and – ” She cut off as a second bird came into the kitchen and dropped another Howler onto the table. Trembling with rage, Molly reached out and touched that one as well only to cringe back as her daughter’s voice shouted throughout the house.

HOW DARE YOU YELL AT HARRY, MOTHER! YOU SIGNED THAT HORRIBLE CONTRACT FOR US BEFORE I WAS OUT OF NAPPIES. PRACTICALLY BEFORE I EVEN LEFT THE HOSPITAL! HARRY HAS BEEN NOTHING BUT A GENTLEMAN SINCE HE FOUND OUT ABOUT IT AND TOLD ME WHAT HE WAS DOING EVERY STEP OF THE WAY. HE HAD EVERY RIGHT IN THE WORLD TO TEAR THAT THING UP AS SOON AS HE WAS ABLE BUT HE TALKED TO ME ABOUT IT FIRST TO MAKE SURE I WAS OKAY WITH THAT. THAT I WOULD BE ALRIGHT WITH THE POSSIBILITY OF YOU SELLING ME OFF AGAIN! IF YOU EVER TRY TO FORCE ME INTO A MARRIAGE AGAIN MOTHER I WILL GO TO BILL AND YOU WILL NEVER SEE ME AGAIN!

Molly’s mouth dropped open as Ginny’s Howler’s ash fell to the table. She fell into her seat and simply stared at the mess on her table.

“How dare you yell at Harry, mother! You signed that horrible contract for us before I was out of nappies. Practically before I even left the hospital! Harry has been nothing but a gentleman since he found out about it and told me what he was doing every step of the way. He had every right in the world to tear that thing up as soon as he was able but he talked to me about it first to make sure I was okay with that. That I would be alright with the possibility of you selling me off again! If you ever try to force me into a marriage again mother I will go to Bill and you will never see me again!”

Molly’s mouth dropped open as Ginny’s Howler’s ash fell to the table. She fell into her seat and simply stared at the mess on her table.

“Molly,” Arthur said. She looked up at him and cringed. Her husband’s face was set in stone. She hadn’t seen him this angry since they had left school. “What contract is Ginevra talking about?”

“Arthur, dear, it’s really nothing. Just a little...well – ” Molly was against saved from finishing her reply as a third owl came into the kitchen bearing another Howler. She paled and reached for her wand to banish it.

Arthur caught her wrist and plucked the wand from her hand. “Perhaps we should hear what this one says as well, Molly.” He reached out and this time a voice she didn’t recognize yelled out into her home.

YOU THREATEN MY WARD?! WHO THE BLOODY HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? YOU HAVE NO IDEA THE SHITE THAT HARRY POTTER HAS HAD TO DEAL WITH HIS ENTIRE LIFE! HE DOES NOT NEED SOME TWO BIT HAG THREATENING TO SPANK HIM FOR STANDING UP FOR HIMSELF! YOUR TWINS WOULD’VE GOTTEN THEIR
It had been a grueling week for Harry. None of his friends or allies had let him rest for very long. Between the massive amounts of specialty training coupled with the few regular classes he attended and Tonks’ workouts, Harry was completely wiped. He took some slight comfort in knowing that at least Sirius and Remus weren’t among those punishing him with individualized spell training. Both had wanted to, but apparently after speaking with Tonks they admitted they couldn’t contribute much more beyond what Harry was already getting. Instead they were holed up in the Black library doing researching to see if they could find anything unusual or off-the-wall that might be useful.

Sunday dawned bright and clear and Harry was lying on the grass with Hermione, Fleur and Tonks nearby. They had just finished a final Allure resistance experiment. Harry had been amused to find that even on full blast, Fleur barely even caused his eyes to droop anymore yet Hermione amusingly enough had started to crawl towards the blonde for a few seconds before catching herself and sitting back down muttering something under her breath. Tonks also confessed to feeling something but had discovered that if she rapidly shifted a few times she could clear her head and avoid the majority of anything Fleur dished out. It wasn’t quite as good as natural resistance but it worked in a pinch.

“I hurt in muscles I didn’t even know I had,” Harry complained.

Tonks snorted. “This is nothing. I couldn’t even feel half my body when Moody was done with me my first week. Still need to try and talk to that idiot...”

“He was your primary trainer right, Tonks?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Things have been so busy this week that I haven’t had an opportunity to sit down with him. When I’m free he’s teaching, when he’s free I’m tutoring. We’ll meet up eventually and have a drink or something. Well, I’ll have a drink while he sips from his canteen. There’s a limit to paranoia.”

“Zis is ze grumpy scarred man with ze peg leg and odd eye?” Fleur asked scowling. “I do like ‘im. I feel like he iz seeing right zrough my robes whenever I get close.”

Tonks shrugged. “Mad-Eye can stare pretty hard so I can’t blame you for that. He may be an arse, but he’s a good man. He’d never use his eye to do that, Fleur.”
Fleur shook her head. “I will still keep avoiding ‘im all ze same zank you. Ze only ones on zese
grounds I would let see under my robes would be ‘arry and ‘ermione.”

Harry’s eyes bulged and Hermione started coughing, two sets of cheeks giving off huge blushes.
Tonks had to force her hair to stay the blue she had chosen for the day and push down the growl
that had started to come up. Hadn’t she already decided not to get angry with the French girl? She
had no right to be territorial when she wouldn’t admit to having a claim!

“Um, err, ah...” Harry tried to say something but just spluttered. Fleur on the other hand started
laughing.

“You two are far too easy to tease!” she said between chuckles. “Truly zough while I doubt I’d
object I would much prefer to go on a date or somezing first. I am not...what is ze English
expression – hard boiled?” The three others turned to Fleur blinking for nearly five seconds before
bursting out in side-splitting laughter. “Well, I guess it was not ze right expression zen,” she said
rolling her eyes.

“It’s, ‘easy’ Fleur,” Tonks said between her laughs. All the enmity she had felt a few moments ago
drained away. The Veela girl could apparently be as adorable as Luna sometimes. “You’re not
easy.”

“Ah. Yes, zat. I knew it was an egg expression.”

Hermione shook her head quieting down. “That’s not really the etymology of the expression,
Fleur. It actually comes from – ”

“Hermione, not the point,” Harry said wiping his eyes. His stomach grumbled loudly and he
snorted again. “Well speaking of food...Sucks we have to head inside to get some though.”

“You could just call a house elf and ask them to bring us a picnic basket you know,” Tonks
commented.

“Really?” Harry asked. “Um, any house elf, could I ask a favor?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the same time saying, “There are house elves at Hogwarts?”

A loud crack sounded as in front of the group of four a house elf in a small uniform made out of an
old ratty sweater and a single glove appeared standing in the grass. The elf bowed low and Harry
stared at him. “How can Dobby bes of service Great Master Harry Potter Sir?”

“Dobby?” Harry asked incredulously. “You’re at Hogwarts now? I – hi! How have you been?”

Dobby straightened up and immediately burst into tears. “Great Master Harry Potter Sir inquires
after Dobby’s health?! Great Master is Best Master Ever!”

“You know this guy I take it?” Tonks asked fighting to hold onto her laughter. Fleur made no such
attempt and was curled up on the grass biting her fist. Harry just groaned.

“Dobby, please, we’ve been over this the last time, either just Harry or if you absolutely must,
Harry Potter or Harry Sir. Okay? Please? And for the love of Merlin, please don’t start calling
me Best Master Ever Great Master Harry Potter Sir!” Harry tried desperately pleading with the elf.

Dobby’s sobs quieted and he peered at Harry. “Can Dobby use Master Harry Potter?”

“Harry Potter.”
“Master Harry.”

Harry groaned. “Fine! Just no more than two words.”

“Deal!” Dobby stuck out his hand and Harry shook on it. “Now how can Dobby be helping Master Harry, Master Harry’s Grangy, Master Harry’s Tonksie and Master Harry’s Flower?”

Tonks and Fleur both raised their eyebrows at these names. Hermione was too busy glowering at Harry to seem to notice her new name.

“Um, can we get a picnic basket out here? If it’s not too much trouble. We can go inside if it is,” Harry said running a hand through his hair.

“Oh no, Master Harry! It be no problem! Dobby gets it and brings it right back!” The house elf quickly snapped his fingers and vanished.

“Haaarrrryyyy,” Hermione said slowly. Sensing danger Harry turned to smile at his girlfriend.

“Yes, Hermione?” He tried to flash her the look he knew made her lose interest in anything but snogging him.

Apparently he wasn’t as practiced at it as he’d hoped. “Why is Dobby still referring to you as Master?”

Holding up his hands he looked to the two older girls for support but they just smiled and waved him on. “Traitors. I have no idea, Hermione. I haven’t seen him since Daddy Malfoy left the castle Second Year.”

She frowned. “You didn’t bind him to servitude afterwards?”

“If I had don’t you think you’d have noticed by now?” Always appeal to logic. Hermione would listen to logic.

“Well...yes, I suppose I probably would have...” she said sounding unsure.

Tonks shrugged as the picnic basket popped into existence in between the four. “You sure about that, Harry?” She ignored the betrayed expression he shot her. “I’m not saying you did it intentionally but house elves kind of need the bond to survive.”

Hermione crossed her arms and huffed. “They don’t need institutionalized slavery to survive! That is brainwashing on a cultural level!”

“No, Hermione, I don’t mean figuratively they need work – though they do of course like it – I mean literally. Here, watch, Dobby? Can you come back for a minute?”

“Miss Tonksie bes calling for Dobby?” Dobby asked as he popped in with a crack.

“Can you please tell, Master Harry’s Grangy,” Hermione noticed the nickname that time but held her tongue for the moment, “what happens when a house elf isn’t bound to a family?”

“It is not something elveses usually be talking about...” Dobby said wringing his hands.

Hermione frowned and sat forward a little. “Why? Dobby, please.”

Dobby sighed and looked to Harry who nodded encouragingly. “If elveses lose their bond they lose their magics and then they die.”
Hermione froze and Harry shot up straight instead. “Wait what? I gave you a death sentence by freeing you?!”

Dobby hurried shook his head fast enough for his ears to flap. “Oh no, Master Harry! Yous be freeing Dobby from bad masters! Dobby being ever so grateful! But...Dobby being bad too...”

Fleur smiled softly and reaching out to pat Dobby’s shoulder. “You bonded wiz your ‘ero, no?”

Dobby nodded his head glumly. “Dobby is sorry, Master Harry. Dobby knows he should have asked but...Dobby didn’t want to make yous feel pressured.”

Harry groaned. “I think Neville needs to pick his pureblood classes back up again. Don’t worry about it Dobby. If you’re happy with me you’re welcome to stay.” He was promptly tackled back down to the ground by a sobbing elf wrapped around his chest. “But I have ground rules!” Dobby hurriedly pulled back and sat up to listen. “Okay Rule 1: no intentionally hurting yourself. If you think you need to be punished run it by me first.” Dobby nodded. “Rule 2: No trying to save my life unless I specifically ask for it. Also any potential life saving attempts must be themselves nonlethal to me and friends/allies, and should also not be expected to cause severe bodily harm including maiming, scarring and permanent disfigurement.”

Fleur started to chuckle before seeing Harry was serious and cutting off. She stared for a moment with an open mouth before turning to Hermione who mouthed ‘later’.

Dobby seemed to consider. “Can Dobby attempt to save Master Harry’s life if Master Harry is unconscious or cannot ask for help if Dobby agrees to the restrictions on life saving attempts?”

“Sure.”

“Dobby agrees.”

“Okay, Rule 3: You get two days a week time off as well as 50 galleons a month,” Harry said.

Dobby looked horrified at Harry’s offer. “1 day a month and 1 galleon every three months,” the house elf replied, voice much firmer than before.

“4 days a month and 1 galleon every month.”

Dobby paused before replying, “2 days a month and 1 galleon every month.”

Harry nodded. “Deal. Final rule for now, Rule 4: You need a proper uniform. Since I can’t give it to you can you make your own if I ask you to buy the cloth?”

“Dobby can do so!” The little elf started bouncing up and down in his excitement. “Master Harry? Would Master Harry be willing to take on second elf? Master Harry will have a big family someday. Winky would be very useful!”

“What happened that Winky needs a new family?” Tonks asked concerned.

“Winky’s master was killed while Winky was in another room. Winky heard the fight and tried to help but was too late. Winky refused to bond to Master’s son when she found she was released. Winky did not like Master’s son.”

Harry frowned. “Wow, that’s awful...Umm, I’m really not sure if I need a second elf, but I don’t want her to have any issues. Anybody else want to help out?”
Hermione frowned, but shook her head. “If no one else will than I suppose I will but I would really prefer not to have a slave. Even if it is apparently a symbiotic relationship it still feels wrong.”

Fleur also refused. “My family has house elves already.”

“Dobby how about I stop by the kitchens to meet her tonight? If she’s nice enough and we don’t clash then I could take her in,” Tonks said shrugging.

Dobby nodded enthusiastically. “Thank you Miss Tonksie! Dobby be making sure Winky is presentable. If Master Harry needs anything, just call for Dobby!” The house elf popped away leaving the group to themselves.

“Well...” Harry said attempting nonchalance, “who wants food?”

Harry was just finishing up his morning routine with Tonks when Colin Creevy came running up to them breathing hard. “Har…ry…hi! I’ve…been…looking for you! Weighing…Wands…need you. Come on!”

Tonks raised her eyebrows at the third year while Harry cocked his head trying to puzzle out just what Colin was saying. “Creevy,” Tonks said, “hold up. Catch your breath. Now, let’s try this again. What do you need Harry for?”

Colin still panted but could at least talk again. “The Weighing of the Wands. For the Tournament. He was supposed to be in Potions but Snape said he wasn’t there. We’re supposed to be up in the classroom in a few minutes.”

Tonks shrugged. “Well they’re not going to start without him. Guess we’re done for the morning, Harry. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do! Try not to kill whichever reporter attempts to swipe you. That tends to reflect badly in the articles.”

“Haha, Tonks,” Harry deadpanned. He wiped his face with a conjured towel then walked over to the younger boy. “Well lead the way, Colin.”

“Follow me, Harry! I can’t believe you’re in this! This is so amazing! Is it true that you’re also the Heir Black? Because if you are you know that means you need a second relationship and you know people talk and everything and it’s just, well, that opens up a lot of options you know.”

Harry nodded along politely and decided that Colin could give Hermione a run for her money with ‘the amount of words uttered without breathing’ award. He completely missed Tonks hysterical giggles and Colin’s blushing look.

“So, Colin, I imagine they’re going to have a photographer but considering some of the articles that the Prophet puts out I’d prefer to have some counters in the Quibbler. Luna’s in class, but they already pulled you out. You want to sign up as my official photographer?” Harry asked.

His eyes widened and he gushed, “Really, Harry?! You want me!?”

“Sure, might as well,” Harry shrugged. Colin turned bright red and mumbled an acceptance. Harry couldn’t help but think he was missing something...

The two walked into the classroom that Colin indicated and Harry waved hello to the other three Champions talking in the corner. Harry started to walk towards them when he was waylaid by a woman in acid green robes and horrible horn-rimmed glasses. “Mr. Potter! Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet. So glad you could make it! You must be ever so enthused to be the Hogwarts Champion. Come, come with me. We need to get an interview before the ceremony starts.”
Harry narrowed his eyes as the woman dragged him away and towards a broom closet. “If you want an interview I’d prefer it to be in the corner. Well within sight of the rest of the room, Ms. Skeeter.”

“Oh don’t worry, Harry, I won’t do anything untoward with you,” she said with a horribly false giggle. She opened the door to the closet and started to pull him inside. Harry noticed Fleur’s face set in an angry snarl as she pushed off from the wall.

Before Skeeter could get him in, Harry pulled free from her grip and crossed his arms stepping back. “Ms. Skeeter, I am not remotely comfortable with being out of sight with you. If you want an interview it will be out here.”

Skeeter’s smile faltered before she plastered it back on her face and whipped out a green quill setting it on a piece of parchment hovering to her side. “Well from what I hear, Harry, you seem to enjoy being alone with older women. Professor Babbling, Auror Tonks, Fleur Delacour…why it’s almost as if you’re seeking out the company of these aged witches. I just assumed that you would enjoy my own company as well.”

Harry scowled and behind him he heard Fleur snarl low. He felt a slight push on his mind and recognized the feeling of her letting her control of her Allure slip. As amusing as watching his friend roast this woman alive would be, he decided to nip this in the bud himself. And Skeeter had insulted Shiva. Marge had made that mistake too. “Ms. Skeeter, how about I give you a statement just so we are absolutely clear? Former Auror Tonks has been my friend for years and is currently my primary tutor for this Tournament. Fleur Delacour has been a friend since we helped each other survive a terrorist attack at the Quidditch World Cup and is a fellow Champion who is also helping me to learn enough to survive this competition. Professor Bathsheda Babbling has been my legal guardian for years and was my mentor prior to that. I advise you to destroy whatever your Quick Quotes Quill wrote and report that statement exactly as I stated and intended it. The last person who made the mistake of insinuating I was in an intimate relationship with the woman who has been the closest thing to a mother I’ve ever known was blasted into a wall with 10 broken bones.”

Skeeter’s eyes narrowed. “The people have a right to the truth, Harry,” she said uttering the much hated battle cry of the reporter.

“I’ve read your ‘truth’, Ms. Skeeter. I think even Voldemort tells the truth more often than you do,” he sneered, twisted on his heel and walked away, extraordinarily happy with the flinch he’d received from mentioning the Dark Lord.

Fleur stepped up into the spot Harry had just vacated. “’arry is not ze only one who takes offense to illicit allegations. I recommend you report ze facts.” She conjured a ball of…passionfyre…and idly lobbed it from hand to hand before letting it dissipate. “Insulting me is somezing I am used to. Insulting my friends zough…zat I do not take sitting down.”

Skeeter snorted at the two teenagers as they walked away. “Fools,” she muttered. “Everyone knows the quill is mightier than the wand.”

Fleur was pleasantly surprised when she walked back up to the other Champions and Harry hugged her. “Thanks for having my back,” he whispered. Pulling back he gave her a wry grin. “And thanks for not setting her on fire. I’d hate to have to try and deal with that fallout.”

Krum nodded. “Yes. If ve are to dispose of the trash ve should do it somvere more private.” The other three looked at him wide eyed before all four started laughing at his joke.
They were still laughing as Umbridge, Bagman and the Headmasters walked into the room with Ollivander following along behind. Umbridge’s face took on a distinctly sour expression as she saw the Champions actually enjoying each other’s company and Harry rolled his eyes at her upturned nose.

“I see everyone is here. Excellent!” Bagman said with a grand smile and a flourish to the front of the room. “Now without further ado let’s start the Weighing of the Wands! Mr. Potter, let’s get you up here first.”

Shaking his head in annoyance Harry started forward and joined Ollivander, handing over his wand when asked. Ollivander’s inspection of his wand made Harry feel a bit creeped out. The way the man handled the stick of wood seemed almost…sensuous. Everything was pronounced in good working order shortly enough however and things went well for Fred too. Krum looked mildly annoyed as Ollivander put down the manufacturer of his wand but held his tongue.

Fleur though…Fleur was not the only one angered by the wand maker’s comments towards her. “Who cares if her wand has a Veela core?” Harry couldn’t help himself from blunting out. Most eyes in the room turned to him. Inwardly Harry cringed but he kept up his annoyed glare on the outside. “I mean, it obviously works very well for her. Is there really any reason to comment on Veela hairs being temperamental other than to deliver a backhanded insult? We already have Umbridge for those. We don’t need another.”

Umbridge’s smile widened sending shivers down Harry’s back. “Why dear boy, you must be mistake.” She gave her horrid little giggle. “I would never insult proper purebloods. Why just look at Mr. Krum! His wand was obviously the highlight of the showings today.” The implications that the other three Champions didn’t fall under her aegis of being ‘proper purebloods’ wasn’t lost on anyone except Bagman. And maybe Dumbledore whose distant expression never once changed.

Fleur took her wand back from Ollivander and nodded sharply. “Zank you, ‘arry. At least some of ze Eenglish know ‘ow to be polite.”

Maxime stepped forward. “Eef we are done exchanging barbs perhaps it iz time to take ze pictures.”

Harry groaned and moved where the photographer, Bozo, and Skeeter directed them. They kept trying to shift him to the front but he had managed to mostly avoid it through the majority of the pictures. It took almost half an hour before they quit snapping shots and Harry was able to wrangle the others for a few quick shots from Colin. The younger boy hurried away calling out that he’d be sure to get them to Luna for her article.

The four Champions walked out of the room together chatting amicably. Rita tried one last time to cut them off but they just parted and walked passed her completely ignoring the woman. As they reached the door, Viktor tossed out a final comment to set the reporter’s blood boiling. “So, may I give an interview to this Quibbler as vell?”

Tom Riddle, a.k.a. Dark Lord Voldemort, was in the middle of a rather frustrating day. He was currently propped up against the back of the armchair with Wormtail holding a communication mirror in front of him. As if this wasn’t annoying enough that he couldn’t hold the thing himself, the fact that Wormtail was shaking so much the view kept shifting was almost enough to have Voldemort sending another Crucio into the fool. Sadly he’d have to wait – it wouldn’t do to break the mirror until after he’d finished his conversation after all.
“Barty,” Voldemort said slowly and in a voice barely above a whisper. He didn’t dare try to shout as this homunculus form wasn’t quite capable of managing that and still conveying his displeasure. “What do you mean, the boy will likely die? I thought I sent you there to ensure that Potter would be delivered to me?”

The form of Barty Crouch Jr. shifted uncomfortably on the other side of the glass. “Master, I’ve been going over everything. There’s simply no way for me to discreetly assist the brat during this Task. That bitch Umbridge is listening too closely to Dumbledore’s ‘suggestions’. There’s going to be a ward that prevents anything and everything from getting through and if I do anything to the arena before it starts we tip our hand and it could ruin everything. Master…if I may…if the boy dies during these Tasks…wouldn’t it just prove that he wasn’t worthy of being the source of your new blood to begin with?”

Voldemort snarled. He was right of course, but there was certainly no way that Barty would be told that until Voldemort could present it as his own idea first. “He has insulted me and I wish to repay that insult. I suppose…if the boy were to be horribly torn apart limb by limb in front of his friends and family during a Ministry sponsored event…that might make my recruitment simpler and would certainly demoralize the opposition. What creature did you say he’d be facing?” It would have to be suitably impressive to make up for the lack of a personal kill after all. Something like a nundu would do nicely.

“They’ve acquired a manticore, a hydra, a dragon and a Greek chimera, Master,” Barty said smiling.

Voldemort’s eyes widened. “A true chimera?”

“Yes, Master. The rumor is they’ve already lost a handler trying to coral it into the transport.”

Voldemort laughed. He couldn’t help it; this made up for the problems he’d been having recently. Oh this would be fun to watch! “See that he faces the chimera, Barty. Should he by some miracle survive…well all the better to cement the loyalty of my Death Eaters again when I kill him.”

“It will be done, Master.”

“Do try to ascertain that at least one of the fools survives. I would hate to have to abduct some random wizard on the night of the Final Task.”

“Don’t worry, Master, the solstice ritual will not have any problems. While the other Hogwarts Champion appears to be a joke, the Durmstrang one is promising. And the half-breed also appears competent from the few times I’ve been able to catch her training.”

“Would Krum work as the sacrifice?” Voldemort mused out loud. He couldn’t remember making any enemies of a Krum family, but there were so many names and it was so long ago. It was possible he’d killed a relative or two.

“I managed to speak with him several days ago, Master. He should do fine if required. The boy is powerful and smart, but he cares little for things beyond flying and being able to protect himself it seems. He is starting to befriend Potter as well and he seems to have no love for our beliefs.”

“Very well.” Voldemort waved his small hand in dismissal. “Do you have anything further to report?”

Barty hesitated causing Voldemort’s eyes to narrow. Before the Dark Lord could comment though, Barty began to speak, “Master, Potter has acquired the services of a Metamorphmagus
former Auror. The half-blood daughter of the Blood Traitor Andromeda. Nymphadora Tonks is skilled but…that is not why I bring it up. Moody was apparently her mentor. The paranoid old man surely has some method in place to let other Aurors know if he was compromised. While Dumbledore has fallen for the ruse easily enough, I…I’ll have a harder time convincing her.” He wrung his hands and scowled. “I tried asking Moody but the man has the damnable training at evading Veritaserum questions! Without the specific wording to force him into the right corner I’ll never get enough to make certain all the bases are covered and I need to save the little Veritaserum remaining. I’ve been avoiding the half-blood in the meantime.”

Voldemort nodded. “Very well. I’ve heard of this particular Auror. She is a fool and incompetent. She may have battle skills but nothing more. She won’t be a threat. Avoid exposure at all costs. If you have to eliminate her, but be certain to cast the light on another. Perhaps Karkaroff. The fool had the audacity to turn on several of your brethren.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Barty,” Voldemort said, “don’t act against her unless forced. We don’t want to stumble after nearly 13 years of biding our time now do we? The timing is nearly perfect for my rebirth and I don’t want anything mucking it up at the last minute. Do. Not. Fail. Me. Or you will beg for death.”

Barty nodded and bowed low. “I will make you proud, Master.” The mirror blanked and Voldemort leaned back into the seat. He scowled down at Wormtail and dismissed the rat. So hard to find good help these days. At least Barty was competent.

Nagini slithered up and wrapped several coils in front of him. Voldemort smiled as he reached out to stroke his familiar. The Potter boy had performed impressive feats before. Perhaps he would survive. A shame Voldemort couldn’t convert him to the correct side. Once he regained his body, if the boy was still alive then he’d probe the brat and see if there was some trigger he could use. Supposedly the Muggle relatives had been abandoned. That avenue was rather useless. There would likely be something he cared for though. Something Voldemort could give him or take away. Ah, no point in worrying about it now.

Harry Potter would sadly be dead by the end of the week after all. At least he could claim it was by his own hand after his orders to Barty.
Chapter 21: The First Task

Fleur walked into Madame Maxime’s office in the carriage a bit confused. The Headmistress had been rather annoyed with her pursuit of the two younger Hogwarts students. The fact that one of them happened to be a competitor certainly hadn’t helped things. Maxime had ended up mostly ignoring Fleur—which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. It’d certainly made things easier on the seduction part. Somewhat easier at least. Both were surprisingly noble so she was actually having to work far slower than she’d initially planned once she’d learned they would be spending the year together. And there was of course the whole ‘life endangerment’ thing concerning Harry. She sighed absently. That boy certainly seemed to attract trouble from what they’d told her. She and Harry’s other tutors had managed to bump his skills up quite a bit in the last month and a half, but she admitted to being slightly worried. He was skilled, strong and smart but he was still several years behind the others.

“Fleur, I ’ave some information to pass on,” Maxime said as Fleur sat down in front of the larger woman’s desk.

“Oui? What type of information, Headmistress?” Fleur brushed off her annoyance at still speaking English despite being in the French carriage. She did need to keep practicing after all if she was going to try and make this a long term thing. Hermione would probably pick up French quickly, but Harry could take quite some time to learn. Maybe she should just introduce him to Gabrielle… that would certainly speed up the volume of French vocabulary he’d be exposed to at least. Her sister could talk faster than an auctioneer when she got going.

“I was…invited on a walk last night,” Maxime blushed slightly and stared down at her desk. Fleur rolled her eyes. She didn’t even need her Veela insight to see that the Headmistress was interested in one of the English men herself. The groundskeeper was most likely. “’agrid mentioned ze imminent arrival of several creatures on ze grounds,” Maxime continued. Her voice hardened at she looked up to meet Fleur’s eyes sending a shiver of ice down the Veela’s back. “I advise you to prepare quite carefully, Mlle. Delacour. Zey have acquired not just a dragon and a hydra, but a manticore and a true chimera as well.”

Fleur blinked and the shiver of ice turned into a steel spike of panic. Her mouth went dry as she stared at the woman all thoughts of romance gone. “A-a chimera, a manticore, a hydra and a dragon?” she whispered. “What are ze thinking?!”

“I agree. I found a dragon distasteful, but acceptable and I know you would likely have few problems with ze hydra. But a manticore is a one of ze most dangerous creatures after a nundu. And zen a Greek chimera…to even zink of pitting you against somezing zat is perhaps ze closest zing to immortal zat magical creatures can come…” Maxime scowled. “Go, Fleur. Ze Task iz in two days. I would very much like to not have to bury one of my best students.”

Fleur nodded numbly and walked out of the room. Harry’s friends had been right. This wasn’t simply a dangerous, but mostly friendly game. This was a blood sport.

She froze with one foot in midair and her eyes widened. “’arry does not know…” The next instant she was leaping into motion and bowling aside anyone who made the mistake of stepping in front of her. She needed to find him and tell him.

Afterwards she should probably find Fred and Viktor as well.
Viktor Krum leaned against the wall in Karkaroff’s cabin on the ship with his arms crossed. His Headmaster was passing back and forth across the deck looking about wildly. Viktor was starting to get worried. The former criminal was relatively hard to frighten – which didn’t bode that well at all for whatever news he was working up to deliver.

“Krum,” Karkaroff said abruptly stopping and turning to his student. “I’ve found out the list of beasts you are all to face in the coming days. A dragon, a hydra, a manticore and a chimera.”

Krum blinked and only his Quidditch reflexes prevented him from sliding down the wall in shock. As frustrating as the Headmaster’s underhanded tactics were Krum could not bring himself to berate the man considering the import of this information. “A manticore? A five X magical creature?”

“And a chimera. The dragon might be difficult too but compared to those…” the Headmaster scowled. “Well at least the dragon wouldn’t prolong things like those would.”

“I do not know vat the danger is vith a chimera…” Krum said slowly racking his brain for why the cuddly little creature would be considered deadly.

“It’s dangerous because these organizers are insane and importing a true chimera. The Greek chimera. I’d like to say this smacked of the Dark Lord but even he wasn’t this foolish. Between those two creatures, they’ve already lost three from the containment team.” Viktor’s mouth dropped open at that. The Greek chimeras had nearly all been hunted to extinction; where in the world had the English managed to find one allowed off the reservation? Karkaroff dropped into his chair and twisted to stare out over the lake waving a hand over his shoulder. “Good luck, boy. I’m glad I’m not in your position. If you die, please be sure to at least give a good showing of Durmstrang beforehand.”

Viktor walked out shaking his head. These English were even crazier than he had seen during his games. He was starting to seriously regret having entered this Tournament. He had only done it because he wanted to show he could do more than Quidditch and was hoping to use the excuse to talk to others outside of Durmstrang. Neither goal was remotely worth facing any of those horrors. He scowled, thinking that he’d have to brush up on spells to help with blinding opponents. With luck that would be enough to get him through the worth of what was coming before they switched to tracking him by scent.

Viktor paused with his hand on the door to the library cabin. The other Champions should be informed as well. They had been very nice to him and weren’t acting like star-struck fans despite his sometimes seeming indifference.

Sighing, Viktor turned to head towards the school grounds. He could spare a few minutes to find the others before diving into his research.

Fred was sitting down to lunch with his brother Charlie in the Three Broomsticks. Was he technically supposed to be out of the castle? No. Did he particularly care when his long lost brother was in town for a few days? No. Besides, he was a Champion – there was probably a rule that let him leave the grounds for ‘official Tournament business’ or some such.

“I still can’t believe you actually wanted to enter this thing, little brother,” Charlie said smiling and giving a rueful shake of his head.

Fred just shrugged. “Well, I figured I had to prove to them and to myself that I can do more than
just prank people. George and I both agreed that this would give us the confidence to move forward with the shop beyond just the owl order catalog.”

Charlie eyed him critically. “And George is okay that you got in and he didn’t?”

“Yup,” Fred shrugged. “I think he was actually a little relieved. Especially after I told him about how worried Harry’s friends are about the dangers involved. It’s a bit intimidating, but I think I’ll be fine.” He scowled – completely missing Charlie’s frown. “Ron however, is very not okay with this. Did you hear about him screaming in the middle of the Great Hall about how he hoped that I’d lose a limb or something and that Harry would be killed?”

Charlie sighed. “I had really hoped that Dad had exaggerated that...”

“He didn’t. Dad came to talk with him too; Ron moped about for almost the entire weekend afterwards. George, Ginny and I all talked about it afterwards. We’ve decided that if Ron actually gives a proper apology we’ll accept it, but not forget what he said. Somehow we all rather doubt that Ron will get over himself before the First Task. Maybe whatever it is will knock some sense into the idiot. Even if he does end up apologizing, it’s going to be a good long while before we ever do anything as brothers again. He went way too far this time.”

Charlie nodded. “I understand. I chatted with Bill a bit before I got here. We’re both behind you three though we’re not cutting ties with anyone yet.” He narrowed his eyes and asked, “Mum, really sent you a Howler demanding you get out?” Fred’s amused snort was answer enough. “I can’t believe she’d do that...she never checks anything before she has to comment and berates you does she...Please tell me you guys fought back for once?”

“Sent her our own Howler in reply we did,” Fred said sitting up straighter and grinning.

“Good for you,” Charlie said clapping his hand on Fred’s shoulder. “You know, Dad, said Mum wanted to come to the school to talk to you, Ron and Ginny but Dad put his foot down.”

“Dad?!”

“Yeah,” Charlie chuckled, “that was my reaction too. Mum finally succeeding in pushing him a bit too far I think. He expressly forbid her talking to any of the four of you until she apologizes to everyone plus Harry Potter – and Shiva surprisingly enough. I can’t wait to get the story of what she did to warrant Dad stipulating that condition. He wouldn’t say.”

“Harry mentioned something about her sending Mum a Howler too...I would pay for that memory!”

“Me too!” The brothers shared a laugh before Charlie quieted down and took a long pull from his drink. “Okay, look, Fred. About this Tournament...well about this Task really...”

“We’re facing dragons yeah?” Charlie’s eyes widened at Fred’s question. “What? You’re suddenly in the country for a few days mysteriously surrounding the First Task and ask to meet me at the pub? Of course we’re going to be fighting dragons. Thanks for the heads up by the way. Hope you don’t mind if I tell the others we got a tip. It wouldn’t be very sporting to be the only one who knew. I’d also hate to lose a business associate.”

Charlie groaned at ran a hand over his face. “Yeah I suppose I wasn’t exactly subtle. It’s not just a dragon though, little brother. Word among the guys is that they’re importing a manticore, a Greek chimera and a hydra too.”

Fred’s eyes widened and he sat back in his seat. “Shite. Well, that sucks. Fire for the hydra heads
– simple enough if you’re fast. I already have a plan for the dragon. I...suppose I could blind the manticore – at least that beastie’s only got the one head. But a bloody Greek chimera? They couldn’t go for the homegrown horror? Or better yet the cutesy Japanese one?”

“Fred, no jokes about this. A buddy lost his friend to the manticore, the chimera ate two people while they were capturing it, and Betty came within a few inches of roasting Mike when some arsehole pissed her off on a lark. Can’t speak to the hydra. I haven’t heard much beyond it already having four heads which means someone screwed up massively while carting it up.” Charlie sighed and shook his head. “I’m really worried about this thing. The populace is going to love it right up to the moment that they kill someone on live Wireless. Hell they’ll probably still love it even then.”

“Charlie,” Fred said slowly, “do I look like I’m joking right now? I’ve been training and coming up with strategies. I have a potions load-out that might even work on the beasties if I can get them to drink the things. I have no intention of depriving the family of my humor for many years.”

Charlie nodded. “See that you don’t, Fred. I have to go. See you in a few days, little brother. And you better come out of this thing in one piece.”

Harry was sitting under a tree near the Black Lake reading one of the books Hermione had given him. He was trying to figure out if his parseltongue would be useful on any of the potential reptilian creatures they could use. The main problem was that there were very few parseltongues who had ever deigned to share the actual limits of their abilities so none of the experts seemed to agree.

He’d checked Salazar Slytherin’s tome they had found in the Chamber but even that was lacking information. Salazar had had a single reference to parseltongue being a 50/50 shot with a dragon apparently largely depending on the species of dragon in addition to whether the dragon had been raised near wizards from birth or not. There was also something about the magic of the language imbuing higher sentience on the target in an effort to let it reply. That had Harry rather exceptionally worried. He’d consulted with Flitwick who’d agreed that trying to use parseltongue for a prolonged period on a magic resistant creature would likely tire him out very quickly. That was also completely ignoring the question of whether he wanted a hostile magical beast even smarter while it was trying to kill him.

He sighed as he set the book aside to watch the giant squid flip some merpeople up into the air and the intricate dives they pulled on the way back down. The Task was only a few days away and he was starting to feel the pressure. Maybe if it hadn’t been on Halloween he wouldn’t be so worried...

“’arry! ’arry, we need to talk immediately!” Fleur called out from a few dozen meters away running in his direction. Harry started to get up when another voice called from the direction of the Durmstrang ship.

“Harry, Fleur, ve should speak,” Krum said walked towards the three with a worried frown. At least Harry assumed it was a worried frown. Krum always seemed a bit taciturn.

“Hey, guys! I got news!” Fred called running up from the Entrance Hall doors looking out of breath.

Harry stared between the other three Champions and closed his eyes. He sat down against the trunk of a tree with a heavy sigh. “Let me guess, you all know exactly what we’re facing?”
Krum nodded, Fred rubbed his neck and agreed while Fleur just looked between the others. She snarled and Harry saw a smattering of feathers break out on her neck. “You two were just told as well? And ‘arry iz none ze wiser? Quelle connerie! Les enfoi-rés! Ils veulent qu'il meure ou quoi?!”

Fred grimaced. “While I can’t claim to understand what you just said I get the gist. I agree it’s not giving me a warm and fuzzy feeling inside that Harry was left out.”

“It is disturbing,” Krum nodded.

Harry just shrugged. “Welcome to my life. Plus it’s almost Halloween and I haven’t had a single good Halloween since before I can remember. If any day is cursed, it’s that day. So what’s the damage?”

Fleur took several deep breaths and her feathers disappeared before she sat down and put a hand on his knee. Fred and Viktor knelt near them as she started to speak, “Zey are pitting uz against a dragon, a manticore, a hydra and a Greek chimera.”

“I believe from the number, ve vill likely have to face one each,” Viktor said. “Hopefully not to the death. I...do not believe I could kill any of those.”

Fred smirked. “Yeah, my brother wrangles dragons for his job. It takes at least between four to eight to kill one. I don’t know about the others but I’d imagine they’re almost a bad.”

Harry took a deep breath. “I’ve read about most of those. They’re...not easy. Do you reckon we’ll just have to avoid them and run passed them or something?”

“We can only hope it is so simple,” Krum shrugged.

Fleur shook her head. “We might have to steal somezing along ze way. It is ze traditional way to complete ze First Task in the past.”

Harry grimaced. He slowly pushed to his feet. “Thanks for the heads up guys. I’m going to go find Tonks and the others and come up with a strategy. If any of you want to come you’re welcome to.”

Viktor considered but shook his head. “Thank you for the offer, Harry. I vould like to prepare on my own for this though I think.”

“I think I’ll bow out too, mate,” Fred winced. “I want to talk with George about some things and maybe talk to Angelina, Alicia and Katie too. If you want my ideas on anything or need some supplies let me know.”

Harry nodded and shook both men’s hands as they walked away. Fleur pulled him into a short hug and kissed his cheek. “While I will likely use my own methods in zis Task, Harry, I will at least stay with you until you can speak with ze others.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “And do not even zink about getting morose due to ze day. Just because ze day is bad luck does not mean zat you have the right to give up before even trying.”

Harry gave a small smile to the Veela and nodded. He took her hand and started walking to the castle calling his friends on the way to ask for a meeting with those available.

Harry sat down at their conference table in the Meeting Room. Fleur, Tonks, Hermione, Daphne and Shiva had been free. The others had all promised to stop by as they were able and add their
advice once they were filled in.

“Okay,” Harry said, “according to the other Champions, we are going to be facing a dragon, a hydra, a manticore and a Greek chimera. I know the primary plan is still to summon my utility belt but what else do we have?”

Daphne gulped and Hermione’s face drained of most of its color while Shiva grimaced and Tonks winced. Tonks slowly shook her head and said, “Well if you go against the hydra, the Ninja rune would probably be your best bet. That wouldn’t be very useful against any of the others unfortunately. All of them would still be able to locate you by scent and the chimera would probably be able to pick you up with infrared from its snake head.”

Daphne nodded. “Yes. Yes, stay away from the Ninja with them. It’s just a waste of time. Um… perhaps you could try the parseltongue idea with the dragon and the chimera?”

“Do I really want to make the chimera smarter?” Harry asked. “Aren’t they vicious enough as it is?”

“It’s better to try honestly,” Shiva sighed. “It’s not as smart as a manticore thank god, so it’s worth a shot, Harry. At least part of it is a snake you have a good chance of talking with it. Hell, turn it against the judges or handlers or something and maybe it’ll be pissed enough you can slip by.”

Hermione blinked a few times and seemed to rouse herself out of her shock. “Harry, the best option is to immobilize both the chimera and the manticore somehow. Don’t try to fight them. You won’t survive.”

They all turned to her and raised their eyebrows. Hermione gulped and continued trying to fall back into her lecturing voice. “The manticore and the chimera are both largely speed based pouncing predators. They are both highly venomous, the manticore through its stinger tail and the chimera through its snake head tail. If stung/bitten, you will be dead within five minutes without antivenom or phoenix tear application. The lion nature of both also lends each to have extremely good jumping skills as well as a high amount of strength and agility. The manticore has the addition of near human level intellect and will attempt to either sing or mock the target in an effort to off-balance it. The chimera on the other hand has the capacity to breathe fire from the lion head. This flame extends just short of a foot in front of it and cannot be kept up for longer than it can hold its breath. The manticore enjoys toying with its victims and will likely attempt to prolong any combat. The chimera simply goes for the kill as quickly as it can. Chimera’s are also largely resistant to nearly every form of poison and have a regeneration ability close to that of the hydra. Even if you cut off a single head it will grow back within minutes.”

Daphne gave a wry grin. “I’d like to see it survive a strike from the basilisk venom imbued Sword of Gryffindor.”

Hermione quickly shook her head and narrowed her eyes. “No. Don’t rely of the Sword. It’s highly likely that even a basilisk strike wouldn’t do much against a chimera.”

“What? But…it’s the deadliest poison in our world…” Daphne said blinking repeatedly. Harry just sighed and sank back into his chair. Of course it wouldn’t be that easy.

Fleur grimaced and answered before Hermione could, “A bezoar iz a poor man’s Chimera Stone. It iz powerful, yes, but ze Chimera Stone dwarfs it by several leagues. Any rock eaten by ze goat head becomes a Stone and if it uses one up it will simply eat anozer during ze battle. I would not rely on ze poison.”
Tonks cursed. “Immobilize the legs then run. I think that’s the best you can do against a chimera. Bloody Greek chimeras…I can’t believe they got authorization for this…”

Harry nodded. “What about the hydra? Just cut off the heads and cauterize them if I have to fight right?”

“You have to be really, really fast though,” Shiva said. “A hydra’s regeneration is one of the quickest around and the beast itself rarely stops moving its heads. You have about five seconds to cauterize the stump before you have to worry about two new heads growing in.”

Fleur nodded. “Oui. Zis is my strategy for ze creature.” Harry nodded along as well. He could hit that time frame. Probably. Between Tonks and Flitwick’s target practice sessions he figured he had a good chance at least and the stealth was primary there anyway.

“Should we go for cold spells with the dragon?” Harry asked. “I figure that’s probably the easiest way to get around it if parseltongue doesn’t work.”

The others all nodded. “Oui. I will be doing a charm to induce sleep on ze dragon. A cold spell would have similar results,” Fleur said squeezing his knee.

Hermione also signaled her agreement. “Dragons are primarily cold blooded. Sleep and cold would definitely be the best methods as both would avoid a fight. Perhaps summoning your broom would also work, Harry. As much as I hate how you fly, I admit that you would likely be able to outmaneuver most breeds.”

Shiva scowled. “I really can’t state enough how much I dislike that strategy.”

Tonks shrugged. “The girl’s got a point though. Harry and Krum would both have a good shot at avoiding it in the air. Dragons have bulk and speed but they corner for shite.”


Shiva and Tonks both looked at each other then back to Harry. Shiva slowly nodded. “I think that’s the best plan for you, Harry. If you have good aim you might be able to spike the last two to one of the walls or just go with the Freezer.”

Hermione turned to Fleur. “Fleur, do you need any further help?”

The older girl shook her head. “No, ‘ermione. I have a plan and I can afford to practice zis on my own. You should all focus on, ‘arry.”

“We will,” Daphne said firmly. “Don’t worry. We have no intention of the letting the mad scientist get himself killed.”

“Mad scientist?” Harry asked raising his eyebrows and chuckling at his friend.

“Hey, you people have exposed me to enough Muggle media that I’ve picked up a few things. You are totally a mad scientist,” she crossed her arms and huffed.

The others smiled though the good mood didn’t last long. Harry turned to Fleur and gave her a quick hug. “Fleur, you should go and practice. I’ll be fine and I have to start working on this stuff too.”
She got up slowly and stared at him. “Make sure you do. ‘Arry, I expect you to come through this wiz few if any injuries. Show us all why they made a mistake forcing you into this.”

He gave her a salute and as she walked out turned back to the others. “Okay, let’s get started shall we.”

The afternoon before the First Task, Shiva, Tonks, Fleur and the rest of the core group – minus Harry himself – all met up in the Room of Requirement. Harry was practicing a few last minute things with McGonagall and they had all agreed to meet in the meantime.

Shiva started the conversation first, “Okay, everyone is here because they are concerned about, Harry. I know we’ve all been assisting him and ramping up his training and education but now that he’s not in the room I want to be completely realistic here. There is a very good chance that something could go horribly wrong tomorrow.”

Everyone nodded seriously. Tonks took over, “Each of those magical creatures they have generally takes a team of specially trained wizards to corral or kill. We already know that someone is trying to kill Harry and I’m willing to bet there’s going to end up being some sort of complication or other during the Task.”

“Oui,” Fleur said nodding. “I will likely be one of the first to know if something is wrong. I will try and determine any issues wiz ze field during my Task if I go first.”

“You’re not worried too, Fleur?” Neville asked.

“I am,” she shrugged. “But I also have an advantage wiz my Veela side. I may not be able to truly injure a manticore or chimera wiz my fire but I should be able to keep zem busy long enough to fly overhead to ze objective. Harry will not have zat option.”

Susan narrowed her eyes at the adults. “So what are you planning then? This wasn’t just to get us even more worried about our friend.”

Shiva shook her head and grimaced. “No. No it wasn’t. I wanted to give you all a heads up about something Tonks and I have talked about. If it looks like Harry is going to be killed tomorrow… the two of us are planning to jump down and help him.” A few of the people around the table gasped. Notably, Hermione, Fleur and Daphne were not surprised.

Daphne nodded slowly and said, “From what I can tell as long as he’s put in a decent effort into attempting to succeed beforehand that shouldn’t break any of the rules of the Tournament.”

Hannah shook her head, her eyes wide. “But if you’re wrong and it does then he’d lose his magic!”

Shiva nodded. “Better a live Harry Potter without magic than a dead Harry Potter. I didn’t fight for three years to get custody of the kid just to watch him be killed.”

Tracey leaned forward. “You know, depending on how those rules are interpreted…all three of you could end up losing your magic if you interfere.”

Tonks smirked and her hair changed to purple. “Then we go full Muggle. My dad was Muggle-born, Hermione’s parents are Muggles, Harry was raised Muggle. We’ll get by.”

Hermione frowned. She sat up straighter and let out a long breath. “If it comes it, I’m jumping with you two.”
“Hermione we can’t –” Shiva started to say before the young bookworm cut off her with a wave of her hand.

“You are not the only ones who love him, Shiva,” Hermione said softly. “You said yourself; you need a team to take those things down. If he is going to be killed then you’ll need my help to stabilize him while you force it back.”

“I’ll help too,” Daphne said throwing the room into sudden silence. All eyes turned to her. Tracey was the first to say something. “Like hell you will!”

“Trace,” Daphne sighed, “I’m not abandoning my friend. He is as important to me as you are.”

“You have no idea how to survive as Muggle!” Tracey snarled.

“I can learn!” Daphne responded with scowl. “I faced a basilisk to help you. You think I wouldn’t face a bloody chimera to help him? I don’t care about losing my magic if it means saving the life of my best friend. I’d do the same for you in a heartbeat!” Tracey narrowed but remained quiet.

Luna spoke into the silence, no trace of airiness or levity. “I would volunteer my assistance as well, but I don’t think I would be much help. I only know third year spells which would not be useful in this situation. I fear I would just be a liability would I to try and help.”

Hannah, Susan and Neville looked between themselves before Neville spoke for the small group, “I think we’re in the same boat as Luna. We’ve been practicing but we wouldn’t be as useful. Daphne knows a lot more offensive and dangerous spells than we do.”

Susan sighed. “I know a few from Aunt Amy, but I’m not good enough yet to coordinate with everyone. I’d just get in the way.”

Tracey sighed. “You’re all bloody crazy,” she muttered. “Look, I’d like to help, god the guy saved my life, but I have no confidence that I can face down a chimera. I’m not skilled offensively like you guys. I’m cocky but I know my limits. I’m getting good with healing spells though. If you all jump in…I’ll help Hermione to stabilize Harry.”

“Tracey, you don’t have to do that,” Shiva said frowning. “None of you have to help. We just wanted to let you know what Tonks and I plan.”

Tracey shook her head. “No. I can’t fight the thing but I can help heal him. If my girlfriend is going to get herself killed then the least I can do is to be there beside her helping our friend.” Daphne smiled at her and reached over to squeeze her hand.

Fleur looked very hesitant. “What are ze chances zat our magic is forfeit?” she asked hesitantly.

Daphne shrugged. “I’d say between 40-50%. It really depends on a lot of different factors from what I’ve read.”

Before Fleur could say anything else Hermione defiantly shook her head. “Fleur you can’t help us if we do this.”

“ ‘ermione, I –”

“No, Fleur!” the brunette nearly snarled. “Veela die without their magic! How do you think Harry would feel to learn that he only lived because you died from a side effect while saving him? Shiva, Tonks and Daphne can hold it off while Tracey and I get him stable and out safe. We’ll be fine. I
will not be the one to tell Harry I let you risk killing yourself when we already had sufficient numbers!”

Tonks nodded in agreement. “We don’t have to kill it, Fleur. We just need to keep it busy while we get him out. We can handle this.”

The French girl groaned in frustration, but nodded her assent.

Shiva looked everyone around the table in the eye. “Okay. So we’re all agreed then?” Nods answered her. “Okay. Get some sleep everyone. Tomorrow going to be a long day.”

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Harry groaned as he shifted in his bed. It took several long moments for him to realize what had woken him up. Blinking he looked down and saw a brown blurry shape curled up on his chest. “Mione?” he whispered.

The brown blur lifted up slightly. “Yes, Harry. I just…I’m scared about tomorrow and I…didn’t want you to be alone tonight.”

He smiled and wrapped his arms around her, drawing the girl deeper into his bare chest. “Thanks, Mione.”

“I love you, Harry. No matter what happens tomorrow just…just remember that okay?” she whispered.

“I love you too, Mione,” he said. Letting his head drop back onto the pillow, Harry wondered what he had done to warrant so many people caring about him like this.

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The next morning, Harry walked into the tent with the other Champions feeling like he’d eaten a lead weight for breakfast instead of toast. At least he wasn’t shaking or throwing up. That was a small comfort but he’d take what he could get at this point.

He had barely been there for 30 seconds before the flap behind him fluttered open again and Harry found himself pulled into Hermione’s embrace. Harry smiled and awkwardly hugged her back. It was made harder since she had pinned both his arms to his side with her hug. “Harry,” she whispered into his chest, “you come back, you hear me. You come back. I don’t know what I’d do without you around anymore.”

“I’ll be okay, Mione.” He finally managed to get her grip loosened enough to free an arm. Lifting her chin up, he leaned down and softly kissed her. “I promise I’m going to survive this thing. One way or another, you guys won’t be rid of me yet.” She squeezed him tighter and nodded.

“You better keep that promise, Harry,” Tonks said. Harry turned a bit and saw her leaning against one of the walls of the tent. Her hair was a deep blue today and her expression was completely blank.

“I will, Tonks,” Harry said. Hermione let him go and Harry moved over to hug the metamorph as well. He stood up higher so he could reach her ear and whispered, “I can do this, Nym.”

As Harry pulled back he saw Tonks’ face had a slight blush to it. She muttered, “Good luck, Harry. We’ll be watching out for you just in case.” Before he could ask what she meant a flash of a camera flared from the side.

“Ah, young love,” Rita Skeeter commented with a sickeningly sweet tone. “Harry, Nymphadora
would either of you care to give a statement?"

Tonks snarled and Harry reached for a rune from his belt before realizing he had left it with Shiva in the stands. Hermione snorted and started forward. All of them were beat to the punch by Fleur who stepped in front of the reporter. "Ms. Skeeter. I do not believe ze press waz invited to zis pre-event."

“Oh I’m sure that was just an oversight,” Skeeter simpered waving the comment off as Bozo snapped more pictures.

Viktor stepped forward with narrowed eyes. “You are not welcome here. Please leave and allow us to prepare for our Task.”

Skeeter looked like she was going to say something else when the heads of the schools all entered the tent behind her. Frowning, Skeeter started to leave. Fred got in his own comment before they were out though, “Hey, Bobo, have a candy. I’m not hungry anymore.” He tossed the photographer a yellow wrapped candy and the reporters were gone. Fred grinned to the others. “Ton-Tongue Toffee. He won’t be taking pictures for a few minutes now.”

The other Champions chuckled and Tonks and Hermione gave Harry one last encouraging look before heading out to the stands.

Bagman stepped into the middle of the rough circle with a large smile on his face. “Okay! Who’s ready for First Task of the Triwizard Tournament, eh!” His response mostly consisted of raised eyebrows. Barreling onwards Bagman said, “Well then, this Task is what we are referring to as Face Your Fear. You will each have to get passed a…magical creature.” His smile faltered a bit before he continued. “They’re a bit dangerous so take care with your strategies. The main thing to remember is that to complete your Task you must retrieve an egg from the beast. This egg will have a clue to the Fourth Task taking place in March. Once you have your egg in hand, simply exit at the other either end of the arena and your turn will be over. Scores will be awarded based on skill, ingenuity, time taken, as well as injuries received.”

With a large flourish he brought out a leather bag and held it out to them. “Now to choose your beast! Harry how about you – ”

Umbridge stepped up with her annoying ‘hehem’ noise. “I believe it is traditional for the… girl,” the way she said that made it perfectly clear to all present the word was both an insult and certainly not the word she wished to use, “to go first. Miss Delacour, if you would.”

Fleur frowned but held her tongue. Behind her Madame Maxime was fuming but she also remained quiet. Fleur reached into the bag and pulled out a miniature figure depicting a hydra with its four legs, fat body and three heads writhing around. It hissed at her but otherwise stayed put in her hand. A small number 1 was around its neck. Fleur couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. That was probably the easiest creature for her to take on.

Bagman moved to Fred and Krum next. Fred drew the dragon with a number 2 on its neck and Krum had the manticore going 3rd. Fred looked a little frightened but nodded determinedly. Krum audibly gulped though he also made no show of complaining about his choice.

Harry just sighed as he reached into the bag and pulled out the last tiny Greek chimera figurine completely ignoring the satisfied smirk on The Umbitch’s face and her accompanying giggle. He had already expected to get the worst of the lot. It was Halloween after all.
Fleur’s nerves were on fire after the lots had been drawn. It was too much of her willpower to pull her mind towards her own battle instead of concentrating on her young unknowing suitor’s fight. She wouldn’t be doing Harry any favors in his Task if she failed her own…

Squaring her shoulders, Fleur stepped into the arena as the bell was struck. The magical creature standing before her looked quite similar to the figurine left behind in the tent. Its body was relatively rotund and stood about 3.5 meters tall supported by four beefy, clawed feet. The three claws on each foot were about a quarter meter long and the tail looked to extend nearly 2 meters. There were 4 hissing heads, each neck nearly 4 meters long. The heads also had an impressive array of fangs protruding. Fleur swallowed her fear and raised her wand in one hand, preparing a partial Change in her left.

Before stepping forward to commence the fight, Fleur glanced around for the egg she was supposed to retrieve. Nodding appreciatively she found it sitting on a pedestal a few meters behind the hydra and in front of the arena exit on the other end of the field.

She took a single step towards the beast and that was all it took. Two of the heads snapped down towards her and Fleur had to dance backwards just barely avoiding being speared through the arm by the fangs. She let out a yell of surprise at the speed with which it had moved and instinctively tossed out a cutting curse.

The spell unfortunately was extremely effective – or the hydra had next to no magic resistance – as it lopped off one of the heads that had come after her. Fleur’s eyes widened and she hurriedly conjured a fireball to try and lob it at the head. Just before she tossed it however, the neck snapped back already bubbling and bulging. Fleur’s shot went wide and another head snapped towards her from the left forcing her to dodge right. By the time she had brought another ball of passionfyre to bear, she was facing five heads instead of four.

Fleur glared at the beast and scowled. A stupid mistake. She wouldn’t make another. She was a Champion for a reason and she would show this thing just what the consequences of messing with a Delacour were.

Jumping forward Fleur launched another cutting curse from her wand while simultaneously throwing her fireball. The spell connected with one head barely a half second before the flames made contact. The neck stump was instantly charred and cauterized. Fleur grinned as she twisted out of the path of two heads and launched a second volley taking out another head and preventing its regeneration as well.

Fleur felt the wind shift more and leaped backwards narrowly avoiding being eviscerated by a claw from the hydra’s front leg. She danced out of its reach and took a third head. The hydra apparently had decided it was done with staying put in the center and started to charge her. Fleur’s eyebrows rose at the speed such bulk could move, but it was still far too slow. Fleur forced more of the Change and felt wings sprout from her back and her face narrow into harsh lines as her Veela nature was brought to the forefront. She took to the air and tossed a fireball at one of the front legs. The hydra squealed in pain as it twisted. It lashed out with its tail and Fleur dove back to the ground now safely outside its charge range. She suppressed the Change enough to be able to use normal wizarding magic again and tossed out another cutting spell and fireball combination. Only one head remained.

Fleur was content to leave the magical creature alive and simply take her prize but the hydra had other ideas. She had barely started to back towards the egg when the beast screamed out and started charging towards her again on its three good legs. The final head snapped forwards and Fleur snarled into its face. She snapped off a final combination attack and the animal fell at her
feet, the last neck still smoking. Fleur glared at the corpse for a moment longer making certain it wasn’t going to get back up and attack her once her back was turned. Finally satisfied, the girl turned to grab her egg and marched out of the stadium, thunderous applause following her.

Fred ran one final check of his supplies as he stepped into the arena. Wand, check. Ton-Tongue Toffee, check. Exploding Elixir, check. Puking Pastels, check. Canary Creams, check. Slingshot, check. He had a few other goodies as well though some of his and George’s better experiments weren’t allowed. Their primary items were always based off potions though and as long as he didn’t take any himself, there was no rule against using them. It seemed whoever had designed the Tournament never expected someone to make a potion that was actually useful in a battle situation without being a Pepper Up or Healing potion. He was going to make full use of that to both surpass the Task and have a bit of fun while doing so.

The dragon stared at Fred as he walked forward and snorted, a bit of flame coming out in the breath. Fred smiled as he saw the egg he was supposed to retrieve nestled between the dragon’s legs. It didn’t look like it was originally supposed to be there as the pedestal in the middle of the field was empty. The dragon must have decided to protect “its” egg.

Slowly and carefully, Fred walked up to a nearby boulder. He transfigured the boulder into a deer and before the animal could run away Fred fed it one of his Canary Creams and a modified, delayed-acting Puking Pastel and slapped it on the rear. The deer ran towards the dragon with a frightened cry. The giant reptilian roared at the deer and took three leaps towards the animal. The deer finally realized that running directly towards an alpha predator was probably a bad idea and tried to back pedal away. Before either party could do much though, where the deer had been, there was now a 2 meter tall yellow canary. The canary frantically let out a shriek of fear and started flapping while the dragon stared dumbfounded at the changed prey. It didn’t wait long to decide what to do though. As the canary managed to take flight for a second, the dragon roared and jumped forward. It snapped down onto the canary and swallowed the thing whole.

Fred had managed to sneak almost the entire distance to the egg by this point. Finishing its meal, the dragon sniffed the air and turned to Fred with a roar. It started towards him before pausing and growling low. Fred grabbed the egg and smirked as the dragon started expelling some of the contents of its stomach. Unfortunately, the puking didn’t last very long as the dragon shook off the effects before Fred managed to get more 5 meters away from the nest. He still had to cross quite a bit of distance before he could escape and the dragon started running towards him again. Fred shrugged and tossed his Exploding Elixir towards the head of the giant beast. It worked almost as well as he had hoped and managed to shock the thing enough for it to open its mouth. Fred took the opportunity presented and shot a Ton-Tongue Toffee into the dragon’s maw with his slingshot. He turned to run towards the exit as the dragon opened its mouth to roast the tiny human. Instead of flames coming out though, a gigantic tongue lolled across the battlefield. The tongue started to roll back up to its normal size almost immediately after, but it was too late.

Fred was already running away, his egg held high in both hands as he made his escape.

Before the crowd could react at all, Fred cast a quick sonorous and shouted, “The products on display today are all available via owl order through Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes in association with Potter Runes! Get them while they’re hot!”

Viktor stepped into the field with jittery nerves. Just like with every Quidditch match he’d ever played however, the Durmstrang Champion showed no outward sign. Despite appearances, he was acutely aware that he was facing off against a five X creature that was known to kill dozens of
highly trained wizards.

The manticore was lounging in front of him with the scorpion tail curled around it. The lion’s head rested on the front paws and the beast looked for all intents and purposes...asleep. Resting on a pedestal a few meters behind the creature was the golden egg Viktor was aiming for.

He stepped forward taking care to silence his feet. If the manticore was going to sleep through the Task it certainly wasn’t his place to wake the beast up. Viktor managed to make it halfway around the manticore before he felt a rush of air heading towards him. His Quidditch trained, lightning-quick reflexes saved him as he ducked, letting the stinger of the manticore fly past him and embed into the wall. Viktor dived and barely managed to put up a shield preventing the second attack as the stinger swung back.

A soft chuckling sound came from the center of the arena and Viktor stared at the manticore as it lifted its head and turned a grinning visage on him. “Did you truly think I’d pass up a tasty morsel delivered to my very footstep? You don’t smell very fatty or very tasty…but I haven’t had a good meal in suuuuch a long time. Shall we play little morsel?” Viktor couldn’t help his shudder as the beast opened its mouth and exposed a row of teeth and fangs. With another disconcerting grin the manticore pounced.

Viktor jumped backwards, somersaulting over the lashing tail and swiping paws. He cast a fire whip striking the thing in its side and earning a howl of pain and rage. Following up his attack with a quick disorientation hex and a Dark cutting curse, Viktor twisted out of the way of a follow up from the animal. The manticore slunk back a short distance, its back left leg limping slightly and bleeding. The stinger was held high and followed Viktor’s movements as he tried to edge closer to the egg.

“That wasn’t very fun, little morsel. I’m not sure that I’m very interested in playing with you anymore. Perhaps I should just move to the main course instead.”

Viktor swallowed hard at the incongruity of hearing human speech from a lion’s mouth but he pushed the disquiet down. The beast was about to ramp up its game which meant he had to try his more desperate strategy. Viktor waited for the manticore to stop moving, the instant before it pounced he yelled out the conjunctivitis hex managing to get it right into the beast’s eye.

The manticore let out a roar of pain and Viktor took the opportunity to turn, grab the egg and run flat out for the exit. He felt the beast jumping towards him, but Viktor managed to leap across the exit threshold just before it could do more than claw his leg. Breathing hard and sighing in relief at his luck, Viktor nodded to the manticore acknowledging the prowess of the creature. Turning, he limped forward holding the egg high and letting the crowd cheer.

Harry listened to the commentary and the roars and the screams and the applause and felt himself getting more and more nervous. His Occlumency had long since ceased to be of much help. The slight emotional control it lent probably helped prevent him from devolving into a shaking mess, but that wasn’t really saying all that much by the time his turn came around. The final gong rang out and he distantly heard Bagman call his name. With leaden footsteps, Harry clutched his wand and walked into the arena.

The golden egg was the first thing he saw, nearly all the way across the field. With wide eyes he quickly searched for the chimera. The clicking of claws on rock to his right was the only warning he had before the creature jumped for him. Yelling out in surprise Harry sprang forwards barely managing to avoid getting clawed in half by the lion’s paw reaching for him. Harry quickly cast a shield charm as he rolled. Thankfully, the snake head tail impacted the shield instead of biting into
Harry’s raised arm.

~Wait!~ he called out in parseltongue. ~I just need the egg. I have no need to fight you!~

All three heads laughed at his call. Harry shuddered as the horrifying cacophony of a lion’s chuffing, a goat’s cackling and a snake’s hissing washed over him. The chimera prowled a bit further away and the snake head positioned itself over the top of goat head, leaving all three in a line as it hissed a reply, ~We care not for what you want, little human. We want to feast. And feast we will.~

Harry’s eyes narrowed. So much for Plan A. Time for Plan B. Raising his wand Harry yelled, “Accio utility belt!” He risked a glance to the crowd and saw with relief his rune harness fly from Shiva’s hands.

And promptly drop to the ground in the front of the stands as it ran into a briefly flaring barrier surrounding the arena.

Harry’s face went white as the chimera chuffed in laughter again. His eyes went back to the beast, the lion’s head was drooling and the snake’s head was weaving back and forth. ~So little human… we believe it is time to eat now.~

“Shite!”

Shiva watched with horror as Harry’s rune belts slammed into a warded barrier field around the arena. “Bloody hell! That’s not supposed to be there!”

Beside her Tonks swore loudly. “Shite! If that thing stops the harness it’s going to stop us too. We’re not going to be able to get down to him if that thing gets lucky.”

Hermione was holding onto the older women’s arms tight enough to cause loss of circulation. Her eyes were wide and all the color had drained from her face. “Lucky?! It’s a bloody Greek chimera! He’d have to kill all three heads at once just to slow it down and cauterize them all to kill it! It regenerates almost as quickly as the hydra, it’s as fast a bloody broom, venomous, breathes fire and is immune to poison! It’s going to kill him!!”

Daphne leaned forward from her seat behind Hermione and clasped the Gryffindor’s shoulder. “Give him some credit, Hermione. He’s been training. He can do this.”

Tracey nodded agreement though her hand clenched painfully on Daphne’s knee spoke of her concern. On the other side of Tracey, Luna buried her head into the girl’s side. “I don’t want to watch this,” she whimpered into Tracey.

The brunette draped her other arm around Luna and pulled her close whispering, “He’ll be all right, Luna. He’s too darn stubborn to die here.”

Harry dodged another lunge from the chimera rolling out of the way of the strike of the snake head. He’d never complain about Tonks’ conditioning training again. It was probably the only thing that had kept him alive so far. Harry turned his roll into a springboard maneuver to get back to his feet and put some distance between himself and the beast. He had no delusions about outrunning it to the egg but if he could distract it he might have a chance. The thing was far too fast to try and carve anything useful into the surrounding boulders, but Harry took the slight opening he had gained to try some of the spell chains that Flitwick had taught him. He launched everything from a flaming whip to a burst of wind to a freezing stream of ice at the monster. It dodged fully half of
his chain and the rest barely even slowed it down.

Harry’s eyes widened in surprise as the chimera made a slightly too slow jump and its front left paw got encased in a block of ice. Harry was about to push his advantage and run to the egg when the chimera simply turned its lion head towards its paw and let out a quick stream of fire that melted off the ice.

“Bloody hell! So much for that,” Harry muttered as he backpedaled away from the beast. He had apparently succeeded in annoying it since the snake was no longer taunting him. Harry desperately tried to think of what else he could try and, as it jumped forward, he remembered the Sword. It might not kill the thing but he could surely slow it down enough to get away yeah?

Reaching for the spot inside himself connected to the Sword of Gryffindor, Harry pulled and a moment later, the blade materialized in his hand. Harry yelled out and swiped at the chimera as it reached him. The Sword cleaved the lion’s head from the body and Harry grunted in Viktory. He rolled to the side and was about to run for the egg when he felt a spike of pain and the sky flew by above him.

Remus and Sirius both growled from the row behind the school kids. Amelia squeezed Sirius’ shoulder, but a low noise of frustration escaped her as well. “The boy will be fine. He killed a Dementor with that sword. He’ll be fine.”

Harry had just been knocked back to near the entrance of the arena by the chimera after it swiped out with a paw when he tried to get passed it. The loss of the lion’s head didn’t seem to do very much of anything to slow the thing down. The audience watched as the beast leaned to the side and the goat head reached down to pull a stone from the ground swallowing it whole.


Neville was scowling nearby. “Seriously? The sword can eat souls now and it still can’t kill the bloody thing?”

Remus leaned over and responded, “Apparently the Greek chimera is not sentient enough to have a soul. That used to reassure me.”

Sirius breathed a sigh of relief as Harry shakily got back to his feet clutching the sword and his wand while wiping blood from his forehead. The chimera slowly stalked forwards again, the snake head hissing at him and the goat head giving that horrible cackling sound. “I’m going to kill whoever came up with this,” Sirius said snarling.

Harry waited until he stopped seeing double before he tried to move around the arena. He had hoped that the loss of the primary head would’ve incapacitated the bloody thing but no. No, the only thing he’d managed to accomplish was to take away its ability to breathe fire. And even that was only a matter of another minute or two since he could see the head starting to regrow. Harry felt sweat bead while he reconsidered. He wasn’t skilled enough or quick enough in his transfigurations to lock the chimera’s legs in stone but now that it couldn’t breathe fire again…he grinned.

“Let’s try this again.” Harry shifted into the Off Balance spell chain again and ran towards the chimera as he launched the spells. His opponent still managed to avoid the majority of the chain was, but was again caught by the ice portion with both legs on its right side becoming frozen.
The chimera shifted its weight and brought its free paw around to start cutting off the ice encasing its leg. The lion head, had gained enough shape that it was able to spit sparks onto the ice as well. Harry didn’t give it enough chance to get free as he lunged with the Sword and took off the goat head then twisted to take the regrown portion of the lion head on his back swing.

Seeing both heads fall to the ground Harry let out a shout of Viktory and tried again to run passed the beast. Unfortunately, the snake head had a far longer reach than he had expected and slammed its bulk into his stomach. Harry was again tossed back towards the front of the arena and watched in horror as the chimera still didn’t seem particularly disturbed that it was missing two heads. He grimaced and took a second to consider his options.

After a few moments Harry stood again, his shoulders square, his face pale and his breath shaky. His wand though was perfectly level as he raised it for his last option.

Shiva looked at the battlefield with a mounting sense of dread. Everything he had tried kept getting tossed back in his face. Harry couldn’t get passed the bloody beast even with two heads removed. The snake had just enough reach to stretch to either side of the field as long it stayed in the center. Harry had obviously realized that with his last attempt. He had stopped trying to get passed it and had instead raised a transfigured wall across the narrow space between them, cutting the chimera off from his side of the battlefield.

“Is he going to try and carve a rune stone?” Hermione muttered beside her. “That’s a bad idea. It won’t take long to break through that wall and it’s too fast in general. He’d need at least three different primary options to stand a chance. He should just stick with trying to lop off all three heads and run.”

Daphne shook her head. “Can’t. He’ll never get that bloody snake one. It moves almost faster than you can see when it wants to. Watch his reactions; it’s been all he could do just to avoid getting bitten by it much less cut it off.”

Susan’s eyes widened as she peered down into Harry’s little corner. “Is that a ritual circle? What the bloody hell is he forming a ritual circle for?”

Sirius took a shuddering breath behind them all and he said, “Don’t do it, Harry. Please don’t do it.”

“Don’t do what?” Tracey asked.

Tonks’ hair had shifted to pitch black and hung halfway down her back while the hand not being held by Hermione was clenched in her mouth. Shiva just watched silently as her ward made a desperate gamble.

She could only pray to every god and goddess she knew of that she’d still have a ward to berate after this was over.

Harry finished the first circle and started sending out his spells to form the inner scheme. He could already hear the chimera slamming into the wall he had transfigured. Dimly he noticed that the yowls from the lion head and the cackling of the goat had rejoined the sounds of rock being chipped away. He wanted to hurry things along, but he remembered the warning from the summer. The ritual had to be perfect or he might as well just let the chimera have him.

He finished the inner scheme and moved to the center of the ritual circle. Promise me, kid, that
you will never do that ritual, Shiva’s voice floated up from months ago. “Sorry, Shiva. I don’t know what else to at this point.” With one last gulping breath Harry started to energize the animagus ritual circle’s sections as the book had described.

Two sections powered and Harry felt like it was going as well as could be hoped. He steadfastly ignored the fact that cracks and chips were appearing in the wall in front of him. He moved onto the next sections. Three more parts of the ritual were activated before Harry felt the imbalance flowing in the scheme around him.

With despairing eyes Harry started to energize the sixth segment. He was missing a component. His wand kept moving and power kept flowing as he desperately cast his mind out searching for what he was missing in the final, seventh section.

Cat.

He needed a cat. He couldn’t conjure or transfigure a cat. That could barely get birds let alone mammals.

The sixth segment flashed as Harry finished with it. Holding in a yell of frustration and despair he turned to power the last section. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to be stuck in animal form for the rest of his life. He could curl up in Hermione and Tonks’ laps. Shiva had said she was a cat person. He got along well with Crookshanks. It’d be better than being dead surely. Maybe Voldemort would even leave him alone if he was permanently a cat?

Harry’s silent musings were completely derailed as the wall finally shattered and the chimera leaped through the hole it had formed. Harry desperately tossed his power into the final ritual segment just as the chimera’s front paw landed inside the circle. Both opponents froze as the finalized magic lit up the entire ritual circle in bright white light engulfing Harry and the intruding chimera.

The crowd held its breath as Harry and his assailant vanished in a flash of brilliance. Luna was crying and Sirius was clutching onto Amelia’s hand for dear life. Daphne had a firm enough grip on both Tracey’s hand and Hermione’s shoulder that she would likely leave bruises. Neville, Susan and Hannah had all hunched down into each other. Shiva, Tonks and Hermione were all just staring blankly at the battlefield.

The bright light abruptly fell away, seemingly pulled back into the center of the ritual circle. The chimera stumbled shaking all three of its heads. In Harry’s place there was a large midnight-black panther also shaking its head. The panther blinked large green eyes and sneezed into the ground. A hiss resounded from the snake head of the chimera, the first of the beast’s three heads to fully clear.

The panther looked up at the hissing and gave a soft chuff. Its eyes narrowed and its claws extended. The chimera pounced at Harry and he leapt to the side. The snake head lashed out and Harry slashed his claws leaving deep marks in the scaly flesh as it passed. He didn’t waste any time and immediately pushed off with all four paws. With a roar the chimera jumped after him. Harry reached the egg and headbutted it off the pedestal, aiming so that it soared out through the open exit. The time it had taken to aim let the chimera catch up and a paw swiped out to knock Harry aside. The panther felt it coming though and twisted, dodging underneath the larger beast. He slashed up above him as he leaped, opening a gash on the chimera’s underside. A roar of pain was answered with a yowl of success.

The chimera turned to surge after Harry who was already bounding for the arena exit. Harry leapt
through just as the chimera slammed into the wards and fell to the ground growling in frustration.

The panther turned to regard the beast for a moment and shuddered. The next moment in place of the panther there stood a very beaten, very tired, very human Harry Potter in a torn shirt and ripped trousers staring back at the chimera prowling on the other side of the gate. He bowed his head to it and said, “Thanks I guess. I know you were trying pretty hard to kill me and all, but…well you really helped me out there at the end. So thanks.”

Harry gave the Greek chimera one last salute, picked up his egg and walked off to the medical tent. The silence behind him was as thunderous in its own way as the applause for the others had been.
Chapter 22: Fallout

Harry walked into the open medical tent and practically collapsed onto the bed open for him. Despite his dislike of the hospital ward he had never been so happy to get to lie down in one of Madame Pomfrey’s beds. The mediwitch rushed over to him and immediately began casting diagnostic spells while muttering about “idiot organizers and their fool ideas”. Harry just grunted in agreement.

“‘arry!” Fleur cried jumping up from her own bed and rushing over. “‘arry, you are alright! I tried to go and watch from ze stands but zis nurse refused to allow me to leave ze tent.” She cast a disparaging look at Pomfrey who completely ignored her and instead shoved potions towards Harry. Grimacing he chugged them and turned to Fleur.

“God, that stuff tastes awful. Probably a good thing you didn’t watch. I’m already likely going to get yelled at by everyone else so at least you can’t join in on that.”

Fleur’s eyes narrowed. “And why would ze others be yelling? How bad was it?”

Before Harry could respond, Pomfrey handed him another potion. “Potter, your physical injuries will be taken care of by the first few potions and I’ve healed over the major cuts and bruises. You have rather severe magical exhaustion however and that can only be fixed by rest. I imagine you need to be awake for at least another hour so here is some Pepper Up. Take it or don’t, your choice. Just remember, if you do want it, you will crash within six hours and coupled with the magical exhaustion that crash will be quite abrupt.”

Harry nodded, took a look at the potion, sighed and gulped it down. He shook his head as steam came out of his ears and turned back to Fleur. “The chimera wasn’t slowed down by losing two of its heads and I couldn’t hit the stupid snake one. I couldn’t hem it in since it was too fast and the arena was too wide so I…kinda turned myself into…an animagus to outrun it…” He rubbed the back of his neck and stared at the floor while the girl in front of him could only blink. On his other side Madame Pomfrey froze while reaching for a salve and turned back to him.

The nurse started speaking very slowly, “Potter, perhaps I should check you over for a head injury as well…”

He snorted. “Well it did knock my head into the wall a few times. But trust me I’m not exaggerating with the animagus thing.”

“You…became an animagus…to survive ze Task…” Fleur said softly sinking into a nearby chair. “Mon Dieu.”

From the other side of the tent Fred started laughing so hard he fell off his chair. “And I thought my performance would be the most outrageous one! You don’t go for anything halfway, Harry! Well done mate!”

Krum just looked between everyone else and shook his head. “And they call me crazy…”

The tent flap burst open and Daphne and Luna ran in. Both stopped and cocked a head at Fred still laughing on the floor before turning to Harry and sighing in relief. Luna took a flying leap and Harry barely managed to catch the smaller girl before her head was buried in his chest and her arms
wrapped around his waist. Daphne was statelier in her approach but she was no less gentle in how she pulled him into an embrace.

“That was extremely impressive, Harry,” Daphne murmured. “But, please, don’t ever do that again. It would be rather hard to convince my father to allow me to keep associating with a panther.”

Luna shook her head and said softly, “You’d always be welcome to come on my excursions with Daddy if you get stuck as a large cat, Harry. Daddy always said the blibbering humdingers are attracted to cats.”

Harry just chuckled. “Thanks, girls. Where are the others? I kinda expected Hermione and Shiva at least to be here yelling at me for being a bloody Gryffindor.”

Luna finally pulled back and moved over to sit next to Fleur. “Tracey and Neville were helping to calm down some of the others while Professor Lupin and Madame Bones went to look at the unexpected extra wards. Hermione, Tonks, Shiva and Sirius were…” she trailed off and glanced to Daphne with raised eyebrows and a bit of a knowing smirk.

Daphne gave Harry a predatory grin. “Well about that…”

The four walked towards the judges box, Hermione trailing slightly behind them and holding her notebook to her chest like a shield. Tonks was out front with her hair back to short and spiky in a flaming red color with orange highlights. It looked remarkably like her head was actually on fire an illusion made even more convincing as she kept it waving slightly as she moved. Shiva and Sirius both looked just as angry though they lacked the theatrics. Halfway there, the Delacours and the Krums joined them as did Arthur Weasley though all hung back near Hermione.

“Dumbledore, Bagman! What the bloody hell was that shite?!” Tonks snarled as she stomped towards them. She poked a finger into the old man’s chest while Shiva scowled down at Bagman. The Head of Games and Sports gulped and pushed back into his seat.

Dumbledore just smiled up at Tonks with his trademarked twinkle and grandfatherly smile firmly in place. “I’m afraid you’ll have to be a bit more specific Nympha – ”

Tonks switched from poking him to grabbing his beard and yanking the man’s head down. The surrounding personnel bearing witness all gasped and drew back. All theatrics left Tonks and her voice dropped several decibels. “Finish my name old man and I will wrap this beard around your throat. You and these idiots,” she waved her free hand towards the rest of the judges, “just sat here and watched a blatant assassination attempt on a 14 year old young man from your own school.”

Bagman held up a hand and said in a forced lighthearted voice, “Now, that seems a bit harsh there. It was just part of the Tournament after all.”

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Shiva crossed her arms across her chest and took several deep breathes in order to avoid drawing her wand on the man. Beside her Tonks released Dumbledore and stepped up beside her. “Bagman, can you explain to me where in the rules it states the arena is placed on lockdown as soon as a contestant enters the battlefield?” Shiva asked. When Bagman just frowned she continued, “How about where the rules state that things from outside the field are forbidden from being summoned?” He opened his mouth to respond but again was left with nothing to say. “Or perhaps you could explain how not one but four X creatures were the opponents. Especially in light of the Triwizard rules clearly stating that anything above four X creatures are highly discouraged from being included in anything other than cooperative battles due to the risks

Umbridge uttered her annoying “hehem” and stood with a smile on her face. “You should know better than to come in here and make threats Miss Tonks, Professor, Black.” Sirius’s eyes narrowed to slits at her slight. “The Ministry always has a reason for its actions.”

Sirius stepped forward leveling his glare on the pink toad. “Oh so this was a Ministry decision? Perhaps you’d like to explain those reasons then before I convene a meeting of the Wizengamot to bring you up on charges.”

Dumbledore cleared his throat and smoothed his rumpled beard. “Now, I believe that might be a bit hasty. We should allow Dolores to speak prior to making any further accusations.”

The Umbitch nodded politely to Dumbledore and turned back to the others with her simpering smile firmly in place. “While I don’t feel you deserve to have anything explained to you at all… seeing as the Ministry would like to avoid any…unsettling implications, I will attempt to set the record straight. The repelling ward was added just this morning. It was an effort to prevent any potential harm coming to the audience members of course. Nothing in, nothing out. Everyone kept perfectly safe by the brilliant foresight. Why could you imagine the danger if the dragon had gone on a rampage?”

Shiva’s scowl deepened. “Oh and I’m sure that preventing any summonings was simply a ‘dreadful oversight’ in that case.”

“Most unfortunate,” Umbridge agreed, her grin spreading.

Shiva gestured to Hermione. “Hermione?”

The bookworm stepped forward and opened her notebook schooling her features into a completely neutral expression. “‘The Tournament organizers will make every effort to ensure that no discrimination is enforced upon any of the competitors. Exotic forms of magic are allowed and no protective measures are to be implemented to prevent their use. This includes but is not limited to any inherent species-specific magic, ritual based magic, crafted magic and component based magic. The only limitation placed is that the initial Task must be started with a single spellcasting implement. Any additional required components may be summoned upon Task initiation and the organizers are to ensure that this is not interfered with. The spirit of the Tournament is of priority in these uncommon situations.’ Section 512, subsection C, paragraph 5.”

Hermione looked up and a flash of loathing appeared on her face before it returned to her neutral mask. “On the subject of the magical beasts the rules state – ”

“That’s enough, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said smoothly. “I believe we can admit we made a mistake when we erected the ward in a hasty decision to protect the public.”

Sirius growled but Tonks spoke before he could say anything, “Oh no you don’t old man! You are not twisting this to make it seem like you arseholes are the beleaguered good guys being set upon by the distraught family. You yourself have admitted that the likeliest reason Harry was entered into this thing was because someone was trying to kill him and now you’re assisting in trying to do just that. That barrier wasn’t put up to prevent the creatures from attacking us. It was there to prevent Harry from attaining his normal means of combat and to stop anyone else from entering to save a Champion in trouble.”

Umbridge just spread her arms and giggled. “A shame that you can’t actually prove that now isn’t it?”
Karkaroff stood and addressed the group. “Neither Madame Maxime nor myself were informed of this change until immediately prior to the Task. We were annoyed with several of the implications ourselves but were convinced that it was an acceptable safety measure.”

Maxime raised herself up as well and bowed to the others. “You ’ave my assurances zat we did not realize it would also prevent ze introduction of items zrough ze boundary from outside. It was never ze intent to put Mssr. Potter at a disadvantage. If zis safety measure iz necessary in ze future I will personally ensure zat it is merely a one-way barrier.”

Bagman hurriedly nodded seizing on the opportunity for a middle ground. “Yes, yes exactly. You’re perfectly right. No Champion should be inconvenienced unnecessarily nor should rescues be prevented! This was simply an unfortunate unforeseen side effect of a last minute decision. It won’t happen again.”

Krum’s father came forward to stand next to Sirius. “I vould also hope that this decision to include two of the deadliest creatures in this hemisphere will not be an indication of further complications. Our understanding vas that this was intended to be a friendly competition – not a blood sport. I would not be surprised to see your Ministry has obtained a nundu for one of the Tasks at this rate,” he finished with a distasteful tone.

Sébastien Delacour raised his hand from the edge of the box and said, “I for one am willing to accept this whole Task as being the result of poor decisions. I’d also like to mention that if we should see a nundu or anything equally as foolish during this event…well, that might lead to rather bad relations with France in the future.”

“And a rather exceptionally lowered opinion of all the personnel involved. Including yourself, Dumbledore. I would’ve expected better judgment coming from you,” Arthur said shaking his head sadly.

Tonks snorted and turned on her heel striding out of the box with Hermione following closely behind. Shiva glared at Umbridge for a moment longer. “Keep screwing with my ward toad and you’ll find out why Voldemort keeps running away with his tail between his legs.” She turned and stalked out. Sirius smiled and waved goodbye with a decidedly false cheer.

Luna and Daphne had returned to their seats in the stands while Harry and the other Champions walked back to the center of the cleared field to receive their scores. Harry had had some help with transfiguring his trousers into a something less likely to fall apart as he walked but his shirt was still mostly shredded.

He stood beside Fleur on the end and smiled up at his friends when he caught sight of everyone. Hannah was still clutching Neville but Tracey caught his eye and gave him a thumbs up. All eyes quickly centered on Dumbledore as he stood and started to speak. “Well, this was certainly an exciting event this morning. It is not entirely through yet, as points still need to be awarded.” The Headmaster paused and nodded down to the Champions his grandfatherly look firm. “All the Champions performed very impressively and while we would love nothing more than to declare you all equal, that is not how a competition functions unfortunately. Miss Delacour, please step forward to receive your point distribution. The scores will be out of 10.”

As Fleur stepped up, Dumbledore raised his wand and cast an 8 in the air. “A slight point deduction for allowing the hydra to form an extra head as well as lack of diverse spells. Excellent maneuverability, speed and accuracy however.”

Madame Maxime stood and cast a 9. “I also feel that allowing ze hydra to gain a fifth head was a
mistake. However ze Task was accomplished with great speed and skill.”

Karkaroff hesitated and sighed before he sent up an 8. “Zero injuries. Very impressive.”

Bagman also scored Fleur a 9. “Excellent showing Miss Delacour!”

Umbridge considered for a moment before sending up a 4. The resounding shouts of disbelief and derision swallowed her initial comments and Umbridge had to repeat them after Dumbledore quieted everyone with a canon blast. “You were forced to resort to utilizing your heritage to escape from injury as well as to finish what you had started with disabling the beast. A more skilled witch would have been able to complete the Task without resorting to such desperate measures. And you showed such barbarism by killing the creature when it had already been defeated!”

Fleur growled softly as she stepped back muttering under her breath of prejudiced little toads. Harry leaned over and bumped her shoulder. “Hey,” he whispered out of the corner of his mouth, “you got Karkaroff to praise you. Everyone knows the Umbitch is evil. Take the win.”

“Zank you for zat ‘arry,” Fleur replied.

Fred stepped forward and Dumbledore sent off a 7. “While you were completely uninjured, there was no visible spellwork either. An ingenious use of potions, but they were borderline unacceptable. Be careful in the future, Mr. Weasley.”

Maxime also gave Fred a 7. “While zat was certainly amusing I would liked to have seen more spellwork.”

Karkaroff gave Fred an 8 as well. “Same as the others. More spells, boy. Impressive use of resources and good foresight though.”

Bagman shrugged before tossing up a 7. “I don’t have a problem with the lack of spells, Mr. Weasley. I do think that you showed us an area where we need to improve the rules though. If Mr. Potter wasn’t allowed to bring his rune stones into the arena those potions probably shouldn’t be allowed in the future either.” He paused and cocked his head at the red-head. “I didn’t even know potions could do that…”

Umbridge gave Fred a 5 to more boos. “Flaunting your disregard of the rules and established procedure. I would expect nothing less from a Weasley.”

Fred snorted as he stepped back and Harry heard his softly say, “Wait til Percy hears about that comment toad. We’ll see how much paperwork dealing with cauldron thickness you have to deal with after today.”

Krum stepped up and Dumbledore gave him a 9. “Truly excellent footwork and spell combinations. A slight deduction for injuries but overall very impressive.”

Maxime scored Krum with a 7. “A single injury against a manticore. Well done. You really shouldn’t have expected it to be sleeping at first zough and you had a free initial shot you passed up zere.”

Karkaroff sent 10 into the air. “Extreme bravery against a manticore. A slight error in range but superb display of skills otherwise.”

Bagman gave Krum an 8. “Well done, Mr. Krum. Well done! Excellent reflexes!”
Umbridge stood and sent off a 10 into the air with zero hesitation. “I have not seen such a display of prowess and skill in quite some time.”

Krum stepped back and scowled saying softly, “I did not deserve those 10s.”

Harry shrugged as he stepped up to get his own scores. Dumbledore frowned at sent up a 6. The crowd’s reaction was rather poor to that score and again Dumbledore had to let off a loud bang before he could speak. “While the display of spellcasting was very impressive, you were unable to get passed the chimera until extraordinary measures were taken. I advise more practice in the future, Mr. Potter.”

Harry snorted at that. “You try fighting a chimera as a fourth year student and without your usual primary tools,” he muttered.

Maxime looked down at him for a long moment before finally sending off a 10. Harry stared with wide eyes as she stated her reasons. “You were clearly outmatched yet kept attempting different methods. Your ingenuity was impressive as was your determination. A superb showing, Monsieur.”

Karkaroff sighed and sent up a 9. “I was impressed by the skill and stubbornness shown as well. The successful completion of a ritual mid-combat was also noteworthy.”

Bagman stood and sent off a 10. “I haven’t seen a ritual circle completed since I was in school! Well done Mr. Potter!”

Umbridge stood and cast a 2 in the air. Dumbledore was forced to send off two canon blasts before the noise lowered enough for her to speak. “Really now, if I could give you a zero I would but as you successfully retrieved the egg and did not die I am forced to award at least two points. That was a horrendous showing all around. You were unable to best the creature, it continually outwitted you and you showed off an illegal transformation to top things off. Stay behind afterward, Potter.”

Harry narrowed his eyes as he stepped back. Of course The Umbitch was going to twist this. There were probably going to be Aurors waiting to arrest him as soon as the crowd dispersed. Dumbledore gave some platitudes while Fleur grabbed his hand. She leaned down and whispered into his ear, “Don’t worry, zey won’t be taking you anywhere if I have anyzing to say about it. And even if zey do…well, France doesn’t extradite its own citizens.”

Harry started to say something but fumbled for the words. He ended up just turning to Fleur and staring at her with a slack jaw. She chuckled and patted his cheek. “I am just saying, ‘arry. It iz somezing to keep in mind iz all.” He eventually just settled for a stunned nod.

Most of the audience started to disperse while Harry and Fleur headed out to the exit with Fred and Krum following close behind. True enough as soon as Harry stepped outside the arena there were three Aurors nearby. Scrimgeour, Dawlish and a bald black man with an easy smile. Harry sighed and said, “Hello. I don’t suppose you actually got the full story by any chance?”

Scrimgeour frowned but Dawlish spoke up before the boss could. “An unregistered animagus transformation. No further explanations are needed. Come with us immediately, Potter. There’s a holding cell with your name on it.”

“Are you daft?” Sirius’ voice shouted from around the corner. He came striding up with Remus at his side and the others close behind. Harry was a bit surprised that Amelia was letting him take point. “No explanations are needed? How in Merlin’s name did you pass any of the training?”
“How dare you!” Dawlish shouted back.

Scrimgeour stepped between the two his frown morphing into a full scowl. “Dawlish! Do not antagonize the Lord Black! We are not here for him.”

The bald man came forward and nodded to both Harry and Sirius before turning to Amelia. “Ma’am Director, would you please settle this little dispute? I get the feeling we are missing a key piece of information.”

Amelia just smiled. “Let’s let the Undersecretary make a bit of a fool of herself first, Shacklebolt.” Right on cue, The Umbitch strolled over from the direction of the stands.

As soon as she was close enough she started pointing at Harry with a huge grin. “There. Arrest the boy. An unregistered animagus transformation! In front of thousands of witnesses! No way out of this one, child. A more open and shut case I have never seen. Such arrogance! Such blatant disrespect for our laws! I’ll see you in Azkaban by the end of the night.” She almost seemed about to laugh.

Before anyone could say anything Amelia stepped up from behind Sirius and approached Umbridge. “Unregistered transformation? Were you sleeping prior to that, Undersecretary? Or are you just showing how stupid you can be? I am honestly curious.”

“What are you talking about, Amelia?” Umbridge asked with a sneer. “The boy didn’t even try to hide it!”

“Well considering it was the result of a ritual found in *Advanced Techniques For the Forward Thinking* specifically designed to force an animagus form I don’t see why he should,” Amelia paused and tapped her chin. “It’s been quite some time since I read that book but…oh what was the wording…oh I remember: ‘This ritual will fail spectacularly if the enactor already has access to an animagus form.’ Yes that was it. So that would make this his first transformation. Meaning he has a full week to present himself and register the animal form assuming he can transform again.”

Umbridge scowled. “We don’t even know that was the specific ritual he performed. It could have been a fancy light show!”

Amelia sighed and turned to the three Aurors. “Scrimgeour, Dawlish, Shacklebolt return to your duties. No crime has been committed. Madame Umbridge,” she turned back to the pink toad and shifted her hand towards her wand, “you should probably go home. Or perhaps you should check in with the Minister and update him on your recent sabotage failures.” Umbridge tossed her nose in the air and turned stalking off. The Aurors waited a few seconds longer, looking between Harry and Amelia before nodding and leaving as well.

Krum turned to the others and nodded politely. “Vell, now that the excitement is over with, I think I will go find drink. Vell done and congratulations to you all. Pleasant evening.”

Fred sighed and clapped Harry on the back. “I got to go find Dad and the rest of the family. I should probably also apologize to Charlie for feeding his dragon some of my products. Catch up to you later, mate.”

Fleur simply stepped partly to the side as Hermione pushed through the adults and barreled towards Harry. He chuckled softly as she almost knocked him over with her embrace and he squeezed her back. “Are you okay?” she asked quietly.

Harry nodded and lifted her head up to kiss her. “I’m fine, Mione. Just tired.” Hermione slowly
nodded and let him go.

Shiva stepped up next to hug him. “I feel like I should be yelling at you, kid,” she said. “Honestly though I’m far too relieved you’re alive to bother. You realize how lucky you were that worked right?”

“I do,” he muttered into her shoulder leaning his head down for a moment. “I could feel how screwed I was by the time I got to the fifth section. I just didn’t know what else to do, Shiva. I thought…I’ve started the meditation stuff that Sirius gave me over the summer and I knew my animagus form was fast and I knew I needed speed to get around the chimera…I couldn’t even see that stupid snake head half the time let alone hit it…I just…I’m sorry.”

Shiva ruffled his hair and pushed him back to arms length. “Don’t apologize, kid. It worked in the end. It was dangerous, but you didn’t really have many options. I’m not going to yell at you for surviving against that thing. And hey, a panther is pretty awesome!” She smiled and shook a finger at him in a mock glare. “But don’t you dare scratch the furniture young man or you will not like the punishment!”

Everyone burst out in laughter at that and the mildly depressed mood broke easily. Shiva slung an arm over Harry’s shoulders and turned him towards the castle. “Come on, kid, let’s get back.”

Tonks cleared her throat and stepped up to Harry’s other side with a slight blush on her cheeks, her hair a resolute pink. “Actually I think I’m going to steal him away for a minute. Party in the Gryffindor Common Room I’m guessing?” At the answering nods she continued, “Okay. I’ll get him to you guys in a few minutes then.”

Harry peered curiously at Tonks as she led him over towards a tree near the Black Lake and well away from anyone else. Harry leaned against the tree trunk still feeling his exhaustion despite the Pepper Up – just another example of how amazingly tired he was. “What did you want to talk about, Tonks? I really am sorry about using the ritual.”

She waved a hand, still looking out over the lake with her back to him. “You know that was foolish, it worked, you’re alive, that’s all I care about. I’m not going to yell at you for that anymore than Shiva did. No, Harry, I – I almost ended up strangling Dumbledore with his own beard a few minutes ago.”

Harry started chuckling but trailed off as he noticed she wasn’t laughing. His eyes widened. “Merlin, you’re serious.”

“Yeah,” Tonks sighed. “When I saw your harness fall next to that arena shield I glanced towards the judges box and I noticed a flash of…well something suspiciously like triumph on his face. After the Task was over when we were confronting the judges on that damn thing, I kinda lost it for a moment there and grabbed him. I assaulted one of the most important and well respected wizards in the past hundred years.”

“Oh,” Harry said softly.

“So you know why I did that, Harry?” She crossed her arms and her hair shifted to a dark blue. “I saw some bad things while I was Auror, but that was the first time I truly almost lost control completely. That was the first time I genuinely wanted to hurt someone. And it was because he had hurt you.”

“Tonks, I…” Harry shifted and looked down at his feet. “I appreciate that, Tonks, but I don’t think I’m really worth that. Dumbledore is powerful and important. You shouldn’t risk getting on his
Harry heard her give a rueful laugh. “Jeez, squirt, you really need to work on your self-esteem issues. I thought Hermione and Shiva would’ve knocked that self-deprecation out of you by now.”

He shrugged, smiling wanly. “Still crops up from time to time.”

“Apparently,” she muttered, though she didn’t sound angry. “Harry, I’m sick of trying to fight this and I’m sick of pretending that it doesn’t matter to me. I’m sick of lying to myself and saying that you’re just a good friend.”

“Tonks, where are you going with this?” he asked frowning. Why couldn’t girls just say what they meant instead of talking in circles? He was far too tired to try and make sense of this conversation.

Tonks made an annoyed groan. “Merlin, you are dense.” Harry was still looking at the ground when she strode up to him, grabbed his head pulled him up into a kiss. Harry’s mind ground to a halt and, without any conscious input from him, one arm came out to wrap around her waist while his other braced against the tree trunk. He lost count of how long they stayed locked together. Eventually Tonks pulled back and took a deep, shuddering breath. “What I’m getting at Harry is quite simple: is that second girlfriend position still available?”

Mentally kicking his brain back into gear Harry shook his head and grinned. “Not anymore.”

Tonks’ face fell and she turned away to stare at the lake with her hair shifting to black. “Oh. Oh. Sorry. That’s what I get for taking too long I guess. Just forget I said anything and – ” She cut off her mumbling as Harry strode forward and laid a hand on one shoulder. He spun her around and leaned in to capture her lips again.

A few moments later Harry pulled back and smiled again. “What I meant, Nym, was that the position became filled about 60 seconds ago.”

“Oh.” Tonks blinked. Neither said anything for a short period before both laughed. Tonks’ hair shifted to a light red and she reached out to take his hand. “Well, now that that’s decided we should probably get up to that Tower so you can hang out for a few minutes before you crash completely.”

The two walked off with matching shy smiles. Neither noticed the fat beetle flying off the tree behind them.

Harry walked through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor Tower to cheers, shouts and general chaos. The entire place was decorated with streamers and mini-fireworks were going off every so often. Fred was in the middle of the couch regaling firsties with how he had gotten through the Task and come up with the ideas; Neville was in the corner retelling Harry’s efforts to Fleur who had her arm around a blushing Hermione; Daphne and Tracey were on the couch talking with Ginny while Astoria bounced around the room nearby; Susan and Hannah were both deep in conversation with Lavender, Parvati and Padma; Shiva, Sirius, Remus and Amelia were sitting with Flitwick and McGonagall drinking butterbeers; even Su Li and Millicent Bulstrode were sitting down with the Gryffindor Chasers, Luna and Coco all laughing.

“Wow…” Tonks muttered as she followed Harry in. “I expected a party but…Merlin, Hogwarts has loosened up since I graduated.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Harry said.
“HARRY!!” The room seemed to explode with noise as people realized he had arrived. Harry was immediately swept into the crowd. He was passed from handshake to handshake, back slap to back slap before finally being deposited on the couch near Fred and Daphne. Looking over the room he saw Tonks had pulled Hermione to the side and breathed a sigh of relief after Hermione smiled and pulled the metamorph in a hug. Tonks caught his eye and flashed him a quick thumbs up before sitting back down with Fleur and Neville, a beaming Hermione in tow.

“So, Harry, let’s see the panther!” Fred suddenly shouted leaning over pump his hand. Harry turned to him and cocked an eyebrow. “Oh don’t give me that, mate. I got us both free advertising and only Fleur and I haven’t seen it firsthand. Come on! Don’t keep a friend waiting!”

“Fine,” Harry sighed and stood up. The room quieted and it seemed like every eye was watching him. “This is like the second time I’m doing this so I don’t know if I’ll be able to stay in it for too long okay? Don’t get your hopes up. It feels…weird.” He closed his eyes concentrating back to how it had felt to change. A few moments later he felt his body flow and shift and the floor was suddenly a lot closer. He could see clearly and could feel the softness of the carpet under his paws. Harry chuffed good-naturedly at Fred who reached out to pet his fur. Harry took a breath and promptly sneezed as his nose couldn’t handle the myriad conglomerate of smells in the air. He tried to take another breath and sneezed again setting off even more sneezes. Less than thirty seconds after shifting Harry turned back and collapsed back into the couch to a chorus of disappointed groans.

“Hey,” Harry harrumphed, “you try smelling a hundred different things at once and see if you want to keep breathing that shite in. You want to pet me, fine, but we’ll do it outside in a day or two. Where I can breathe.” The group started laughing and the party picked back up.

Fred leaned over and clapped Harry on the shoulder. “Sorry about the Task, Harry. George and I found the little loophole about the potions thing but it didn’t apply to rune stones. If I had realized you wouldn’t be able to summon your stuff I would’ve given you some of our stock to use too. Apparently potions weren’t considered ‘spellcasting implements’ by whoever made the rules originally. They had their own category. That’s probably going to be changed by the time this one’s over, but I figured I’d use the ambiguity while it existed to go in locked and loaded.”

Harry shrugged. “From what Tonks said, you did good, Fred. I’m just glad you’re okay.” The red-head grinned and turned back to the firsties waiting for his story to go on.

Harry felt himself shifted to the side a bit as someone bumped his shoulder and he opened his eyes to see Daphne beside him. “Hey,” she said just barely loud enough to hear over the commotion. “Hey,” he responded.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Harry. That was…rather frightening,” her eyes closed and she squeezed his leg. “I knew this was going to be dangerous, but that was worse than I had feared. We’re going to have to take bigger steps I think.”

Harry nodded agreement. “Yeah, I think you’re right.”

Daphne nodded her head towards Tonks in the corner still talking and laughing with Hermione. “So you and Tonks are official now?”

Harry’s eyes widened as he turned fully towards his friend. She just smiled and shrugged. “I didn’t get into Slytherin because I was blind, Harry.” Her grin drooped a bit and Harry thought he caught something akin to regret flash across her face before it was again happy and she was hugging him. “I’m happy for you, Harry. Those two get along well and are good for you. Don’t
expect Fleur to give up so easily though. And I’ve done some digging; you may need to watch out for a third option from her.”

“What?” Harry asked confused and finding it hard to follow what Daphne was saying. Maybe the Pepper Up was starting to wear off.

“Don’t worry about it, Harry. I’m sure Fleur will bring it up herself soon enough if she’s going to go that route.”

“Umm, okay,” Harry sighed. “Daph, would you tell the others I’m going to go and sleep? Madame Pomfrey said the potion should last longer, but I’m already losing it.” Daphne nodded and Harry headed up the stairs to the boys dorm.

He had just enough strength left to kick off his shoes before he collapsed back into the bed. Thinking he should probably take his shirt and trousers off at least, he tried to convince himself to move just a bit more. He gave it up after a minute and just lay there. The door to the dorm opened again but Harry couldn’t be bothered to care.

“Ugh, Harry, you can’t sleep in those clothes. They’re filthy. Come on, let me help you get undressed then you can sleep,” the soft voice of Hermione rang through his ears.

“Hey, Mione,” Harry murmured keeping his eyes closed.

“Come on then,” she said sitting down beside him and pulling him up into a semi-sitting position. Harry groaned in protest. Hermione chuckled and maneuvered him so that she could pull his shirt over his head. “There. You can lay back down now. You are wearing pants, yes?”

“Yes, Mione,” Harry said snuggling back into the blanket. He felt her move down to his trousers. “So you’re not mad about Nym?”

Hermione paused. “Nym? Oh you mean Tonks. No, Harry, I’m not mad. It would be rather hypocritical of me to be mad when I was the one to push for it to begin with.”

“Still…”

Hermione chuckled. “Harry, I like Tonks. And she is certainly very protective of you. You should’ve seen her with Dumbledore earlier.”

“She said she grabbed his beard,” Harry mumbled.

“It was glorious. I wish I was that brave.”

“You’re brave, Mione.” She had finally succeeded in wriggling his trousers off and pulled his socks down as well leaving him in just his boxers.

“Thank you, Harry. Lift your legs up. Come on, get on the bed fully now. You’ll get a horrible crick if you sleep half on, half off.” He shifted and pulled his legs where she directed and felt her pull the blankets over him. “Get some sleep, Harry. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mione. Tell Nym, and the others, I said night…” Harry yawned and passed out while Hermione smiled and slipped back down to the party.

Dumbledore strode into his office and sat down at his desk with a heavy sigh. Fawkes watched him absently cast a spell to freeze the portraits and start muttering to himself. “The luck involved
in that task…one would be forgiven for thinking a higher power had a hand in this.” Albus rubbed his beard and peered towards the shelf with his pensieve. “No. No, that can’t be. Coincidences do happen after all and Harry Potter has nothing if not the best of luck at the worst of times. Fudge will likely lean on Dolores to tone down her attacks on the boy now. It certainly doesn’t help that half the school and soon half the country will believe this was a deliberate attempt on his life.”

Fawkes trilled softly. Perhaps his bonded was finally starting to recognize his errors?

“I will simply have to be more subtle. The woman is a fool to the highest degree. There is still the Aspect Columns. They are completely foreign and it will be fully understandable that none of us knew of the dangers associated with their use.” Albus nodded slowly. “Yes. That will work. Harry may be lucky but that should easily balance out when his own darkness is his opponent.”

Fawkes crooned a sad song. Albus was straying dangerously close to unforgivable. The phoenix had been together with the old man for so long…yet everyone had a breaking point. Albus’ issues were mounting faster and faster. Soon Fawkes wouldn’t be able to keep making excuses for the man.

“I wish there was another way too, my friend,” Albus whispered as he looked at Fawkes. “Today’s events only provided further proof I’m afraid. Even without his crutch, Harry Potter is dangerous. We must act now, before he has a chance to gain even more power and skill. With Barty acting to insert him into the Tournament it could still count as Voldemort’s hand. The prophecy will be fulfilled, the Horcrux destroyed, a future Dark Lord’s birth prevented and the way clear to forever destroy Tom.”

Fawkes could only turn away. How had Albus come to this point? How had he forgotten all his old feelings and beliefs? Was it the disease that pushed him here or what it simply exhaustion? Did he truly not see how close his thoughts matched his old lover’s?

“I must stay strong and do what is right over what is easy. I must ensure that this is finished,” Albus sighed. “For the Greater Good.”

Fawkes uttered another sorrow filled trill. Albus’ course was set. Now it was only a matter of time before he left his friend forever.

Dolores Umbridge strode into the Minister’s office the next morning feeling rather pleased with herself. Sure her initial plan hadn’t quite panned out, but it had given her another delightful opportunity. That fool boy thought that he could use the rules to escape what was coming to him? Not while Dolores Jane Umbridge was in charge!

She sat down in the chair across from Fudge and smiled. “Good morning, Cornelius! I – ”

Fudge scowled and held up a hand stopping her. “What the bloody hell is going on at that school, Dolores?! Do you have any idea how bad this looks?!”

She frowned. “Well, I admit the boy surviving without any lasting injuries was frustrating, but I know just how to deal with the animagus fallout. All we need to do is lose some of the paperwork he submits and then we can arrest Potter for not properly registering.”

“Animagus? Lost paperwork?” the Minister leaned back and rubbed his forehead. “I don’t care what the brat did! Have you seen these papers?!” He tossed two folded Daily Prophets across the table. “Two issues, Dolores! Two! A special issue last night dealing with our incompetence and then another one this morning!”
Umbridge leaned in to read the headlines. *Ministry of Magic Endorses Deadly Tournament* was plastered over the top half of the page from last night’s printing and *Blatant Sabotage and Rampant Favoritism Taint First Task* was printed along the bottom half.

The second paper, the one from this morning, was devoted to the headline: *Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Cheated?*

She pulled back and shrugged. “Well we will have to lean on her a bit, but at least she got the part about the half-blood cheating.”

Fudge literally growled. “That article is 95% devoted to his love life! And it also makes casual mention of how us entering him into this thing granted him full emancipated adult status! You assured me you had this handled, Dolores. He was supposed to appear the villain not a gossip topic!” Fudge slammed a hand onto the table. “Potter has enough allies that he could make real trouble as a member of the Wizengamot. How could you let this happen?!”

Dolores blinked and simply stared at the Minister. “He – what?”

“As if this wasn’t bad enough I’ve already had visits from the Bulgarian and French Ministers! Both of who expressed their supreme disappointment that five X creatures were included in a single combat Task and that there was a ‘safety shield’ that would have prevented assistance from being rendered. Both made clear threats of diplomatic and economic sanctions should any more blatant attempts at sabotage be present!”

“The shield was a suggestion by Dumbledore though,” Umbridge said floundering. “He seemed to think it would be perfect for ensuring audience safety while I realized it would work perfectly to trap the fools inside it…surely we can just explain the original reason behind it?”

Fudge scowled and poured himself a drink of firewhiskey. “Why do you think I’m still in office? As valid as the excuse is they have legitimate grievances with the methodology and lack of foresight concerning consequences. I can’t even blame this on the idiot Bagman because you quite clearly took credit for it!” Fudge leaned back and glared at her. “Fix this, Dolores. I will not be taking the fall for this mess.”

Umbridge gulped and nodded. She hurriedly scampered out of the office desperately trying to figure out where she had gone wrong and what she had missed.

Nymphadora Tonks walked up the driveway to her parent’s house as if going to an execution. It probably wasn’t all that different anyway. Andromeda Tonks may have been struck from the family for a few years but she was still very much a Black through and through. Ted Tonks was a nice man all things considered and he had taught Tonks a lot about humor and how to have fun but…that sword went both ways. Both parents loved nothing more than teasing their daughter until she exploded. And now she had to tell them that not only was she dating a younger man, not only was said younger man 14, but that her boyfriend happened to be one of the most famous teenagers in Britain for several generations. This was going to a nightmare.

She checked her hair one more time to make sure it was a nice neutral purple and gulping, knocked on the door.

“Nymphadora, what a surprise!” Andromeda exclaimed pulling open the door and folding Tonks into a hug. She grimaced trying to avoid flinching at her mother’s not so subtle needling. Sure the full name thing had started off innocently enough but for the past two decades Andromeda only did it because she knew she could get a rise out of Tonks.
“Hey, Mum. Is Dad around? I kinda need to talk to you both for a few minutes.”

“Of course, dear. Come in, have a seat, I’ll go get us some tea.” Andromeda moved off into the kitchen as Tonks went to the couch. “Ted! Nymphadora stopped by! Get off that infernal machine and come say hello to your daughter!”

“Coming, love!” Ted called back from somewhere in the bowels of the house. He stepped into the living room after another minute, gave Tonks a quick hug and smiled at her hair. “I like the purple, hun, but I think it would go better if your eyes offset it a bit. Maybe a yellow?”

Tonks raised her eyebrows and snorted. “What and look like a Sith? No thanks, Dad.”

He shrugged and sat down on the loveseat accepting the proffered teacup from Andromeda. “Lucas ruined yellow eyes for everyone with that series.”

“Now, Ted, most people can’t have yellow eyes so I hardly that’s a fair comparison,” Andromeda chided.

Tonks groaned and leaned back. “Why are we arguing about yellow eyes?”

Andromeda smiled and patted her leg. “Well because you don’t want to tell us why you came to visit us of course.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to talk about it…” she grumbled.

Ted chuckled. “Oh, Dora, you’d think you could lie better.”

“Well to everyone else I lie fine.”

“But not to us,” he replied with a smile. “Now, what has you up and about so early? I’d imagine you should be training with your friend at Hogwarts.”

Tonks shifted uncomfortably. “Um, well…you know that the First Task of the Triwizard was yesterday?” Both parents nodded. “Okay, and you know that Harry actually did remarkably well considering some attempts at sabotage?”

“I heard rumor that he performed the animagus ritual. Dangerous gamble that. I’m glad it worked out for him,” Andromeda commented.

Tonks nodded. “Yeah. Agreed. He didn’t have too many other options. We talked about it for a bit afterwards.”

“So you’re giving him the day off then, Dora?” Ted asked.

“Well yes. But that’s not why I’m here, Dad. I um…I have something to tell you…I uh, wanted to be the one to explain things. You know before you heard from someone else and got everything all twisted and weird and not cool and got some crazy ideas in your heads and gave him a hard time or tried to forbid me from it or…yeah, that’s not why I’m here,” she lamely finished off her ramble.

Andromeda smiled. A chill went down Tonks’ back. Her mother smiled like that only when she was about to play a particularly good card. “Oh really dear? So than I assume that this is about your recent relationship upgrade with a 14 year old young man with brilliant green eyes.”

Tonks blinked, staring at her mother and father neither of who seemed particularly surprised at Andromeda’s words or Tonks’ lack of reaction. She groaned and let her hair shift through to bright
orange. “Dammit you already knew. I was hoping to get here before you found out.”

Andromeda patted her daughter’s leg. “Oh, Nymphadora, you should really know me better than that. I am a Black again after all thanks to Sirius. I have access to all my old sources. Now, has he gotten you pregnant?”

Tonks’ eyes widened and she choked on her tea. “What?!?”

“Oh, I imagine I’ll have to get the wedding plans set up if that’s the case. Would you both be okay with the week that the term ends? I’d obviously prefer to wait until he’s at least 15 but we don’t want the baby to be illegitimate after all and that would be cutting rather dangerously close.”

“Mother! Stop!” Tonks yelled holding her hands over her face and desperately trying to dampen the full-body blush. “I’m not pregnant! We’ve only snogged twice, I’m not shagging him yet!”

“Oh good. That leaves me more than enough time to plan the wedding then!”

“Mum, please just stop!” Tonks moaned. “And how did you find out anyway? This literally just happened last night!”

“It’s already in the paper, Dora,” Ted said with a smile.

Andromeda rolled her eyes. “Well take all the mystery and fun out of it why don’t you?”

Tonks had meanwhile sat up straight and stared at her father. “Paper? Already? That…that shouldn’t be possible. I only got over myself yesterday afternoon after the Task…” She lifted her wand and summoned the *Daily Prophet* which zipped into her hands from the kitchen. Reading through it saw her hair shift into brilliant displays of red, her face heat up and her hands shake in rage. “Skeeter. I’m going to murder that woman.”

Andromeda casually sipped her tea. “I taught you better than that, Dora. Murder is easy. You want payback instead. I think we can do far better than a simple murder.”

Tonks’ eyes widened and she calmed back down. “You’re honestly not upset by…me and Harry?”

Ted shrugged. “Well of course we’d like to meet the young man. We haven’t forgotten though how he believed in you and gave you good advice for the past two years and how he’s done more since re-entering our world three years ago than most of your former compatriots did in a decade of being with the Aurors. I’m not particularly happy about his age personally – but, honey, better a younger man who appreciates you rather than an older man who only wants your abilities.”

Andromeda just lifted an eyebrow. “I was almost married off to a man forty years my senior when I was 15, Dora. Never forget what family I was raised with. Since I’m assuming you’re not playing Celebrity Who’s Who bedroom games with the young man to win him over,” Tonks growled low at that and Andromeda rolled her eyes. “I have no real issues beyond advising you to be careful, be prepared for the criticism and the comments and to make certain that above all, you are all happy with a multiple relationship.”

Tonks fidgeted. “Yeah…um, about that. I did already talk with his girlfriend, Hermione Granger. She, err, is rather eager about that aspect it seems.”

“Oh, good!” Andromeda smiled wide. “I remember you swearing off boys for a few years after you started off in Hogwarts. Now you get the best of both worlds!”

“Mum!” Tonks groaned. Her father just laughed and patted her leg. “You guys, suck.”
Ted shrugged. “True. We’re your parents. We’re supposed to get that reaction.” Tonks just groaned louder as her parents started to laugh.

Harry sat down to breakfast that morning feeling decidedly chipper for the first time in weeks. The mood was not to last unfortunately.

Hedwig swooped down to greet him with the other owls. She initially refused his offer of bacon and instead affectionately nipped at his fingers for a minute. “Thanks, girl. It’s nice to know you care.” She barked and puffed up before turned her head to the side. “Well of course I knew you cared before.” She eyed him and the people sitting nearby stared between owl and human. “Oh come on, I’m fine! And I even get to be a cool animal now!” Hedwig barked at that causing Harry to snort. “I’m not going to eat you when I change, Hedwig. I’m still me.” Hedwig preened her wing and ignored him. Harry sighed and held out his bacon again. “And I’m sorry for almost dying. Happy now?” His owl looked up, barked one final time, took the bacon and dropped the two issues of the *Prophet* she had carried in earlier. “Thanks, girl.”

Daphne reached over to grab one of the papers. “I really wish I understood how you talk with that owl,” she muttered. Hedwig barked at her and nipped her fingers. Daphne lifted an eyebrow. “What? I certainly can’t understand you like him. Well, actually for that matter I can’t understand him like you can either. He’s your human not mine.” Hedwig puffed up and flew up to Daphne’s shoulders.

Harry grinned at the two. “She likes you, Daph.” Daphne’s raised eyebrows garnered several laughs and Harry went back to his breakfast.

“Oh listen to this, guys,” Daphne said sounding excited. “Skeeter wrote an article decrying ‘awful mismanagement’, ‘unthinking potential homicides’, ‘lack of foresight’…it goes on and on. There’s very little fact here at all and mostly speculation, but it’s actually not too bad overall. At least it slams the organizers rather than the contestants. Mostly.”

“Mostly eh? What does it say about the contestants?” George asked from nearby.

Daphne sighed. “Well it decries Fred for using a loophole to cheat on the starting line though it does mention your owl order catalog so I’d recommend just taking it as free advertising. It says that Viktor shouldn’t have bothered playing with his creature and should’ve taken it out at the first glance. Fleur is beaten down for being French, being a Veela, not showing varied enough magic, etc. Harry is berated for using a dangerous ritual mid-combat as well as not knowing enough spellwork to get around his beast without resorting to extremes…the typical drivel I suppose. Certainly not as bad as it could’ve been.”

Harry had been looking at his own paper as Daphne talked. He was snarling to the point of practically spitting. “Yeah, because she saved all of the worst stuff for this one!”

The others turned to Harry. He started to read the article out loud:

*Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Cheated*

*Both in skills and in love Harry Potter is not as innocent as he appears. It has long been known that the young Boy-Who-Lived is skillful with his rune crafting and experimentation. What has only recently come to light is that he also seems to have a way with the fairer sex. Mr. Potter has been surrounded by the female gender for several years now. Ever since he reentered our world, he has been in the company of Hermione Granger, Muggle-born. The two made their relationship official at some point the year prior. One wonders just what the Granger girl did – and continues*
to do – to ensure that Harry Potter remains so attached to her for so long...

Not content with just the one girlfriend though, Harry has also flirted heavily with fellow Triwizard Champion, Fleur Delacour. The French girl has been seen shamelessly pursuing our young wizard since the Quidditch World Cup this summer. “It’s just sickening watching how open those two are about being interested in each other,” Pansy Parkinson, Harry’s schoolmate, comments. “Doesn’t he already have a girlfriend? Does he really have to wave it in our faces that he can have anyone that he wants whenever he wants them?” Perhaps there is some truth to this statement or perhaps it goes deeper than that. Fleur Delacour happens to have Veela blood. Could she be enchanting our dear national hero? Could she be seducing him with her charms and her powers that he has no defense against? One certainly hopes not, but the possibility cannot be ignored.

To further complicate matters, Harry just last night added Nymphadora Tonks, disgraced former Auror, to his growing harem. This woman graduated Hogwarts in 1991 making her nearly six years older than young Potter. They have had several meetings prior to this year but this reporter has discovered their steamy affair has heated up through repeated personal training sessions in the past two months. Just how deep do these sessions go? Just how much has this aged metamorphmagus abused her powers to snare and seduce Harry Potter? Just who has she impersonated to keep his interest or satisfy his fantasy?

Even more disturbing, Harry Potter has been taken in by young Bathsheda Babbling – the youngest professor on staff at Hogwarts. “Yeah, Professor Babbling starting hanging out with him and inviting him into her office first year,” Draco Malfoy, another fellow schoolmate says. “I know she graduated a few years back but it still seems inappropriate. And she always sticks up for him when he gets into trouble. They’ve got to have some sort of relationship. It’s the only thing that makes sense.” Careful investigations have uncovered that Babbling somehow managed to acquire legal guardianship status for Mr. Potter prior to his third year. Just what interest does this woman have for keeping the boy close? Just what sort of relationship do they really have? Inquiries to Gringotts about whether the Professor had managed to obtain magical guardianship status as well – which would have granted her complete control over our hero’s fate – was met with laughter. This reporter finally managed to find records showing that Harry Potter was legally emancipated September 3rd. Is it coincidence that this coincides with the boy’s selection into the Triwizard Tournament? Surely not! Could Harry have entered the Tournament solely to escape Ms. Babbling? We can only watch and wonder. Keep reading while we at the Daily Prophet follow up on this horrifying story concerning Harry Potter!

By the time Harry had finished reading the paper there were literal sparks jumping from his feet into the ground and a magical wind was fluttering the floating candles above. “When I catch that woman I’m going to –”

“Harry James Potter, you calm down this instant!” Luna yelled without any of her customary detached tone. Everyone stopped and looked to her. Harry blinked at Luna several times before he took a few deep breaths and relaxed his hands. The candles steadied and he seemed far less likely to strike someone. “Better,” Luna said. “Now remember that Rita Skeeter makes her living printing off vitriol and that you have a ready source to counter these lies. A source that has been growing larger and better respected for the past two years. A source that likes and trusts you. Remember that the wizarding world has no such thing as libel or slander laws so you legally can’t touch her.” Luna’s eyes narrowed and her voice took on a dangerous undertone. “Also remember that everyone has secrets. It is merely a matter of finding those secrets. We will retaliate. We will not give her further cause to injure us.”

The Gryffindors were quiet for a long minute. Eventually Tracey broke the silence. “Bloody hell,
Luna, how did Ravenclaw survive you? You’re as dangerous as Harry’s girlfriends!” She grinned like a loon and pulled the little blonde into a hug. Luna blushed and muttered something unintelligible and people started going back to their meals.

Harry shook his head as Hermione squeezed his hand. “Thanks, Luna. I appreciate the reality check,” he said glumly.

Luna pulled away from Tracey slightly and smiled at him, her dreaminess back in full force. “Anytime, Harry. That’s what I’m here for after all.”

Dumbledore noticed a disturbance by Harry’s table and frowned. The magic that boy let off when he was truly angry was worrisome and it further cemented the resolve he had renewed last night. Things around the young man calmed before Dumbledore felt the need to intervene however. A little curious, he turned to regard Babbling to see why the woman hadn’t gone down to check on the boy. Holding in a chuckle Dumbledore saw her glaring the *Daily Prophet* in front of her and seemingly trying to cause it to catch fire with her eyes.

Cracking a smile, Dumbledore opened his own paper intent on seeing just what it was that had gotten under the woman’s nerves. With a chuckle he read through the article. While he knew that Harry did have the same magnetic personality so prevalent in Dark Lords, it was obvious that the article was a huge exaggeration. He took a sip of his pumpkin juice as he finished up the amusing commentary.

*Harry Potter was legally emancipated September 3rd*

Dumbledore sat straight up and spit his juice out violently enough it reached a third of the way down the Ravenclaw table. He clutched the article and reread the last paragraph. Surely it was simply a falsification! Surely this couldn’t have happened! Not right under his nose! With horror Dumbledore realized that he hadn’t spoken against anything stated at the choosing of the Champions. There was in fact a distinct possibility that Harry could have wormed his way into twisting that to acknowledge an updated legal status.

With wide eyes, Dumbledore stood up fast enough that his chair was thrown backwards. “Minerva, I will be out for the day. Please handle matters here for me.” He ignored the odd looks several students and staff sent at him while he hurried out of the Great Hall. He had to call an emergency Wizengamot session to fix this immediately!

Harry watched Dumbledore practically sprint out of room and turned to his group. “What in Merlin’s name was that about?”

Daphne snorted reached over the table and tapped the article in front of him. Harry just frowned and Daphne rolled her eyes. “Neville? You want to take this one?”

Neville shrugged and said, “Sure. Harry, you never let Dumbledore know he wasn’t your magical guardian anymore right?” Harry agreed with his friend. “Well, Skeeter just let the cat out of the bag on that. He’s probably just run off to try and get that overturned and himself reinstated.”

Harry frowned. “Can he do that?”

“Doubt it,” Neville snorted. “He’d have to get a two thirds vote in the Wizengamot to overturn any guardian issues. The Headmaster has allies but not enough to pull favors like that. The real question is if you want to be there to watch the fireworks or if you just want Sirius and Remus to
give you the highlights later. You’re Lord Potter now even if you don’t officially use the title. You’re entitled to the seat at the Wizengamot.”

Harry frowned. He opened his mouth to speak but cut off as Shiva laid a hand on his shoulder from behind. “You’re going to the meeting, kid. Come on. Let’s collect Sirius and Remus and wait for him to call it. I want to watch this thing firsthand. At minimum it’ll take both our minds off strangling a certain reporter.”

“But your classes?”

“Are being covered by McGonagall. I’m entitled to attend as your legal guardian. Daphne, Neville, would either of you like to come as well? Both of you are far more suited to politics than me.”

Neville shook his head. “Sorry, I promised I’d help Professor Sprout in the greenhouse a little later.”

“I’ll go,” Daphne said moving her things into her backpack. Tracey shook her head beside her but didn’t say anything. “I’m certainly not about to let either of you take advice from Sirius Black. Remus Lupin might be skilled with Defense but he’s certainly not a politician.”

Snape strode up behind the group as they all stood up from the table. “Greengrass. Class starts in five minutes. I suggest you hurry along.”

Shiva gave the greasy haired man a soft smile. “Sorry, Professor Snape, Miss Greengrass is going to be attending a Wizengamot session in a few minutes. As her and Mr. Potter’s escort I assure you, I’ll keep watch over her.”

Snape frowned and glared at his colleague. “She is neither of age nor are you her Head of House. You do not have leave to exit the grounds, Greengrass.”

“Professor,” Daphne said smiling, “I am acting as the official legal counsel for Lord Potter. The position is an honor and a privilege. I have no intention of slighting a Noble House by refusing and I doubt my father would take barring me from attending to my duties in any sort of favorable light. If you wish to force this issue than I can contact him via Floo to ensure that everything is cleared up prior to whenever the meeting should commence.”

Snape’s frown deepened into a scowl, then he jerked his chin down in a brief nod. He looked like he wanted to spit out an acerbic reply but ended up biting his tongue. “Ensure you do not dawdle or sightsee Greengrass.” Turning on his heel Snape left in a huff.

Harry waved goodbye to his friends and followed Shiva and Daphne out into the Entrance Hall. Hopefully the Wizengamot session would be entertaining instead of annoying.
Chapter 23: Wizengamot and Witch’s Woes

Harry, Shiva and Daphne met up with Sirius and Remus in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic. Harry idly fingered his badge – *Harry Potter, Fireworks Observer/Instigator* – and peered curiously at the woman standing beside Sirius. She looked vaguely familiar but he couldn’t put his finger on it…

“Heya, pup,” Sirius said smiling. “You got here fast! Dumbledore just called the meeting ten minutes ago and it starts in another fifteen. I thought we’d have to have Remus sit for you.”

“We watched Dumbledore literally run out of the Great Hall after reading the paper. Figured it’d be a good idea to come straight here,” Shiva said shrugging. “Hello, Andromeda. I’m a little surprised to see you here.”

The woman besides Sirius just lifted a corner of her mouth and shook her head bemusedly. “Professor Babbling, did you really think I’d let my cousin come to an important Wizengamot session without an actual legal advisor?” Sirius held a hand to his heart while the rest chuckled. “Miss Greengrass, I assume you’re fulfilling the same role for our young Lord Potter?”

Daphne nodded and gave a slight curtsey. “That would be correct, Mrs. Tonks.”

Harry’s eyes widened as he looked back at Andromeda. His mouth went a little dry and he had to fight the urge to run and hide in a corner somewhere. “Um, hello, Mrs. Tonks. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Oh no need to be so formal, Harry!” Andromeda said smiling evilly at him. “Call me Andromeda or Andi. After all it’s only a matter of time before you’re officially family now isn’t it?”

Harry gulped. “Err, so I guess Tonks talked to you already then…”

“She stopped by a few hours ago,” Andromeda said with a shrug, chuckling lightly. Remus and Sirius just looked between the two confused. “I asked about when I should start planning for a wedding but she didn’t very cooperative.” Harry blanched and started trying desperately to loosen his collar completely ignoring Daphne and Shiva rolling their eyes to either side of him. “You’re going to have to talk to Dora. I realize it may be some time off but really, these things take time.”

“Right. I’ll uh, get right on that…”

Andromeda broke down laughing and pulled Harry into a brief hug before moving back to Sirius’ side and shaking her head. “Kids these days are far too easy to set off balance. Don’t worry, Harry, I’m just teasing. My husband and I would like to sit down with you at some point in the future, but we realize you’re quite swamped at the moment. Shall we all head down? We can talk on the way.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief as they all piled into the lift. Sirius leaned against the wall with his arms crossed and said, “So I take it you and my cousin are dating, Harry?” Harry nodded trying and failing to suppress the blush on his cheeks. Sirius snorted. “Man, pup, James would be so proud. Not even 15 and already has two girlfriends.” He wiped fake tears from the corners of his eyes while Remus just shook his head. “I was wondering how much truth was in that article. Anyway, try to let me take the lead in this session for the most part yeah? If you’re directly
addressed respond, but have Daphne give you prompts. Marcus may be a bit frustrating, but he taught his girls well.” Harry and Daphne both nodded. “Amelia is of course on our side in practically everything, as is Augusta Longbottom. I got word from the Abbotts, the Browns – and surprisingly the Bulstrodes – that they’ll vote with us as well. The Patils and the Lis don’t have a seat on the Wizengamot but they’ve both already informed their trading partners to follow along with us. Even if things go utterly off the rails we should be able to prevent a two thirds majority to overturn anything. Daphne can we count on your father’s help?”

Daphne grimaced. “I’m not sure. Lord Greengrass votes according to who presents the best case for his own interests. He’s never been a fan of the Headmaster, so I would say it’s likely however I would not recommend counting on him.”

The others nodded. Harry frowned. “Could we use this session to bring Dumbledore or Umbridge up on charges?” The lift pinged and the group walked out.

Andromeda shook her head. “Dora has explained some things to me. Unfortunately, as Umbridge said yesterday, you really don’t have any actual proof of wrongdoing.”

“But they rigged the Tournament! And with all the other stuff he’s done…” Harry muttered scowling.

Andromeda just shrugged. “He was your magical guardian. While his actions were underhanded and highly suspect they nearly all had legal justification and precedent. They didn’t show good judgment and we will certainly use that, but they also were not technically illegal. Even the barrier around the Task had a legitimate reason. You can’t prove the intent was malicious even if we all know that was likely. The fact that five X creatures would be near casual observers gave them the right to construct safety measures. I’m certain it wasn’t Umbridge or Fudge who came up with that little gem of wisdom since neither are intelligent enough for that.” She smiled and Harry felt a chill run down his back, suddenly very glad that the woman was not directing that at him. “However, just because we cannot accuse the esteemed Headmaster does not mean we cannot imply anything…”

They reached the Wizengamot chamber and headed up into the stands taking their seats, Sirius next to Harry and the others sitting behind the two. Sirius clapped Harry on the shoulder. “Just relax and enjoy the show, pup.”

Harry sighed and nodded. Politics really made no sense whatsoever. Less than a minute after they sat down, Dumbledore strode into the Chamber and took a seat in the center chair with Fudge sitting beside him. He banged a gavel against the podium in front of him and called out, “I call this emergency meeting of the Wizengamot into session. A matter of grave importance has recently come to my attention which necessitated this meeting. I apologize for the short notice and thank all for their prompt attendance.” He paused and cast a grandfatherly gaze at the assembly. Harry just snorted wondering when the man was going to notice that he was here. “We have convened this morning to discuss the oversight leading to young Harry Potter being cast adrift in our world and to ensure that it is corrected so that he can be properly guided as befitting all other young wizards among us.”

Sirius stood and cleared his throat. “Chief Warlock, are you referring to Lord Potter’s emancipated status?”

Dumbledore nodded with a deep sigh. “Yes, Lord Black, that is exactly what I am referring to. Such a sad state that a fault of our own led to this circumstance. We simply must address this issue.”
Sirius shrugged. “Well sure, but if you’re so concerned why didn’t you bring it up two months ago when it first happened? You were his magical guardian up to that point weren’t you? Surely you received the notification? It wasn’t a problem then for Lord Potter to take up his seat, why has this suddenly become an issue requiring the entire Wizengamot?”

Dumbledore shifted slightly and frowned at Sirius. His eyes widened as he locked eyes with Harry and Harry gave the old man a little wave. “I must have missed that notification, Lord Black. I assure you, as soon as I became aware of the occurrence I immediately moved to convene this body.”

Sirius grinned. “You must have been pretty busy to not realize for two months that your charge wasn’t your charge.” Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed slightly and Sirius charged on. “But I suppose we all might as well hear whatever arguments you have to try and overturn the fully legal means that Lord Potter has obtained his emancipation.”

“Perhaps first we should determine exactly how said emancipation occurred,” Dumbledore said. “Surely this technicality must be addressed and corrected.”

Sirius made a show of rubbing his chin. He turned to look at Harry and there were a few gasps as several close by people recognized that he was in the stands. “Hmm, Lord Potter, you claimed emancipation because the Minister for Magic’s direct representative claimed that only legal adults could participate in the Triwizard Tournament and they were refusing to allow you to disqualify yourself, yes? And your magical guardian was in the room at the time and said nothing to contradict either point?”

Harry nodded and stood up. Many more indrawn breaths greeted him as he nodded. “That’s correct, Lord Black. When the Ministry itself proclaimed that I needed to be recognized as an adult in the magical world in order to compete in the Tournament emancipation seemed like the best option. I am rather interested in keeping my magic after all.” He sat back down and smirked at the pursed look that Fudge developed.

“So, Chief Warlock,” Sirius said cocking his head at Dumbledore, “now that we’ve cleared up how, shall we hear your counter-arguments?”

Dumbledore’s eyes closed briefly and he visibly shifted gears apparently recognizing that he wouldn’t be able to get Harry’s emancipation thrown out via improper procedures. Once Harry had mentioned losing his magic he’d more or less won that argument hands down. “An adult in our world must be capable of supporting themselves. Mr. Potter – ”

“I believe that’s Lord Potter in this setting Chief Warlock,” Sirius interjected.

Dumbledore pursed his lips and replied, “Of course. My mistake, Lord Potter, must be capable of supporting himself. He is still a mere schoolboy. He cannot possibly accomplish his studies while maintaining a living.”

Sirius outright laughed. “Really? Chief Warlock, you embarrass yourself! Completely discounting that Lord Potter has full rights to access his own inheritance, he is also the Heir Black meaning he has my House’s reserves as well. In addition Professor Babbling still assists in this aspect. Plus on top of all that he has successfully started his own business already. I believe he’s already associated with Fred and George Weasley’s business as well. Perhaps you’ve heard of either one? Weasley Wizarding Wheezes or Potter Runes?”

Dumbledore spread his hands beseechingly. “Lord Black, a simple schoolyard owl form hardly covers a child’s full expenses.”
Sirius raised his eyebrows and was about to motion for Harry to stand again when Amelia abruptly stood up from her position near Dumbledore. “Chief Warlock,” she said, “Potter Runes has recently supplied their proprietary Silver Spirit rune to the entirety of the Auror department. This alone has greatly increased the ability of the Aurors to control – and if necessary combat – a Dementor. While they were provided at a steep discount I’m sure it still turned a nice profit for Lord Potter. I’ve been in talks with him to supply additional types of rune clusters to further increase the Auror’s standard arsenal.”

Harry stood as Amelia sat back down. “That’s just the first professional contract, Chief Warlock. The prank stones have a high demand and we’re already getting a bit of a backorder on several items. When I get the opportunity to expand, I imagine I’ll be making more money than several people in this room.”

Dumbledore frowned. “Be that as it may, you still require a place to reside, Lord Potter.”

Daphne leaned forward and whispered, “Mention your estate and how you’ve been having it fixed up for a while. Also bring up your Muggle legal guardian status before he attacks you there. Make it a positive, Harry.”

Harry nodded and turned back to the chamber. “Currently I’m living with my legal guardian, Professor Babbling.” Dumbledore opened his mouth to say something but Harry kept talking before he could. “She became my guardian in the Muggle world prior to my third year and has done an excellent job of correcting my previous medical issues and living conditions. Her flat is more than accommodating enough for the two of us, but it isn’t necessarily fitting for a Noble House. So we’ve been in talks with the Goblin Nation to restore Potter Manor since I moved in with her. The work is nearly complete and will be ready for inspection sometime during the winter holiday.”

A flurry of murmuring broke out at that and Harry saw Dumbledore’s frown deepen. Harry sat back down and let Sirius take over again. Dumbledore sighed and said, “While Lord Potter’s foresight in some matters can be seen, his overall inexperience and lack of wisdom is readily apparent. This is clearly shown in his choice of relationships. Why just this morning we all read how Lord Potter has entered into a relationship with a woman quite a few years older than himself. Miss Tonks left a stable job with the Ministry for no reason, with no warning and she is far too old for him. That Lord Potter thinks this relationship is acceptable is deeply concerning.”

Harry growled low, but stilled as Daphne laid a hand on his shoulder shaking her head slightly. She nodded towards Andromeda and Sirius both of who had gone rather still. Andromeda leaned in to whisper to Sirius and the smile he sent Dumbledore afterwards probably lowered the temperature in the room by several degrees.

“Chief Warlock,” Sirius said, “allow me to address some of those points. Miss Tonks did not leave the Aurors with no reason. She had been consistently sidelined and belittled despite many of her suggestions leading to money saving alternatives or increased security. In addition her deductive skills were proven correct several times, one of the primary cases being my own proven innocence.” The room again broke out in murmurs.

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Amelia stood and glared at Dumbledore. “I spoke with Former Auror Tonks quite extensively about her decision to leave. Her reasons were valid and pervasive. Her complaints brought to light a frankly absurd level of derision and prejudice within the ranks that I am still working to stamp out. Her competence was never once in question and the simple fact that she was the last protégé of Alastor Moody should prove that beyond the shadow of a doubt.”

“If you are implying that Miss Tonks is lacking in employment you are flat out wrong since she
was working for me up until accepting a post as Lord Potter’s personal trainer for the
to the…’last minute additions’ to the wards
preventing any outside assistance.”

Harry noticed several people turn direct annoyed gazes at both Dumbledore and Fudge at Sirius’ remark. He wasn’t done yet though. “In addition to this, Miss Tonks and Lord Potter have had previous interactions for several years and have come to know each other quite well. Even discounting all this…Nymphadora Tonks is a member of the House of Black through her mother Andromeda Tonks nee Black my own cousin. Lord Potter has a relation to House Black through his grandmother, Dorea Potter nee Black allowing me to name him my Heir. However, this connection is not as strong as my family tends to prefer. Should Heir Black’s relationship with Miss Tonks progress to a marriage it would certainly strengthen the familial ties to a point where the family blood and name would be assured to be pure.”

Harry frowned at that, but again Daphne leaned in. “Don’t dispute it, Harry. It’s just politics. Your friends all know you didn’t start anything with Tonks because of that, but the purebloods in the room will never say anything against either of you if they think that you’re basically being set up as a political marriage to strengthen a claim. It’s common practice among some of them and gives you even more pull in those circles for having the respect to play their game.” Harry sighed and nodded he understood.

Dumbledore was straight up scowling at this point. “Certainly the boy is too young to be making such decisions.”

Several people in the audience laughed at this one. Harry waved for Sirius to sit down and stood to defend himself this time. “Chief Warlock, was I too young when I fought a Professor at 11 to safeguard the Philosopher’s Stone? Was I too young when I fought a basilisk at 12 to save a classmate? Was I too young when I fought off hundreds of Dementors at 13 to save my godfather, the head of the DMLE, and more classmates? Was I too young to fight off rioters at the Quidditch World Cup over the summer? Was I too young to enter the Triwizard Tournament?”

Dumbledore just shook his head. “That you have had to face such things despite your age is deeply regrettable, Lord Potter. But surely I have served as your magical guardian for long enough to warrant being reinstated. I understand the unique requirements that come from caring for the Boy-Who-Lived and can ascertain that all your needs are met without incident. I am the only one who can be trusted with such a burden, Lord Potter. Surely you understand this. Surely you don’t wish to take on everything by yourself.”

Harry narrowed his eyes at Dumbledore. “Lord Black, perhaps you’d like to answer this. I don’t quite trust myself to maintain my calm.”

Sirius snorted and stood. “Of course, Lord Potter. Chief Warlock, every incident that Lord Potter just stated except the World Cup occurred at Hogwarts under your very nose. Whether these attacks were intentional or not doesn’t particularly matter. You were unable to protect him from them while he was at your own school.” Murmurs rose in the audience again. “You neglected to remove a mail ward after he began attending school preventing Lord Potter from retrieving his correspondences. You neglected to inform Lord Potter about his heritage, inheritance and his expected duties as an eventual member of this very body.” The murmurs rose in volume and Harry could hear several angry whispers. “You were his magical guardian since his parents were murdered yet you never checked on him during his time with his magic-hating Muggle guardians;
Sirius sighed and shook his head theatrically. “This lack of oversight led to neglect, abuse and malnourishment. Lord Potter has recovered significantly thanks to Professor Babbling, but the process continues. You, Chief Warlock Dumbledore, utterly failed as a magical guardian to Harry Potter. You hold far too many titles: Chief Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, Headmaster of Hogwarts. Just one of these jobs is supposed to be a full time position yet you hold all three. Chief Warlock, you are far too overworked to ever be expected to act as an effective magical guardian. Lord Potter is doing perfectly fine on his own and he has several advisors and friends to assist him if he ever requires it. Something you might think of doing yourself.”

Augusta Longbottom stood up nodding. “Well said, Lord Black. The Longbottoms have long been allied with the Potters. Had we realized the deplorable conditions that Lord Potter was left in prior to his recovery I would have made it my mission to see you in a cell for neglect, Chief Warlock. You are lucky that the young woman took charge of the situation before we were forced into that action and that the young man has recovered.”

Mr. Bulstrode stood drawing several raised eyebrows. “He is also proving to be an extremely good influence at the school. My daughter was thought of as a simple brute not suited to anything beyond housework – even by my wife and me. She has since taken Lord Potter’s attitude and work effort to heart and has risen to become the third highest scoring Slytherin in her year group. If he can inspire that sort of change in my daughter I see no reason why he shouldn’t be left to his own devices.”

Dumbledore gave a heavy sigh and sat down in his seat. “Shall we cast a vote on this issue? All those in favor of returning Harry Potter to my custody cast your spell into the white orb.” He raised his wand and a white and black orb appeared in front of him. “All those for Harry Potter maintaining his emancipated status, cast your spell into the black orb.”

Harry couldn’t help the large grin that spread over his face as almost the entirety of the Wizengamot members cast their votes into the black orb. Shiva had been right. It was supremely entertaining getting to finally put the aged Headmaster in his place.

“I admit, I expected us to have a bit more trouble than that,” Daphne said as the small group left the Wizengamot chambers.

Andromeda shrugged. “Albus Dumbledore is not used to people questioning him, especially not in a setting he normally controls such as this. He wasn’t prepared for informed, logical arguments. I doubt he was expecting us to actually have been ready for this meeting and to have thought it out beforehand.” She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Actually many witches and wizards tend to blindsided when presented with a properly reasoned and logical argument. We really do need to include more Muggle-born in our proceedings…”

Harry snorted. “Agreed. But hey, it worked out for us at the moment so I’m not complaining right now. They were still so annoyed with Dumbledore that I was able to get Remus as my official proxy without anyone even commenting on him being a werewolf!”

Remus smiled shyly. “I’m still honored that you trust me with this, Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s nothing, Remus. Just make sure to ask me about anything big beforehand.” The older man nodded and they all stepped out of the lift onto the floor with the animagus registration office.
“I must say, I am looking forward to seeing your transformation close up, Harry.”

“Yeah, pup, I can’t wait! Don’t get me wrong, you ever do something that foolish again and I’ll… um… I’ll uh… Andi?” Everyone laughed as Sirius fumbled for an appropriate punishment.

Andromeda eventually quieted and turned to Harry grinning. “Please ignore my cousin, Harry. He tends to be the one being punished rather than the one doing the punishing.”

Harry just smiled and shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. Shiva’s got that part covered anyway. I lose apple tart privileges.”

“Amongst other things,” Shiva muttered at the raised eyebrows. “What? He’s got the innocent kid look down pat. You try punishing him with anything long term and we’ll how well you do.”

They were still chuckling as Harry stepped up to the counter and said hello to the wizard behind the desk. The man looked up and nearly fell out of his chair when he saw Harry standing in front of him. “My word! Harry Potter as I live and breathe! Oh I had hoped that you would come while I was on shift! May I have your autograph, young man? Please? It’s for my daughter. She’s followed your creations and was one of the first on your owl order listing!”

Harry managed to stop his groan before it left his lips and just nodded his assent. At least he was being praised for something he’d actually done instead of his parent’s sacrifice. The wizard quickly grabbed some parchment and slid it across the desk. “Her name is, Marie, Mr. Potter.”

Quickly signing the parchment, Harry handed it back to the beaming man and cleared his throat. “Um, can I register my animagus form now?”

“Oh, certainly, certainly! My apologies, please just step through here,” the clerk quickly ushered all six into a side room with a large circle outlined in the middle. “Stand in the center, Mr. Potter. Now, your animagus is a panther, yes? Good. We won’t need to use the expanded room. Some people’s forms are quite large and don’t really fit here. Whenever you’re ready, Mr. Potter.”

Harry took a breath and shifted. Once he was on all fours the clerk stepped forward to peer at him. Harry hesitantly took a small breath. The nearby smells were still strong but they weren’t as bad as back in the Gryffindor common room during the party. One quick sneeze and he could breathe normally. As the clerk took his notes, Harry’s friends all peered at him curiously as well.

Sirius gave a low whistle. “Still got those green eyes, pup. Maybe I should start using ‘cub’ instead… That is a really beautiful fur coat. I wish my hair was that soft and silky when I transform.”

“Maybe you should bathe more as a dog then, Padfoot,” Remus commented amused.

Daphne frowned and leaned forward tentatively reaching out a hand towards Harry’s head but stopping halfway. “May I?” she asked. Harry responded by leaning forward to bump her hand with his head and purred softly as she idly scratched him. “Your fur is a bit grayer in this section above your eyes, Harry.”

Shiva and Andromeda looked where she was pointing and Shiva nodded. “Yeah, she’s right. It looks a bit like your scar actually. Man, kid, you’re stuck with that thing even as an animal!”

Harry did his best to shrug his shoulders. The wizard moved back to Harry’s front and tapped the parchment he had been using with his wand. “You may change back now, Mr. Potter.” Harry shifted and the man smiled. “Anything unique besides the eyes and the slight coloration on your forehead that you know of?”
“I don’t think so,” Harry said shrugging. “It feels…weird. Like there’s something I’m missing or not doing, but this is only like the third time that I’ve changed and I wasn’t really paying much attention the first time so…I don’t think so?”

The clerk nodded. “Well there likely isn’t anything else. Odd feelings during the first few transformations are common. Should anything strange develop in the future please keep us posted so we can update your records. I’ll make sure a copy of this license is entered into the Hall of Records. It should be automatic just like trial proceedings, but one can never be too careful! Would you like a copy as well?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, please. Also can we have one extra copy for Gringotts?”

“Of course, of course!” He made the copies and handed them over. “A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Potter! Have a pleasant evening all of you!”

As they walked out, Sirius stared at him contemplatively. “You said it feels weird, pup?” Harry nodded. “Weird like too much information or weird like a thrumming in your bones?”

Harry considered as the lift started to move. “Maybe the latter? I don’t know. It’s really hard to describe. Could it be a side effect of the ritual?” he asked grimacing slightly.

Daphne reached over and squeezed his hand. “I checked into that last night, Harry. If there were dangerous side effects you would’ve known by now.”

Shiva and Sirius both nodded their agreement. “It’s not meant to be done with magical creatures as the focus though,” Sirius said shrugging. “While a chimera is based largely around the lion body it is still magical. The ritual really shouldn’t have worked using it in place of a regular critter. That it did was a huge stroke of luck, Harry. It’s possible that the chimera did end up contaminating your form somewhat though. Maybe you got a bit of something extra from the deal. Most animagi gain some sense of their animal’s instincts while transformed. Whatever is feeling odd about yours, just go with it. See where it leads, what the panther wants. You never know, there might be something awesome at the end of that road.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “Okay. Thanks for the advice, Sirius.” He was still deep in thought as they split up to head their separate ways.

Barty watched from the staircase as Potter, Greengrass and Babbling came back into the castle. He allowed himself a quick glance at the two women before nodding his respect to the boy. While he’d never admit it out loud he was quickly coming to see why his Master was so obsessed with Potter. It took a special kind of blind stubbornness to survive against a chimera. Granted there had been quite a bit of luck involved, but even the spell chains before he bothered to try the ritual had shown a large amount of promise. The battlefield transfiguration was nothing to slouch at either. Not for a fourth year.

It was a true shame they’d be killing the boy at the end of the year. The Dark Lord had said that Potter had impressed him enough that the boy would be offered a duel to allow for a quick, honorable death but still…Crouch started to wonder if they might be able to turn him. He’d make for a powerful asset and it would greatly demoralize the Light if their savior ended up assisting the Dark Lord. Something to consider at least.

He frowned as his magical eye caught Draco Malfoy slinking up the dungeon staircase. Potter had stopped to tie his oxfords while his companions continued forward. Draco muttered something below Barty’s hearing range and lifted his wand pointing it at Potter. Snarling slightly Barty
stepped off the stairs. Potter may be the enemy, but he certainly didn’t deserve to be cursed in the back by a cowardly little weasel like the Malfoy spawn!

Draco managed to get off a spell but Barty levitated a suit of armor into the path causing it to ricochet into the ceiling. Potter immediately dropped and rolled while Babbling and Greengrass also drew their wands and turned back towards the entrance hall. Barty just grinned at their reaction times and watched Draco’s mouth drop open. He savored it for a moment before flicking his wand and in the little Malfoy’s place was a tiny ferret. Barty laughed at getting to have some fun for once and kept flicking his wand bouncing the ferret up and down in the hall a few times. Oh this should be the common punishment for students!

Potter cocked his head and sidled up next to Barty. “Um, thanks for blocking that spell, Professor. Is that ferret Malfoy?”

“Constant vigilance, Potter. Constant vigilance. Imagine if I hadn’t been here!” He let that lie for a moment as the other two came up followed shortly by McGonagall.

McGonagall uttered a horrified little gasp. “Is that a student?!”

“Yup. Ferret boy here was trying to curse Potter in the back. I don’t know what kind of school you’re running here, but that constitutes an attack amongst the Aurors. A bit of transfiguration is far easier than I could have been,” Barty said. It was true too; he could’ve crucio’ed the little coward. He had to restrain his smile at the thought of torturing the little brat. Lucius had gotten to keep prancing about maintaining his status by just lining a few pockets and abandoning their Master. Torturing his spawn a bit seemed like fair play. A bit of a smirk slipped through as he kept bouncing the ferret.

Greengrass raised an eyebrow. “He’s almost cute in this form. Can we just leave him like that?”

McGonagall gave another strangled noise and pulled out her wand transforming Draco back to normal. Barty sighed. Such a shame. “We do not transfigure students as punishment!” Draco looked around, blinking stupidly. The boy looked torn between leaping at Barty and running away.

Shiva sighed. “Malfoy, get to the hospital wing. Detention tonight. We’ll discuss just why you feel it’s acceptable to try and curse someone in the back then. And depending on your answers, we’ll see just how many more detentions you end up with.”

Barty shrugged. Well it wasn’t torture, but it was something. At least the woman showed nerve to go along with her appearance. He cursed having chosen to be Moody yet again. Looking at women was all well and good, but no one would ever consent to going out with the gnarled old man. Shame Lockhart wasn’t still around…that had certainly been an excellent specimen of a man.

Andromeda sat down in the chair across from Rita Skeeter all smiles. The reporter grinned back at her and pulled out a Quick Quotes Quill along with some parchment. If there had been any doubt at all in Andi’s mind that pretty much killed it right there. The despicable little worm couldn’t even be bothered to use a real Dicta Quill. Bitch deserved this. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, Ms. Skeeter.”

Skeeter smiled and waved off her concern. “I admit I was a bit surprised. I never expected you to ask to give an interview concerning your daughter’s…activities,” the woman said with a sly little grin. “She must have quite frustrated you for you to be willing to reveal the true extent of her time
“After a fashion,” Andi said. She reached for the tea set beside on the table and poured two glasses passing one to Skeeter. “Please, have some tea. Only the best for my guests.” Andi wandlessly vanished her own drink before lifting the cup to her lips. Skeeter smiled and sipped her tea while Andi kept in her snort of amusement. It was simply amazing how often that little trick worked. It was one of the first things her mother had drilled into her, pour the laced drink, vanish the laced drink, pretend to drink the laced drink, watch as your rival drinks the laced drink now assuming it’s safe.

“This is delicious, Mrs. Tonks,” Skeeter said. She quickly draining the cup and Andi nearly didn’t manage to cover her urge to facepalm with a cough. Really, the compulsion charm to drink wasn’t even that strong! And the tea was awful!

“I’m glad you enjoy it. Now shall we get to business?”

“Of course, of course!” Skeeter leaned forward with a hungry, slightly glazed look in her eyes.

“So then, tell me, Ms. Skeeter, what don’t you want me to know?”

“Well I found out that info about your daughter by spying on her,” Skeeter said leaning back with a smile. A moment after she finished speaking her features morphed into horror and she glanced down at the tea cup. “What did you do?!?”

“Just a touch of veritaserum in the tea. Really, quite simple. I’m honestly a bit disappointed that I didn’t have to try anything more complicated. How did you spy on my daughter?” Andi asked waving a hand in dismissal.

“I’m an unregistered beetle animagus and I listened on the tree behind them talking. I was hoping to get something juicy on Potter and the Veela, but I got something with your daughter instead.” Panic crossed her eyes and she clapped one hand over her mouth while the other reached for her wand only to find it across the room being held by a grinning house elf.

“Winky is good elf. Winky takes bad reporter’s wand, as Mistress’ mother asked,” the elf said bowing low.

“Thank you, Winky. Just leave the wand over here, please. And tell Dora I’ll have a bit to add to whatever the little Ravenclaw is cooking up.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” With a pop the elf had vanished leaving just the wand sitting beside Andi on the armchair.

“Now, where were we? Oh yes,” she quickly sent a spell at Rita forcing the woman’s arms onto the couch. “So you were just telling me about you being an unregistered beetle animagus. Have you spied on any others of note with this skill?”

“Yes,” Skeeter said through clenched teeth. “My boss, three of my competitors, the editor for Teen Witch Weekly, Madame Rosmerta, Krum, several team members of the Holyhead Harpies, the manager of the Chudley Cannons, the Weird Sisters, the Lis, the Patils, several other trading partners, a few business owners, patrons at the Leaky Cauldron, patrons at Gringotts, Madame Marchbanks, others who I forget.”

Andi’s eyes widened. “I admit I’m a bit impressed. That’s quite a list. I assume you tried to stay away from anyone who you’d offend too greatly?”
“Yes,” Skeeter practically spat out. “I didn’t screw with the important people because they’d come after me.”

“Well, it’s really a shame that you forgot that despite my name change I am still a Black,” Andi chuckled. “While Dora may be frustrating and annoying at times, I love her dearly. I don’t take kindly to people accusing her of being a whore on national news. So, Ms. Skeeter, what is your dirtiest secret?”

Skeeter visibly fought against the potion and the spell, shuddering in her seat and clacking her teeth trying to stop from answering. The fight didn’t last very long. “The Carrows,” she mumbled slumping into the chair. “They’re my darkest secret.”

Andi leaned forward intrigued. “Oh? What about the Carrows?”

“Amycus and Alecto are together. Together, together. A couple. The twins regularly are intimate with each other,” Skeeter said looking away from Andi. “I found out about two years ago while I was looking for some juicy gossip. Saw them going at it on the couch. They caught me, offered me a bribe to stay quiet about it. I took it and also made sure that I can join in every once in a while. It’s harder to get laid when most of society’s suitable people rather despise you or are worried you’ll find blackmail on them. And the twins are somewhat attractive.”

Andi leaned back and couldn’t hold in her laughter. “I was hoping for a bit of blackmail or some juicy tidbits to give to the Quibbler. I certainly wasn’t expected anything this good! My, my, Rita. You’ve been a bad girl!” She stood still laughing and moved over to Skeeter. “Here’s the antidote. Drink up.”

Skeeter hurriedly gulped the potion and glared at Andi. “What do you want?”

Andi shrugged. “Honestly I would’ve been perfectly content to simply keep blackmailing you with this and have you become our personal attack dog. My daughter’s new boyfriend and his other girlfriend though were rather insistent that, and I quote, ‘we want her destroyed’. So I will deliver this information to your newest adorable little rival and watch the sparks fly!”

Skeeter’s eyes widened. “You can’t do that! Please! I’ll do anything! I’ll report whatever you want. I’ll stop reporting. I’ll move to another country. Please!”

Andi sighed and shook her head. “Sorry, Rita, you’ve succeeded in tickling the sleeping dragon. Harry and his friends can be quite ruthless to those that threaten the people they care about. You’ve done that. Now, let’s erase this conversation shall we?” Andi pulled out her wand and a quick obliviate later, Rita was walking back to her desk annoyed at Andromeda Tonks berating her on lying about Nymphadora Tonks instead of giving anything useful for the interview.

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The Writing and Lies of Rita Skeeter – A True Harry Potter Story

By Luna Lovegood

Rita Skeeter is widely known as a prolific reporter primarily writing for the Daily Prophet and Teen Witch Weekly. While her articles are generally interesting and entertaining to read they very rarely have a basis in fact aiming primarily for shock value. They twist kernels of truth into paper-selling stories of lies and scandal. This may sound funny coming from the Quibbler but the truth is often far stranger than fiction.

A primary example of Rita’s version of the ‘truth’ concerns one Harry Potter and the most recent article printed about him. Several claims were made by the paper against him, none with any
context, and all involving a healthy amount of invented scandalous details and speculation. Let us examine these points on a case by case basis with quotes from The-Boy-Who-Lived himself.

Hermione Granger: “Hermione has been my best friend since we survived a troll attack together on Halloween, 1991,” Harry Potter states. “Becoming her friend is one of the only truly good things I can say has ever happened to me on any Halloween ever. Hermione has always supported me no matter what and she is the most brilliant witch of the age. I’m honored to know her and call her my friend.” Harry Potter began dating Hermione Granger in 1993 satisfying a great many personnel in Hogwarts castle who had been running a pool for when they would make it official. Sadly this author did not make much money from the pool herself, however the point is, their relationship was no surprise to anyone who spoke with either for longer than 60 seconds.

Fleur Delacour: “Hermione and I both met Fleur as she was being assaulted by the Death Eater wannabes at the Quidditch World Cup. Even with a really bad head injury she was still able to fight back and she saved both of our lives that night. Fleur may be Veela, but she has more self control than almost anyone else I’ve met. One of the reasons we are such good friends is that I’m one of the few people mostly unaffected by her Allure and Hermione is getting better at ignoring it as well. Fleur can be herself around us without needing to worry about whether she’s talking to a dumbstruck zombie.” It should be noted that the Beauxbatons Champion has made many inroads with multiple other Hogwarts students and is quite well liked and respected among both the students and staff.

Nymphadora Tonks: “Tonks is probably the main reason I’m alive to talk to you today. Without her training this year I never would’ve survived the First Task. She also really helped me with clearing the name of my godfather, Sirius Black. Even before that, Tonks helped me to stay calm when there was an issue with getting to school in my second year. She’s been a good friend for years now and while yes, it’s true that we recently started dating, it’s not true that Tonks and I have been having an affair. Due to my godfather naming me his Heir I’m expected to have two wives eventually. Tonks was against starting anything between us for quite some time due to the age difference and only the reality of my potential death in these Triwizard Tasks has changed her mind.” One topic that both Harry Potter and Tonks repeatedly avoid concerns her abilities as a metamorphmagus. While neither will explicitly discuss it this reporter has been given leave to explain that Harry Potter is only the third male outside the immediate family to never once ask Tonks to take a specific form and that this was a large factor in their original friendship.

Bathsheda Babbling: “Professor Babbling is the first adult who I ever trusted. She was the first person to actively try to help me, and probably saved my life and the lives of my classmates by showing me safer ways to work with runes. She’s constantly supported me and as soon as she found out about my living conditions with my relatives she immediately began acting to try and get me removed from that environment and into someplace safe. After several long discussions I asked her to be my guardian as there simply wasn’t anyone else I trusted more for the task. I consider Bathsheda Babbling more of a family member than my Aunt and Uncle ever were.” Bathsheda Babbling’s first actions as Harry Potter’s guardian were to ensure that he obtained inoculations and treatment from St. Mungo’s. He had never had a magical physical before and several problems were corrected and prevented before they could develop into lifelong ailments. In less than three years, Miss Babbling has done more for The-Boy-Who-Lived than anyone else in our world other than his late mother and father.

Rita Skeeter: This reporter has come into some rather startling information regarding the Rita Skeeter. Many have wondered over the years just how she manages to obtain some of her most inflammatory knowledge. It appears that Miss Skeeter is in fact an animagus. Not just any animagus either, but a beetle animagus. She has used her alternate form over the years to spy on everyone from her own editor to Holyhead Harpies players to patrons inside the walls of
Gringotts. These underhanded tactics are severely frowned upon in the reporting community. Bringing a story to light is important, but ethics are also primary and Rita Skeeter has ignored those principles. Even more disturbing is her depravity. While marriages and relationships involving cousins are very prevalent in our culture, relationships between siblings are less well received. Information has recently come to light about an incestuous relationship between Amycus and Alecto Carrow stretching back years. Rita Skeeter has known about this for quite some time and has even leveraged her knowledge of the relationship to join in with the twin siblings on their intimate encounters on multiple occasions. This fact was easily verified during a raid just last night on the Carrow siblings. Multiple dark artifacts were recovered from their home and veritaserum questioning revealed their relationship as well as the involvement of Rita Skeeter.

Skeeter did well at her chosen profession for years largely because she was skilled with twisting facts, spying, and making implications. She got away with it because she chose her targets well and was careful to avoid drawing too much attention to herself. Now that her own deep issues and scandals are coming to light however, one cannot help but wonder: just how far can Rita Skeeter fall?

Several days after Luna’s article had been released Harry was on Cloud 9. His friend had received quite a lot of praise over bringing to light Skeeter’s hypocrisy. Privately Harry and his friends all agreed that both Luna and Andromeda deserved some rather large gift baskets. It was nice finally getting some karmic justice for once. He still may not be able to truly touch Dumbledore or Umbridge with the people protecting them both but…well Rita certainly hadn’t made very many friends in high places. And now she never would. Last he heard she was running from a mob of goblins after they found she had spied on their patrons while within the bank’s sovereign domain.

Things had been going rather well for the past week. He had gotten comfortable enough with his alternate form that he didn’t even sneeze most of the time – though he hadn’t gotten much closer to tracing that continued odd feeling of something more whenever he changed. He also hadn’t named it yet since he wanted Hermione and Tonks to be the ones to have that honor. They had both decided to wait until the next Hogsmeade weekend to sit down together and go over options. Normal days were simply too busy with the continued training for the upcoming Second Task. A Task Harry had just been called to learn more about.

“Good afternoon, Champions!” Bagman said smiling at the group of contestants and judges. Harry completely ignored Umbridge and sat between Fleur and Fred. “Now, about the Second Task, it will be held the first weekend of December and the theme is Face Yourself.” He spread his hands, obviously expecting some reaction but raised eyebrows were all that greeted his pronouncement.

“Yes. Well. So, for this Task, Mr. Weasley, you won’t be able to walk in with those potions you used. While a full rule addition cannot be added until the Tournament has ended, it’s been decided that your potions should be classified as ‘spellcasting implements’ and are thus required to be left out of the initial starting ring.” Fred shrugged and nodded having expected that to happen. “In addition, this Task is somewhat nebulous in nature being largely dependent on the individuals participating in the event. As such, we have decided to again include the barrier surrounding the arena in order to ensure audience safety.” Fleur’s hand tightened around Harry’s. He made sure his face was completely neutral. Plan B was going to have to be implemented for sure now. “In an effort to avoid the risk to the Champions present in the First Task, this barrier will be modified and tested beforehand to ensure that items and personnel can enter – but not leave – the battlefield.”

Harry let out the breath he’d been holding. That did make it easier, but he wouldn’t trust Bagman’s words alone. Not when Umbridge was involved in this.

Viktor raised his hand and asked, “This Task, what do you mean by it is ‘nebulous’ and based on
the individual? Are we not all supposed to face the same sort of obstacle?"

“Of course you’ll all be facing the same obstacle,” Umbridge simpered. “You’ll be facing the darkness within you. It will be quite enlightening to see what each of you looks like at your worst, I’m sure.”

Harry tuned out the rest of the Umbitch’s words focusing instead of the dangerous implications of what she had said. ‘Darkness within you’ could refer to quite a lot. The idea of having to face more Dementor hordes was predominant in his mind though he doubted it’d end up being something so simple. Perhaps he’d have to include a Silver Spirit in his plans just in case…that could be…problematic. He’d been hoping to avoid resorting to using soul runes. They were simply too unpredictable when paired with others…

“Harry,” Daphne said hesitantly, “are you really sure about this?”

“I’m sure,” he nodded in reply.

“I know I said we had to go farther, but this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind,” she said frowning.

“I know. But I’ve been thinking about doing this for years, Daph. I can’t do it on my own. I need your help.”

“Wouldn’t you prefer to have one of your girlfriends or your mentor doing this? Or at least be here supervising?” she asked.

Harry sighed. “I’ve already talked about it with Shiva and she’s been against it. Hermione wouldn’t be very happy and Tonks doesn’t know enough about runes to feel comfortable with giving her opinion.” He set his shoulders and turned to stare hard at Daphne. “I need to do this, Daph. If they pull something like the First Task I can’t count on another Deus ex Machina miracle to pull my arse out of the fire. I need to have a backup plan and be prepared. I’ll bring Shiva and the others in after I have a proof of concept.”

Daphne turned away and stared at the wall of the Room with her arms crossed for several long, uncomfortable minutes. Finally she turned to him with worry etched all across her face. “Can we at least start with your left hand? I don’t want to risk hurting you, Harry…”

He grimaced but nodded. “It’d be a lot riskier to start with the Concussor, Daph. That actually destructive potential. The right hand is just a summoner, nothing dangerous about it.”

“And if I slip? If I miss a mark? If this doesn’t work at all and ends up looping the magic back through you? You could lose the hand, Harry!”

He grimaced but nodded. “I know. I can learn to fight with my left hand though.”

“In three weeks?” she asked raising an eyebrow in challenge.

“Better than risking a loop failure with the Concussor. Please, Daph…please…”

Daphne scowled and threw her hands up in the air. “Fine! Fine, I’ll bloody help you! You stupid, Merlin-be-damned idiot! But I want to know why me. Why not one of the others? And don’t give me that bullshite reason you just tried!”

Harry shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Well, it’s true I need someone who understands this stuff…” He paused but Daphne waved him on impatiently. “And it is true that both Hermione and
Shiva don’t like the idea, but they’d be willing to help if I spoke to them long enough. It’s just… the fights that we get into, Daph, it’s like you’re basically my right hand. Have you noticed how whenever we used to form up you were at my side with Hermione behind me and the others arrayed out around us?”

The girl nodded slowly before saying, “Yes. Partly it was intentional to play up the Slytherin Slayers thing. Partly it was because I’m simply one of the best heavy hitters in our group. A large portion was simply due to intimidation – both my own inherent Ice Queen persona and the sight of a Gryffindor and Slytherin standing shoulder to shoulder. But that’s not going to last anymore, Harry. Tonks is with you officially now. She’s far more of a fighter than I am.”

“Tonks is a really good fighter yeah,” Harry agreed. “But she’s also used to fighting either alone or with one or two others. She’s better with Hit and Run tactics or evasion things rather than a true heavy hitter. You’re better at straight up offense while she’s stronger with guerrilla tactics. That was one of the things that Moody drilled into her and it plays to her metamorph skills. You’ll still probably end up being my right hand in major fights, Daph.”

Daphne furrowed her brow and considered her friend for a long moment. “You really believe that don’t you?” Harry nodded causing her to sigh. “Okay. Fine, consider me satisfied for the moment. I still don’t think this is a good idea, but at least I get now why you want me to help.”

Harry sat down and held out his hand palm up, smiling encouragingly. “You can do this, Daph. You’re good at this.”

“I hope so…” She took gingerly took his hand and drew her wand. “Now you’re absolutely sure, you want an *accio* instead of a *Fishing Line*? There’s no going back after this, Harry.”

The teen nodded. “Yeah. I’m sure. The *Fishing Line* is great and super useful but if I lose my wand or something an *accio* would be far more effective.”

“Okay. Okay. Here we go.” She took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “Merlin and Morgana please don’t let me screw this up,” she muttered as she drew her wand across Harry’s palm.

Hermione, Tonks and Shiva met up with Harry and Daphne in the Room while it was in a Training configuration. The three women looked at each other and all shrugged. Together they turned to Daphne who softly shook her head and gestured towards Harry.

He stepped forward a bit and gulped. “Hi, girls. I um, asked you all to meet up here because I need to show you my backup plan for the Second Task. I asked Daphne for her help so please don’t get mad at her. It wasn’t her idea, it was mine.”

Tonks frowned. “Harry, you’re not instilling very many warm and fuzzy feelings here.”

“I know! I know, and I’m sorry. I’m just not really sure how to explain this very well without getting yelled at…”

“Even less good feelings now, kid,” Shiva said narrowing her eyes.

Hermione stepped forward and gave Harry a quick hug. “Just tell us quickly and get it over with, Harry. Unless you’re doing blood rituals or sacrificing animals I promise I will only be angry with you for the night.”

Daphne raised her eyebrows. “Well that’s a new one,” she muttered.
Harry walked to the center of the girls and slowly turned his right hand over showing off a rune tattoo along his palm. Shiva reached out and ran her hand over the mark noting how it felt completely flush against his skin and she couldn’t feel any magic or heat running through it. She frowned and looked up at Harry’s face letting her hand drop to her side. “You did it without talking to me, Harry. You promised me we’d talk about this, kid.”

Tonks was frowning and running her fingers over Harry’s hand while Hermione just peered over his shoulder curiously. “What is it?” Tonks asked. “It looks like a rune.”

“It is a rune,” Harry said keeping his eyes on the floor. “It’s a rune for the summoning spell. I considered trying to learn it wandlessly, but everything I’ve seen says that that takes months at minimum and most likely years. Plus this gives a good proof of concept so that I can take runic tattoos further. I asked Daphne to help me with this one because it’s simple and not dangerous and I can’t really draw or write well with my left hand.” He grimaced and finally looked up at Shiva. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Shiva. But I needed to do this early enough to get used to the feeling of them on my body prior to the Task and I knew that if I talked to you before showing you it could work…you’d talk me out of it until it was too late.”

Shiva slowly shook her head and spoke very softly, very calmly, “I’m not happy about this, kid. I’m not happy at all. Obviously it’s worked, but we’ve been over how wrong runic tattoos can go. How many more of these do you plan? Where do you plan on putting them? I expect to be here for each and every additional one. This is completely non-negotiable, Harry. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“Do I need to make you swear an oath that you will call me and get me before adding any more?” Shiva asked still sounding deathly calm.

Harry shook his head. “No. I promise, I won’t do any others without you. I just needed to prove that it could work first.”

Hermione moved over to quietly talk with Daphne while Harry spoke with Shiva. “He roped you into this?”

The blonde nodded and followed Hermione into the corner. “Yeah. I’m sorry for going behind your back. I think he didn’t want you to worry.”

Hermione sighed. “As much as I hate to admit it, it was probably a good call. I very much enjoy Ancient Runes, but I can be far too protective of that boy to sit calmly by while he gives himself a runic tattoo.” She paused and narrowed her eyes at Daphne. “You were confident you knew what you were doing?”

Daphne scowled. “Do you really think I’d let myself work magic into his skin if I wasn’t sure I could do it correctly?”

Hermione shook her head. “No, I don’t think you’d be willing to move ahead if you weren’t certain. I apologize.” She looked back at Harry who was still nodding at whatever Shiva was saying. “There weren’t complications?”

Daphne shrugged. “If there were I haven’t seen them. We’ve been running a few tests for the past hour. I am sorry, Hermione.”

“Don’t be,” Hermione said crossing her arms. “I’m good at research and spell invention. Your strengths are here, helping him to survive by any means necessary. Thank you for helping him,
Daphne.” The Slytherin girl looked uncomfortable but nodded. Hermione sighed and asked, “How deep have you two gone? I know you’ve taught him some of the Darker spells, but…how far have you taken it?”

Daphne scowled and turned to wall obviously not thinking of the current locale. “We’ve gotten through most of what my father taught me. The worst I’ve shown him is the Bone-Breaker curse. I…don’t want to teach the blood-boiling one. And I flat out refuse to explain some of the worst ones. I’d prefer to forget they exist entirely to be honest.”

Hermione considered that. She nodded and gently squeezed the other girl’s arm. “Thank you, Daphne. Truly, thank you. If you know how to transfigure a person into an animal, show him that as well. If not, I will. It’s something that’s grey enough we’ll all be comfortable with it, but it will still quite effectively remove a combatant from the fight.”

Daphne turned to her friend and smirked. “Like what Moody did to Malfoy the other day? I’m not so good at transfiguration and I never learned that. If you figure it out though, let me know. I’d like to sit in with Harry on that lesson.”

“I will,” Hermione nodded smiling back.

“So does it work?!” Tonks asked loudly. She finally let Harry’s hand go and was smiling widely. “Come on, let’s see it in action, Wonder Boy!”

That comment drew chuckles from everyone in the room. Harry stepped back with a smile and raised his hand towards a pillar in the other corner of the room. A quick look of concentration and the pillow on the top of the pillar soared into his hand. With a flourish and a bow, Harry turned to Tonks handing her the pillow. “My lady.”

Clapping Tonks took the pillow and sat down on it as the rest smirked and came to sit beside her. “That’s really cool, Harry!” she said. “So you just channel magic into it and it works like a spell?”

He nodded, “Pretty much, yeah. I also have to think about what I’m summoning just like the real spell, but it is just that simple. I want to tattoo either a Concussor or a bludgeoning hex into my left hand so that I can cast some offensive spells that way. I’m leaning a bit more towards just a bludgeoner that way it’s less likely to be potentially lethal.”

“How not just a stunner then?” Tonks asked.

“Well for one, I have no idea how to make a stunner rune cluster,” Harry shrugged. “For two, I honestly don’t really believe in stunning someone or something trying to kill me. I know that’s what they teach you in the Academy, Tonks, but it just doesn’t seem smart to simply stun someone when their buddies are right there to wake them back up. If you’re going to knock someone out of fight it should leave them actually out of the fight.”

“That seems a little ruthless,” Hermione said frowning.

Harry turned to her and raised an eyebrow. “You cast cutting curses when saving Fleur over the summer.”

Hermione blushed and muttered a retraction to her objection. Harry pulled the brunette into a one armed hug. “I’m not talking about killing people just because they’re on the other side. I’m just saying that tying them up or breaking a leg is a far more effective means of taking someone out of a fight than a stunner that can be cancelled with a simple charm. At minimum, being able to shoot off a bludgeoner would knock people away from me if I keep the magic channeled pretty low.”
Tonks cocked her head and picked up his hand again to look at the rune with wide eyes. “You can change how much magic is channeled through this? Wow…”

Harry nodded. “Yup. It’s not a big deal with this one, but it’ll come in handy with some of the others.”

Hermione peered up at him. “What else are you planning?”

He shrugged. “Well, the bludgeoner on the palm of my left hand, a Lockpick on the top, a Spiker on my left forearm, probably a Boomstone on the top of my right hand. I want to put a Reflector or an Armor cluster onto one of my shoulders, but I can’t figure out how to make it project outwards instead of just wrap around a small section of my skin so those are on hold. I also don’t think the Freezer would work very well without the stone and it would be downright dangerous to tattoo on a Chain Reactor Beam or any of the Feedback stones. Considering what Bagman said about the next Task I really want to add a Silver Spirit, but I’m not particularly keen on permanently adding anything with a soul rune onto my body.”

Shiva nodded. “Yes, agreed. Don’t do that. We don’t even really understand how that one works to begin with. I don’t want you putting that onto your skin, Harry.”

Harry nodded. “I’m also conflicted about the Ninja. If I add that one to my back then I can –”

“NO!” Four voices rang out causing Harry to rock back a little.

Hermione growled low in her throat and pulled Harry’s head around to look her straight in the eyes. “That cluster has never once reacted well to any other spells or magic cast on or near it. How you got it stable enough to work to begin with I will never understand, but one thing clear beyond a shadow of a doubt is it does not like additional magic! You will NOT be adding any rune cluster that is unstable around magic to your magic channeling body, Harry Potter!”

Tonks jerked her flaming red hair towards Hermione. “What she said. Harry, it’s not a good idea and if I have any say in the matter, it’s not happening.”

“I will certainly not be helping you tattoo that one on, Harry. You have other options and you can fight without being invisible,” Daphne said crossing her arms and glaring at him.

Before Shiva could put in her two knuts Harry held up his hands warding them all off. “Okay, okay! I already said I was conflicted! Jeez, I was going to ask for your opinions, people,” he grumbled.

Hermione let out a loud breath, “Good. Well you have them. Now about these other runes…”
Chapter 24: Unforgivable and Unbeatable

Barty watched as the group of Gryffindors and Slytherins walked into his classroom. This was going to be such a fun class! He had been looking forward to this one since he’d started this year. Surprisingly he’d actually almost enjoyed the teaching thing in general but this time…this time he’d get to expose them to a bit of the real Barty Crouch Jr.

“Professor, why do you have spiders on your desk?” Weasley asked with a slight whimper. Barty barely managed to hide his smile. The Weasleys may not rate very high on the Dark Lord’s priority list but the boy was part Prewett too. And the Prewetts were always fun to play with.

“Well, Weasley, these volunteers are going to help with today’s demonstration,” Barty said grinning. He saw Greengrass’ eyes widen and was somewhat impressed that girl had already sussed out his intentions. Or maybe he was giving her too much credit? Eh, didn’t matter. “Now, today we’ll be going over something that the Ministry doesn’t like you folk knowing, but times are changing and if the World Cup was any example you lot need to know what’s coming so that you can properly defend yourself. Who knows what the Unforgivable Curses are?”

That comment drew quite a few more indrawn breaths and Barty saw the Longbottom boy, the Granger girl and Potter all narrow their eyes. There was a definite growl coming from one of them too. With amusement he also saw the Davis girl snarling low. Greengrass seemed to have drawn an aura of calm detachment down over herself. Useful skill that. Maybe he could recruit her too? Perhaps if he could grab both her and Potter he could use the two to turn each other and gain two skilled servants for the Master?

“Professor Moody, I thought the Unforgivables were illegal to use?” Granger said.

Barty nodded. “Aye, that they are. There are some exceptions such as demonstrations and during the last Blood War the Aurors were given leave to use them on Death Eaters resisting arrest. Good riddance to bad rubbish I say. Now, Miss Granger, do you know just why the Unforgivables are classed as Unforgivable?” If they were going to be put under these spells they really ought to understand just why they were special after all. Such beautiful, beautiful spells.

“Well the use of one immediately confers life in Azkaban,” Granger said with a bit of a frown.

“Yes, but why? What makes them special? What makes them different? A blood-boiling curse is certainly more dangerous than the first, a transfiguration that turns blood to mud is both more painful and more lethal than the second and there are far more painful ways to kill than the third. So what makes an Unforgivable, unforgivable?”

Granger frowned, shook her head and sat back thinking. Eventually Malfoy raised his hand. “They bypass any form of shield and they target a person’s soul instead of the body.”

Barty grunted. “They don’t bypass every shield, boy. Just magical shields.”

“Why other form of shield is there?” Malfoy snarked.

Barty tossed out a quick spell at the child and the boy squawked falling out of his chair as he
rocked out of the way. Barty sent another two spells at him until the idiot finally managed to flip his chair to block the spell which hit it harmlessly. “That sort of shield, ferret. A physical item will block an Unforgivable. A protego doesn’t do squat. Your second point was correct though. The Unforgivables are so classed because of their target.” Well, mostly. The cruico had originally been a medical spell but no self-respecting mediwitch would ever bring that up these days. Not since someone had worked out long ago how to ramp it up and make it last longer than a second. Really, who’d want to restart a heart anyway? They were so much better off when they stopped beating.

“Each Unforgivable manipulates the target’s soul. One forces the soul to submit, another twists it with unimaginable pain and the third simply severs the connections with the body. The Ministry rather frowns on touching someone else’s soul. They frown on touching your own soul as well but most people aren’t stupid enough to do that so there are no laws against it.” He saw with some humor Potter shifting uncomfortably. “Now, who can name the first Unforgivable? How ‘bout you, ferret? Your father has some…experience with that one.”

Malfoy scowled. “The Imperius Curse.”

“Aye. The Imperius takes full control of the victim by forcing them to submit to the caster. A particularly strong will is required to resist.” He took out of the spiders from the jar and idly pointed his wand at it. “Imperio.” The spider stopped trying to scuttle away and instead stayed put. He cast a quick enlargement making it the size of his hand before sending it off to tapdance around the table. The spider then took a flying leap and landing on Weasley’s table gaining Barty a scream from the red-head. He immediately moved the spider through a few other tables to spread the love before dancing it back to the table and dropped the normal sized spider back into the jar.

“Next curse? The pain one. Longbottom?”

Longbottom snarled. Oh the poor boy. Barty might actually have had a bit of a fight on his hands had the child recognized that one of the people who tortured his parents into insanity was standing right in front of him! “Cruciatus. It fires every nerve ending and makes the victim wish they died.”

“Good. That is the physical result of twisting the soul of the victim. About five minutes continuous exposure will utterly break most minds. A few particular individuals can last a bit longer. Once you start hitting ten continuous minutes though, well it doesn’t really matter how strong the mind is because the body starts failing. The heart drops out first most times but it’s been known to rupture arteries throughout the body too.” Barty grabbed his second spider and a quick crucioc later, the thing was twitching and jerking all over the desk. He didn’t hold it long. He wasn’t a monster after all. It’s not like he was Bellatrix or one of the Lestrange brothers!

“Third curse. Potter?”


“Correct. Avada Kadavra. An interesting fact about this one, it’s well known that you need to hate in order to cast it. What isn’t as well known is that that hate can be self-hatred. So never let your guard down around someone you think doesn’t like you even if you’re convinced they can’t muster up hating you. They could always try hating themselves and use that to curse you from behind. It’s happened before. Constant Vigilance!” Barty smirked to himself as he caught several of the students with his shout. He drew out the third spider and a quick green flash later, the spider was gone.
Davis raised her hand and Barty nodded to her. “Professor, you said those curses target the soul. But the First Task basically proved that most animals don’t have one. Or at least, the chimera doesn’t have one. How can the Killing Curse work on them then? How can any of them work on animals?”

Barty nodded his approval. This girl was no slouch. “They’re all hybrid spells. For example, Avada Kadavra is a combination of a livestock killing curse from ancient times tied into the soul targeting one from a millennium or two ago. The two working together are what make it so dangerous. Just the soul targeting and it wouldn’t do very much. Just the livestock one and it couldn’t affect humans. But with both, the initial intent of each spell is twisted and perverted into something that can affect any living animal or person it touches and instantly separates souls from bodies. The other two are similar corruptions of base spells allowing them to work on any living target as well. Good question, Davis. Ten points to Slytherin.”

Barty grinned. “Now, let’s try resisting the Imperius shall we? You’ll never be able to practice this real world so might as well do a bit of it now while we have the chance.” And if he could ensure Potter or one of his cohorts was his completely…well all the better!

The rest of the class was an exercise in amusement for Barty. Almost none had been able to put up any sort of defense against his Imperius Curse. Of course he was rather skilled with it, but still, it was somewhat disappointing. Malfoy was bouncing around like the ferret he was; Finnegan was quacking like a duck; Weasel kissed a spider…the interesting people finally came with Potter’s group. Greengrass was barely under for two seconds before she threw the curse off completely. Longbottom was able to wriggle out from his control after about five seconds. Granger’s organized mind let him in easily enough but somehow his commands kept getting lost in an internal labyrinth and she managed to throw him out completely after a few seconds. It was an unusual defense but privately Barty admitted it was effective. The true surprises though had been Potter and Davis. Neither was swayed for even a moment! He had expected some resistance from Potter especially after learning that he was resistant to Veela but Davis! Perhaps it had something to do with the rumors about the diary the girl had possessed briefly during her second year?

The students left the class giving Barty something to think on. He’d have to let his Master know of course. The Dark Lord would most likely still want to test Potter himself. Who knew, maybe the boy would actually end up surviving this next Task too and come even closer to satisfying the Dark Lord’s curiosity!

The last Hogsmeade weekend before the Second Task was upon the school and many were taking advantage of the little bit of leisure offered. Unfortunately not everyone was looking forward to the day’s activities; Daphne and Tracey, for one, were arguing together near the Black Lake. “Oh so now you want to spend time with me?” Tracey said glaring at her girlfriend.

Daphne rolled her eyes and snorted. “What is that supposed to mean? We’re dating. Of course I want to spend time with you.”

“How are we dating? Are we really dating, Daphne?” Tracey asked. She tossed her head and crossed her arms. “I barely even see you anymore. Even in the dorms you’re always either studying and making notes or just falling right asleep. You spend all your time with him!”

Daphne gaped for a moment utterly lost, before her eyes narrowed and she stood up straighter. “Are you talking about Harry? Seriously?”

“Oh course I’m talking about Harry! Who bloody else would I be talking about?”
“Jealousy is very unbecoming of you, Tracey,” Daphne said lowly and crossing her own arms. “You know very well that all I’m doing is trying to keep our friend alive.”

“Oh please, don’t give me that shite. He’s being personally tutored by two of the best professors in the school, the youngest Auror of her generation and a Veela in her last year!”

“And not a single one of them know or are willing to teach the things that I do!” Daphne yelled back. “He saved your life, Tracey! Why are you being like this?”

“You both saved my life, Daph!” Tracey snarled and turned away. “I feel like I’m losing you to a guy who doesn’t even freaking get it!”

“Tracey, I’m not going anywhere,” Daphne said with a heavy sigh. She started to reach out to Tracey but dropped her hand halfway through the gesture. “I’m also not going to apologize for spending my time with Harry either. There’re at least two, possibly three people, trying to kill him this year. I have very few true friends and I refuse to risk losing one because my girlfriend is jealous.”

“He let you give him those tattoos, Daph,” Tracey said softly. “I’ve looked that up. Done wrong, you could’ve made him a squib or worse. Do you have any idea how much he trusts you? Or are you willfully ignoring it?”

“He’s my friend, Trace.” Daphne moved to stand next to the other girl both staring out over the lake. “I’m not going to abandon you just because I have someone else I care about. We’ve known each other since we were five. How can you think I’d just leave?”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“Trace…”

“Whatever,” Tracey shook her head and turned on her heel to start walking towards the gates. “I think I’ll go on this thing alone today.”

Daphne’s eyes widened and she opened her mouth to say something to her friend before slowly shaking her head and deciding against it. Instead she just started walking slowly after her and slotted into the line to get out of the gates by Fleur, Tonks, Hermione and Harry.

Daphne heard Harry talking emphatically with Tonks and Hermione. “I’m sure. You two go, I’ll just wander for a bit. I need to pick up some sugar quills and other snacks anyway and you guys need to hang out alone more if this going to work between the three of us.”

Tonks rolled her eyes. “Well if you want to miss out on all this hot action between your partners that’s your prerogative, Wonder Boy.” She looped an arm through one of Hermione’s and waved to the others. “I’ll take care of the brainy beauty, Harry. Don’t mope too much!”

Fleur smirked and stepped up to Harry’s side. “Would you mind showing me around ze town, ‘arry? I ‘ave yet to see zis area.”

Harry shrugged and said, “Sure, I can show you a few of the sights.”

Daphne saw Tonks cast a calculating glance at Fleur before the metamorph shrugged. “Have fun you two. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Harry smirked. “So I can pretty much do anything then?”
Hermione leaned back and playfully smacked the back of his head. “Don’t be a prat, Harry. No teasing Tonks on date day.”

“Spoilsport,” Harry chuckled. He turned to Daphne and frowned as he saw her carefully neutral expression. “Daph,” Harry said softly, “you okay? Why is Tracey up there and you’re back here? I thought you guys were going to spend some together today?”

Daphne smiled at him, admittedly slightly surprised that he had seen through her mask so easily. “We had a bit of a fight. She’s angry and wanted to be alone for a while. I’ll meet up with her later.”

“You should come wiz us zen,” Fleur said nodding to the Slytherin. Daphne cocked her head to the side considering for a long moment. She was about to say no when Luna walked past the small group.

“Don’t worry, Daphne. I’ll keep Tracey company. You go and enjoy the day,” the younger girl said with a dreamy smile.

“Well…okay, sure. Might as well. Will you make sure she’s not too depressed or angry for me?”

Luna nodded. “Of course.” She crossed the short distance and Daphne distantly heard Luna comment, “Hello, Tracey. I think I should walk with you today.”

“I’d actually rather prefer to be alone at the moment, Luna. I need to think a bit,” Tracey said.

“But you’ll never get to think if you are alone while frustrated like that,” Luna stated matter-of-factly. “It attracts the blibbering humdingers. Once they start chattering you’ll never be able to think easily with the racket they cause.”

Daphne snorted at the little former Ravenclaw’s tactic though she noted with a small grin that Tracey just rolled her eyes and let Luna lead her forward. Trust Luna to brighten the mood.

“I still find it hard to believe that you are so okay with all this, Hermione,” Tonks said drinking her butterbeer next to the brunette in the Three Broomsticks. The one good thing about the Skeeter fallout had been that she didn’t have to try and hide that she was in a relationship with the two teens. And how weird was that…That her mother and cousin had managed to spin it from being weird and creepy into Tonks upholding true pureblood standards boggled her mind. Politics made no sense whatsoever.

Hermione shrugged and sipped her own drink. “My parents are rather open-minded. They certainly never expected me to enter into a polyamorous union, but they were remarkably accepting when I brought it up originally. I’m somewhat convinced that they were worried I’d come home magically bound and married before I hit fifteen. So when I told them I was going to have both a boyfriend and a girlfriend they were simply far too happy I wasn’t married to care about the particulars.”

Tonks snorted and her hair shifted colors as she tried to keep her laughter in check. “Wow. I think I’m going to like your folks, Hermione.”

The younger girl grinned. “From what Harry said about your mother – and Luna’s comments about her additions to the Quibbler article – I imagine Andromeda will get along quite well with them too.”

“Oh, Merlin, that’s going to be a scary combination,” Tonks groaned. She shuddered slightly.
“Two dentists and a Black daughter…I weep for whoever gets in their way. Us included.”

Hermione waved it off. “We’ll just deflect to Sirius. He’s a good target for deflection. The four of them can get into a mini war and forget about the rest of us.”

Tonks laughed. “Oh that is too perfect! You sure you aren’t a Slytherin?”

“I might have a bit of Gryffin tendencies ever so often,” she replied with a smirk.

“Well they are adorable to hear,” Tonks said. She leaned over and gently kissed Hermione. Both girls pulled back blushing slightly. “You know you never really did answer my actual comment.”

“I didn’t, did I?” Hermione paused for a moment and frowned in thought. “Honestly I think it mostly comes down to Harry. I’ve always been rather independent and headstrong. I used to practically worship books – even my mother’s romance novels. I loved those books, but I knew I could never be like the heroines in them. Those women drop everything for their man and tend to be rather subservient. I can’t do that. I don’t need to be directing everything, but I need a strong say in matters. But Harry…he needs more support than I feel I can give him alone. I can rein him in when he starts going off on tangents or taking his experiments too far. But with how he was raised…I don’t feel like I’d be enough. I love that boy and I want him to be as happy as possible. If I have to share him to ensure that he’s happy I’m fine with that.”

Hermione blushed deeper and said, “It also helps that no matter what form you’re in, you are quite attractive, Tonks. I don’t mean your body. I mean your mind. I haven’t met many women who stand up for themselves and others like you have. It’s…inspiring.”

Tonks smiled warmly and looped an arm around Hermione’s shoulders. “Thanks, Hermione. That’s really sweet of you. And if you want, Harry’s taken to calling me ‘Nym’ when we’re alone. You can do that too.” Hermione leaned into Tonks’ side and mumbled something. “Say again? Didn’t catch that one.”

Lifting her head slightly, Hermione shyly murmured, “I like that, Nym. Call me, Mione.” Tonks smiled and hugged the younger girl tighter.

“And this is Zonko’s,” Harry said gesturing towards the joke shop. “They have some fun stuff, but their inventory never really changes and apparently it hasn’t added more than one or two new items since Sirius’ day. It’s part of the reason why Fred and George are expecting to do so well and why my prank runes are selling so quickly. Together the three of us might end up putting Zonko’s out of business if they don’t step up their game.”

“Very impressive, ‘arry,” Fleur said nodding along. She noticed Daphne smiling appreciatively at Harry on his other side. The friendship between the two was rather intriguing to Fleur. Both were attached to others, yet both gravitated to the each other as well. Fleur could feel the attraction thanks to her nature just as she could feel the strained bond between Daphne and Tracey. The whole situation certainly complicated her goals.

Harry’s budding romance with Tonks hadn’t been unexpected. That Fleur hadn’t made better progress prior to the official start of the relationship was a little disappointing perhaps, but not disastrous. She still had several months left with which to build her own foundation; she just had to insure that that foundation now included three bases instead of two. Granted, she was more interested in the two teenagers then the metamorphmagus, but Tonks was certainly nice enough herself to maintain Fleur’s interest so it wasn’t a deal breaker. The woman’s battle prowess and determination was exceedingly impressive not to mention the humor she brought to the table. Both
Harry and Hermione needed to relax more so that was probably the best contribution. Fleur could tease all day long, but she knew she rather lacked in the jokes department.

Daphne though made things far more...interesting. If the girl ever decided to make a move, Fleur could easily see herself shunted to the side. She somewhat doubted that Harry would be accepting of four women in his life. It would be hard enough to convince him that he was worthy of three. With the trust and support both showed the other...Fleur had to start seriously considering whether she wanted to ramp up her attempts or simply step aside and encourage the other girl. She seriously didn’t see the relationship between the two Slytherins lasting much longer – especially not while Luna Lovegood was still available as a shoulder for Tracey to cry on afterwards. Fleur could only hope that when the break finally happened, the two still remained friends.

Perhaps after the next Task was over she would speak to Hermione and get the younger girl’s thoughts. Beating around the bush was not going to work much longer and she needed to know whether the brunette would even be open to it. She’d probably have to speak with Daphne at some point before Yule as well if only to offer her advice concerning Tracey. If Daphne did prove to be interested...well perhaps they could both join forces and attempt to convince Harry to accept each of them as Consorts.

It was certainly a nice dream.

“And this is Madam Puddifoot’s Tea Shop. I’m not taking either of you in there so don’t even bother teasing me, Daph...” Harry droned on beside her. Fleur smiled again at the young man. He really was simply adorable.

“That shop sells some corsets and lots of lingerie plus some other stuff. I’m not entirely sure what, but I do know that it is all supposed to be somewhat adult oriented. At least I would assume so since McGonagall has made it clear if she ever catches any student in there we won’t be out of detention for months. This building over here is – ”

Fleur’s attention snapped back to the moment and she stopped to peer critically at the ‘clothes’ shop. “Adult oriented you say?” Fleur said interrupting Harry. He turned back to her and she grinned. His little shudder was so cute. Daphne’s hungry grin was also rather welcome. “I zink zis shop has promise.”

“Fleur,” Daphne said with a note of amusement. “From what the older Slytherins say, that shop’s other items are of a somewhat more...personal use; or at least items meant for use with just a partner. They sell rather unholy things dealing with rubber and leather from what I hear.”

Fleur’s grin widened. Yes, this indeed fit her interests nicely! “Even better. Come along, Harry!”

“Wait, what?!” Harry shouted as both girls grabbed his arms and maneuvered him. “I’ll wait outside! I’ll wait outside!”

The weekend following the Hogsmeade outing, Harry again sat waiting in the tent prior to starting the Second Task sweating and scratching at his new tattoos. The Spiker and the Knockback were still itching almost two weeks after application. Shiva and Madame Pomfrey had taken a look and both insisted that the itching was just in his mind. He wasn’t sure if that was supposed to make him feel better.

His utility belt was back in the stands with Shiva again and he was hopeful that he’d actually be able to use it this time. He really wanted to have the Silver Spirit if he was going to be fighting something that induced depression. The Sword would probably work, but using it still scared him
and it was definitely not a distance weapon anyway.

Bagman walked into the tent again all smiles and practically bouncing. One of these days Harry really was going to end up punching the man. Or Viktor would do it. Viktor was getting increasingly short-tempered with the former Quidditch player. Bagman apparently had been trying to hound the younger Champion for playing tips. Harry was privately supremely thankful that the idiot hadn’t focused on him and he and Viktor had shared some butterbeers and a few prank runes over the annoyance. The announcer still had the purple hair induced by the Metahair rune Harry had given Viktor earlier in the week.

“I hope everyone is excited for the Second Task!” Bagman said. Crickets greeted him. “Yes, well, successful completion of this Task will see you given the key to opening your golden egg from the First Task afterwards. This time we won’t be drawing for opponents, however we will be drawing for turn order. Miss Delacour, if you please.” Fleur ended up with the fourth slot this time while Harry took third, Viktor took second and Fred first. “A final reminder that you will unable to exit the arena until the Task is complete. This event’s primary opponent will be an…alternate version of yourself. At least that’s the idea! I don’t know if you’ve heard of them, but in Australia they’ve been testing a new device termed the Aspect Column. This item is a large runic array construct that samples anyone approaching within a certain distance. It will then create a phantom version of that person for them to fight against. The phantom embodies their darker elements and is intended to act both as a training aid and as a tool to assist in personal reflection. I wish you all the best of luck! Show those doppelgangers what for!”

Still smiling Bagman left them alone and Harry relaxed ever so slightly. Turning to Fleur he tried to grin a bit though he only managed a very slight pull at his lips. “Well, at least it’s not a horde of Dementors.” Harry’s forced levity faded as he took in Fleur’s extremely worried expression. “Hey, Fleur? Fleur. Fleur!”

She jerked and shook her head. Turning to him she let out a sigh. “Sorry, ‘arry. Zis Task…I do not zink I will enjoy zis.” Harry just grimace and squeezed her shoulder in support.

Viktor shrugged and gave her a salute from the other side of the room. “Vell you made a hydra appear easy. I vould think you vill better than you expect here.”

“Yeah, it’ll be fine. How bad can this be? It’s intended to be used as a training and reflection aid. The phantoms shouldn’t actually be able to do too much to us I’d think,” Fred said nodding his agreement.

Harry shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. “Three things, Fred. One, Umbridge is involved. Two, when has anything I’m involved in been simple like that? Three, made in Australia. The country where even the grass can kill you.”

Fred opened his mouth, closed it, held up his hand, put down and eventually groaned. “Point taken.” The gong sounded and Fred shrugged. “Well, guess I’ll find out in a moment. Good luck everyone.”

Fred walked into the battlefield with a smile plastered on his face a bounce in his step. Even if he was nervous it wouldn’t due to show that before facing the enemy. After contact all rules went away but beforehand, appearances were paramount. He saw the perimeter barrier flare into life and immediately lifted his wand to summon his potions jacket from George. Nodding with a genuinely happy grin, he watched the tools sail through the ward and into his outstretched hand. Casually tossing his jacket on, he strode towards the large pillar in the center of the stage.

The meter-diameter pillar had etchings across each of its eight faces, inscriptions done in both red
and black at seemingly random intervals. The whole structure itself was seemingly pure white and slightly translucent with a dull fading pulse of light emanating inside. The light illuminated the runes every few seconds in a manner that was partly creepy and partly beautiful. Once Fred got within about 50 meters of the pillar the light flared briefly and every visible rune lit up.

As the spots in his eyes faded, Fred looked out and narrowed his eyes in confusion. A little ways ahead, directly in front of him was a man who looked somewhat like Fred. An older Fred. A Fred who had lost quite a bit of hair, the remainder of which had lost a lot of the vibrant red and seemed almost dull. Evil Fred wore glasses and a pinstriped set of robes and was carrying a briefcase in one hand and a stack of papers in the other. He looked exhausted. An impression not helped when he squinted towards Fred and sighed.

Setting the briefcase on the ground, Evil Fred rubbing his forehead above his glasses. “Ah. An Aspect Column. I think I’m supposed to fight you, but there doesn’t seem to be much point.”

Fred frowned and cautiously walked forward. He made a short circle around his doppelganger finally ending in front of him and poked the Evil Twin in the side of mouth. A small grimace and rolled eyes was the only reply. “Who are you?” Fred asked rather confused.

“I’m you. Well more specifically, I’m what you’re afraid you could be,” Evil Fred said simply.

“Nah, not buying it. You’re hardly an Evil Fred. Maybe a Percy Fred but not an Evil Fred. Evil Fred would be trying to kill me with a Lightning Swamp or a Cat-Got-The-Canary or a Twister-In-A-Can. You’re an awful Evil Fred,” the redhead said cocking his head to the side.

“Did I say I was evil?” Not So Evil Fred asked with raised eyebrows in a dull, bored voice. “I said I’m what you’re afraid of becoming. I’m you without George. I’m you without Alicia. I’m you without Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes. I’m the you who lost everyone and just doesn’t really care enough to do much of anything anymore. I’m the you that Mum thinks we are. The one who doesn’t amount to much of anything and just walks through life letting opportunity after opportunity pass him by.”

Fred had grown increasingly nervous during the little monologue and had slowly backed away from the double, bringing his wand to bear. “I’d never sink to the depths that you have. I’d find something to be excited about.”

Evil Fred shrugged. “Why bother? There’s no reason to get excited if there’s no one to share it with. I lost half myself when George died and I lost the rest when Alicia left.”

Fred shook his head trying to push down the little voice that was nodding along with the clone and whole-heartedly agreeing that it fully understood exactly what the other man was saying. “No. No I refuse to acknowledge that! Let’s get this over with you pompous prat!” He plunged a hand into the left pocket of his jacket and pulled out a Squawking Growth Egg. That’d work nicely as a distraction.

Evil Fred just gave a sad grin. “It’s been quite a long time since I fought an actual battle so like I said originally, there’s not much point to this. Perhaps we could instead check my report on cauldron thickness over for errors?” He hefted the stack of papers in his hand and waved it in Fred’s direction. “I’ve been told by Percy and his assistants that my work could qualify as attempted murder. If you make it all the way through without quitting we call it your win?”

Fred gaped in horror. What could possibly cause him to ever turn into…this?! He completely forgot about all his tools and potions and prank stones and just cast a powerful reducto at the Evil Twin. The doppelganger didn’t even try to dodge and as a large hole appeared in the center of his
Viktor was feeling slightly anxious over the lack of excited calls and frenzied commentary. The First Task had left him with a keen sense of just how dangerous things could get and he dearly hoped that Fred’s Task had not been so incredibly deadly that the audience was too shocked to even cry out if he had been killed. Viktor liked the jokester. The man was funny and had a good sense of humor. Not to mention he appreciated Viktor’s attempts to be somewhat more social. He sincerely hoped the man had made it through okay.

Walking towards the large white pillar Viktor paused as it lit up momentarily blinding him. As his vision cleared, Viktor’s eyes widened and he stumbled back a step, throwing up a hand in front of him and desperately attempting to keep his stomach from rebelling.

In front of him, there was a huge, dirty, grotesque mass of flesh. It was sitting down on the ground, the robes covering it were stained all over. Pieces of food and condiments were still openly prevalent in places. The thing had to be over 600 pounds! The mass cocked what must have been its head towards him and spoke, “I forgot I used to be skinny. Do you have any food? I’m – ”

Viktor uttered a blood-curdling scream and whipped his wand forward casting a continuous series of the most destructive curses he could think of. 30 seconds later, the horrid mass in front of the Bulgarian had been wiped from existence and Viktor ran from the arena desperate for alcohol or someone who could obliviate him.

Harry concentrated on his breathing as he stepped into the arena. He felt the perimeter ward flare and stopped to quickly examine the wardstone nearby. Breathing out a quick sigh of relief he saw it would actually let items and people in this time. Raising his wand, Harry called his utility belt to him and smiled as the rune stone harness flew into his hand. Taking the time to carefully strap it on, Harry turned to the white pillar in the center. He briefly tried to decipher the mass of carvings and etchings on the structure, but shook his head after a few moments. Figuring out how it worked would take too long – the interweaves were just far too intricate to risk carefully dismantling it.

Squaring his shoulders, Harry walked forward. The Aspect Column flared in response and as the light died Harry’s doppelganger came into view. Evil Harry was dressed all in black with form fitting cargo pants and a skintight T-shirt. His bare arms were covered in tattoos and there were several around his eyes and ears as well. The twin had a belt looped around him with dozens of dangling rune stones and more hung from a harness similar to Harry’s draped over his chest though the twin’s had far more stones. He wasn’t wearing glasses and his hair had been cut extremely short barely even qualifying as a buzz cut.

Evil Harry grinned and Harry felt a shiver run up his spine. That was a predator’s grin through and through and it promised pain. “Well this is interesting.” The doppelganger twisted so that he could take in the pillar behind him and as he turned back to Harry the grin grew even larger. “So we’re supposed to fight, but did you see that transference section?” He hitched a thumb towards one part of the etchings. Harry squinted and just managed to make out a Soul rune before redirecting his attention back to his opponent who had shifted slightly to the side. “Nice bit of work there. I can use that. If I’m careful I might even be able to switch in before I disappear.”

The shiver of fear turned into an icy spike of pure dread. “Switch in?” he asked, mouth completely dry.
“Yeah. Switch into you. Have to oust the original soul though. I think I have…ah here we go,”
Evil Harry purred as he caressed a small rune stone on one of his belts. “I haven’t used the Soul
Rend stone since I killed old Tommy Boy. But let’s not jump straight there. I know I’m
technically not real yet, but I feel real enough. And I have had so few real challenges for so long.
Might as well enjoy this before I claim your body.”

Harry gulped. It was just a projection right? It couldn’t actually do that? It was a…shite! Harry’s
eyes widened as he caught sight of a pulsing segment of the Column higher up. It was supposed to
be the safety features, but it didn’t look to be strongly tied into anything beyond the banishing
cluster. This doppelganger would disappear sure, but anything it did while still corporeal was fair
game.

His Evil Twin looked like he was going to keep monologuing so Harry used the opportunity to
launch into a spell chain. There was no point in limiting his arsenal at all. His spells couldn’t get
out of the barrier, his Evil Twin wasn’t exactly real and, most importantly of all, this arse wanted
to destroy his soul and take up residence. No mercy was warranted.

He sent the most destructive spells he knew at Evil Harry, everything Daphne had grilled into him,
all the higher level items that Fleur had taught, the more dangerous spells that Flitwick showed and
the more explosive varieties of transfiguration that McGonagall had directed him in. For a full
minute Harry launched spell after spell not pausing even once. Breathing hard he finally let the
arsenal stop and waited for the dust surrounding his target to clear.

“No bad!” A mirthful voice sounded from the haze causing Harry’s eyes to widen in horror.
“You’re what? A Fourth Year? That was pretty impressive actually.” A slow clap resounded
across the battlefield and Harry could only stare. His doppelganger stood in the exact same spot
he’d been in before with a glimmering sheen of a shield surrounding him. Some minor pockmarks
surrounded his booted feet but there wasn’t a scratch on the man himself.

“That’s not possible,” Harry whispered. “Some of those were designed to blast apart shields…”

Evil Harry shrugged. “You’ve been designing the Fortress of Solitude for years. Did you think I’d
just sit idle and not have perfected it? Such a useful little thing.” He lifted his shirt with that crazy
smile evident and lightly fingered a rune cluster tattooed into his stomach. “I figured out the
movement problem by the way, so in addition to every attack strengthening my shield I’m not
limited to staying put with it active. Plus I even managed to build in a modification for my arsenal
so I can attack without having to drop it! You can’t touch me, Mini-Me while I get impunity to fire
off whatever I want! Care to try to guess the password to shut it down? I’ll give you one free shot
at it.”

Harry gaped. His Evil Twin had worked out an even more gamebreaking form of the shield from
his first real conversation with Shiva…that was…he was screwed. He was going to lose his soul
and die. He didn’t even know how to finish his own weaker version let alone how to beat a
monster-sized variant!

“Um…err…uh…” Harry desperately tried to think of what he’d possibly use as a password lock on
a personal shield. If his double was going to try and be sporting then Harry needed to use the
opportunity since it was probably going to be the only shot he had at survival. Opening his mouth
to start to say his own intended password, Harry quickly snapped it closed and bit off the word
before it could form. This version of himself wouldn’t use Harry’s password. He’d use a perverted
form. Stall. He had to stall. “Can I ask a question first?”

“What happened to you?”

“Oh such a loaded question!” his twin smirked and shrugged. “Mostly I got tired of dealing with the idiots and hypocrites surrounding me. I got exhausted of being told again and again that I couldn’t cut the legs out from under the people torturing me and trying to kill me year after year. When Luna died because they convinced me to hold back I…decided I’d had enough. The school fell the next day. The Ministry in under a week. I killed Tommy Boy about three days after that,” his grin widened and he started laughing. “That was fun actually. He tried to run from his body. I ate his soul. Nym, Nev and Shiva all said I went too far and turned on me then. I had to kill them before they killed me. Hermione lasted longer. My glorious Dark Lady stuck with me through the entire time it took to take over Britain, Europe and Asia. She only decided to betray me when I started to think about how to get rid of magic-hating Muggles.”

Evil Harry frowned and rubbed his chin while Harry just gaped in mind numbing shock. “I still don’t get why she had a problem with that. I have nothing against Muggles in general. It wasn’t like I was going to touch her parents. I just wanted to kill all the people like the Dursleys. Maybe some politicians too…Ah whatever, point is I had to kill her too. I was willing to just let her have the Americas, but she insisted we had to fight. I like to think it was her way of apologizing and ensuring I moved on.” He raised an eyebrow. “I guess I shouldn’t really be all that surprised that Daphne was the only one to stay at my side. It’s ironic really. I was going to give her the Fortress tattoo but the Weasleys got to her the night before. Killed her in her sleep.” Evil Harry’s eyes darkened. “I stopped playing nice then. No more Benevolent Overlord for me! I went full Evil Overlord after that. Didn’t take much longer to take over everything. Amazing what a bit of logic, practicality and ruthlessness will do isn’t it? Granted it helps that I’m functionally immortal, can’t be touched by spells, am immune to any and all poisons and made sure to anchor my soul to my body so that Gryffindor’s Sword won’t do anything if I accidentally cut myself. Does that answer your question?”

Harry worked his mouth for a few long moments before violently shaking his head side to side. “No. No! I’d never do that! I’d never do any of that! I’d never hurt them! I’d never – no!”

Evil Harry rolled his eyes. “Some part of you obviously would. Otherwise that pathetic thing would never have made me,” he gestured to the Aspect Column. “Now, I’d have your guess to my Fortress password so we can get on with this, please.”

Harry kept shaking his head trying to think through the voice inside screaming that the Evil Twin was wrong, that he would never do what had just been described. He didn’t fully succeed.

“Oh, Vader marches on.”

Evil Harry cocked his head and smirked. “Not a bad one. That was one of my first. Changed it after Hermione died though.” His grin turned predatory again. “My turn.”

Harry barely managed to jump to the side as a rock spike nearly four feet in diameter flew from his doppelganger’s lower arm tattoo. The thing impacted so close to him that Harry felt the wind on his pants leg and then he was rolling again, dodging a storm of lighting shooting out the man’s right hand. Twisting to the side Harry somehow managed to leap over a stream of bubbling tar that spewed from his twin’s other elbow.

Harry tried to raise a wall separating them only to see a small rune stone sailed over it. Eyes wide, Harry quickly lifted the Freezer and encased it in a layer of ice. The small grenade rune stone exploded an instant later showering ice everywhere and leaving Harry with many small bleeding cuts. The wall melted a second after revealing his twin who had been walking slowly forward with all the speed of a determined Terminator. It was all Harry could do to turn enough to raise his left
forearm and send out a spike of his own towards Evil Harry. The twin didn’t even bother dodging; he just reached up and flicked a finger sending the spike ricocheting off into the outer barrier.

Cursing, Harry jumped backwards to avoid another lightning strike and tried to send his Silver Spirit panther towards the doppelganger. Evil Harry let it come still grinning and spread his arms wide. Harry watched the silver form crash into the shield surrounding his twin and simply vanished in a bright flash. He let out a scream of pain and collapsed to the ground, clutching his arms around his sides. His body felt like it had just been soaked in water and attached to a live wire.

Evil Harry chuckled. “To be fair, without the Fortress that actually would have been a good idea. The Spirit can’t really be blocked easily. Unfortunately for you, as a mostly magical construct my Fortress eats it. As it has a tiny part of you inside it you feel the pain as it dies. Fun huh?” Harry fought off the urge to vomit and managed to slowly regain his feet, breathing hard. “You’re doing better than I expected honestly. I would’ve thought I’d have at least taken one of your arms or legs by now. Let’s keep going!”

Harry saw his twin lift his arms, bringing them together and without thinking Harry lifted his left hand sending out the most powerful bludgeoner he could. The spell hit the stream of magma that had just started to issue from Evil Harry’s hands and sent it straight back over him. Harry ran forward knowing that wouldn’t do much but figuring he could at least try just straight up beating the guy down. He barely took a single step before shifting into his animagus form and closing the distance on four paws.

Evil Harry shattered the magma dome that had covered him and grimaced as a burn showed up momentarily on his right side. It flashed; an instant later the skin was perfectly healed. Harry had just leaped to try and slash the man with his claws, but Evil Harry stepped into the maneuver and caught him, tossing him off to the side. The doppelganger raised his hand and Harry panicked. With no time to shift or dodge he lifted his left paw to try and cast the bludgeoner again. Pain lanced down his left front leg and Harry yowled falling onto his face.

Evil Harry eyebrows rose. He lowered his hand and started laughing. Harry yowled again and shifted back to human. He could barely even feel his left arm and he knew he wouldn’t be running on it anymore. “Was that your first time trying to use an R-Tat while shifted?” Evil Harry wheezed out between breaths. “They alter as your shape does, idiot! If you want to do that you need to completely redo any interesting ones on your other form and avoid using those while human! It’s not remotely worth the trouble, Mini-Me.” He finally got his laughing under control and shook his head in amusement. “I love to run on four legs, but the cat’s rather useless for me in a fight when I have all this to use instead,” he said gesturing to his encompass his body.

Harry grunted and risked a glance into the stands while his Evil Twin was still distracted. He had figured someone would’ve tried to get in to help by this point. His eyes widened as he saw most of his main group prowling the edge of the barrier ward and Shiva fiddling with three other Tournament supervisors with the Ward Anchor. “Oh, you finally noticed?” Evil Harry asked sounding surprised. “I added my own Anchor while you were hiding from the Feedback grenade. No one’s interrupting us. I’d really like that body of yours. It’s so annoying to not be actually real you know? Stupid pathetic pillar can’t even pull from alternate universes.”

With a start Harry suddenly realized something. Both he and his doppelganger had been ignored the easiest way to win this battle. Well, really the only way for Harry to win this battle. But…he wasn’t strong or skilled enough to pull it off like a Gryffindor. He’d have to do it like a Slytherin instead.
Shifting a meter to the side and trying to shake a bit of feeling into his left arm he managed to grab one of the *Chain Reactor Beams* from its pouch. “One more dance then?” Harry asked trying to display some confidence he definitely wasn’t feeling.

Evil Harry smirked. “Of course, Mini-Me. Let’s make this sporting again. I can see from here that’s one of your single use stones so I’ll give you one more free shot. I’ll even agree to show you my improved version once yours fails!”

Harry gulped, but raised his hand and charged the stone. Barely a second after he took aim, the *Chain Reactor Beam* reached cascade failure and the energies of the feedback loop fed into itself. Each failing rune set had its destructive power directed into the next layer. The final result was a magical Beam-of-War almost two feet wide and pure white streaking across the battlefield towards his Evil Twin’s feet. He had aimed to try and destroy the earth around the double and have him be cut up by the debris. It didn’t work very well. The beam only lasted a second or two and ended up doing more tunneling than exploding.

Evil Harry nodded towards him and waved a hand at the new crater. “That was the original version of the *Chain Reactor* right? Not really your best idea to use that here, but hey, B for effort! Now,” he grinned and lifted a rune stone from a pocket, “here’s my version. The *Yamato Cannon*."

Harry watched the orange energy of destruction form on the face of the rune in slow motion. He waited just long enough for the energy’s path to be inevitable before leaping to the side. The *Yamato Cannon*’s shot was nearly six feet wide and almost pure orange. Instead of a long lasting beam though, it was more like a cohesive ball of roiling energy with a flaming tail of power. Harry was rather grateful for that honestly since had it been any longer lasting, his doppelganger could have twisted to hit him as he moved.

Harry grinned triumphantly as the energy ball smashed into the Aspect Column behind where Harry had been standing before he dodged. The Pillar didn’t stand a chance. It exploded in a shower of rock shards and tongues of flame. Evil Harry roared and started to reach for him before vanishing in a twinkle of light.

Harry blinked a few times making sure it hadn’t been just a trick. He could hear the sounds of the audience gasping again. Nodding to himself, Harry turned towards where Shiva was standing at the Ward Anchor gaping at him and started shuffling forward holding his limp left arm.

Fleur didn’t know exactly why they were taking so long to usher her turn in. She had heard quite a lot of muted explosions and desperate shouting following by two blasts that managed to ruffle the tent. It had been all she could do to avoid rushing out and trying to help and the final blasts were just too much. By the time the crowd started cheering she had been standing and reaching for the flap out. Now ten minutes later all she had been told was that Harry had survived his Task with a few injuries and that she would have to wait due to damage to the arena and the need to bring in a replacement Column.

_Finally_ the gong sounded for Fleur to start. She wasted no time in rushing out. The sooner she finished this, the sooner she could find her friend and make certain he was alright.

Stepping into the battlefield, the barrier flared behind her and she briskly strode towards the translucent pillar in the center. The Aspect Column flashed and Fleur froze solid. In her fears about Harry, she had forgotten just why she was so worried about this specific Task. Unfortunately, her cause for concern had not been overstated.
In front of Fleur, was a mirror version. One that didn’t bother with Fleur’s self-control. One that not only acknowledged her heritage, but took it to the logical extreme. This doppelganger was clad in form-hugging yoga pants and a skintight white top. Neither left anything to the imagination. Her arms were completely covered with feathers and her face was slightly angular while her wings had fully formed and were curled against her back regally. In short, the twin made no effort at all to appear remotely normal. She was not human; she was a harpy.

“Ah. My, my, how strange,” the harpy said cocking her head and peering at Fleur not unlike a bird would do. She felt icy pangs of fear snake through her. This was not good at all. “You are me, but not me. You are...far too human. Why?”

“My fazzer was human,” Fleur snarled. “As is yours if I understand zis correctly.”

The harpy shrugged. “Of course I have human blood. All Veela have human blood. We certainly wouldn’t be mating with centaurs or goblins now would we?” She shuddered at the thought and then narrowed her eyes. “I was not speaking of blood. I was speaking of mannerisms, sister. Why hide who and what you are? Why cloak yourself in the human deception? Be free! Be strong!”

“You do not know of what you speak!” Fleur said. Her hands clenched and she had to fight to keep her feathers from showing. That would be a rather quick loss of this moral argument. “You would ‘ave me constantly broadcast zat I am not one zem? Zat I am to be feared? Are you mad?!”

The harpy chuckled though it held no mirth. “But you aren’t one of them. You are Veela! You are strong and proud and worthy of their adulation, their devotion, their worship! Take what you want from who you want! You are Veela!”

“I am Fleur Delacour. Daughter of Sébastien and Apolline Delacour. I am not defined by my blood!”

“Weak, foolish girl,” the harpy said softly, shaking her head. “Allow me to show you what a Veela who embraces her nature can do.”

Fleur’s eyes widened praying that perimeter barrier would not let the harpy do what she obviously intended.

Harry’s arm was still mostly numb, but at least he had a bit of tingling back in it and the fingers moved when he tried to wiggle them. It was rather disconcerting to watch his hand moving and not be able to feel it...Shiva and Tonks had stayed with him while he managed to get the others to head back into the stands and watch Fleur after they had all been satisfied that he wasn’t going to collapse into a ball in the corner of the room. That was certainly going to happen of course. He just thought his nervous breakdown should wait until after Fleur got through her thing was all.

Shiva had been sending odd glances his way for the past ten minutes when Harry felt a wave of desire and love wash over him. Harry gasped as he almost swooned from the need to go to his goddess, to see her, to grovel in front of her, to give her everything he had and to –

Harry uttered a strangled growl as he wrench his mind away from the spiral loop of devotion. “Holy freaking hellfire. Merlin’s balls, that was worse than the Imperius!” He turned to look at the others in the tent. Krum was still out like a light from the Dreamless Sleep he had insisted on. Fred was looking towards the arena with flickers of comprehension being repeatedly drowned out with drooling looks of devotion. Pomfrey had sat down with a completely glazed expression. Shiva was grimacing and jerky but gazing towards the field as well. Tonks was breathing hard and squeezing his hand in a death grip.
“Tonks? Tonks! NYM! Snap out of it!” Harry yelled. Tonks’ lips curled into a silent grimace and her hair started shifting colors rapidly. She didn’t respond at all otherwise. Harry quickly stood and grabbed the side of her face with his good hand. “Nym! Nymphadora! Dammit, Nym, bigger shifts! Break through!” Tonks shuddered and her body started having little ripples run through the visible skin – evidence of rapid back and forth metamorph changes. None of the changes were large, the last time Harry and Tonks had trained with Fleur she had said that she usually ended up just making quick shifts between her base body and her current chosen form. Harry assumed that’s what she was doing now though it was a lot faster and more continuous than he had ever seen her do previously.

Gasping, Tonks shook her head and her eyes cleared, her body still rippling. “Harry? Wha-what the bloody hell is going on? I can barely think!”

“Yeah you and everyone else! We have to get to the arena; I think Fleur’s Task is going as bad as mine!”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.” She stood and immediately stumbled only being saved from falling by Harry catching her. “I can barely walk. I have to keep shifting to keep thinking. Go ahead, I’ll catch up!”

Harry scowled and turned to Shiva. She had lifted a hand towards the arena and was halfway out of her seat but still looking conflicted. “No. No I may need someone else to run interference. Especially with only one good hand. Hop on my back!” He knelt down and beckoned for Tonks to climb up in a piggyback. She looked like she was going to argue, but shook her head and moved to him. Changing slightly so that her form was slimmer and shorter she wrapped her arms and legs around him. “Let me know if my left hand slips, Nym. It’s still mostly useless.”

“Just go!”

Standing up, Harry started running towards the arena. Thankfully the medical tent was only a short ways from the battlefield proper. As it came into view Harry very nearly wiped out. Fleur was in the center of the arena desperately dodging left and right, backwards and forwards. Spells and curses were raining down into the arena from hundreds of places in the stands. She could barely stay ahead of each spell and transfiguration. Some people weren’t bothering to toss spells but were instead throwing anything they could get their hands on at the girl. He saw knives and chairs and Quaffles and rocks raining down into the arena. Throughout it all, Fleur’s doppelganger stood near the Aspect Column with a small grin on her face as she glanced between Fleur and the crowd.

“I…Nym…”

“Opaque the barrier, Harry,” Tonks whispered into his ear. “We’d never get close with Queen Fleur controlling the whole fucking crowd.”

Harry nodded despondently and shifted course to head towards the Ward Anchor. As he ran, he saw some of the crowd climbing over the stands to get to the battlefield. One had almost jumped over the side when a stunner lashed out and dropped him into unconsciousness. Another ran into a shield and knocked himself out. Giving a quick glance up, Harry saw Daphne and Hermione both moving in fits and spurts halfway under the thrill of the Allure and halfway cognizant. Both were stunning and blocking anyone who looked to be close to entering the arena while they could think straight. He uttered a silent prayer that Queen Fleur wouldn’t notice them and turn the crowd against them too.

Reaching the Ward Anchor he dropped Tonks onto the ground and knelt to examine it. “You sure
we should do this, Nym?"

“Fleur’s strong and smart,” she said nodding. He could hear the strain in her voice though whether that was from the situation, the suggestion, or the effort from so much continuous shifting he didn’t know. “She can handle the harpy bitch on her own if we can stop the rain of spells and make sure that no innocents get caught inside the damn thing for her to worry about too.”

Harry started working to modify the necessary segment. “What if one of us is inside when I finish this? Then we could still help!”

Tonks gasped and clutched her sides. “No, I can’t finish the mod so it would be me in there. And I would be a liability because I can barely move, Harry.” She gave a low moan. “Hurry, Wonder Boy.”

Scowling, Harry moved to the final segment. One man dropped to the ground right in front of him but immediately fell to the ground unconscious from a stunner cast by Tonks. “Okay, I...got it!” Harry yelled as the ward barrier flashed and suddenly dozens of spells and items started ricocheting off the now solid barrier. He slumped a bit as the haze over his thoughts cut off.

Tonks groaned and slumped over, but Harry caught her before she could fully collapse. “Nice job, Wonder Boy.”

“I hope so...Let’s hope, Fleur’s still going to be okay...”

“Trust her, Harry. She can do this.”

Fleur took a flying leap and managed to just barely get out of the way of something that looked suspiciously like a disemboweling curse. Abruptly, just as fast as they had started, the rain of spells and attacks stopped. Gasping for breath and clutching her side, Fleur cautiously looked around. She saw Harry and Tonks slumped over together near the Anchor and the crowd glancing confusedly between themselves. The harpy’s face had devolved into a full avian appearance as she scowled.

“That’s cheating,” the harpy snarled. “They were mine. You took away what was mine!”

“Zey are zeir own persons!” Fleur tried to yell. It came out as little more than a loud whisper – her voice was so hoarse from shouting spells and counter-curses and shields. “You ‘ave no claim to zem!”

“I have every claim! They were MINE! EVERYONE is MINE! Anyone I want I take! Anyone who harms me dies! If I want someone to do something they do it! I am Veela! That is my right!” The harpy was practically foaming at the mouth in her rage.

“You are insane!” Fleur growled. “You would ‘ave my people destroy millennia of progress for your own selfishness!”

“It is my right!” the harpy screamed. “It is your right! You want the boy. You want the girl. Take them! You are Veela!”

Fleur finally got her breath back. She could not let this go on any longer. The harpy was still too angry to focus properly. She was still too concerned about losing her toys. Fleur didn’t even bother responding to the accusations. She shifted. Her wings sprouted as Fleur ran and took a running leap at the harpy. She didn’t bother with forming passionfyre – it would have taken too long to fully form. The harpy’s eyes widened and her lips pulled back in a snarl. Her arms lifted
and the balls of flame began to form. The harpy had just started to move her right hand forward as Fleur reached the Queen Bitch.

Thrusting ahead with her arm Fleur hit the harpy’s chest at full speed, taloned fingers completely extended. A shriek of rage and pain echoed and abruptly cut off. Fleur’s hand speared completely through the harpy holding the phantom’s heart. She growled and squeezed crushing the useless organ and pulled her arm back out of her doppelganger’s chest. A moment later the phantom winked out of existence and the arena barrier dropped. Breathing deeply, Fleur turned and headed to where Harry and Tonks still sat, leaning on each other

She needed to thank both of them for saving her life.
Chapter 25: Frank Conversations and Dangerous Decisions

“I want them both arrested!” Umbridge screamed at the head in Rosmerta’s Floo. Rosmerta just cringed. Why she had bothered to let the toad woman in escaped her.

Head Auror Scrimgeour shut his eyes and shook his head. “No.”

“What do you mean NO!”?

“N. O. No. Dolores, I may make many mistakes, but I am not incapable of learning from some of them. The fact that you are calling me immediately after the expected end of the Second Task in your thrice damned Tournament means that – yet again – something has gone horribly wrong. The last time I left to arrest someone as soon as you called I nearly lost my job for not checking my facts beforehand,” Scrimgeour said scowling. Rosmerta held in her snort. She would have paid good money to have seen that conversation.

“I am the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic!” Dolores screamed her face going red.

“And your star is falling! Every time this Tournament goes belly-up you get another black eye, Dolores. I have aspirations! I will not let you drag me down with you. What did they even do this time?”

The toad woman stood up straighter and glared. “Potter destroyed Ministry property during his Task. He is to be arrested and fined at minimum. The French abomination mind-controlled the entire audience into her willing slaves. I will see her arrested and Kissed before the evening ends!”

Scrimgeour made a sound somewhere between a sigh and growl. “You idiotic woman…One, those Columns you had imported were insured by the International Committee due to the likelihood of possible destruction – whether intentional or accidental. The very Department you’ve been overseeing as Interim Head. Two, nothing any of the Champions does while in the performance of a Triwizard Tournament Task can be prosecuted. They all have sovereign immunity, Dolores! It’s in the damn rules! Read the blasted things before trying to cite them.”

Umbridge’s mouth snapped shut and she whipped out her wand. Rosmerta surreptitiously grabbed her own in response though Umbridge seemed to have forgotten she was in the room. “Fine. If you won’t do anything get me Dawlish.”

Scrimgeour laughed. “If you want him, get him yourself, Dolores. I should warn you though, Amelia has made it perfectly clear to him that one more wrong move and he’s fired as well so I doubt he’ll come running either. I’ll be leaving now to speak with Fudge and see if we can head off another international complaint.”

As the head disappeared from the Floo, Umbridge screeched and twirled on her heel walking out of the pub. Rosmerta heaved a sigh and put her wand away. “Last time I ever let that bitch into my pub. I better go find Amelia and Sirius to let them know she’s on the warpath.”

Fleur sat down next to Harry and Tonks with a sigh. She hesitated for only a moment before leaning over and pulling them both into a rib crushing hug. “Zank you,” she whispered blinking away tears. “Zank you both so much. I-I couldn’t dodge zat many and zey were starting to climb in…I just…zank you…”
Harry patted her back and murmured soft reassurances while Tonks just nodded and squeezed her in sympathy. Harry pulled back slightly and said, “Daphne and Hermione helped too. They were trying to stun people before they could run inside. I’m sorry we couldn’t jump in to help too…”

“Non. It is better zat you did not. I shudder zinking of ‘aving to fight both ze harpy and one of your evil doppelgangers as well.”

Fleur noticed the wave of revulsion and fear that Harry radiated along with his own full body shudder before he clamped down on it and nodded. Tonks must have taken notice as well because she shifted to make sure she was leaning against Harry again and wrapped one arm around him.

All three looked up as Dumbledore and Madame Maxime walked up to them, both Headmasters wearing contrite expressions and moving slowly. “Miss Delacour, I believe I owe you an apology,” Dumbeldore said causing Fleur to raise her eyebrows in response. “We expected the Aspect Column battles to be unusual, but we never thought that they would be quite so…extreme. I also wish to apologize personally for being unable to adjust the Ward Anchor and prevent interference from the crowd. I was…quite affected by the Allure of your counterpart and to my embarrassment I was unable to fully overcome it.”

Madame Maxime nodded behind him. “As was I. In fact, ze most resistance I saw was a listless stupor. Your aspect was…very strong, Fleur.”

Fleur sighed and nodded. “Yes. Zat ze harpy was…I am not surprised zat everyone was so affected.”

“I admit I am curious,” Dumbeldore said slowly and frowned down at Tonks and Harry. “Miss Tonks, Harry, just how were the two of you able to resist?”

Harry snorted. “You missed two, Headmaster.” He waved towards the crowd where Hermione and Daphne were hugging Luna and Tracey and speaking with an unnerved Neville, Hannah and Susan. “Hermione and Daphne were able to fight it off somewhat as well.”

“That does not answer my question.”

“It’s because we’ve practiced, Sir,” Harry said sighing. “Fleur has been subjecting the four of us to increasingly powerful blasts of her Allure for over three months now to improve our resistance to it. I was practically immune to start with so while I can feel it, I can also ignore it. Tonks brushes it off through her own method and Daphne and Hermione use some form of mental discipline and Occlumency from what I understand.”

Fleur nodded. “A lot of zeir resistance comes down to recognizing the foreign feelings and wanting to fight against it. It takes quite a bit of practice and exposure to reach zat level. Normally only our mates ever bother to try and learn.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I am glad they were able to assist before a disaster occurred. Miss Delacour, Harry, if you are both willing, I would like to announce the scores immediately to allow everyone to leave and take stock of themselves,” Dumbledore said.

Fleur turned to Harry in silent questioning. Physically, she was mostly unharmed and she would not let the implications or mental stress take hold until she was away from this crowd. The sooner that happened the better. Harry though still looked exhausted and injured from his fight. She could see him still holding his left arm and barely moving it which was worrying. She could hold herself together longer if it meant he could get more medical attention.
Harry just nodded. “Let’s get this over with. Viktor is still asleep though…”

Karkaroff came up from behind the other two Headmasters and nodded. “Yes, he is. He granted me permission to give his scores in his absence and inform him of them later.”

The three Heads all nodded to each other and started back towards the box while Fleur stood. Harry turned to Tonks before moving. “Nym, do you need help getting back up?”

Tonks smirked at him though Fleur could see the exhaustion and strain in her smile. “Nah, I’m good, Wonder Boy. I’m going to be sore for a week, but now that I can lay off the shifting I can move again. I’ll meet you in Common Room afterwards yeah?”

Harry stood and turned away from them both, but not before each caught the grimace on his face. Fleur winced internally. Whatever Harry had faced must have been as mentally tiring as her own harpy clone. “Actually I think I’d rather skip that, Nym. I would like to talk though…”

Tonks nodded and, pushing herself to her feet, she laid a hand on his shoulder. “Sure, Harry. Head up to the Room after?” He nodded. “Want me to grab Hermione too?”

Harry stayed silent for a long moment before turning and considering Fleur. She tried to stay quiet and impassive. He needed his mates. She would make do as she always had. “No. Tell Hermione to keep Fleur company.”

Fleur had to fight with everything she had to not drop her mouth open in shock at his words. As it was she could only stammer in reply. “I-I–’arry!”

He shrugged and Tonks gave her a small nod. “You need someone to lean on and talk to just like me, Fleur. Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you don’t exactly hang out with anyone in Beauxbatons or that you prefer to be near me or Hermione. I can talk with Tonks while you talk with Hermione.” He grinned ruefully. “One really cool aspect of having two partners is that we can multitask like that.” He took a breath and started to walk towards the center of the arena. “Come on, let’s get our scores.”

Fleur just gaped after him frozen. She heard a light chuckled and felt Tonks move beside her and cross her arms. “He’s definitely sweet, huh?” Fleur just nodded in agreement. “No wonder he’s getting so many girls to fall for him…I know you’re aiming for a Consort agreement, Fleur. I was against it originally but…let’s just say I’m open to the possibility now. I’m always going to be third though when it comes to these things. You convince Hermione and Harry – I’ll go with whatever they decide.” She smiled at Fleur before shrugging. “Try not to let the Queen Bitch get to you too bad. That wasn’t you anymore than the Runic Physical God was Harry.”

“I…zank you, Tonks,” Fleur said softly.

Tonks just shrugged again. “Only saying the truth. Go. Get your scores and talk to Hermione. I’ll have her meet you at the carriage.” Tonks gently pushed Fleur to start walking then headed back to the stands herself.

Fleur joined Harry and Fred in the center of the arena. Fred was still looking a bit confused when he turned to address her. “So Evil Queen version I’m guessing?” Fleur nodded, grimacing. “Eh, it’s better than Percy Fred. Anyone know why Krum was so freaked out?” Both Harry and Fleur shrugged. They hadn’t exactly had time yet to find out what had happened with the others.

Dumbledore stood and cast a quick *sonorous* before speaking. “Well, this Task was certainly not as expected. On behalf of the judges I apologize for our oversight in administering this Task
without adequate safety measures in place. We will certainly aim to improve to ensure that audience members are not involved in the future. To facilitate recovery of both contestant and non-entrants we will be holding the scoring immediately. Madame Umbridge is unfortunately absent so her scores will be given by fellow Ministry worker Percy Weasley who was in attendance today and works in the Department of International Magical Cooperation.”

Dumbledore paused and looked down into the field. “Fred Weasley, you largely maintained your calm throughout and once the Aspect shifted to a battle, ended the confrontation with a single spell. I give you 9 points.”

Maxime, Karkaroff, and Bagman all gave Fred 9’s as well. The only judge who broke the mold was Percy who glared at his brother. “Your Aspect asked for a different form of competition where fighting was not necessary. You could have easily taken him up on that offer. I give you a 7 for not even trying to consider the option.”

Fred snorted as he stepped back into the group and muttered, “You’re just annoyed that I killed a crazed version of me acting like you.”

Krum received blanket 6’s for seemingly panicking during his Task and continuing to cast spells after his doppelganger had been destroyed.

“Harry Potter,” Dumbledore said. “Your Aspect was rather disturbing and its skills bordered on topics better left unsaid. However we are here to grade your performance and not your Aspect’s. You were resourceful throughout and attempted to act instead of react. Your initial salvo of spells contained many borderline Dark spells and I would caution you against using those in the future. Your attempted use of your animagus form was intriguing despite its lack of effect and induced injury. Ultimately your use of your Aspect’s own attack against him was very impressive. 9 points.”

Surprisingly, only two judges didn’t end up giving Harry nines. Percy scored him 8 for injuring himself, while Karkaroff scored him a 10 for ‘impressive quick thinking skills and using your enemy’s overconfidence against him.’

Finally it was Fleur’s turn and she stepped forwards with her back straight and her head held high. A confidence radiating from her that she did not remotely feel.

“Fleur Delacour,” Dumbledore sighed. “Again, we are not grading the actions of your Aspect. Your skill shown in dodging numerous spells and projectiles from outside interference was… exceptional. Your ability to quickly utilize the opening granted when the doppelganger lost her focus was impressive as was the quick ending shortly thereafter. My only concern is that you did not immediately try to end the battle as soon as you realized what she was going to try and do. I score you 8 points.”

Fleur blinked in surprise not expecting anything remotely that high. Yet the same sentiments were repeated by the others, with the only exceptions being Maxime giving her a 10 for ‘exceptional acrobatics’ and Percy giving her a 9 for a ‘quick resolution when the opportunity presented itself.’ Stepping back she caught Harry flashing her a quick thumbs up.

“That concludes the Second Task. Champions, as you have all successfully completed this challenge here are your keys,” Dumbledore said as he waved his wand. Three golden keys floated out from the judges box and into their hands while Karkaroff held a fourth for Viktor. “These keys will allow you to open the golden egg retrieved during the First Task. It contains a clue for your Fourth Task while one final item will be retrieved during the Third Task in early February. Good day to all.”
As the three Champions walked out of the arena Harry leaned over to Fleur and whispered, “First and second for us. I suppose that’s at least something good considering what we just went through.” He smiled at her and gave her a quick one-armed hug before walking back towards the castle. Fleur stayed blushing on the lawn for several seconds before turning to the Beauxbatons carriage.

*Start of adult content*

Harry slowly paced in front of the dancing trolls tapestry, opening up the Room. Tonks had already arrived and was sprawled across a large queen size bed with her boots kicked off. Harry hesitated for a moment before deciding that it wasn’t worth asking about and he’d probably be falling asleep here anyway. Lord knew, he could certainly use the comfort of drifting off in one of his girlfriend’s arms.

“Hey, Nym,” he said shutting the door and shambling forward to sit on the edge of the bed with a sigh.

“Wotcher, Harry,” she said. Tonks turned her head and watched him lean down trying to untie his shoes with his right hand and fumbling with the laces. Frowning she picked herself up and got off to help him. “Your hand is still that bad? It’s been almost two hours…”

Harry just nodded and let her take his shoes and socks off. Eventually as she slipped back on the bed behind him and wrapped her arms around him he responded. “It’s not as bad as it was. I can somewhat feel things with it now, but it’s still mostly numb. Pomfrey said there was some nerve damage, but it should be healed with full feeling back by tomorrow afternoon. I deserve it after being so stupid. I should’ve known the tattoo would’ve altered with my shape.”

Tonks shook her head and kissed his neck. “You were in the middle of a pretty huge battle for your life, Harry. You can’t think of everything all the time. I’m just glad it wasn’t worse.”

“It could’ve been. I’m actually rather surprised that the Reflector Lenses don’t have any issues when I shift.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask about that actually,” Tonks said. “You can still see fine when you change?”

Harry nodded. “I think the glasses are included in my eyes during the change. I don’t quite get how it works, but Sirius said that the same thing happened with my dad. Cool side benefit is my panther is immune to anything that relies on eye contact to work. Oh what did you and Mione end up naming him by the way?”

Tonks shrugged. “Well the original option was Blackie like you apparently tried to name Sirius at first.” They both chuckled slightly at that joke. “I voted Shadow, but Hermione rebutted with Midnight. We ended up agreeing on that. It seemed a bit cliché, but appropriate.”

Harry nodded. “I like it. Nym, about the tattoos thing…Did you see all the things that…he had? Some of those should’ve driven him insane.”

“He seemed pretty off-kilter to me, Wonder Boy,” Tonks said frowning.

Harry shrugged. “Maybe. A little. I don’t know. Nym,” Harry said in a voice barely above a whisper. Tonks had to strain to hear him and she was right behind him. “Nym, I think I can understand why he did what he did. Why he went so far. I…if you guys all started to die because I
hesitated to act…I’m scared I might…that I might…”

She squeezed him tighter and lifted one hand to turn his face to hers. “Harry, you are not that twisted version. All of us know that you would never go that far – that you wouldn’t start trying to kill us just because we disagree with you. We know you better than that.”

“But…”

“But nothing! Harry, you are at your core a good person. If you weren’t you would’ve killed the Dursleys long before Shiva took you in. You’re probably a better person than me because I almost definitely would’ve killed them. That thing in the arena was not you. It was every one of your darkest thoughts and desires given form. It was not you. Everyone has some evil little urges once in awhile. Dumbledore and the others were right bastards to make you look right into your own with thousands of people watching,” Tonks said. She saw Harry nod though he didn’t seem to fully believe her. “That thing was a phantom Harry. It said so itself, it wasn’t even drawn from a parallel world. It was just an imaginary construct.”

“A construct that tried to eat my soul,” Harry muttered with a snort.

Tonks chuckled. “True. And you certainly gave it what for! You should probably send a strongly worded letter or something to the manufacturers by the way about that. Bit of a safety hazard that.”

“Yeah,” Harry actually cracked a bit of a smile at that. “You could say that. That’s what happens when you include Soul runes in things though. Damn unpredictable results those give, huh?”

“Right you are, Wonder Boy.” Tonks shifted back slightly and wiggled her eyebrows. “So are we going to tease Hermione for apparently being a Dark Lady? Or maybe Daphne for somehow becoming your Dark Mistress?”

Harry full on laughed at that. “You tease Daphne with the Dark Mistress title and she’ll try and hex your lady bits off.”

“Let her try!” Tonks grinned and cocked her head in thought. “Hey, did you get a good look at any of your Evil Double’s runes? Some of those seemed right useful.”

Harry shrugged. “A few. I’m pretty sure I can remake his Yamato Cannon without any issues. I think I might try to do that thing with the lava too – the one that was spread over the back of both hands. That could be useful. I wish I hadn’t been in shock when he showed off a bit of the Fortress cluster…I’ve been trying to get that to work since I was 11.”

“Would a pensieve help? We could try borrowing one from Bonesy’s department.”

He shook her head. “I doubt it. He didn’t lift his shirt very far so I don’t think we’d be able to see much that was too useful. Maybe it’d help for some of the others but…honestly I don’t want to include a lot of that anymore. Some of it had been idle thoughts for the future yeah, but now I just don’t want to have anything to do with something that could do…that. He killed you, Nym. He killed Shiva and Nev and Hermione and god knows how many others…I don’t want to put things on my body that are going to constantly remind me of him.”

Tonks nodded and pulled him into a short kiss. “I understand, Wonder Boy. Was there anything else you wanted to try and steal though?”

Harry gave a scary little grin. “Oh yeah. I am going to figure out what he did to make the Sword not work on him. That’s half the reason I don’t use it. One wrong swipe I kill myself or any allies
because I accidentally nicked you. Now that I know it’s possible to safeguard against it I’m going to reverse engineer it and tattoo it on me, you, Mione and everyone else I care about.”

Tonks shook her head good-naturedly. “You sure don’t aim small, Harry.” She winced as her neck cracked and reached up to rub a hand over it.

Harry twisted and narrowed his eyes slightly. “How are you, Nym? You looked, err, pretty bad after the thing with Queen Fleur.”

“Like I said, earlier, I’m going to be seriously sore for a while. Normal shifting doesn’t do a thing but I basically had to stay in a constant flux during that. It…hurt. A lot. It doesn’t hurt anymore now that I can stop shifting, but my body still remembers the strain and magically I’m a bit exhausted.”

Harry considered that for a long moment before nodding. “Lie down on your stomach.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to give you a massage to see if I can’t make you feel a bit better, that’s why. Now lie down,” Harry said rolling his eyes.

“Oh, a massage eh? Well let me just get a bit more comfortable then,” she said smirking. Reaching down, Tonks pulled her shirt over her head leaving her in just a pair of trousers and a bright blue bra. She was mildly disappointed when Harry didn’t even blush.

“Don’t look at me like that, Nym,” Harry said chuckling. “I have seen breasts before you know.”

Tonks raised an eyebrow. “Hmm, I detect a challenge there…” She reached behind her back and unhooked her bra, letting it slip off her shoulders. Smirking in triumph she saw Harry finally start to blush a bit. She’d made sure that her breasts were just as tanned as the rest of her body before slipping her shirt off so she knew it was probably a bit different for him already without the tan lines that Hermione likely had. What had almost definitely been the deciding factor though would be her piercings. There was no way the brainy beauty had nipple piercings. Granted they made it a bit hard to play around with her nipples generally, but it was totally worth it sometimes. Especially today with seeing Harry’s reaction. Deciding to tease him a tad she increased her chest size from a C to DD and her grin widened even more as Harry’s blush spread to his ears.

“You cheat,” he murmured glancing at his feet before looking back up at her body.

“Proudly!” she said straightening up and striking a sultry pose. “Though don’t expect these to stay this size. Big is far more annoying than it’s worth. Tried it for a while when I was 16. Sucks to run in, sucks to exercise in, too many girls envy you despite not realizing how frustrating they are, all guys want to do is see you undressed. Big sucks. I much prefer a B to C.”

Harry’s face lost a bit of its redness and he shifted closer to her. “What’s your normal size?”

“You mean default?” He nodded at her question. Tonks hesitated for a long moment before sighing and letting every usual change she made to herself fade away. Her hair shifted to a dark brown extending to just above her shoulders, her breasts reduced to a small C cup, her face subtly shifted from heart-shaped to a bit more angular and her body slightly extended to become overall more sinewy and muscular. “This is my default. My complete default,” she said quietly avoiding looking at him.

Harry nodded and reached out to grab her chin lifting Tonks’ face like she had done to him earlier. “Nymphadora, you are beautiful no matter what form you are in.”
Tonks gave a sad smile and a slight lift of her shoulders. “If you say so, Harry. I don’t like my natural form very much. It has too many hard edges to feel comfortable in and it looks too much like my crazy aunt. Plus I hate my hair. Completely and totally hate my hair. It has no personality like this.”

Harry shrugged. “Tonks, you can be whoever you want when you’re with me. Thank you for showing me your default state, but if you don’t want to you don’t have to take that form ever again you know.”

Tonks smiled and pulled him into her so that they were crushed together and laid back on the bed with Harry over her and their mouths pressed together. Several long minutes later they broke the snog and Tonks brushed some of his hair out his eyes. “I think I love you, Harry.”

“I think I love you too, Nym,” Harry responded softly leaning his head down on her chest. “Promise you won’t leave?”

“I’m not going anywhere, Wonder Boy,” she said softly.

“Good.” Harry stayed like that for several minutes both of them just relaxing and taking comfort in the other. After a while Harry had an idle thought and said, “Can I ask you a question about your shifting, Nym?”

“Shoot.”

“How drastic can you make the changes?” he asked. “Like can you look like a obese senior citizen or a scrawny child or does it have to be at least somewhat close to you actual body-mass?”

Tonks considered, shaking her head. “It has to be close my actual mass though I can stretch it pretty far. I can actually turn into a guy also.”

Harry’s eyes widened. He was very thankful she couldn’t see his face at that point. “Really?” he squeaked.

“Yeah. Somewhat functional too. I have to keep concentrating to make the dick work, but it’s doable. Bloody weird though so I don’t really like doing that unless a job calls for me to be a man. I’m only fertile as a girl though so don’t worry about me eventually knocking Hermione up.”

“Err…right…can we talk about that some other time maybe?”

Tonks chuckled. “Sure, Wonder Boy. Kinky play saved for later aye!”

“Your concept of kinky and my concept of kinky seem somewhat far off,” he muttered. “You’re as bad as Fleur and Daphne.”

Tonks raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Oh that’s right! I heard they dragged you into the sex shop in Hogsmeade! Spill, Wonder Boy! How was it? Everything you dreamed about?”

Harry shuddered trying to block out the memory of the two girls gushing over some of the toys and trying on the lingerie. “It was…educational.”

“Oh come on, you can’t leave it at that!” Tonks whined.

Harry sighed, “What do you want me to say, Nym? That I had no idea that girls had so many options to keep themselves entertained without a guy around? That lingerie is apparently far more attractive when there is slightly more material than less despite it covering more than regular
underwear? That it was rather exceedingly awkward for them both to be teasing me for practically an hour while I’m not dating either?” He snorted. “I’ll give you this, some of the stuff in there was kinda cool and maybe one day I’ll work up the courage to suggest something to you and Mione, but it’s going to be a long while away most likely.”

Tonks laughed. “Okay, okay, I’ll leave it alone! I might have to ask Fleur though which styles you gravitated towards.”

Harry just groaned. Eventually he realized something and picked his head up, smirking at her. “We got distracted. Turn over, woman. I still owe you a massage.”

Tonks lifted an eyebrow but did as he commanded. “Seems like it would be difficult to massage someone with only one good hand.”

“I’ll manage,” he said squatting on her legs and digging his right hand into her back.

“Yeah and how are you going to, oooohhh, damn, Wonder Boy, arrrggg right there,” she moaned into the pillow as Harry moved his pressure up her spine and over her shoulder blades. “Morgana’s tits, that’s amazing, aaaaahhhh, where the hell did you learn that?”

Harry chuckled. “It’s amazing what some of the books Hermione finds have in them. A little bit of magic correctly channeled through the fingertips and,” he demonstrated, pushing ever so slightly into her back and eliciting another small moan from his girlfriend, “it’s a wonder the results you can get.”

“I am going to thank that girl so badly tomorrow…” Tonks mumbled.

*End of adult content*

Hermione casually walked through the doors to the Beauxbatons carriage ignoring the gaping expressions from some of the girls hanging out in the front entrance. “Où se trouve la chambre de Fleur Delacour?” she asked. One of the people blinked and pointed down the hall to the left. “Merci.” Grinning to herself slightly at their reaction Hermione turned and walked down a little ways. The carriage was intriguing. She’d expected space enlarging charms, but this certainly seemed to stretch the limits of that spell.

Finding the door labeled ‘Delacour’ Hermione took a deep, steadying breath and reached out to knock. It opened a moment later and Fleur blinked out at her in surprise. Stepping back, the Veela girl waved Hermione inside and shut the door casting silencing, locking and privacy spells at it. Hermione took in the modest decorations in the room during a slow turn and eventually ended up looking back at Fleur and raising her eyebrows at the older girl’s shocked expression.

Fleur shook her head and smiled at Hermione. “I did not actually expect you to come, Hermione.”

“Why not?” Hermione asked moving forward to give her a short hug before sitting on one of the chairs. “You are my friend, Fleur. Tonks and Harry were right. You should have someone you trust to talk to after that disaster earlier.”

Fleur shrugged sitting on her bed. “It is certainly nice, oui. But, zis does not change zat I did not expect you to leave ‘arry’s side tonight.”

Hermione sighed. “I admit it was a bit hard not to rush to him, but I don’t want to be that clingy girl who dissolves into tears every time he gets hurt. I comforted him after the First Task; Tonks should be allowed her own time to make him feel better. This is complicated enough and we all
need to have time alone with each other to ensure that none of us develop any feelings of jealousy or entitlement.”

Fleur frowned. “Hermione, relationships should not be approached in such a clinical fashion…”

“I know,” Hermione said with a shrug. “It’s…hard to explain. I don’t mean it quite like that and certainly not as detached as it sounds, but I find it easier to talk about it in those types of terms.”

“Well, as long as you all are ‘appy,” Fleur said sighing. She turned and looked out her window with a slight frown. “I am ‘appy for you, Hermione.”

Hermione considered the older girl and examined her own feelings on the matter. Finally heaving an internal groan of defeat she moved from the chair to the bed and hugged Fleur. Fleur stiffened for a moment before melting back into the brunette witch. “Zis is nice.”

Hermione nodded. “Fleur,” she said slowly, “what do you want?”

“I don’t zink I understand ze question, Hermione,” Fleur responded just as slowly while pulling Hermione’s arms tighter around her.

“I mean this,” Hermione moved her arms slightly. “What do you want from me? From Harry? He’s as dense as board when it comes to the fairer sex, but even he’s noticed something. So what are you looking for from us? We are involved Tonks after all and I really don’t see that ending anytime soon…”

“I had meant to speak with you after ze Task about zis anyway,” Fleur said trailing off in a sigh. “Ze harpy razer distracted me.”

Hermione nodded. “We can talk about her first if you want.”

Fleur stayed silent for almost a minute before nodding. “I would like zat, Hermione. I…I have always been slightly afraid of my heritage. It is…not always ze shining example of love and honor. Ze Veela of old were quite different from today. Zey were angry and forceful. Ze first Veela were created to be toys for the rich and powerful. Experiments for zeir creators to enjoy at zeir whim.”

“I’m sorry, Fleur. I didn’t know,” Hermione said softly.

“We do not speak of it often,” Fleur said shrugging. “It all happened very long ago. Zis is ancient history. Ze point is zat when my ancestors broke free, ze decided to take whatever ze wanted from whoever ze wanted in repayment. It was a dark time in ze Veela history. It took us many, many years to recover from zat time and zat image. In some ways, we still have not succeeded in ze effort. Ze harpy’s beliefs and actions were a reflection of zose expressed long ago.”

Hermione considered that in silence. Eventually she asked, “Would you really be able to take control of an entire stadium full of people like that?”

Fleur shook her head and leaned back. “Non. I am not zat strong. Zere are perhaps zree or four elders who could, but I am not one of zem. I could…perhaps control ze men like zat. But certainly not ze majority of ze women.”

“You know you’re nothing like that Queen Bee version of your fears right, Fleur? You’re a far better person. You would never do what she did.”

“I would certainly like to zink so,” Fleur said shrugging. “I have never truly tested my limits to
such an extent anyways. I do not like being reminded that many of the people I interact with could easily fall under my sway should I let my control slip. It makes it very difficult to care for someone when you are wondering if they are only interested in you because you are unconsciously seducing them.”

“That does sound very difficult,” Hermione said. “Is that why you’re interested in Harry?”

Fleur sighed and nodded. “It was certainly one of the things that drew me to you both in the beginning. Both of you are resistant so I know I am not swaying either of you. It is…wonderful to know that you two are accepting of me, both knowing what I am and without being consumed by the Allure.”

“You said one of the things?” Hermione asked softly.

“Oui. Ze more time I spend with you both, ze more attractive you both are. You are kind and caring, thoughtful and critical. You work hard, but you know your limits. You are not afraid to buck ze system. And most importantly of all…I see a reflection of my own struggles in you both. I don’t have many friends outside my family due my heritage. Ze women are jealous and ze men succumb to ze Allure. ‘arry has few close friends due to his Boy-Who-Lived curse. You were isolated due to your intelligence. Even Tonks had few truly close associates because of her abilities.” Fleur sighed and leaned her head back against Hermione. “I find it hard to express just how good it feels to be able to enjoy the company of those familiar with the same type of isolation.”

Hermione stayed quiet for a long time just holding Fleur and thinking. The older girl for her part just shut her eyes and enjoyed the embrace while it lasted. Finally Hermione said, “Fleur, I can truly understand where you are coming from and I want you to know that we will all always, always be there for you if you need us. But I…I really don’t think Harry is going to be leaving Tonks…”

Fleur smiled slightly and stroked Hermione’s hand. “You have not done all your research, Hermione.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked frowning.

“Hermione, once I realized that you and ‘arry were together, I did not expect nor hope to be his wife,” Fleur said chuckling softly while Hermione just looked on even more confused. “I have been hoping to eventually be a Consort to you both.”

“A consort?”

“Oui. With a capital ‘C’. It is, what is the expression in English…akin to having my cake and eating it to.”

“Fleur, can you please explain just what a Consort is?” Hermione said exasperatedly. “Obviously you’re implying more than the simple Muggle term denotes.”

Fleur nodded. “Ze Consort is a position not often used these days. Ze only ones who truly need it are ze Purebloods and in ze countries where it would matter zey tend to be too arrogant to accept ze arrangement most times. Hannah, Susan and Neville all appear to be more open in zat manner than the majority of zei counterparts.” She shrugged. “In essence ze Consort is a wife without ze title of ‘wife’. Ze Consort has many of the ze same privileges zough their authority over ze husband’s estate does not extend as far. Most importantly ze Consort does not carry on ze husband’s line. She carries on her own.”
Hermione drew in a sharp breath understanding finally what Fleur had been hinting at. “Oh. There aren’t any other Delacours besides your father, mother and sister are there?”

Fleur shook her head. “Non. My fazzer’s uncle died several years ago wizout an Heir. My fazzer’s line is expected to die with Gabi and me. He of course is accepting of zis as he cares far more for his daughters zen he ever did for his name but…” She paused for a long moment before continuing. “I want to marry for love, but if I can ensure zat my fazzer’s name does not die out zen I would like to do so as well. Zat was why I was happy zat you are Muggle-born. You could carry on Harry’s line while I could carry on my own. Zat I am quickly falling for you both means I also get to enjoy ze relationship rather zan just ze duty. Ze cake and ze eating, no?”

“I suppose I could see that…” Hermione said slowly. “But your parents are still somewhat young aren’t they? Couldn’t they have another child?”

“Even if ze did, it would likely be anozer girl,” Fleur said. “Zere are no male Veela, Hermione. Ze Veela, we breed true. Any daughter of a Veela will be a Veela. Male births are very rare among my people since ze male does not carry ze Veela traits beyond being handsome.”

“Oh,” Hermione whispered. “We really need better books on these things in this country,” she muttered to herself causing Fleur to chuckle lightly.

“Zat is adorable when you do zat.”

Hermione blushed. “And what about Tonks? You’d really be okay with her too?”

Fleur nodded. “We would need to speak quite a bit more I zink. She did not like me very much at ze beginning. We spoke shortly after ze Task zough and she informed me zat she had withdrawn her objections. She also said zat she would go with whatever you and ‘arry decided.”

Hermione frowned and thought about that for a minute. “Tonks has been deferring to one of us rather a lot with those types of things…I hadn’t noticed before…” She shook her head and focused back on the French girl. “Fleur, I can promise that I’ll talk with Harry and Tonks. I…don’t think I can promise any more than that though. It was hard enough to convince him to start dating her and for her to accept that we were actually okay with it.”

“Oh of course,” Fleur said agreeably. “I have no interest in driving a wedge between any of you. I am not ze harpy. If you would accept me into ze fold I would have it be because you truly wanted me. Please don’t zink zat I will be condemned to a life of misery or loneliness should you all decide zat it is too much. I will accept your decision and adapt as I always have.”

Hermione snorted. “Well considering I haven’t had you move from my lap since we sat down I’d advise you not to give up hope yet, Fleur.”

Fleur raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Don’t, ‘oh’ me. You know perfectly well that you’ve done rather exceptional on the seduction front with both me and with Harry.” Hermione sighed and squeezed Fleur slightly, feeling the older girl’s heart racing under her arms. “Fleur, do you really think I’d be sitting in your room embracing you if I didn’t feel at least something for you?”

“Well…I had hoped…” Fleur admitted.

“I am not going to betray Harry or Tonks though no matter what,” Hermione said quietly. “So please don’t try to kiss me or anything until I’ve had a long talk with my partners about this. I…do think Harry will be open to it though.”
“Why?”

“Because,” Hermione sighed, “he told me to come to you. He might be dense with women, but he’s been getting a lot better and I think he pretends to miss a lot more than he actually does. I can virtually guarantee you that he knew you were basically on a date with him at Hogsmeade and I am somewhat certain that he fully expected us to be having this talk when he asked me to look after you tonight.”

“Oh,” Fleur said in a very quiet voice. “Hermione,” she asked a bit louder, “would you stay with me tonight? I promise I will behave. I just…don’t want to wake up remembering ze harpy and not have someone nearby to remind me zat she was simply a nightmare.”

Hermione nodded. “I will, Fleur. I will.”

\\\n
While Hermione, Fleur, Harry and Tonks were enjoying their evening, Luna, Daphne and Tracey were hard at work in the Gryffindor Common Room. Luna tapped the parchment with her quill and quirked her mouth in concentration. “I’m not sure about the title.”

Tracey shook her head. “No, it’s good Luna. *The Dark Mirror and the Queen Bee* hits everything we want to address without implying any sort of wrongdoing at all. It’ll grab people’s attention too whether they’re expecting either a real story about the Tournament or just one of the typical *Quibbler* pieces.”

Luna slowly nodded. “I suppose you’re right. It does have a bit of the *Quibbler* flare to it. Daphne, what did you want to add to the section detailing Harry?”

Daphne finished reading over their current version and pointed at a part near the beginning. “I think this should say something more along the lines of: ‘heroically facing off against a callous, unfeeling Evil Doppelganger driven insane through the loss of friends and loved ones.’ And we might want to switch the end to read: ‘tricked his overconfident, self-consumed Aspect into killing itself using its own attack.’ We want to avoid humanizing Evil Overlord Harry. It should help distance the evil version from our friend.”

Tracey emphatically nodded. “Agreed. We definitely should call the Overlord by ‘it’ instead of ‘him’. Good idea, Daph.”

“Okay,” Luna said making the corrections. “Are you two happy with what I put for the end with Fleur?”

Tracey leaned over. “Read it again?”

Luna held up the paper and read her notes, “‘The French Champion stood tall and denounced her Evil Counterpart’s beliefs. Triumphing over the horrid, underhanded control forced upon others, she clearly stated that a Veela would have to be insane to even think of performing such actions. Fleur Delacour showed in no uncertain terms that any Veela that tried to exert their will on others would be destroyed by their own people thus proving herself to be an exemplary representative of her species. Miss Delacour’s outstanding moral code was the prime component in forcing her Doppelganger off guard enough to ensure the Aspect’s defeat.’”

The two Slytherins nodded. “I like it, Luna,” Tracey said throwing an arm over the former Ravenclaw. “I think we have a winner there.” Luna blushed and her smile lit up the room at the praise.
“Yes. This should be more than enough to combat whatever drivel the Prophet puts out as long as we’re first. The first opinion is always the one most will believe the strongest,” Daphne said.

“Oh we’ll be first,” Luna said with a confident grin and a chuckle that would send waves of fear at her enemies. Coco gave an odd little sound that the girls swore sounded like the little snorkack was laughing along with her master. “Daddy already has the printing press fired up and Shiva has agreed to let me use her Floo to give the article to him personally rather than wait on an owl. The Prophet writers think they have until the morning since they’re only doing the one issue. Ours will run tonight and tomorrow. By the time the Prophet hits homes, everyone will be decrying it as absurdly biased!”

Tracey looked at her younger friend in awe. “Luna, do me a favor. If I ever well and truly piss you off, give me a heads up so I can try to run until you cool off for a bit okay?”

Luna shrugged. “Okay. I doubt it would help much in the long run, but I promise to give you a head start.”

Daphne cocked her head. “Why wouldn’t it help much?”

“I am quite determined when I set my mind to something. Also,” Luna shrugged, “Coco is apparently very good at tracking someone she knows.”

Daphne and Tracey both looked to the snorkack which turned her head to them and gave a little grin. Both Slytherins calmly turned to each other and silently agreed to never cross Luna.

Madame Maxime sighed as she set aside her final piece of paperwork. This Tournament was becoming far more trouble than it was worth. She was quite thankful that neither Apolline nor Sébastien Delacour had been present to watch this latest mess. The British disliked Veela on principle so the true extent of the horror could be avoided and France could likely still maintain some semblance of trade with this country. Had Apolline been there though…the entire Veela Enclave would have gotten involved and that would have been an unmitigated disaster.

A knock sounded on her door and Maxime waved her wand letting her visitors in. Her eyes widening in shock she quickly stood to curtsy and greet the two as they walked in. “Monsieur and Madame Fulcanelli, it is an honor.”

The man rolled his eyes and waved her to sit back down as he and his wife took their own seats. “It’s Newton, please,” he said amicably. His smile was easy and his demeanor quite relaxed. He had on a nice brown tweed suit cut in a style that, when coupled with his mannerisms, seemed carefully designed to blend in with a crowd whether in the wizarding world or the Muggle one.

“And please call me Paracela as well,” the woman said. While her dress was also cut to blend in, her expression was a bit harsher than Newton’s. Her smile promised danger should Maxime not tread very carefully.

“Of course, of course. I honestly did not expect you to come,” she said with a hint of nervousness. That these two had deigned to answer her request in person was worrying indeed.

“We’ve been following the news quite closely,” Paracela said. She sighed and the danger inherent in her posture bled out leaving the woman just looking very tired. “We agree it’s quite…odd.”

Newton nodded his agreement. “We were glad you called Olympe. We were starting to worry that you might be involved in whatever is going on behind the scenes here.”
Maxime’s eyes widened in shock and she pulled back. “Me? Involved in attempted murder on my own students?!”

Paracela shrugged. “Wouldn’t be the first time.” Maxime just fumbled for words though Paracela continued before she could find any. “So obviously the toad bitch is trying something. Any ideas or guesses as to who’s pulling the imbecile’s strings?”

Maxime sighed and rubbed her forehead. “No. I wish I did have one. I wouldn’t have had to call you. I know how you both hate to be disturbed.”

Newton shrugged. “True, but sometimes the situation warrants it. I warn you, Olympe, we have no intention of getting personally involved in whatever this is. We’ll see if we can find anything and let you know but that’s it. We’re curious and a little worried, but we’re not that curious.” He paused and sighed. “Mostly we’re annoyed that someone from our school is getting caught up in whatever ploy these idiots have concerning the Potter boy.”

Maxime nodded. “He is doing remarkably well for himself despite the…issues.”

Paracela laughed. “Oh that he is indeed. We’ve been watching things surrounding him for a while now. If he survives we might even meet him in person one day!”

Maxime almost laughed until she realized the woman was serious then she just goggled. “Truly?”

“Stranger things have happened,” Newton chuckled. “Anyway, Olympe, we just wanted to give you notice that we’re in the area now. If we see anything we’ll keep you posted.” He stood and his wife joined him.

Maxime nodded still shocked. “Of course. Thank you for stopping in. It’s been a pleasure.”

Paracela waved goodbye as both stepped out. Shaking her head to herself Maxime laughed softly. “Potter has no idea the waves he causes.”

Dumbledore took another long drink from his bottle of firewhiskey as he stared morosely at the pensieve sitting in front of him with the memory from Harry’s Task still swirling around inside it. “How could I have been so blind to let it get this far?” he whispered. On his perch to the side, Fawkes perked up and crooned a happy little trill. “Harry has been nearly completely consumed now.”

Fawkes song abruptly cut off, but Dumbledore paid it no mind. “Those spells used in his original attack were all extremely lethal and many very painful. He did not even try to talk to the Aspect!” Dumbledore moaned. “He simply started attacking immediately! And that Aspect itself! It was completely mad, totally consumed with the need for power and control. That Harry has the potential to sink to such depths…where did I go so wrong?! He was supposed to want to sacrifice himself! He was supposed to want to help others! How did I force him into becoming such an unfeeling monster?!”

Dumbledore held his head in his hands as Fawkes sang a sad song. Looking over at his familiar Dumbledore tried to smile in appreciation. “Thank you old friend, but it won’t help much. I doubt the next Task will put him in much danger. It is far too simple thanks to everything that has already occurred. Perhaps we will be able to correctly maneuver things for the 4th though…yes. Yes I will have to see how I can use that one to force the issue. At minimum, if he won’t die during it I can at least show the world his true colors.”

Dumbledore pulled a long drink from the bottle and nodded to himself ignoring the angry look
from his phoenix. “If this Task doesn’t expose the boy’s darkness than the Fourth Task certainly will.”

“Umm, Fred, can I talk to you for a minute?” Ron asked as he walked up to Fred and shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

Fred glared at his youngest brother for a long few seconds before sighing and waving to the chair across from him. “Yes, Ronald?” Beside him, George turned to listen in while Ginny wandered over from the corner of the room where she had been talking with Dean.

“Oh, I was kind of hoping this could be private…”

“Ron,” Fred said with a sigh. “You said you hoped I’d be maimed and a friend killed in the middle of the Great Hall. I think if you’re going to try and apologize you should at least be able to do so in the Common Room.”

Ron winced. “I deserve that I guess.” He wrung his hands and looked at his feet for awhile before eventually saying softly, “I’m really, really sorry about that, Fred.”

Fred raised an eyebrow. “Sorry about what, Ron?”

“You’re really not making this easy,” Ron muttered as his ears went red.

“Of course I’m not making it easy you bloody arse!” Fred growled. “I fought a freaking dragon and you didn’t say shite! One of my friends was almost killed twice! Another of my friends almost died today too! If you’re going to apologize for losing your temper than you’re going to actually have to apologize for once in your life!”

George took over while Fred got his breathing back under control. “Ron, we understand you are making a big gesture for you. But if you’re going to grow up then you need to learn how to well and truly say you are sorry. The half-arsed things you used to give Mum aren’t going to cut it. Now what are you sorry for?”

Ron opened his mouth to say something with a scowl on his face but bit it back and took a few deep breaths instead. Finally he said softly, “I am sorry for being a git. I’m sorry that I said I wished Harry dead and you hurt, Fred. I was jealous and angry and I should never have said that to you or to him. I tore things apart time and time again and the way I’ve acted over the past few years has brought a lot of shame on the Weasley family when all I wanted to do was to do something big and important.”

Ron looked down at his feet again. “Harry said that I was as bad as Malfoy and I think he may have been right. I’ve been acting spoiled and entitled and when things don’t go the way they should in my head I throw a fit just like he does. I can’t promise I’m going to change overnight. I can’t promise I’ll change this year. I can however promise that I’m going to at least try to get better. I’m going to try and think before I speak. I know I screwed up majorly and I know we’ll never be as good as we were. But I do miss my brothers and my sister. I am sorry. I’ll probably still be a git at times, but I will try to make sure it doesn’t happen often and that when it does, I apologize for it immediately after.”

Fred leaned back into the sofa with a grumbling sigh. He looked at George and Ginny who both shrugged and stared back at him. Fred grumbled louder and nodded to Ron. “Alright, Ron. I accept your apology. It’s good that you’re acknowledging the problem and are trying to improve. But seriously, Ron, don’t do this again. Getting angry is one thing, but you went way too far
earlier.”

Ron shrugged. “I know. You guys aren’t completely innocent either you know! I still have nightmares about that spider thing!”

George sighed. “And have we ever pranked you remotely as bad as that since then, Ron?” Ron opened his mouth to reply before frowning, thinking about it and shaking his head. “Exactly. We didn’t realize just how terrified of the little beasties you were and we apologized for that, Ron – like you are doing now. And like we did afterwards, with toning down our pranks, we expect you to tone down your outbursts.”

Fred laid a hand on Ron’s leg. “Keep yourself under control little brother and keep growing up. Think before you act or speak and we’ll be fine. Have a nice night, Ron.”

Voldemort stared at the darkened mirror in front of him as he stroked Nagini. Barty’s latest report was both exciting and worrying. The fact that Harry Potter was shaping up to be a true worthy opponent was unexpected, and somewhat welcome. It allowed him to make a stronger claim as to why he was disembodied in the first attempt on the boy’s life if Potter was actually an impressive combatant. Yet…the phantom version of him claimed to have essentially taken over on a whim.

Voldemort shook his head. The phantom was obviously an exaggeration. Potter himself did not have such power. One day perhaps – if everything went perfectly right – the boy might gain a bit of that ability. Though if he had even a tenth of the strength displayed…

No. Recruiting Potter would certainly be entertaining and would likely be one of the single strongest blows he could deliver to the morale of the fools in the Light but it was far too risky. Voldemort was not the only one who could play a long game. If Potter had gotten any ideas from his doppelganger then he could pretend to follow Voldemort and bide his time. When Voldemort had shared enough knowledge and power then Potter would strike and remove him. He might be immortal but as evidenced by the last decade, this version of immortality had its downsides.

Potter needed to die. And Voldemort had to be the one to kill him to validate his claim to being the strongest. The boy deserved more than to die like a dog in the night though. Yes. He’d duel Potter after the ritual. It would clearly show his followers just how powerful he was even newly reborn. And Potter could die a warrior’s death.

A death the boy’s mother should have been granted as well.

“That’s all for class today,” McGonagall said as she lowered her wand. Before the students could start to get up and head out she smiled and kept going. “However, one announcement before dinner. This winter holiday, on December 24th, there will a Yule Ball held at Hogwarts. We will be hosting all three schools and there will be dinner, dancing and music. I have it on good authority that we will be hearing the talents of the Weird Sisters.” A small cheer greeted this remark and she waited for it to die down before finishing. “You are all welcome to stay and attend if you wish. If so I recommend you find a date. In addition, the Ball is open to fourth years and up. Younger students may attend if invited by one of the upper years. I hope you all look forward this as much as I do!”

A small chorus of conversation started as everyone started filing out and talking about the dance. Harry had already turned to Hermione when McGonagall called for him. Hermione rolled her eyes and waved him back towards their teacher. “Yes, Professor?”
“Mr. Potter, while I imagine this isn’t going to come as a large surprise to you, as a Champion you are expected to open the dancing segment with a partner. This means you should expect to attend the Ball and if you don’t have experience dancing you should probably start practicing. Somehow I doubt finding a date will be much of an issue.” Her eyes were smiling even if her mouth wasn’t and she surreptitiously cast a glance at Hermione waiting by the door.

Harry laughed. “Yeah this doesn’t surprise me at all, Ma’am. Daphne had mentioned it was tradition a while ago so I’ve been taking some lessons with her and Tracey for the past week when we needed a break from regular training. Do I sense I wager on my date again?”

“Again, Mr. Potter?” McGonagall asked with a hint of amusement.

“I heard you might have come into some money when I started dating Hermione last year…” Harry said smirking.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, Mr. Potter.” McGonagall turned back to her desk and shifted some papers. As Harry laughed and walked back to Hermione McGonagall called over her shoulder, “Though I would appreciate it if you take Miss Granger or Miss Tonks.”

After dinner, Shiva had grabbed Harry and practically marched him back to her quarters. “Sit down, kid,” she said gesturing to an armchair near her fireplace. Harry grabbed a cup of pumpkin juice from the bar and sat as indicated shifting nervously. He had been avoiding talking to her for most of the day. The looks she had given him immediately following his duel with the doppelganger had worried him somewhat and if she was going to be kicking him out of her life he wanted to push that conversation as long as possible. So far, he’d managed to avoid even thinking about it but now…now that worry was rearing up again.

It certainly wasn’t helping that Shiva had grabbed a bottle of firewhiskey and poured a small amount into two glasses, handing one to him.

“Umm…”

“You might need it, kid,” Shiva said staring into the fire and looking determined. “That’s about equivalent to a single drink so you’re not going to get drunk and you’re not getting anymore. So if you want to drink just sip that way it lasts.”

Harry cringed. “I’ll pack my things after the Yule Ball,” he said softly.

Shiva frowned and turned to look at him in complete confusion. “I haven’t even mentioned my idea yet, Har – oh for fuck’s sake! No! Harry, that is not what I meant!” She surged off her chair and pulled him into a rib-cracking hug. “Jeez, kid, I’m sorry. I suck at these things. Seriously freaking suck. I am not kicking you out. This conversation is going to be bad, but do not think for a second that I am even considering kicking you out! I meant what I said when I took you in, Harry. We are family now and you are not getting away from me that easily, kid.” She pulled back and ruffled his hair, studiously ignoring the watery sheen over his eyes.

“You don’t want me to leave?” Harry asked, his hands shaking slightly. “Even after what he said?”

Shiva slowly and deliberately shook her head. “That was a version of you so far removed from anything I’ve seen, Harry, that it might as well have been Tom Riddle. That was not you. That was your darkest fear manifest. A boggart on steroids with its dial cranked to 100 on a 1 to 10 scale. That was not you. I am not going to abandon you, kid. Especially not because some hyped
up pillar decided that you were scared of a callous, broken version of yourself.” She smirked and said, “Hell, at this point I probably would end up being all alone with Daphne as your final follower if you did decide to take over the world.”

Harry snorted and wiped at his eyes. “That’s really not funny.”

She heaved a huge, dramatic sigh. “You’re right. I wouldn’t be a lowly follower; I’d be the Dark Vizier. Daphne would still be your Dark Mistress, but Hermione and Tonks would definitely still be the prime Dark Ladies. Do you think Fleur would be there as a Dark Mistress too or would it be appropriate for her to be a Dark Courtesan?” Harry groaned and Shiva just kept going. “Sirius could be the Dark Dog though he might have to share that post with Remus. Hehe, share the post. Neville would probably be your Darth Vader if we could find a nice helmet for him. I’m not quite sure what titles Susan, Hannah or Amelia would go for…”

“And Luna would be Dark Cryptozoologist?” Harry asked shaking his head and swallowing down his pumpkin juice.

“Seems like the best job for her. I’d say she’d fit as the Dark Jester too, but a court jester just isn’t truly respected enough these days for her to have that job.”

“It would be if I took over everything and gave her the job.” Harry finally cracked a bit of a smile.

Shiva rubbed her chin and nodded. “True. True. Well we’ll leave it up to her I suppose. She could probably handle both jobs or foist one off onto Tracey. I was going to suggest Tracey fit well into the Dark Announcer but she’d probably do better as Luna’s assistant.”

“Probably,” Harry said shrugging. He ran a hand through his hair and smiled at her. “Thanks, Shiva.”

“No problem, kid,” she said standing up and moving back to her chair. “No more of this ‘I’m leaving’ thing. I started this thing off awfully wrong sure, but you should know better than to think I was kicking you to the curb after dealing with me for 3 and-a-half years.”

“I should. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing!” She said rolling her eyes. “Alright now that that misunderstanding is over with let’s get onto the real reason why this is going to suck.” Harry frowned, but nodded. “Okay, here goes…” Shiva took a deep breath and grimaced. “Harry, I think…what would you say if I asked you to leave after the Yule Ball.”

“Like to go see the Manor?” Harry asked confused.

“No,” she said softly staring into the fire again and fingering her drink. “Like leave as in leave Britain. Leave as in disappear to Australia or – you know what not Australia. If those idiots are making more of those columns we’re staying the hell away. We could go to Canada or Brazil or the United States or Japan or something.”

“But what about your job?”

“Screw my job. I can get a new job. I did like four things for Bill over the summer and raked in nearly a third of what I make here.”

“Okay…well we’d have to come back for the Tournament events…I guess Fleur could tell us when they were coming up but…” Harry trailed off as he saw Shiva shaking her head. “That’s not what you’re talking about is it?” he asked with dawning comprehension and a bit of fear.
“Yeah it’s not,” she said clutching her glass like a lifeline. “Harry, this Tournament is getting more and more dangerous. I’m scared, kid. I don’t want you competing in this thing. I don’t want to have to bury you by the end of the year. I never planned on having a kid before I hit 30 – and I sure as hell never figured that kid would be as mature as you before I even met him – but now that you are part of my family, Harry, I don’t want to let you get taken away by this twisted blood sport. I would much prefer to have us both living a Muggle life somewhere far away than to have to visit your grave once a year.”

“Shiva…” Harry took a sip of the firewhiskey, gagged for a moment and then left his seat to hug her.

Shiva leaned into the embrace and let out a soft sob. “I don’t want to lose you to this, Harry. Dying because Voldemort is targeting you is bad enough, but dying because some Ministry bitch has hate-on for you and someone else is taking advantage of it is something completely different! If I ask, Harry, will you leave? Will you give up magic and live as a Muggle?”

Harry stayed quiet for a long while just holding her and thinking carefully. Finally he said softly, “I would, Shiva. But I don’t think I really have that option.”

“You do. You always have a choice, Harry,” she said shaking her head.

He pulled back. “Not yet I don’t,” he said slowly. “It’s not a real choice. We know that Voldemort is still out there. We know that Pettigrew escaped and probably went running to him now that the rat doesn’t have anywhere else to go. Eventually he’s going to come back and when he does the first thing he’s going to do is try to find and kill me. We could run, Shiva, but I’m willing to bet he’d find us eventually. And then we’d die because as much as I love you, you’re not a match for him. If Dumbledore can’t beat him, then you can’t either.”

“Neither can you, kid,” Shiva said defiantly. “You beat a shadow and a memory. The real thing with real spells and a real body is a completely different Quidditch game.”

“We’d certainly stand a better chance though if we both had magic.”

“The others could come too. I wasn’t completely kidding earlier, Harry. You’re magnetic. We’ll all follow you if you need us.”

“I don’t think it’d be enough,” he said running a hand through his hair. “I think there’s something bigger happening that we don’t know enough about. If it was just when I was a baby and first year I could ignore it as ridiculous coincidence, but running into Memorymort second year…there’s something bigger Shiva. It’s going to end up being him and me. I hate that and it scares the hell out of me, but I can’t really ignore it. Even if you don’t believe that, you can’t think that whoever is rigging this Tournament through The Umbitch is just going to give up and let us run.”

Shiva scowled and turned away from him. She took a long pull from her drink and set it down scowling deeper. “Why do you have to make sense? Why can’t you just beg to not leave your friends or give up your magic? I had counterarguments for those! I had plans and ideas! I can’t argue against Goddess-be-damned fate!”

Harry shrugged. “I’m just cursed that way,” he said chuckling somewhat to try and lighten the mood. “If it helps, I have kicked the arsehole to curb three times in a row now so I think I’ve got a good chance. And this Tournament hasn’t killed me yet. I’ll be okay, Shiva. I survive. It’s kind of my thing: worst good luck ever remember? Well that and saving people.”
Shiva stayed silent and stared into the fire. After several minutes of silence she turned to him. “You promise me you are going to survive this year, kid. You promise me no matter how bad this gets or who we end up fighting against, that you will keep going. That you use the messed-up luck and come out the other side.”

“I promise, Shiva.” He smiled at her and shrugged. “Like you said, you’re not getting rid of me that easily.”
Chapter 26: Yule Tidings

Harry walked into the Common Room early the morning after his talk with Shiva to see Hermione already sitting in her favorite spot and reading a book. Smiling he walked over to sit with her. “Hey.”

“Good morning, Harry,” Hermione said marking her page and setting it aside. “Sleep well?”

He nodded. “Yeah. So would you like to –”

Hermione put a finger over his lips before he could finish the question. “Before you ask, we need to talk for a minute.”

“Is this a good talk or a bad talk?” Harry asked frowning. “Because I just had a rather emotionally draining talk with Shiva last night and I’d like to have a bit of warning if I’m about to have another one.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “Oh? What kind of emotionally draining talk? Do I need to go and threaten her again?”

“No, it wasn’t that bad. It was just – wait ‘again’? When did you threaten Shiva the first time?”

Harry asked gaping at his girlfriend.

Hermione blushed and looked down at the ground. “I…may have threatened to…end her after waking from the basilisk attack. You had just mentioned she was trying to become your legal guardian and I wanted her to understand that you trusted her and that if she used that to hurt you I’d make her life a living hell…” Hermione mumbled her face beet red.

Harry continued goggling at her before finally bursting out laughing and hugging Hermione to his chest. “Man, Mione, you are scary when you’re angry. Thanks for sticking up for me back then it really wasn’t necessary.” She nodded against his chest. “And it’s not necessary now. She tried to convince me I should leave the wizarding world with her. That we’d move to a foreign country after the Yule Ball and only keep in contact with the main group.”

Hermione pulled back drawing in a breath in a sharp gasp. “But the Tournament! That would make you lose your magic!”

Harry nodded. Before she could freak out further he kept talking. “Don’t worry, I’m not going. I did consider it though. I agree with her that I’d be fine living a Muggle life if it kept me out of a casket, but I convinced her that I think it would only push off – and probably assure – my untimely death. Eventually Voldemort would come back, track me down and kill me without much of a fight. At least if I have my magic I can try and defend against him. The Tournament hasn’t killed me yet and I’m getting a bit better.”

Hermione sat back in the couch and didn’t speak for a long time. Harry had almost decided to reach for her book when she started talking quietly. “You would’ve told me and Nym before you left right?”

“Of course,” Harry said staring at her confused at the obvious question.

“And where you were going so we could follow you?”
Harry raised his eyebrows. “You wouldn’t have been rid of me that easily, Mione.”

Slowly she nodded. “I can understand why she’d advocate for that solution then. I certainly prefer you breathing as well.”

“It would be rather gross trying to kiss a corpse,” he said smiling.

“Don’t even joke about that,” Hermione shuddered. “Well, the talk I was going to initiate is… nowhere near that level of difficulty. It will likely be awkward and require some time to think about, but ultimately it rather pales in comparison.”

“Well that’s good to know. Shoot.”

“You know I stayed with Fleur the other night…” When she paused Harry nodded. “We spoke. Quite extensively. Harry, I don’t know how much you’ve noticed, but Fleur has not exactly been subtle about trying to get closer to the both of us.”

“Yeah, I know,” Harry said running a hand through his hair. “Even I can’t exactly miss the flirting.”

“I got her to tell me what she was hoping to have come about at the end of all this,” Hermione said wringing her hands. “Hear me out okay? Don’t just dismiss it out of hand, Harry. Fleur is…well she’s hoping for…umm…to be our Consort…”

Harry closed his eyes and sighed. “So she’s not just being playful then, but she’s actually well and truly serious.”

“Yes, she is. She’s – wait!” Hermione’s head whipped up and she stared at him mouth agape. “You understand the implications?”

“I did my research after getting blindsided with the two wives thing,” Harry said shrugging. “I didn’t want to end up being roped into something similar because of some ancient tradition that no one pays attention to but is still on the books. Found out about Consorts in the process. I can apparently take one official Consort per line. Not that I had ever planned on exercising that right,” he said.

“Harry Potter,” Hermione said her eyes narrowing. Yup she was angry. At least she was sticking to just two names instead of three. He could always call Dobby for a quick escape if she transitioned into three names. “You knew about Consorts before we returned to school and you never told me?”

“You knew about the two wives thing long before I did. I just assumed you had already read about Consorts too.” It wasn’t enough, Hermione wasn’t backing down. “I’m sorry?”

Hermione shook her head and leaned back crossing her arms. “For future reference, this is the sort of thing you should bring to Tonks or I. Arg! That could’ve saved me some awkwardness the other night!”

“Sorry,” Harry said contritely. Frowning he continued almost to himself, “Daphne did said that Fleur would likely be going a different direction since Tonks was dating us, but I didn’t think… Fleur really wants to be a Consort?”

“Yes, Fleur is interested in being a Consort,” Hermione said still sounding mildly annoyed, but at least she didn’t sound angry any more.
“Despite us dating Nym too?”

Hermione nodded. “She didn’t quite say as much, but I think she likes Nym as well. She identifies with us all on some level since we were all rather isolated growing up and she craves a relationship with someone who understands that feeling and the loneliness.”

“She wants to continue her line as well correct?” Luna said leaning over the back of the couch. Hermione and Harry let out a shout of surprise and fell off the couch as they scrambled away.

“Merlin! Don’t do that, Luna!” Hermione said clutching her chest.

“How are you so quiet?” Harry asked trying to calm his racing heart. Coco wandered over, licked his face and lightly headbutted him, before giving that odd laugh she had.

Luna shrugged. “I’ve always been quiet.” She hopped over the couch and sat cross legged there looking down at her two friends with a big smile. “So, you three are going to start dating Fleur now? I like her! She’s very nice!”

“We hadn’t quite gotten to that point in the conversation, Luna,” Hermione groaned.

Harry shook his head and chuckled at the girl. “She did ask two valid questions though, Mione.” He got to his feet and pulled Hermione up as well. Both sat back down with Luna in between them eagerly looking to each face in turn.

“Yes, Luna, in answer to your first question, Fleur is interested in continuing her father’s name which a Consort option would allow for.”

“That’s probably what I’ll have to do as well,” Luna said nodding along. “Unless I end up in Tracey’s harem in which case I’ll just have to find a donor father who doesn’t need a long term relationship.”

“Luna,” Harry said looking at the girl critically, “you do mean ‘donor’ like in those Muggle methods I was talking to Daphne and Tracey about a few months ago right?”

“Uhh, right,” Hermione said blinking rapidly and trying to ignore the implications of that statement. “Fleur did stress that she was more interested in a fulfilling romance than being a trophy Consort for someone she didn’t care for.”

“And she thinks she can have that with us,” Harry said looking carefully at Hermione and becoming completely serious.

The brunette nodded. “She does. She said being involved with the three of us would essentially be the best possible outcome for her. Fleur did however make it clear that if the three of us were not comfortable with it then we should not feel guilty for turning her down. She would move on and find love with someone else. She did ask for us not to dismiss the option though until the end of the school year if only so that she could pretend a bit longer.”

“You should date her. She’d be good for you all,” Luna commented bobbing her head. Hermione shut her eyes and visibly counted to ten while Harry just leaned back into the couch and thought. He was quiet for a long time before he shifted slightly.
“Mione, are you interested in dating Fleur?” Harry asked with a furrowed brow and quiet voice.

“I… I just…” Hermione sighed and sat back in defeat nodding. “Yes, Harry, I am. It’s selfish and greedy and I already have two amazing partners who care for me very much, but yes, I am interested in her.”

“Can I ask why?”

“Part of it is related to how she is actively pursuing us. You and I just sort of fell in together after dancing around each other for months. It’s mostly the same situation with Nym. Fleur though is trying to actually seduce us. It’s… nice to feel like I’m worth pursuing.”

Harry opened his mouth to dispute that but Luna quickly covered it with her hand. “Shush, Harry. Let Hermione talk.”

Hermione nodded thankfully at the younger girl. “That’s not the entire thing of course. I understand the loneliness she spoke of. How being a Veela forced her into social isolation. I experienced similar issues due to my intelligence and love of reading. Nym has a direct correlation with her metamorph powers forging a complete parallel. You’ve always been isolated yourself thanks to the Dursleys in the Muggle world and the Boy-Who-Lived thing in the magical one.”

Hermione sighed. “So, yes, Harry. I admit to feeling a kinship with Fleur and I am open to exploring that.”

Harry considered that before asking, “Your parents wouldn’t have any problems with that? Actually, how do they feel about you being with Nym too?” He shook his head ruefully, “How have I never asked that?”

“My parents knew I’d have a girlfriend in addition to a boyfriend before I talked to you over the summer,” Hermione shrugged. “They didn’t really put up much of a fuss about it all. I told Nym how I think they were just ecstatic that I wasn’t already married to truly mind. I haven’t quite told them yet that I’ve already gotten a second partner… I should probably do that soon…”

“If they read the Quibbler they already know,” Luna said patting Hermione’s leg as the brunette lost some color.

“Yes. Well. Moving on,” Hermione sputtered. “We’re not really talking about my parents, Harry. We’re talking about you and me and Nym and Fleur.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. “Honestly I knew she was flirting with us, but I didn’t really think that Fleur was aiming long term. I’m uncomfortable enough with two girlfriends, Mione. I’m… not sure I’d be okay with a third. I like Fleur. I really do. I get that we all have a similar background and can understand each other. The thing is that I really am not sure I can handle a fourth leg in this relation at this point.”

“I understand, Harry,” Hermione said softly reached over to squeeze his leg. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Can I take some time to think about it? I don’t want to string her along but I have to sort out how I feel and whether it’s something I could see lasting. I am not going to jump into something that could jeopardize what I already have with you and Nym.”

“That’s fine, Harry. This is why I brought it up now. Just like when I brought up Tonks during the summer. I feel it needed to be addressed so that everyone could start thinking about it,” Hermione said smiling at him.
“Mione…” Harry said turning to look at her. “If you want to date Fleur, I think you should. Don’t let my baggage and insecurity hold you back.”

Hermione’s eyes widened and she gaped at him for a moment. Luna calmly reached over and closed her mouth jump-starting Hermione’s brain somewhat. “Come again?”

“If I can have two wives, then you should be able to have a second partner as well. I’ll tell Nym the same thing and – ”

“No.” Hermione shook her head cutting him off. “Thank you for the offer and I appreciate the sentiment, Harry, but no. I already have two partners. I have you and Tonks. Tonks has two partners as well with you and me. I really should’ve brought her into this discussion to begin with and that’s my fault for not thinking things through but my point stands. Just as you don’t want to jeopardize what we have, I don’t plan to do anything to endanger it either. I’m sure Tonks feels the same.”

“Oh,” Harry said, a warm feeling spreading in his chest. He fought a blush as he mumbled, “Good to know.”

“I’ll talk to Fleur and let her know to try and tone things down a bit while we figure out whether or not the Consort thing is something we’d all be open to. Okay?”

“Sounds like a plan though I may talk to her at breakfast. Thanks, Mione.” She just smiled back at him and both chuckled slightly as his stomach rumbled. “Breakfast?” Standing, he pulled Hermione up as well and they moved around the couch. “We’ll meet you down there, Luna.”

Luna waved to her friends and sighed down at Coco who had jumped into her lap to be petted. “Oh poo. Now I don’t get to bring out my chalkboard to chart their relationship!”

“Wotcher, Harry, Hermione,” Tonks said as both sat down across from her at the breakfast table. It was still somewhat early so the Hall wasn’t filled yet.

“Morning, Tonks,” Harry said piling food on his plate.

“I expected to see you two here earlier considering none of us really seem to sleep in anymore – even when I give you the morning off,” Tonks said eyeing them speculatively.

Hermione sighed. “We got distracted by a…discussion.”

“Way you put that, it sounds like an important one.”

“We were talking about our relationship,” Hermione admitted. “It got complicated. Luna got involved and seemed ready to start making diagrams or something before we made our escape. She was going for a chalkboard.”

Tonks blinked at her before looking to Harry who kept nodding. A moment later Tonks shook her head and chuckled. “Why does that not surprise me? So what were you even talking about concerning us that inspired her like that? Should I be worried?”

“We’ll tell you later,” Hermione said blushing.

Harry looked between his partners while a few more people came to sit down. “We might as well just tell her now.”
“What?” Hermione’s eyes widened as she turned to him. “Harry, it is breakfast! We should wait and talk in private!”

“Do we have to? I’m really not looking for another confusing conversation of trying to understand girls and Tonks likes it straight anyway. Right, Tonks?”

“Uh…right?” she squinted between the two. “I feel like I’m missing something important here though…”

“Come on, Hermione, let me rip the band-aid off?” Harry asked giving the brunette his best puppy dog stare. Hermione groaned and covered her face in her hands. “I’ll take that as a yes! Tonks, we were talking about, Fleur.”

“Oh fine,” Harry grumbled grabbing a muffin, standing and heading for a room a little ways off the Hall with a thoroughly bewildered Tonks and a blushing Hermione trailing behind.

As soon as the door closed, Harry charged onwards. “Okay, so long story short: Fleur’s flirting is not because she’s playful and likes us, but more because she likes us and wants to try for something long term. She’s interested in us because she feels that she can relate to us all better since the four of us all grew up as anti-social loners with few friends. Hermione is open to the idea but I asked for time to think about it because I don’t want to risk damaging what the three of us already have and Hermione agreed that our current relationship is paramount. It’s…weird having two girlfriends and I’m not sure I’d be able to be there enough for three.” Harry paused and turned to Hermione. “Did I miss anything?”

Hermione just groaned and raised her eyes to the stars in prayer. “Tonks, Fleur isn’t interested in muscling either of us out of a wife position. She wants to be a Consort with someone she cares about so that she has love as well as the potential to continue the Delacour name.”

Tonks looked between her partners completely bewildered. Her hair flashed through several colors before settling back on pink. Furrowing her brow she turned to Harry. “So short version is Fleur wants to date, Hermione is willing to date, you are unsure about dating, and neither of you will date unless I agree?”

“Basically,” Harry nodded happily.

“You should’ve said that to begin with,” Tonks said shrugging.

Hermione growled and balled her fists. “What is wrong with you both?! This isn’t something that can just be summed up in a minute and a half conversation! We need to have an in-depth discussion and establish how each of us feels and how this impacts the larger dynamic and whether or not we accept that this is even remotely plausible without hurting each other! And, and, and, arrgg!” Crossing her arms she glared at Tonks and Harry both of whom were looking at each other in confusion. “You both have the emotional range of a teaspoon.”

“Hey!” Harry mock glared at her. “I resent that! Ron has the emotional range of a teaspoon. I’m at least a tablespoon!”

“Quite right, Wonder Boy,” Tonks agree stepping beside him. She shifted to match his height and
crossed her arms to mirror his posture and join in his mock glare. “We are tablespoons when it comes to emotions.”

Hermione kept her own glare for almost ten seconds before cracking and shaking her head in exasperation. “Tonks can you please be serious about this for a moment?”

“No sense of humor,” the metamorph said shrugging and reverting to her normal form. “Okay, fine, to be completely serious…I’m not surprised. I’ve known Fleur was interested in more than just a fling basically since I got here, guys. I was pretty jealous for a while at first; which really wasn’t fair to her at all since I wasn’t even dating you at the time.” Tonks sighed and leaned against one of the desks. “Part of my problem was that I thought she had a really good shot. She’s smart, funny, smoking hot and also very interested in you because of who you are and not what you are. I’ve gotten over the jealousy thing though.”

“That’s why you glared at her for a few weeks…” Harry muttered. “I really have no clue about girls…”

“Yeah, but you’re sweet as hell, Harry, so it’s endearing,” Tonks said smiling at him. “Anyway, my mother’s a Black whether she has the name or not anymore. I grew up hearing about her ranting about contracts and mistresses and Consorts and vows since before I could walk. I’m not going to lie and say that it wouldn’t be a little weird and a huge change, but I’m also not going to deny finding the idea at least mildly interesting. The girl is a freaking Veela. I’d have to be mad to not at least consider it. And she really is crazy about you both. I talked to her for a minute after you went to get your scores, Harry.”

“You did?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah. Nothing deep, Hermione. I just let her know that I had withdrawn my objections to her trying to get into Harry’s Harem. I was however, perfectly clear that if she is to join us in any form whatsoever she has to win you both over first. I’ll follow along with the majority decision. I’m not remotely interested in screwing up the one good romantic relationship I’ve ever had in my life.”

“Nym,” Harry said frowning. “you get a full vote too. We should make these decisions together.”

“And we are,” Tonks said shrugging. “Harry, I’m rather forceful in pretty much everything bar relationships. I’ve always been that way and it’s why I had so much trouble when I first started dating. ‘Can you make your breasts bigger?’ ‘Sure.’ ‘Can you take off two inches? I hate being shorter than the girl.’ ‘Sure.’ I don’t have to worry about you or Hermione taking advantage of that part of my personality though. All it means is I let you both more or less take the lead in stuff like this.”

“But if you’re not comfortable…”

Hermione sighed and patted Harry’s shoulder. “She already said she was okay with Fleur, Harry. She’s simply not willing to say ‘yes’ until we do.”

Harry frowned further and crossed his arms thinking. “Girls make no sense at all,” Harry eventually groaned while shaking his head. “And can we not call it Harry’s Harem please? I’m trying really hard to make this a poly-poly-Hermione what was the word?”

“Polyamorous.”

“A polyamorous relationship, yes – one where we’re all together and not one with two wives and one husband,” Harry said emphatically.
Tonks raised her eyebrows and cocked a thumb at Harry while whispering to the brunette. “Is he always this confused?”

“About women?” Hermione asked sighing. “Yeah, pretty much.”

Tonks shrugged. “Eh, at least he’s cute about it. Besides this whole thing is moot anyway since you’re going to take some time and see how you feel, Wonder Boy.”

Hermione and Harry both started to protest before looking at each other and chuckling. Harry turned to Tonks and held up his hands in defeat. “You know if you had led with that we could’ve finished this talk in the minute-and-a-half discussion it started as.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Tonks asked far too innocently to be believed. “So onto a related, but different topic while we have the time: Yule Ball. How are we handling this?”

Harry shrugged. “Well I’m dating you both. I had figured I’d just ask you both. Hermione, Tonks, would you like to attend the Yule Ball as my dates?”

Hermione goggled at him while Tonks laughed. “You can’t take two dates, Harry!”

“I checked the rules. Nothing says I can’t. It hasn’t been done before best I can tell, but if I ask McGonagall to make sure we have an extra setting at the Head Table, it should be fine.”

“Oh I can’t wait to see McG when you tell her that, Wonder Boy!”

“Nah, she expects it from me,” Harry smirked. “I’m far more interested in seeing her face when Neville shows up with Susan and Hannah on each arm.”

The trio walked back into the Great Hall only to run into Luna standing by their spot with her hands on her hips. A flicker of fear crossed Harry’s mind before he settled on a plan of attack. “You two ran away,” Luna said. “I wanted to make sure I had the diagram correct.”

“We didn’t run, Luna,” Harry quickly explained. At her look he hurried to keep talking. “I mean, we just wanted to make sure you didn’t have to change the diagram by the time breakfast was over in case Tonks was mad for deciding without her.”

“Oh.” Luna considered that and put a finger under her chin before nodding. “That’s nice of you. Reworking things can be frustrating at times. So the verdict is unchanged?”

“For now, yes, the verdict is unchanged,” Harry said nodding and sitting down next to Fleur while Hermione and Tonks sat next to Luna. Everyone else at the table just looked on in confusion. Fleur stared between the two, raising her eyebrows. Harry leaned closer to Fleur and said softly, “Fleur, Hermione talked to me earlier this morning.”

The French witch nodded. “About me, I assume.”

“Yeah,” Harry ran a hand through his hair. “Can you give me some time to think about it? I’m barely comfortable with just Hermione and Tonks. I need to make sure I can deal with it before giving you a firm answer either way. I like you, Fleur, but I don’t want to screw up either my current relationship or our friendship.”

“I understand, ‘arry,” Fleur said quietly. She turned and gave him a small smile. “It is not a full rejection so I will take comfort in zis. Truly, I did not expect anyzing zis quickly zough it was nice to hope. Let me know what you end up deciding?”
“I will. Thanks for not pushing.”

“You are my friends. I will never push for somezing if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“The flirting didn’t make me uncomfortable by the way,” Harry commented with a smile. Then he grimaced. “But perhaps we can avoid one particular shop in Hogsmeade for a while.”

Fleur laughed and nodded. “Zen I will just have to leave zat particular mezod of enticement to Hermione and Tonks.” Harry could only groan louder in response. “So who is everyone taking to ze Ball?” Fleur asked the group.

“Well, Harry has decided to be different like usual and is taking both Tonks and myself,” Hermione said giving an annoyed huff and glaring at Harry. The amusement present in her eyes took any heat out of the rebuke.

Neville rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “You can do that?”

Harry shrugged. “Nothing in the rules says you can’t. It’s probably the same thing as with Fred’s potions: nobody’s done it so no one thought to say you can’t.”

“Huh.” Neville looked to Susan and Hannah on either side of him and raised his eyebrows. Before he could do more than open his mouth, both girls nodded.

“Sure, Nev, you can take us both,” Susan said smiling.

“I love you two,” he replied sagely.

Daphne rolled her eyes. “I suppose I can’t really comment since I’m going with Tracey. Same sex couples don’t usually tend to go out together to these functions without at least a pretend buffer.”

Tracey chuckled. “Yeah, but we have enough of a rep at this point that nobody’s going to say anything.”

“I can’t go. I don’t have a date,” Luna said shrugging.

Fleur frowned. “Zat will not do at all. Luna, would you do me ze honor of accompanying me to ze Ball? As friends of course.”

Luna’s eyes widened. A grin split her face and she nodded enthusiastically. “Of course! I would love to go as your date, Fleur!”

“Fred and Alicia are going together,” Hermione mused. “So that’s three out of four Champions. Should we try and set Viktor up as well?”

“Already taken care of yesterday,” Harry said waving his hand in dismissal. “Millie mentioned at the beginning of the year how she claimed first dibs remember? Well, I followed through and got her the date. Rest is up to her.”

Tracey goggled. “Wait, what? How the hell did that happen?”

“Viktor said he needed a date after we were complaining about the last Task together. I told him Millie was available and wasn’t just interested in him for Quidditch so he said okay.”


“I just hope one of them knows how to dance…” Daphne mused.
“They have to be better than Tonks,” Harry said grinning back at the metamorph. She’s downright deadly at times.”

“Hey! I take offense to that!” Tonks replied.

“You almost cracked my head on the table when you tried to teach me dancing, Tonks,” Harry said raising his eyebrows.

Hair flashing to a quick orange, before she mumbled, “The floor was uneven.”

“Your legs were uneven.”

“Same difference.”

It was the comment that broke the dam and the entire table started laughing. Harry rolled his eyes and turned back to eating breakfast.

The executive at Outback Training Alternative reached out to the letter that had just been dropped on his desk by a snowy owl. It was a little confusing how the letter made it to him to begin with since only official business owners were supposed to be able to contact him directly and the owl was certainly not a typical business correspondence owl. For that matter the bird was glaring at him quite strongly.

Opening the letter with a slight frown, Kevin Lyght began to read. Before he was even two lines into it he paled. “Marge, get R&D up here immediately!” he yelled to his secretary.

To Whom It May Concern,

I am not particularly fond of Howlers, but you really deserve one. My name is Harry Potter and my friend and I recently had rather large issues with one of the Aspect Columns you designed and sold to the British Ministry for use in their Triwizard Tournament.

To clarify: your creation created a double of my friend that mind-controlled thousands of people into trying to kill her and then my own doppelganger tried to eat my soul.

No, I’m not exaggerating and yes, he really could have done it. You idiots included a Soul rune into your focusing array, but didn’t link anything through the dissolution matrix! I’ll grant you, the Soul rune is a good idea to make sure that the Aspects are keyed into their originals. I cannot understand how you ignored basic safety measures though! Seriously! Did you have a five year old draw your clusters?! Soul runes are unpredictable at the best of times let alone when they are included in a complicated etching like your Aspect Columns. I’ve included diagrams on how to link limiters into your dissolution matrix without disrupting the rest of the cluster. This should stop the Aspects from doing any actual harm to their targets. For the love god please have someone double-check this change and include it into your Columns. I’m sure that our experiences with these safety concerns weren’t a one-time affair.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter, Owner and CEO of Potter Runes

The night of the Yule Ball saw Harry standing at the foot of the Grand Staircase and pulling at his shirt collar. Fleur reached over and slapped his hand away. “Stop zat. It is fine. You look very dashing.”
Harry straightened and smiled. “You look beautiful yourself, Fleur.” Her deep blue dress was close cut enough to accentuate her figure without being inappropriate and her hair was cascading down her back in silky waves. Harry felt his emerald dress robes didn’t really measure up, but then he doubted anything he put on would ever measure up to any of the girls’ dresses. “I’m still not sure why you all insisted that we wait here though. We could’ve just escorted Hermione and Luna down from the Common Room.”

“Well, Wonder Boy, you needed the full effect of seeing us in the gowns and we enjoy being able to watch your reactions.” Tonks commented with a grin as she stepped into the atrium. Her tight black dress ended just below her knees and almost seemed to flow around her as she swayed up to him and kissed his cheek.

“Wow…” Some part of Harry acknowledged that Tonks was right. After all he had practically gaped when he first saw Fleur a minute ago. And he was doing the same thing now while looking at Tonks. “That dress is beautiful, Nym…”

“Thanks, Harry. What do you think, Fleur?” Tonks asked turning to look over the blonde.

Fleur nodded approvingly. “Ze dark purple hair certainly sets off ze rest of ze outfit. Zat was a good choice.”

“I thought so too. Took a while to get the shade right,” Tonks said. Harry still mostly speechless stared between the two as they chatted. “Did you notice my eyes were silver? I think it adds to the mystery.”

“Oui. It matches ze necklace as well.”

“Aww! You noticed!” Tonks turned to Harry and patted his cheek. “You better appreciate this, Wonder Boy. I don’t generally like getting all dressed up so enjoy this while it lasts.”

“Definitely,” he said in agreement. Tonks and Fleur both giggled and rolled their eyes. A moment later, Hermione stepped onto the landing and Harry’s brain halted again. He barely recognized his best friend as she walked down the rest of the stairs. Her periwinkle dress flowed around her and her she was wearing a set of opera gloves. Her hair had been pulled up into a bun and either charmed or conditioned to such a degree that it rivaled Fleur’s for apparent silkiness. Strolling up to them with a wide smile on her face, Hermione gave a light kiss first to Harry and then to Tonks.

“I zink you broke him, Hermione,” Fleur said chuckling.

“I’m fine,” Harry croaked.

“Sure you are, Wonder Boy,” Tonks chuckled.

Hermione rolled her eyes and looked at her partners. “You are very dashing, Harry. Those robes definitely set off your eyes. Tonks, I like the hair choice. It goes very well. Fleur you are even more striking than usual.”

“You’re not so bad yourself, hon,” Tonks replied.

Fleur nodded. “Oui. You are beautiful tonight. And zis hair!” She reached up and ran a soft finger along the bangs along the side of Hermione’s face not caught in the bun. “Magnifique.”

“Thanks,” Hermione blushed. “Lavender helped. The charms from the book weren’t quite enough, but she had a bottle of Sleekeazy on hand. Remind me to get her something nice. Luna should be here in a – oh never mind. There she is.”
Harry nodded appreciatively as his friend came down the stairs smiling widely. She was in a gold dress which highlighted her hair nicely and set off the sapphire necklace she was wearing. Luna had on short heels as well which helped to make up some of the difference in height between her and Fleur. “Hello everyone!” Luna said. You all look amazing!”

“Thanks, Luna,” Harry said smiling. “You do too.” The other three nodded emphatically. She grinned even wider and moved next to Fleur.

“Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, Miss Tonks, Miss Delacour, Miss Lovegood,” Professor McGonagall said as she came to stand near them. “If you’ll all follow me, we will be opening the doors shortly.” The group all nodded and stepped into line behind Fred and Alicia. Alicia immediately started chatting with Hermione while Fred just smiled and swore again that he wouldn’t be pranking anyone during the Ball when McGonagall asked.

McGonagall had just started to turn away when she froze and her face took on an expression of complete shock with her mouth dropping open. “Mr. Longbottom! What are you doing?!”

“Greeting my dates for the Ball, Professor,” Neville said nonchalantly as Susan and Hannah took his elbows.

“Dates? Plural? But-but-but…”

“Well, if Harry can have two dates, I didn’t think it was fair to ask one of my girlfriends to go alone just to keep up appearances.” Neville smiled and started to walk into the Hall to find his seat. “See you inside, enjoy the evening, Professor!”

McGonagall was still sputtering as Viktor came up and slotted into line behind Harry and Tonks with a dark haired girl in a green robe accompanying him. Harry smiled in recognition and waved hello. “Hi, Millie. You look very nice tonight.”

“Thanks, Harry. You’re quite handsome yourself. Tonks, good to see you out of the combat boots for once,” Millicent said with an easy smile.

Viktor laughed beside her and shook his head. “Ve disagree on that point. I prefer the boots. It means a woman knows how to defend herself. Granted Millicent has made it clear she can do so without the boots.”

Millie shrugged. “What can I say, I’m intimidating.”

“Which is very good. You keep the fangirls at bay!”

Tonks laughed. “Funny how that works huh? You never appreciate the value of a good menacing stare until you need to beat others off with a stick to stay away from your date. Either of you need backup tonight let me know.”

The doors opened and the Champions walked in. There was a collective intake of breath from the crowd as they saw that Harry had one girl on each arm. He snickered and whispered to Hermione, “You’d think they had thought I was joking when I said I was taking you both.” Hermione rolled her eyes and shushed him.

When they finally were allowed to sit down the Champions took one look at the seating arrangements and mutually agreed to shift things around. Instead of Umbridge sitting next to Krum, she ended up next to Fred.

Harry made sure to sit next to Alicia. He’d originally planned to be between his two partners but…
Umbridge lasted longer than Harry had expected. She ignored whatever Fred did that caused her to fart every time she opened her mouth. She ignored her hair suddenly turning a shade of roaring pink and sticking out in all directions. She ignored when her plate started to move away from her — shrieking in fear — every time she lifted a utensil. She ignored the fact that when the farting wore off she instead started to croak when speaking. Finally almost halfway through the dinner, Umbridge sat up straight and shuffled woodenly from the room.

Grinning like a loon, Harry leaning to the side and raised his eyebrows at Fred. “So, what did you do? What was the final one? I didn’t see anything different.”

Fred conspiratorially looked from side to side before leaning down too and beckoning Tonks and Alicia into the small huddle. “George and I developed something for Percy originally but never got around to using it.”

“Oh?” Alicia said with raised eyebrows. “And what new form of torture were you going to use on your brother?”

“Well, you know how we always say that Percy has a stick up his arse?” All three nodded. “Well obviously Umbridge has the same problem. So I just thought that maybe we should help her remove that particular ailment. Bowel loosening charms can be quite healthy for you I hear.”

It was only through sheer luck that Harry, Tonks and Alicia were able to stay on their seats through their gut wrenching laughter. Wiping his eyes, he saw McGonagall collecting a few galleons from Flitwick and Shiva quietly saluting Fred.

When the time came to open the dancing up Harry and Tonks took their places next to Fleur and Luna while the other two Champions and their dates were on the other end. Tonks had tried to argue that Hermione should get the first dance but the brunette had insisted that the older girl take it. “Remember,” Harry whispered to Tonks, “let me lead.”

“Very fun, Wonder Boy,” she whispered back seemingly concentrating heavily on her legs.

“You really don’t have to concentrate that hard, Nym.”

“I do if you don’t want us to look like idiots,” Tonks muttered. “These stupid heels make remembering how long my legs are at the moment even harder than normal.”

“You really don’t trip as much while I’m leading.”

“Yeah because I can concentrate on my legs, Harry. Now shush. The music is starting.”

Harry listened to his date’s request and paid attention to the music and the steps in the dance. They made it through the song with Tonks only tripping once and even managing to look up at him once they were halfway through. Smiling, the song ending and he bowed to her while she affectionately shook her head at him. The rest of the students started to file onto the dance floor and Harry moved sideways to stand in front of Hermione. “May I have this dance, my lady?” he asked holding out his hand. Grinning back at him, Hermione took his hand and stepped into his waiting arms.

As Harry moved Hermione to the side, Tonks stepped up to take the vacated spot as Fleur’s dance partner while Luna went to find Tracey. “I’ll try not to make us fall,” the metamorph said softly.
“Even if you do, we will have something to laugh over,” Fleur murmured back with a grin. “Relax, Tonks. Zis is supposed to be fun, not work.”

“Dancing is always work for me,” she replied in an amused tone.

“Zen perhaps I can finally do ze tango? Zat would get you to loosen up on ze dance floor.”

“No that would get me worked up not loosened up. Since I’m not about to sneak off to a broom closet with you tonight and neither Harry nor Hermione and I are that far along I think I’ll pass,” Tonks said openly grinning as they started to move. “Just because you can tango and salsa better than whatever-this-is-called doesn’t mean you get to tango with me. Not until either of my partners says so at least.”

“Oh well, I will just to wait until it is my turn with ‘arry zen,” Fleur said sighing theatrically.

Harry’s conversation with Hermione meanwhile, was going down a starkly different path. “I still can’t believe that Dean asked Ginny to be his date for tonight,” Hermione said while they moved with the music.

“Yes. He asked Lavender two nights ago and got lucky. Her boyfriend had apparently just broken up with her so she said yes. I’m surprised he’s dancing actually. I wouldn’t have thought he’d know how…”

“If he doesn’t he’ll regret it. She’s getting quite good at stinging hexes from what she told Parvati.”

The song ended and Harry bowed to Hermione and shifted positions again to hold his hand out to Fleur. “Miss Delacour, may I have this dance?”

Smiling Fleur nodded and accepted his hand. Hermione paired off with Tonks and both sets were swaying around the floor again. “So I saw you kept Tonks on her feet,” Harry said.

Fleur smiled back. “It was difficult, but yes, I managed. Are you enjoying ze dance, ‘arry?”

“Oh well, I will just to wait until it is my turn with ‘arry zen,” Fleur said sighing theatrically.

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“Actually I am,” he said. “I was a bit skeptical at first, but this has worked out a lot better than I expected and it’s a very nice evening so far.”

“Well I am glad you are enjoying zis. Balls can be so much fun as long as ze friends and partners are interesting,” the French girl chuckled. “I do still wish we could tango zough.”

Harry blushed and softly replied, “Maybe next time, Fleur. That’s kind of a step too far.”
“I know. No one wants to tango with me zough,” she said rolling her eyes. “It does not have to be sexual. It generally is but it does not have to be.”

Harry laughed. “Fleur I think you’d give most of the people here a heart attack if you tried to tango with someone.”

She nodded sagely. “Ah, yes, you British folk are so sensitive at times. Oh, before I forget, zis weekend after Christmas is for ze eggs yes?”

“Yup. We’ll open them together and see if we can get a head-start during the holiday.”

The next song had Harry dancing with Shiva. She laughed as he started to lead her. “You got pretty good at this, kid, for someone who was deathly afraid of the dance floor when we started.”

“I decided that if I could fight a chimera and an evil twin I should at least be able to dance,” Harry commented grinning. “When are we getting you a date by the way? I have two and a third trying to become official. You need a boyfriend, Shiva.”

“Or a girlfriend. I’m not picky.”

Harry laughed. “Or a girlfriend. What about Bill? You guys seem to get along well.”

“A, he’s out of the country way too often. B,” Shiva said shaking her head in bemusement, “I am not taking love advice from a teenager. Especially not you. You never do anything normal, kid.”

“Well Millie and Viktor certainly seem to be having a good time. I can do the match-making thing on the side.”

“You keep telling yourself that, Harry.”

The song ended and Harry’s next dance was claimed by Daphne. The music had barely started again before she was swinging him rather forcefully around the floor. Harry knew from when she had taught him that Daphne liked to lead her partner so he let her take control. “You okay, Daph? You seem a bit annoyed.”

“It’s nothing, Harry,” she said shaking her head.

“People aren’t giving you a hard time for coming with Tracey are they? You know you aren’t the only same-sex couple here, Daph. Fleur and Luna may have just come as friends, but Katie Bell and Su Li came together just like you.”

“No, Harry, it is fine, really. I’ve just gotten a few comments from Malfoy tonight that have me riled up a bit.”

“Oh.” His eyes narrowed. “I should sic the twins on him then. When he left Hermione, Tonks and I alone I thought he’d have taken the night off.”

“No, he has merely focused on a more convenient target. He appears to think I should be on his arm. Sanctimoniously little prat,” she glowered.

“Hey, don’t let the git ruin your night, Daph. At least you and Tracey aren’t fighting.”

“True. Don’t be too surprised if I hang around your group a bit tonight though. Tracey rather has her hands full keeping track of Luna. Shouldn’t that be Fleur’s job?”

Harry chuckled. “Fleur took Luna solely so that the girl could come to the dance. Hermione and I
have agreed that when Tracey gets exhausted one of us will step up and take the next spot. The goal is to make Fleur be the last one standing so that she can leave with Luna and escort her back to the dorm.”

Daphne grinned shaking her head. “We’ll make a Slytherin out of you yet, Harry.”

Tonks had just grabbed a new drink when she spotted one of her targets this evening and made a beeline to intercept him before he could run off again. He spotted her just before she reached him, but wasn’t fast enough to move in time. “Hey, Mad-Eye, are you even trying to enjoy the night or are you too worried about assassins popping up?” she asked with a grin.

“You can never be too careful, girl,” Moody grouched, his magical eye spinning and focusing on random women before moving on. “Constant vigilance is of the utmost importance. Now more than ever with these insane events.”

Tonks’ eyes narrowed though she nodded in agreement. “It has been rather worrying, though I don’t think it’s likely for anyone to try anything with this many people.”

“At least you got the right idea sticking close to Potter, Tonks. With you at his side, it’ll be a lot harder for anyone to get to him outside the Tournament.”

“True, but that’s not why I started dating him, Mad-Eye.” Something was definitely off here. The conversation had gone on long enough and he had only given one of his code phrase answers instead of the three she had given him openings for. She’d only actually said her own version once though and he’d answered that one correctly…Maybe she was just being paranoid. Her old mentor would of course answer her second code phrase correctly. “So it feels like you’ve been avoiding me. Anything brewing in the winds I should know about?”

“Nothing specific. Just have to maintain constant vigilance. I taught you that if I taught you nothing else.”

Wrong. Completely wrong. “Yeah, that you did. Well, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go find my date. Try to loosen up a bit and enjoy the night for once, Mad-Eye.” She smiled as she left though it was forced. Hermione had the map. She needed to check it immediately.

Dumbledore practically ran down the corridors. The pass phrases to insure against impersonators and the Imperius! How had he forgotten that?! How had he not realized the danger of allowing Tonks and Crouch to speak! He’d already known the Death Eater only knew of a single code from his own initial talk with the man. How had he overlooked this for so long?!

It was just lucky that he was close enough to overhear their conversation and recognize the importance of what had been discussed. He knew the woman would be going to that frustrating Map that the children possessed. He only prayed he had enough time to reach his office before it was too late.

“Hermione, do you have the Map on you? I need to see it,” Tonks said as she pulled her partners aside.

Hermione frowned. “I do. You need it here? With all these people around?”

“Yeah. Please, it’s important.”
Hermione hesitantly reached into her purse and pulled out a small folded piece of parchment. Harry looked at Tonks with a piercing stare. “Nym, what’s going on?”

“Something’s weird with Moody. I just want to check to be sure. I solemnly swear – ”

“No,” Hermione said cutting her off. She took her own wand and laid it on the parchment. “I promise to never disrespect a book.” The parchment began filling with lines and the title at the top read *The Librarian’s Aide* and Tonks gaped for a moment before turning to Hermione. The younger girl blushed. “Sirius has the original. I’ve been working with Daphne to try and recreate and improve their work using Harry’s mother’s notes and Remus’ and Sirius’ recollections. There are still some bugs, but I felt it more appropriate to keep this one on us despite the issues. It…has a search function.”

Tonks whistled quietly. “That’s my girl. Alright, well let’s see. Moody, Moody, Moody…he should be right here…Barty Crouch? What the hell?”

Dumbledore was breathing hard as he ran into his office. He cast a quick freezing charm on the portraits and leapt to the Ward Anchor. Hurriedly he pressed the symbol that would display a visual list of the presences detected by the inner wards. The feature had initially been implemented nearly three centuries ago by a teacher particularly annoyed at students leaving the grounds and it ensured he could track when they were actually at the school. Dumbledore put it to a decidedly different use now.

Taking a deep breath, he raised his wand and directed his magic between the names of Barty Crouch Jr. and Alastor Moody. Nearly 30 seconds of chanting later, the names swapped. Dumbledore closed down the display and resealed the Anchor.

He could only hope he was not too late.

“I told you it has some bugs,” Hermione said shrugging. “Try wiping it and restarting it. That tends to clear any issues. Knowledge safeguarded.”

Tonks nodded distractedly and hurriedly activated the Aide again. “The name switched to Moody…Hang on a second. Comm on, contact Sirius. Hey, cousin, I need you to grab your Marauder’s Map. Yes, I’m at the Ball. Don’t ask questions, I’ll explain later. Okay great. You see the Great Hall? Who does the map say is at the corner near the main doors? It does show Moody? Okay, thanks. Yeah, I’ll call back later and explain. Thanks again, cousin. Disconnect.” Tonks tapped her *Comm Stone* and sighed. “Well I guess it is Moody. Maybe he just didn’t think that he needed to give all the code phrases since we’ve seen each other around for almost four months now?”

“What do you mean code phrases?” Harry asked as Hermione slipped her version of the map back into her purse.

“Moody’s paranoid to high heaven. He has three code phrases he teaches people he trusts and they’re supposed to slip the phrases into conversations with him the first time they meet after being apart for three or more months.” Tonks shrugged. “It’s a safety measure to avoid the Imperius curse or polyjuice incidents. Since this was our first real conversation since I got here I figured he’d want to use more than just one.”

“Could he be under the Imperius?” Harry’s gaze had turned to fix on Moody.
“Not very likely. The old man’s practically as good at throwing it off as you, Harry. Plus if it was Imperius he wouldn’t know any of the code phrases. Same with polyjuice.” She paused and sighed. “It’s always possible he’s just drunk. That flask isn’t always filled with water you know. With this many people here tonight he might have actually decided it was safe to drink a bit.”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and frowned. “All the same, I think we should keep a closer eye on him. My track record with Defense Professors is…not great, Nym,” Harry said.

Tonks nodded. “We’ll keep watch just to be safe. For now though, I think one of you owes me another dance. I didn’t wear heels just to sit around and speculate about the enigma that is my old mentor!”
Harry’s friends and fellow Champions were all assembled in the Room of Requirements the day after Christmas. Dobby and Winky were serving refreshments to everyone while the Champions stood off to the side with their eggs. Harry turned his over in his hands studying the thing. It was about a foot high and completely golden with little decorative swirls and etchings all over it. The hinge along the middle had an ornate little lock in the center with a keyhole. The key, that the Champions had received for successfully completing the Second Task was perfectly sized to fit inside the opening.

“So do you think that they all have the same clue inside?” Fred asked frowning at the egg. “If they do, it seems rather stupid of them to deny us a key if we had failed the last Task. All we’d have to do was go and ask one of the other three what the clue was.”

Viktor shrugged. “It does not seem like they feel ve vill cooperate like this. I have avoided mentioning it to Karkaroff myself. I doubt he vould approve despite that being the actual purpose of this Tournament.”

“Madame Maxime might not encourage it, but at zis point I don’t zink she would discourage it eizer,” Fleur commented.

Harry just raised his eyebrows at the others when they looked to him. “What? Do you really think Dumbledore would like me working with you guys? I’m just happy he didn’t come up with a rule preventing it. Let’s just open these things and get it over with. Anyone want to go first?”

“I’ll take the plunge,” Fred said slotting his key in and flicking it to the side. As the prankster opened the egg a loud, shrill screeching echoed throughout the room. Everyone immediately cringed and covered their ears crying out in pain at the horrible noise. Dobby and Winky had dropped their plates and smashed their ears over their heads while the Champions dropped their eggs in reaction. Thankfully as Fred dropped the egg it banged closed and the offending screech ended.

“What the bloody hell kind of clue is that?” Tracey complained sticking her fingers in her ears and glaring at the egg. “That’s the most useless piece of information throughout this entire competition!”

“I almost don’t want to open mine now…” Harry muttered. “Dobby, Winky, you guys okay?”

Dobby nodded wincing slightly. “Yes, Master Harry. Dobby bes fine. It bes hard to hear, but Dobby bes fine.”

Harry sighed in relief and turned back to his fellow Champions. As he caught sight of Fleur he froze. She was standing stock still staring at the egg with a look of fear and revulsion stuck on her face. “Fleur, what’s wrong?” Harry asked reaching out to gently touch her shoulder.

Fleur jerked back at his touch and took a shuddering breath. “Mermish. It was Mermish.”

“Mermish?” Hermione commented frowning.

“Oui,” Fleur replied softly.
“Fleur?” Harry moved towards her again. “Fleur?”

“Sorry,” the French girl shook herself and visibly composed her features back to neutrality. “We must listen to it underwater. It will make sense zat way.”

Neville frowned. “Wait, how could you recognize it right away like that? All I heard was screeching.”

“Any Veela would recognize Mermish,” Fleur said shaking her head, but not elaborating further. Most of the group nodded though Harry continued to eye his friend.

“Well let’s get some water in here!” Fred commented with a forced grin. “Who set the configuration?”

Shiva raised her hand. “I did. Give me a second.” She shut her eyes and a few moments later, four large tubs of water were standing in the back of the room. “That should be big enough guys.”

“Thanks, Professor!” Fred bounded over to one of the tubs and thrust his egg and head in opening it up. None of the sound carrying above the water.

Viktor snorted. “Always so dramatic,” he said shaking his head in exasperation. He walked to the next tub and after unlocking and placing his egg in, he just lowered his head so that just his ear was underwater.

“Fleur, let’s go listen to the clue. Okay?” Harry said taking her hand and pulling her towards the tubs of water. She nodded weakly and moved to her own section.

Harry dropped his egg in the water and leaned in to hear it’s message:

Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you're searching ponder this;
We've taken what you'll sorely miss,
An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour, the prospect's black,
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.

He lifted his head from the tub and frowned. “Guys I need some – ” He cut off as Hermione was already at his side with parchment and quill.

She blushed and muttered. “I saw Fred and Viktor start writing.”

“Thanks, Mione,” Harry said smiling and copying some of the clue. He stuck his head back into the tub a few more times to make sure he ended up getting the whole thing right. Finally satisfying he removed the egg and walked back to the table to join the others. “Okay this is what I got in my egg. Did you guys have anything different?” Harry asked the other Champions. All three took a quick glance at each clue and shook their heads.

Viktor shrugged. “Vell at least ve know this Task vill not be different for each of us.”

“I wonder what they’re having us grab from the Third one though that will help in this one…” Fred said thoughtfully. “Maybe a map of the Black Lake?”

“Or maybe what ve vill miss?”
“No that doesn’t make sense,” Harry said. “It’s probably either a map or another key. ‘What we will sorely miss’ has got to be something we already have. Like my rune belt or your broom or something.”

“Or a person…” Susan said softly. All noise in the room stopped and everyone turned to look at her. “What? It would fit the pattern wouldn’t it? Make the Task as dangerous as possible and motivate as best they could? Especially if The Umitch has any say in the matter, you’re probably going to have to retrieve someone from the lake, not something.”

Tonks’ hair had gone white as she took Harry’s clue and reread it. “And if you don’t get there within an hour they’re dead…they can’t seriously get away with that could they?”

“If it’s another ‘accident’? Sure,” Shiva spat out. “As long as they can claim that it wasn’t intentional and that the line was just to scare you all a little.”

Hermione nodded slowly. “I’ll talk to Myrtle. She gets flushed into the lake a lot so she might already know how to find the Merpeople’s village. If she can’t draw us a map to start getting used to it, she might at least be able to point us in the right direction.”

Tracey’s eyes widened as she stared at Hermione in shock. “You actually talk to Moaning Myrtle? Voluntarily?”

Hermione shrugged. “She’s really not that bad as long as you don’t set her off. She got a lot calmer after the basilisk corpse was trotted out. I actually think she has a bit of crush on Harry and Daphne…”

Daphne shivered. “Remind me to never go into that bathroom. I don’t even want to think about the implications of a ghost having a crush on me.”

“The map is useless unless you can breathe underwater,” Tonks said, her hair shifting back to blue. “Harry, I can start teaching you the Bubble-Head charm. The others should know it by now. It’s a sixth year spell I think. Takes a bit of magic to maintain long term, but it’s a solid option.”

Harry shook his head. “I can learn it as a backup, but if it causes a constant magical strain then I might have a better method.”

“Oh?” Hannah cocked her head in surprise. “You can already breath underwater?”

Neville snapped his fingers and laughed. “The Breath Keeper! You’re going to repurpose it, Harry?”

“No reason it shouldn’t work just as well underwater,” Harry said nodding. At the querying looks from the others Harry shrugged. “It’s something I came up with to help Neville a few weeks ago. He was having some trouble with one of the potions we were working on and it kept blowing up and letting off these horrible fumes. I made a rune stone that switched the contents of your lungs with the nearest clean source of air within 333 meters. It’s designed to prevent you from breathing in toxins or bad smells, but since it works via breathing relax and switching spells there’s nothing that stops it from working underwater too…I should start selling that one actually…I could market it to potions labs, and divers…” Harry trailed off rubbing his chin.

“You could also sell it hospitals! If it works using switching spells then it can get rid of any fluid or blood in someone’s lungs,” Hannah said grinning broadly.

“Good point, Hannah. Fred can you add it to the list? I’ll give you the specs and instructions on
“Will do, partner,” Fred said nodding. “I think I’ll stick with the Bubble-Head though for the Task.”

“You could also always just use gillyweed,” Neville said. “It’s a plant that turns you partly aquatic. Webbed hands, webbed feet, gills, slight immunity against cold water. It only works in freshwater though. Nobody’s found a saltwater variant yet. I might try and crossbreed one when I graduate.”

Shiva nodded. “Gillyweed is a good idea. It would help if you’re a weak swimmer too.”

Viktor held up his hand. “I think that I will use this method then. I do not enjoy swimming so the boost would be helpful.”

“What about you, Fleur?” Harry asked turning to the French Champion. His friend had been unnaturally quiet throughout the entire discussion and she was still just staring down at the note clutched in her hands.

At Harry’s question she shook herself and sighed. “I will go with a Bubble-Head charm. I can swim relatively well if I have too and while I would not turn down a rune stone I would prefer not to have somezing that I could lose – or have taken from me.” Harry frowned at her last comment but remained silent for the moment.

“Who do you think they will take?” Luna asked. “Perhaps we could put a tracking charm on them the night before to better assist in locating them quickly.”

Fred smiled at the younger blonde. “Good call! My hostage will almost definitely be George. Maybe Alicia.”

Viktor thought for a moment. “I am not close with most in Durmstrang. They will likely take Millicent as we will have been on several dates by the time of this Task.”

“Hermione, Tonks, they’ll…probably take one of you. Or you, Shiva,” Harry said dejectedly.

“Ze same for me,” Fleur contributed quietly. “Zough I would zink most likely Hermione for me.”

The others all nodded. “Okay, so we have a decent plan for the Fourth Task. What about the Third? Do you guys have any info on it?” Daphne asked.

“All we know for sure is that we have to retrieve the thing to help in the Fourth and that its theme is: Face the Sky,” Fred said shaking his head. “My best guess is we’re going to be doing some flying.”

“I don’t think we’re going to end up getting much more than that unfortunately. At least not without the Headmasters cheating again which I certainly wouldn’t turn down. We’re all really good flyers though which is nice,” Harry shrugged.

Fleur nodded perking up a bit. “Zis is true. I may not play Quidditch like you zree, but I do enjoy being in ze air and I have my wings as a backup if required.”

“Okay,” Shiva said clapping her hands together. “Good planning session and good progress people. Enjoy the rest of your holiday and don’t forget to do your holiday break homework if you haven’t gotten it done yet.” A round of grumbling greeted the last comment and people began to file out of the room. Shiva, Harry, his girlfriends and Fleur hung back.
As the last person left, Harry turned Fleur and frowned. “Okay, what’s wrong, Fleur? Why did you freak out about the Merpeople?”

“Binns really needs to be fired,” Shiva muttered with a sigh. “You’re worried about the treaty right?”

Fleur nodded and Hermione gasped. The French girl smiled a little at that though she crossed her arms before replying. “Oui. Ze treaty forbids any Veela from entering a Merman’s territory just as it forbids zem from entering ours.”

“What treaty?” Tonks asked her hair shifting a few colors.

“Wait…I read something about this a few weeks ago…” Harry said. “Something about…the Treaty of Athens? A Veela and Merpeople war right? That was what…two hundred years ago?”

“Zree hundred,” Fleur said shaking her head. “Ze hostilities stopped, but both sides still hate each ozer for ze most part. All Veela are taught to avoid ze Merpeople as many will use any justification to kill us while trying to uphold ze treaty terms.”

“They can’t do that!” Hermione yelled. “How can they possibly expect you to compete in this if they’re marching you to your death?!”

“Zat was why I was frightened. I don’t believe I will have much issue at first zough. Zis Tournament is known zroughout much of ze world so ze Merpeople will not do anyzing as long as I stay within ze time limit. If I am still in ze water zough after an hour is up…” Fleur grimaced.

Harry violently shook his head. “Not going to happen, Fleur. We’ll stick together in the Task and if they try anything I’ll be there to help fight them off.”

Fleur looked up at him blinking. Harry caught a sheen across her eyes before she smiled and nodded looking down again. “Zank you, Harry,” she whispered.

Tonks walked over to the younger girl and laid a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t forget, Fleur, Harry has a ‘saving people thing’. You’ll be fine. He’ll probably end up hurt somehow knowing this idiot’s luck, but you’ll both survive. I’m sure of it.”

Fleur chuckled. “Yes. I’m sure you are right.”

“Of course she’s right,” Shiva smirked. “Now all of you come on. Dobby and Winky promised us some hot cocoa.”

New Year’s Eve after dinner saw Harry being dragged back into the Room by Hermione and Tonks with his eyes closed. He was laughing at their insistence that he keep his eyes shut once they hit the seventh floor corridor, but didn’t ask questions.

“Okay, Wonder Boy, you can open your eyes now,” Tonks said her grin evident in her tone.

Harry shook his head good-naturedly and opened his eyes. A moment later his jaw dropped and he squeaked in surprise. The Room had been turned into a cozy bedroom again with a couch to the side and a large bed in the corner. Both the bed and the couch were covered in satin and against the opposite wall was a roaring fireplace. Above the fireplace was a picture of Big Ben and the London Eye with the countdown displayed on Shell Centre. “Wow…”

“We wanted to do something nice for New Year’s and while the castle was planning on having
some fireworks visible from the dorms it didn’t really seem like enough,” Hermione said smiling. Tonks nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, so we decided to get a picture of the celebration in London last year and charmed it so that the countdown will end up being correct. The fireworks should go off at the right time too.”

“Girls, this is amazing!” Harry said grinning and hugging both of them tightly. “How come the bed though?”

Hermione raised her eyebrows and Tonks broke out into chuckles. “Really, Harry?” Hermione asked. “Did you seriously think we’d want to be alone on New Year’s Eve?”

Harry’s face went bright red as he caught her meaning. “Um…I hadn’t really thought about it, but when you put it like that…”

“Ah, so he can be taught!” Tonks crooned quieting her chuckles and shifting to grinning mischievously. “Now we are all wearing too much clothing.”

“Err, all I have on is a shirt and trousers,” Harry hedged raising his eyebrows.

“As I said, far too much clothing. Let’s slip into something a bit more comfortable eh, Mione?”

Hermione blushed but nodded. As she followed Tonks over to grab a mostly transparent nightgown from the bed Hermione looked back over her shoulder at Harry. “Feel free to watch, Harry. You’ve seen both of us mostly naked anyway.”

Harry could only nod dumbly in reply. Hermione’s statement wasn’t entirely accurate. He had actually only seen them both topless not naked. It was an important distinction. In his mind at least. A distinction that was quickly growing rather outdated. The girls pulled off their shirts and removed their bras without much fanfare though Harry still stared in awe at both of their chests. He couldn’t help comparing the two. Tonks was slightly larger than Hermione, though Hermione’s breasts seemed a bit perkier and her nipples were a bit bigger. That was hard to focus on though with Tonks’ piercings still on display. He was so focused on their upper bodies that he barely even noticed as they unbuttoned their trousers. As the jeans started to slip down though, Harry eyes widened as he finally followed their hands downward.

His mind ground to halt as the trousers were removed entirely leaving Hermione and Tonks clad in just a set of panties each. Well Hermione had panties on – a red piece of material with some small lace around the sides. Tonks on the other hand seemed to be wearing a yellow thong that barely covered her at all. His blinked in awe of the two beautiful women in front of him and barely managed to restart his brain enough to say something. “Is that a badger on those?” He didn’t get his brain working enough to say anything intelligent however.

Tonks giggled. “Yup, it is. Hufflepuff and proud! Granted they’re not my sexiest pants, but I’m saving those for Valentine’s Day.” Harry swallowed on a suddenly very dry throat and nodded dumbly. Both girls reached for their nightgowns and slipped them on. How more clothes could make them even more alluring was a mystery lost to time but the addition of the transparent gown certainly managed it.

“Harry,” Hermione said raising her eyebrows and slinking closer to him. “Are you going to get comfortable or are you going to leave Nym and me dressed up all alone?”

Harry’s shirt, shoes and trousers were on the floor almost before he finished processing her statement eliciting another round of giggles. “Man, Wonder Boy, that was almost fast enough to
make me think you used a switching charm.”

Harry’s face went red though he turned back to Tonks and quipped, “Well, I guess next time I’ll have to undress you to prove it wasn’t magic.”

Tonks raised her eyebrows at the challenge and chuckled. “I’m going to hold you to that, Harry. Hermione, are you bringing his cute little arse to bed or what?”

“Coming, Nym,” Hermione sang as she took Harry’s arm. She led him to the bed and pushed him lightly so that he was laying down between herself and Tonks. “There, that’s better.” Hermione leaned over and kissed him. Harry melted into her embrace for nearly a minute before coming up for air. As Hermione pulled back, he grinned widely and pulled Tonks down for a kiss as well.

“You two are beautiful. I don’t say that nearly enough,” Harry mumbled panting for breath when Tonks pulled back.

“You do, Harry,” Hermione sighed as she leaned her head down on his bare chest. “But thank you.”

“Doesn’t mean we don’t mind hearing it more though,” Nym agreed nuzzling his neck. “You’re pretty handsome yourself, Wonder Boy.”

Harry made a noncommittal sound of agreement though he was currently more focused on Hermione. She had grabbed his hand and laid it on her stomach shifting it slowly downwards. “Mione?”

She stopped and lifted her head to stare into his eyes. “Harry…I want this. We both do. I’m ready for it and Nym is ready for it with us as well. If you want me to stop though I will. Just say so and we can stick with what we’ve done previously.”

Harry blinked and tried to think of a reason why they should be staying above the stomach. He really tried.

“Um,” Harry let out a low moan as Tonks lightly bit his ear. “Never mind. I’m done arguing. I’d have to be a complete idiot to argue.”

“Good man,” Tonks whispered into his ear sending a shiver down his spine as she took his other arm and brought it under her nightgown and up to her chest. Her other hand drifted down to slip underneath his pants while Hermione resumed guiding Harry’s right hand down her own body.

Both of them groaned when he felt his hand slide under her panties and cup her. Harry’s last coherent thought for several hours was a simple, “I love you girls.”

“I think we missed the New Year,” Harry said. The wide smile on his face as Hermione and Tonks both cuddled on his chest left no concern that his statement was a rebuke.

“Eh, we were probably kissing during it anyway,” Tonks mumbled.

He felt Hermione nod. “Yes, we were. I was snogging you, Nym, when I saw the fireworks go off in the painting.”

“Oh was that why you broke off and hurriedly pushed me towards Harry then claimed his lips for yourself almost immediately?”
“Yes. I wanted us all to get the New Year’s Kiss in on time,” Hermione stated contentedly causing all three of them to laugh softly. “So, Harry, I take it you liked this idea?”

“Very much so,” Harry said nodding. “It was definitely the best New Year’s celebration I’ve ever had.” He paused and shrugged. “Well, technically it’s my fourth New Year’s celebration and really only the second that I’ve actually done something worth remembering, but it still counts.”

“That it does, Wonder Boy,” Tonks said patting his chest.

“And you’re going to have many, many more of them, Harry, so don’t even think about slacking off for the remaining Tasks,” Hermione said holding him tighter.

“I’m not going anywhere, Mione.”

Tonks lifted her head a bit and furrowed her brow. “Actually, speaking of that, Mione, with the Marauder’s Map and the Librarian’s Aide, how do they determine who’s who?”

“They tie into the castle’s inner ward scheme,” Hermione said shrugging. “It was Sirius’ idea, but they hadn’t gotten it to work until Harry’s mum managed to invent the charm that piggybacked off the wards. According to Remus’ notes, your cousin was actually going to try and insert a modification to the Anchor to make the Map work before Lily agreed to help. Good thing she did too because they had no idea where the Anchor was and best guess had been under Black Lake or somewhere in the dungeons. Why?”

Harry shifted so that he could see Tonks’ eyes. “Moody right?” She nodded. “I know it’s stupid, but I can’t help thinking that I’m missing something. I managed to get a detection charm on his flask before the Ball was out and it did show whiskey so I’m probably just being paranoid. Still though…it’s just odd,” Tonks winced. “Sorry, this isn’t the time to be talking about that. Just ignore my paranoid Auror mutterings.”

“It’s not paranoia if they’re really out to get you,” Hermione commented grinning. “Muggle saying. I don’t think the wards that identify people can really be changed though, Nym. Even with access to the Anchor you’d need an incredible amount of finesse, power and time. Not to mention intimate knowledge of the entire ward scheme.”

“Sounds like something Dumbledore could do,” Harry said.

Hermione shook her head. “He may be Headmaster and he’s a very good wizard, but even he would need at least a half hour to erase someone from the ward scheme and replace them with someone else. Swapping people might take a shorter time, but Crouch has barely left his house since Sirius got those reparations from him – so there is no way he was on the grounds to swap names with.”

Tonks nodded. “She’s right. I actually looked for Dumbledore while you were dancing with me right after that, Harry, and he was there. If he’d done anything it should have taken longer. We can settle this right now though to be sure. Accio Librarian’s Aide.” Hermione’s map flew out of her pants lying on the couch and into Tonks’ hands. “Okay, if Crouch is on the grounds we call Bonesy and take both of them in. If not, we just continue watching Mad-Eye and note any inconsistencies compiling until we see if we have enough to bring to Bonesy.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Harry said as Hermione nodded.

Tonks activated the map and Hermione showed them how to use the search function. “You just hold your wand to the eye over here and say ‘Locate, Barty Crouch’. See when the eye flashes like
that it means the target isn’t detected by the wards. If it does see them, then it will highlight their
name and flash the room their in.”

“Cool. This is amazing work, Mione,” Tonks said. She redid the search a few times to ensure that
the lack of response wasn’t due to a ‘bug’ before wiping the map and putting it on the table.
“Okay, let’s just cuddle for now guys. I’ll keep poking around later and seeing what’s what.
Mione, would you mind checking for Crouch every once in a while just to be safe?”

“Of course, Nym.” Hermione frowned and reached out a hand run along the older woman’s back.
“Just promise me if you do find something you come get one of us first. I don’t want you getting
hurt because you didn’t call for backup.”

“Promise, Mione,” she said smiling. A second later she shivered as Hermione’s hand drifted
between her legs. “Playful little minx…”

Harry laughed while Hermione smirked. “Yes. I certainly can be.”

Barty scowled as he sat down in his office during his first free New Years in a decade and drank a
bit of firewhiskey in ‘celebration’. That damn Yule Ball had set off so many alarms in his head it
had been all he could do not to make the bloody metamorphmagus disappear afterward. She’d
been fishing for something deeper then what Moody had given him and his stupid ‘constant
vigilance’ hadn’t been good enough judging by her quick retreat. How the damnable old paranoid
had managed to hide layers upon layers of code and avoid telling him everything was
simultaneously the most impressive and most frustrating bit of foresight Barty had ever seen.

At least he’d managed to swap out his polyjuice flask for the whiskey one while she ran. Seeing
her with Potter and Granger afterwards had worried him immensely and ended up being the sole
reason he had stayed his hand from slaughtering the woman. If she were to simply up and
disappear after telling those two he was acting suspicious, he wouldn’t have lasted the night. He
was good and in any fair duel he’d decimate the teens or whatever backup they brought…but
Potter wouldn’t fight remotely fair if he suspected Barty had killed his sex toy. Barty’d probably
wake up to a tree growing through his back or something. That was one of the ways those Asians
slowly tortured and killed criminals wasn’t it? Even if Potter didn’t try to kill him, the boy would
still end up exposing him and then his Master would kill him for screwing up the plan. Either way
he was looking at a painful death if he acted against the bitch.

So he’d let her live. A few precautions and things should still be fine. He’d moved Moody to a
room in that rundown old shack just in case they tried snooping around his office. It made getting
extra hairs more difficult, but it wasn’t much more than an inconvenience really. He’d just have to
avoid mentioning this little problem to the Dark Lord until he could permanently take care of it.

Now if only he could figure out how the girl had found him out and not Dumb-as-a-door. Either
the old man really was getting senile or the Moody had never trusted him as much as the fool had
liked to pretend. Barty briefly considered that perhaps Dumbledore did know and was simply
letting him be. He couldn’t help a laugh at that idiotic idea. The Great Lord of the Light helping a
murderous Death Eater? That would certainly be the day!

A few days before the start of the new term Harry was sitting on the grounds in his Midnight form
and letting Luna and Fleur pet him. Ostensibly he was ‘letting his instincts guide him’. He
personally felt he was more just relaxing and taking the chance to get used to the sensation of
having a tail as well as better handle the increased smell ability in his panther form.
And getting teased to high heaven by Fleur. “Midnight is so dreadfully boring though, Hermione. And far too appropriate,” the French girl was saying. “I much prefer Snowball. When you call for Snowball ze first zing someone will zink of is ‘Oh no, I am about to be pelted with slush!’ and not ‘Oh no ze evil ‘arry!panzer is attacking!’ It is ze best cover, no?”

“You just want to call him Snowball because you like to tease him,” Hermione pouted crossing her arms.

“And because I like to tease him, yes,” Fleur agreed wholeheartedly. She smiled and hugged Midnight around the middle. “Ze name is adorable. You, Midnight, are always going to be Snowball to me, you fluffy, silky little monster.”

Midnight huffed in grudging acceptance. He was too concerned with Luna’s hand scratching behind his ears to bother caring about what nickname Fleur was going to call him. His tail was swishing back and forth on its own with a curious little shiver flowing up his spine every so often. He tried to ignore the feeling since it felt like ice running down part of his tail.

Luna’s hand suddenly froze and she went very still. Midnight could taste her scent change into something exuding a mixture of curiosity, wonder and fear. Growling slightly Midnight raised his head to peer around the girl and take stock of his surroundings trying to find what had her on edge.

“Harry…your tail,” Luna said softly. “The graboids seem to have stolen it.”

Midnight’s eyes narrowed and he turned to stare at where his tail had fallen still. The ice was running up its length again and it was staying present far longer than before. Coiling his muscles, Midnight, searched the ground by the tree.

His tail was not there.

Letting out a low growl, Midnight stayed very still and shifted his eyes to his haunches, tracing the beginning of his tail to where it ended as it disappeared into the shadow of tree. Sucking in a sharp breath Midnight again traced his tail. It wasn’t a mistake, his tail wasn’t just lost in the shadow of the tree it was literally in the shadow!

Letting out a yip of fright Midnight jumped up and away from the tree. The ice left his tail as he leapt over Luna’s head and landed on the other side of her well away from the shadow. He curled around to inspect his newly whole tail and start licking it and then pawing at it lightly.

“Harry,” Hermione said softly her eyes wide, “are you alright?”

Midnight shifted and Harry sat down on the ground heavily. “I have no idea. What the bloody hell was that?”

“The graboids stole your tail,” Luna repeated with a bit of wonder seeping into her voice. “I watched it happen. Your tail was flicking back and forth on the ground and when it fell onto the shadow, it disappeared inside it then came back as it flicked back out. It was the oddest thing…”

“Do you feel alright, ‘arry?” Fleur asked reaching out but seemingly unsure of where she should be touching to make sure he had all his parts intact.

“I…think so? Hang on, I’m going to try to do it intentionally. If I disappear get Shiva and Madame Pomfrey.”

“You will not bloody disappear, Harry Potter!” Hermione started to yell as Harry shifted back to Midnight and carefully stepped forward.
Extending a tentative paw, Midnight touched the shadow hanging in the air. Nothing happened. He growled low and gently laid his paw on the ground inside the shadow. Still nothing happened. Giving himself a little shake, he tried to remember just what he had been feeling and thinking as he had felt the ice in his tail a few moments ago. With deliberate slowness, Midnight called up that feeling again and pushed gently into the ground against the shadow. His paw slipped into nothingness and ice spread up his limb. Shivering Midnight leaned more of his paw into the ground and the ice spread higher. When the feeling reached his shoulder Midnight pulled back shuddering and shifted back to human.

“Merlin, that’s cold!” Harry shook out his arm and cast warming spells on it until he started to regain some feeling. “Did you guys see that? I was literally in that shadow!”

“Yes, Harry, we saw it. You’re okay?” Hermione asked as she moved forward to lightly run her hand along his arm. Harry nodded in reply.

“Shadow panther,” Luna whispered her mouth gaping. “Oh my! You’re a shadow panther, Harry!”

“I’m a what?” Harry asked.

“A shadow panther!” Luna jumped up and hugged him hard enough to make him lose his breath for a moment. “Oh they are nearly extinct! The shadow panther is a cousin to the North American wampus. It can travel through shadows as easily as walking. Observers have only seen it use shadows it can see to maneuver through, but there didn’t seem to be a range limit beyond requiring line of sight from what they could tell. It could also take passengers with it though that was what led to their overhunting. Many people wanted a shadow panther for the novelty of traveling through shadows.” Luna’s happy voice died down to a sad tone. “Unfortunately the shadow panthers didn’t take too well to that and many died as their masters forced them to travel with them. At least the masters tended to die or disappear as well.”

“That…doesn’t sound very safe, Luna,” Harry said slowly.

“Well the animals themselves never had a problem before they were domesticated,” she said shrugging. Tapping her chin she continued in a bemused tone, “Perhaps they died of frostbite?”

“Haha, very funny. That really was freezing you know.” Harry stared speculatively at the shadow. Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “Harry, I know that look. You are about to do something incredibly stupid.”

“Maybe,” Harry acknowledged nodding. “But if it works it’ll be pretty cool. And probably pretty useful too.”

“And if it doesn’t work you’ll be on a bed in the infirmary.”

Harry shrugged and shifted into Midnight before taking a long look at the shadow of the castle wall about 200 meters away. Staying fully focused on the wall, he leaped into the shadow of the tree. Ice covered his entire body and it felt like he had jumped into an Arctic bath. His body was squeezed and bombarded by a wind that came from nowhere and all light had vanished. For what felt like an eternity Midnight flew through the space between places buffeted by the wind and the cold.

Just as suddenly as it started, it stopped and Midnight flew out of the shadow of the wall exactly where he had been focusing on. Yowling at the uncomfortable cold and shaking slightly trying to
return some feeling to his extremities he paced back over to the small group and shifted back.

“Ow,” Harry muttered. “As naturally as walking, huh? Yeah no. That’s going to take some serious getting used to if I want to do that more often.”

“What was it like?” Fleur asked cocking her head.

“Cold. And windy. And it wasn’t just dark but…it was like the complete absence of even the idea of light. It…felt wrong. Like I was intruding on something primal or something. I don’t know really how to describe it,” Harry finished with a lame shrug.

“Only Harry Potter would break every known magical law by becoming a magical animagus and describe it as simply as ‘it felt wrong’,” Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes.

“Hey, I used other descriptors too!” Harry complained.

“What if you tried enflaming your magic while walking through the shadow?” Luna asked quizzically. “Encase it around you like a cocoon.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair and shrugged. “Worth a shot. If I can do this more than once or twice it would really improve my battlefield mobility.” He shifted to Midnight and tried to do what Luna had described. It took him a few minutes to figure out how to call up his magic and force it through his body to hover just at the surface of his skin and fur but once he got the hang of it he tried leaping through the shadows again.

This time, the cold was still present but it was less a bone-chilling numbness and more of a fall evening. The wind didn’t do much more than push him along and before he could feel anything beyond a heavy tingle, Midnight was popping out of the shadow of the wall. Mouth widening in the feline approximation of a grin, Midnight called his magic back up again and stepped back through the shadow to jump out beside his friends. This time though, instead of popping up inside the shadow of the tree he decided to have a bit more fun with it.

He leapt out of Hermione’s shadow and ended in a crouch in front of her.

Hermione cried out in a surprise and fell back on her butt before glaring at Midnight. In response he looked up at her with wide eyes and nuzzled her leg purring. “Insufferable, twit,” Hermione grouched. She reached out to scratch behind his ears though all the same and laughed along with Luna and Fleur.

Daphne leaned back against Tracey in the other girl’s bed with a soft moan of both exhaustion and contentment. “That, was tiring,” she said shutting her eyes as Tracey moved to rub her shoulders.

“Complicated tattoo this time?” Tracey asked in sympathy.

Daphne nodded. “And awkward positioning. Trying to correctly place the thing along the pad of his paw was frustrating enough. It was made even worse when he kept fidgeting every time I brought my wand closer. Shiva ended up having to stick his paw to the floor before I could start.”

“Yeah, that sounds annoying,” Tracey grimaced. “Both feet?”

“Paws. Both paws,” Daphne corrected with a sigh. “We did make sure Harry took his shoes and socks off first before shifting to Midnight in case the runic tattoo decided to incorporate those items while being inscribed which would’ve been a disaster – but that’s beside the point, the distinction between paw and foot is an important one. Remember what happened in the Second
Task when he used a tattoo in feline form that was made in human form? These were made in feline form instead so he can’t use them in human form or the same thing would happen.”

Tracey shrugged and snorted. “I know, Daph. You don’t need to get defensive about it. What were these ones again? Windflyer something or other?”

“Windrunner. It seemed like a modified short-range directional concussive blast designed to amplify reactionary feedback instead of dissipate it from what I could tell. A complicated way of saying his leaps will have quite a bit more power behind them while the tattoos are used. Harry only asked for them on his back paws since he never expected to use any tattoos on his feet while human,” Daphne said waving her hand in the air dismissively. “Like being a large cat that can leap through shadows isn’t impressive enough.”

Tracey laughed. “Yeah well when does Harry ever do anything halfway, huh?”

“True.”

“Sooo…” Tracey said softly. “Daph, I want to ask you something. Please don’t dodge the question this time okay?”

“Okay,” Daphne shrugged. “Why would I dodge it?”

“Because it’s about Harry,” Tracey sighed. She felt Daphne stiffen slightly underneath her fingers. “You do like him, don’t you?”

Daphne stayed silent for nearly a minute before sighing deeply and giving a small nod. “I honestly didn’t want to. I tried not to. I don’t even know why I do like him. Maybe it would make sense if he was a frustrated loner who leans on everyone else at every turn. At least in that case then I would be shoring up his weaknesses and he would be softening my edges. But…he’s an alpha the same as me. I shouldn’t like him.”

Tracey quirked her mouth a small smirk. “We can’t really choose who we like, Daph. I never chose to like girls.”

“That’s not quite the same thing, Trace,” Daphne frowned.

“It kinda is after a fashion.” Tracey kept up her massage for another minute in silence. “Are you going to tell him?”

Daphne shook her head. “Of course not! He has more than enough to worry about at the moment than yet another girl with a crush on him!”

Tracey sighed and lightly flicked Daphne’s forehead. “Stop being an idiot; it’s not attractive. You aren’t just another girl with a crush. You are Daphne Greengrass.”

“His group already has Fleur in a holding pattern. The girl obviously told them how she feels and what she’s looking for and they’re still trying to decide what to do about it,” Daphne said matter-of-factly. “Even if I was willing to say something to Harry I’m certainly not going to until they give her an answer.”

“Daph, we both know he’d accept you over Fleur in a heartbeat.”

“Oh come off it, Trace, he’s only known me a year-and-a-half longer then her and the girl not only has a beautiful accent but is a Merlin-be-damned Veela!”
“Harry has never cared about that side of her. And you’re his right hand,” Tracey said quietly. “You’re the first one he calls if he needs muscle to back him up in something. Just like he’s the first one you call.”

Daphne scowled and sat up turning so that she was staring at Tracey. “Why are you even trying to convince me of this, Tracey? Do you want to end…us?”

Tracey gave her girlfriend an exasperated look and leaned back crossing her arms. “I want you to be happy, Daphne. If Harry makes you happy then I’m going to do what I can to get you together. I’m sorry I’ve been a jealous bint for so long this year. You didn’t deserve that and I don’t like being that type of girl. We swore we’d be friends first and lovers second. As both your friend and your lover, I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy with you, Tracey,” Daphne said shaking her head.

“You’ve never looked at me like you look at him. He’s your equal. I’m not. I want to be, but I’m not,” Tracey said simply. “Look, if we can keep up what we have I’d love that. But I don’t want you to pass something wonderful up just because you think you’d hurt me, Daph. I’m a big girl and I can handle it.” She paused and glanced to the side in embarrassment. “I’m…also not entirely without my own options, you know.”

Daphne furrowed her brow thinking before letting out a small bark of pleased laughter. “Luna? That does actually have potential? I thought she was just playing?”

“So did I at first. I’ve recently been informed she’s actually rather serious about it,” Tracey said blushing.

Daphne smirked and shook her head. “Well you and Harry do seem to be the only two who can calm her particular brand of…”

“Oddness?” Tracey supplied.

“I was going to say quirkiness. Do you like her?”

“Actually…I kinda do. It’s not the same as with you. I’d be in the flying seat which…would be weird to be honest. I’m not sure, Daph.”

Daphne nodded and twisted so that she could lean back against Tracey. “Quite a pair we make,” she said as she pulled the other girl’s arms around her. “Neither sure of what we want and both somewhat unwilling to find out.”

“Too bad, we’re not more Slythindorish, huh?” Tracey commented eliciting a round of laughter from both girls. “Seriously though, Daph, I think you should go for it with Harry before the year is up. If you decide you want to keep up with us – either in the meantime or after he accepts you – I’m willing to do that. I rather doubt that boy would object to letting you stay with me on the side. Just know that I won’t be joining you in bed with him.”

“I’ll…think about it,” Daphne said quietly. After a short pause she continued louder, “If you want to give it a go with Luna you have the same permission from me. Just please let me know so I don’t find out secondhand.” Daphne paused and shrugged. “I also wouldn’t be joining you two in bed. She is adorable in small doses, but the girl is not my type at all.”

“Noted,” Tracey laughed. Both Slytherins sighed and closed their eyes relaxing against one another and trying not to think about the future.
“Hey, Shiva, you have a few minutes to go over some stuff?” Harry asked his guardian after class ended for the day.

“Sure. What’s up, kid?” Shiva stretched, leaning back in her chair and cracking her neck. Harry laid two drawings out on the table in front of her and pulled up a chair.

“I wanted to get your opinions on these two designs. This,” he said pointing to the first one, “is the Tracekey first draft. It obviously has major grounding issues which I haven’t quite managed to work around yet, but the thing I need a bit of help on is the targeting section of the cluster.”

Shiva leaned in and squinted down at the exploded view of the runic array Harry had been working on since the World Cup incident. “This part’s the problem right? Any reason why you need it to link to both the origin and destination of the last portkey?”

“Well, I want it to be an ‘either/or’ thing not a ‘both’ thing,” Harry said shrugging. “If it targets either the origin or the destination then you can track the bad guys whether you nab them while the crime is in progress or after they’ve made their getaway.”

“Makes sense,” she agreed nodding. After staring at it a few moments she crossed out one of the runes he was using and switched it for a Transient rune. “This should probably get that result, kid. Make sure you test that though because it might make some other aspects unstable.”

Harry studied her change and broke out into a huge smile. He hugged her and nodded enthusiastically. “Thanks, Shiva! That does make the grounding section unstable, but it should actually make it easier to start bleeding off the magical backlash from the ward tunneler which is the main sticking point I’ve had. Thanks!”

“Always glad to be of use,” she said smirking. “What’s the other one?”

“Uh,” Harry grimaced. “It’s…the Lava Bomb. I know how to make it but…well just take a look and tell me what you think.”

Shiva’s eyes narrowed at his evasion, but she turned to the diagram instead of pressing him. About a minute later after mumbling to herself and making a few notes she sucked in a sharp gasp.

“Yeah. That was my reaction as well,” Harry muttered.

“This is a chimera rune! Harry, what the hell is a chimera rune in a channeling configuration doing in this cluster?”

He shrugged. “I remembered the basic design of the main cluster from when I saw Overlord Harry use it, but I couldn’t remember the subarray formed in the middle where the two halves met. I drew it up and realized the only thing that fit was a channeled chimera rune. I…don’t think anyone else but me could use this, Shiva. I think he designed it specifically for himself.”

She scowled. “Using another side effect of the ritual?”

“That’s my guess,” Harry nodded grimacing. “I don’t know whether it’s related to a slight fire resistance or a breathing fire thing, but it’s got to play into it somehow. I…just really hope I don’t end up accidentally breathing fire on someone…I’m actually hoping that this rune would diminish any potential negative effect that we haven’t seen yet.”

“Goddess,” Shiva leaned back and blew out a breath. She fixed Harry with a piercing stare. “You’re sure that this is a good idea?”
He nodded. “The implications are worrying, but the cluster is sound. It’ll work. On me at least.”

“Still extremely unstable, kid.”

“That’s why it’s in two halves,” he pointed out. “I have to seriously kink my arms to get them to meet up correctly to complete the cluster.”

Shiva frowned and stared at the runes a bit longer before eventually nodding. “I’d be happier asking you to wait until the summer for this one, but I know that’s not exactly practical. Especially if it’s going to be something that might prevent any accidents before they can happen. Harry, will you at least promise me to try not to use this one during the Tournament? If people start seeing you using a lava generating rune so soon after your evil twin did…All I’m saying, kid, is that we don’t want to piss away all the good will we’ve managed to swing our way.”

“I’ll be careful, Shiva. I’d just feel safer knowing I have a nuclear option if I need it.” Harry smiled reassuringly.

“Okay. Okay, kid, you have my permission for this one then. How did that Windrunner thing work out by the way?” Shiva said passing him back the diagrams.

“Pretty good. Without activating them, Midnight can jump about 6 meters forwards and with them I can get to almost 9 meters,” Harry said giving her a thumbs up. “It feels a bit weird since I’m basically being pushed for part of it instead of actually jumping, but it works great.”

“Well that’s good,” Shiva nodded. “How about that Ministry guy – the one with the daughter? He didn’t want you to come in and show off for the extra paperwork right?”

Harry shook his head. “Nope. His name was Donovan by the way. Hedwig just got back this morning with the revised copies of the forms and certification that they’re entered into the Hall of Records as well as Gringotts. He…also sent a thank you note from his daughter, Marie,” Harry said blushing a running a hand through his hair. “It was actually really sweet. When I open a physical location I may end up hiring her.”

Shiva chuckled. “Careful, Harry. Last thing you need is another girl crushing on you!”

“Ugh,” Harry groaned theatrically, “don’t I know it!”
Chapter 28: The Third Task

Harry fidgeted in place as he and the rest of the Champions waited for Bagman to finally get around to explaining what their goal for this Task was going to be. He couldn’t help flinching at the constant buzzing sound coming from over their heads outside the tent.

“Mate, you gotta relax a bit,” Fred said raising his eyebrows at his fellow student.

“I’ll relax when I know what that sound is,” Harry said shaking his head.

Fleur and Viktor nodded along also glancing uneasily at the ceiling above them. Fred just shrugged. “No point worrying about it since we’re going to be facing off against it in a minute anyway.”

Bagman chose that moment to walk into the tent with his characteristic bright smile firmly in place. “Good morning, Champions! Exciting Task on the schedule for today!”

“Yes, that’s right,” Bagman said smiling, glad that someone knew about the creature. He obviously missed the death glares he was receiving. “With the complaints about the previous two Tasks though we felt it better to tone this one down a bit.” Four collective sighs were heard at that. “All you have to do is solve the puzzle box floating in the air! Each of you has your own box and you’ll all be given your brooms to fly with once you step outside. Inside the box is another key which will unlock your…unlock something over the course of the next Task. I advise you not to get too distracted during this one though! If you don’t retrieve the key in time – a half hour time limit – the box will collapse and the key will be destroyed.

“The distractions to keep you multitasking a bit include some varieties of flying magical creatures. There are a few hippogriffs, several coatls, a roving swarm of Cornish pixies and a thunderbird!” Bagman smiled widely still oblivious to the growing looks of worry on the Champions’ faces.

Well I think that’s it. Good luck to everyone! Scores will be out of the time it takes to complete the Task as well as the measures used to ensure your safety from the flying critters. Have fun!”

As he strode out, Harry turned to give Fred a look. “So should I relax now, mate?”

“Well, at least you know what the buzzing is now!” Fred said attempting to crack a smile, though it fell somewhat flat. “Merlin,” he muttered, “swarms of pixies are bad enough but they brought in a bloody thunderbird?”

Viktor sighed. “If I get done quickly enough I will try to keep it distracted. I encountered one during a game in the United States last year. Their shocks are quite strong, but they are slow to fire their bolts and rarely leave whatever perch they are using.”
“Zank you, Viktor. Zat is most generous of you,” Fleur murmured.

The Durmstrang student shrugged. “Might as vell make use of my Quidditch skill.”

The gong rang before anyone could respond properly to that and the Champions trooped out onto the field. In front of them were four brooms lined up side by side with four identical small boxes about 30cm to a side floating in the air nearly 100 meters up. Harry spied a beautiful, majestic yellow bird sitting on the edge of one of the boxes in the center. Its plumage seemed to crackle with static electricity and it gazed lazily around the arena. There were a half-dozen hippogriffs flying around the boxes clacking their beaks at anything that came too close. One or two managed to grab a Cornish pixie that left the swarm. The swarm of pixies mostly moved as one, weaving between the different boxes and blacking out the sky to a significant degree as they changed locations. Those had been the source of the buzzing that had so unnerved him earlier. Finally, Harry counted over a dozen flying, multicolored snakes all seemingly clustered around the box to the left of the thunderbird. Those had to be the coatls. They were strangely captivating with their shimmering rainbow of colors.

Harry considered the situation for only a moment before moving to take the spot next to Viktor. “I’ll take the serpents,” he said quietly as the older man nodded staring at the large yellow bird above.

Fleur took up the spot on the other side of Viktor and narrowed her eyes at the swarm coalescing into rude shapes in the air above her box. “We will see how many shapes you take after I send some passionfyre your way little monsters,” Harry heard her growl.

The gong rang again and Viktor and Fleur took off while Harry and Fred summoned their items from the crowd. Harry strapped on his harness ensuring it was extra snug and the additional *Superman* frame had been put into the correct positioning before summoning the broom to his hand. The *Superman* wouldn’t let him actually fly, but it would be a nice emergency save if he had to abandon the broom. It was a runic array combining Feather-Light charms, cushioning charms and a wind generating charm which should hopefully let him drift gently to the ground. It was something he had worked on at Hermione’s insistence to provide some protection during a Quidditch match. Her insistence about having no interest in acting as a Lois Lane to his Clark Kent had been both strenuous and curiously specific...

Fred beside him gave a thumbs up and hopped on his broom heading into the air with a potion in hand. Harry did a few quick maneuvers on the broom to get the feel of the thing and how it differed from the Firebolt Sirius had gotten him. This broom wasn’t necessarily awful, but it definitely didn’t seem to have anything close to the maneuverability, acceleration or top speed that he was used to. Frowning slightly Harry turned towards the coatls and hoped his half thought out idea would work.

Harry reached his box as he heard a shout from Fred’s direction echo out. “All eligible hippogriffs look alive! Lusty Liquid for Lucky Lad coming up!” A shattering sound rang through the air and Harry’s eyes widened as he saw one particular pixie that had ventured into the area near Fred get coated with a pinkish substance. Every hippogriff in the vicinity turned their heads and sighted onto the pixie which chattered and immediately began to fly evasive patterns as quickly as its wings would allow. The hippogriffs began following it around leaving Fred clear to approach his puzzle box.

To Harry’s far right, Fleur was tangling with a great many more pixies. The entire swarm alternately closed on her and flew away shrieking in fear as she lobbed more fireballs into their midst. She was working on the puzzle box in the lulls while the creatures tried to regroup after
they were scattered. Her angry scowl clearly indicated what she thought of the beasts’ attempts.

Harry drifted close enough to the coatls that he could hear their hissing. He stopped, held up his hands to show he was unarmed – as far as the creatures knew at least – and started to hiss in parseltongue. ~Peace, magnificent sky serpents. I only wish to get at the box behind you.~

One coatl fluttered to the front of the group and regarded Harry critically. ~We are not supposed to let you at it. We are supposed to try to injure or kill you. We did not know you would be a Speaker...The last speaker passed many generations ago...~

~I don’t want to fight you.~ Harry said gently but with steel still present in his tone. ~I will if I have to, but I don’t want to.~

~Speakers are precious and few.~ The coatl continued to regard Harry for several more moments before it turned to its fellows and hissed too quickly for Harry to follow. Eventually, all the snakes’ heads nodded in agreement and they beat their wings as one. The lead coatl turned back to Harry. ~We will not harm you Speaker. You have free access. Be warned. We have no wish to serve and we will not obey any order you give. Should another human approach we will attack them. Free access is yours and yours alone.~

Harry nodded, restraining his grin. ~My thanks to you and yours.~ The coatls flew aside opening up a corridor for him to access the puzzle box. As Harry pulled out his wand to start moving the shapes and etchings, he couldn’t help the little chuckle that escaped.

Diplomacy actually managed to work for once!

Viktor had completed 5 out of the six sides on the puzzle box with almost no difficulty even if he had moved slowly. As long as he didn’t startle it, the thunderbird had barely even spared him a glance. It idly tossed a lightning bolt at one of the hippogriffs that got tired with chasing the perfumed pixie around, but even that display had appeared to simply be one of boredom and apathy.

Now though...now Viktor was afraid. The creature was perched right on top of the last segment he needed to shift. He’d have to disturb it in order to finish. Flying right next to the bird left very little room for dodging. He’d have to exercise every reflex he’d honed in the next minute in order to get out of this with minimal injuries. Taking a deep breath, Viktor started to slowly shift the remaining panel into the open position.

He had solved almost the entire segment before the thunderbird ruffled its feathers and turned to stare at him. Viktor froze and the bird extended its wingspan wide letting out a piercing caw.

Well you didn’t win a game without taking a risk. Narrowing his eyes at the magical bird, Viktor snapped the last puzzle box segment into position. The side panel flipped up as the electricity running between the feathers of the bird snapped into a coherent pattern and flew towards him. Viktor ducked, grabbed the revealed key and flew up. The thunderbird shrieked its annoyance and immediately took wing to follow him. He eyed the tent below but took a quick stock of the other three Champions instead of heading for safety.

Rolling to avoid a second lightning bolt, he saw Fleur and Fred nearly complete with their puzzles, Harry only a few moments behind. He dropped into a switch-back loop and smirked as the thunderbird overshot him and circled to glare at him before trying to hit him again. This Task was actually...almost fun.
That was, of course, was when a pained scream rang out below him.

Fleur snarled and felt feathery down sprout from both arms. One hand tightly gripped her wand and kept manipulating the box in front of her while the other tossed a new fireball into the maddening swarm. The frustrating menaces simply refused to learn!

She’d initially tried avoiding killing the creatures and aimed to simply frighten them. They had grown bolder and moved to start biting her while she was working on the puzzle. She had ramped up her attacks casting freezing charms and stunners in between throwing her fireballs. They had responded by trying to claw and bite her eyes.

Fleur had stopped being nice then. Tiny burnt bodies tumbled out of the air around her and still the swarm came back for more. She cast several larger area spells before deciding to instead hurry along with her box and maintain a fireball in her left hand occasionally tossing it into the swarm when they tried to mass. The deterrent strategy mostly ended up working and she received very few additional scratches or bites.

Finally, Fleur finished the last segment and the puzzle box popped open. Fleur had just grabbed her key as a pained scream sounded from behind.

Fred worked on his puzzle box in relative freedom. The pheromone potion had worked a lot better than he had ever expected. For a stock of something they were planning to destroy, it was a decent final usage indeed. It was based off a love potion that George and he – at the urgings of Alicia and Angelina – decided not to carry in stock. A quick scouting run to snag a feather as he got to the group of animals let him key the pheromones to hippogriffs and a careful toss hit an errant pixie.

The little creature had panicked and started to fly around in every which way. Fred couldn’t have planned it better if he’d tried. Unfortunately he was a little slow with solving the actual puzzle configuration. He had never been the type to enjoy these little games as a kid and he didn’t have the visualization ability to see how they all fit.

Thankfully, without distractions around it went a bit faster than it could have otherwise. After a few minutes Fred had moved onto the very last section. He just managed to finish it up and grab the key when a frenzied chattering sounded just behind him.

Fred whipped around and his eyes widened as the pixie he had tagged came barreling towards him with six annoyed hippogriffs trailing behind. The creature was too close and there wasn’t time to dodge or twist away. All Fred could do was throw his hands up to try and protect his face from the manic flying devil.

The pixie slammed into his forehead at high speed and knocked Fred off balance. He tried to lock his thighs around the broom but he’d gotten too used to his normal broom’s handling and response speeds. His knees missed their grab as the broom bucked too slowly to be trapped between his legs and it tipped up with his weight thrown back. Fred desperately reached forward to latch onto his broom but a hippogriff slammed into him just before he could get a handhold.

The broom bucked from the impact of the mass of the impact and Fred flew off it. The pixie latched onto his hair and rode him down through the sky while the hippogriffs twisted to follow his descent to the ground.

Fred tried to twist and cast a cushioning charm but drew in a sharp breath as he saw his wand above him falling just out of reach.
He couldn’t help it. Fred screamed.

Harry got more and more annoyed as he worked on his puzzle box. The thing shouldn’t be this complicated! The problem was the etching and designs made it look too much like runes. Every time he shifted a segment he tried to make it match up to the appropriate rune or cluster that it would be only to realize just before he started to move the piece that it wasn’t supposed to be a rune. It was just more decorative etchings with only the barest hint of a pattern to help with placement.

He wished he could just disillusion the stupid box and do it by touch instead of looking at it. He’d risked a quick glance at the others once he hit his final segment – finally – only to see Viktor already done, Fleur starting to grin in triumph and Fred just about to reach into his box.

Harry’s eyes widened as he saw the hippogriffs barreling towards Fred full tilt and his friend none the wiser. Harry was about to call out a warning as Fred twisted then cried out in surprise and rocked back on his broom. Harry sucked in a breath and started to angle towards Fred. He shot through the coats as the lead hippogriff hit the red-head. Harry watched Fred get thrown off the broom and start to plummet letting out a scream of pain and fear.

The broom Harry was on was too slow; he could barely outpace the hippogriff let alone catch Fred before he hit the ground. The large animals were also positioned such that he could get a clear enough shot to hit his friend with a charm. He’d try to leap to him if he could but the same distance problem was present preventing that from working as well. The Superman wouldn’t work to support someone Fred’s size as a passenger anyway.

Grimacing, Harry saw a single option to save the twin from an impact with the rapidly approaching ground. Angling correctly and pushing off, Harry changed to Midnight in midair and used the Windrunner against the broom for a quick push. It wasn’t substantial but it was enough. He fell below the closest hippogriff and focused on the shadow that the line of creatures cast onto the back of the one directly above Fred.

Midnight wrapped his magic around him and fell into the shadow below him. He flew out the other side onto the top of the hippogriff above Fred. They were barely 10 meters above the ground now. Without taking time to do anything beyond angle himself correctly, Harry leapt off the hippogriff, again powering his jump with a burst from the Windrunner. He caught Fred’s wand in his jaws and wrapped a paw around the boy’s waist with the ground directly below them. Midnight desperately extended his magic to wrap around Fred while his eyes searched for a spot just in front of the medical tent. He focused on a shadowed area just as he and Fred fell into their own shadow on the ground.

Pain and cold beyond almost anything he had ever before experienced gripped Midnight as he flew through the world of darkness between shadows with Fred pulled tight against him. The cold and ice seemed to seep into his very soul and the gentle breeze that he had started to get used to became a raging hurricane buffeting him from all sides. The pain surging through his body approached similar levels as what he had felt latching onto Quirrellmort in his first year. It was all Midnight could do to remain conscious and keep his magic continually wrapped around Fred – protecting the other boy from the maelstrom surrounding them.

As suddenly as the torment began…it ended. Midnight and Fred burst from the shadow in front of the medical tent and landed on the ground. Midnight yowled in pain and agony and curled into a ball as he let Fred slip out from under him and the wand slid out from between his teeth.

Fred groaned and rolled into a sitting position running his arms. “Wow. That was bloody cold.
Thanks, Harry. I seriously owe you one, mate.”

Midnight could only yowl plaintively and curl around himself tighter. Dimly he heard shouts and cries for help as he shut his eyes and slipped into unconsciousness.

The rustle of a page turning nearby was quiet though it might as well have been the roar of a passing lorry. Harry groaned as he latched onto that sound and clawed his way back to consciousness. His body still ached and he could still feel some of the numbing cold deep in his bones, but it wasn’t all-consuming as it had been when he’d passed out. It wasn’t even really that bad at all compared with how he’d felt after some of the training sessions with Tonks and Flitwick. Harry’s eyes fluttered open and he twisted to try to find his glasses on their usual table before they were slipped onto his face by themselves.

Blinking the world into focus Harry saw Shiva lean back into a sitting position on the chair next to his bed with a small smirk on her face. She put the parchment she had been going over to the side and shook her head at him. “One day, kid, we’re going to see about getting you some contacts or something – or maybe that new Muggle surgery to fix those eyes.”

Harry answered her smirk with a small grin of his own. “Eh, I like the glasses. They stop mind attacks and basilisks. They can stay for the moment.” His joviality faded and he sighed. “So how bad was it? How long was I out?”

“Almost two days, kid. I finally convinced Dora and Hermione to get some sleep a few hours ago,” she shrugged. “Both of them only left you to take a shower before that. Most of the others have been in and out too. Daphne and Luna both stayed almost as long as your girlfriends and only left after the combined efforts of Tracey and Neville convinced them it would be better for you to not have multiple people hanging overhead when you woke up. I saw Fleur once at the beginning but she didn’t stay long. I think she might be blaming herself a bit even though it’s stupid. You’ll have to talk to her at some point soon and beat some sense into that bird-brain head of hers.

“Krum was also annoyed with himself actually. The guy was busy dodging a darn thunderbird to keep it busy and he still thinks he didn’t do enough to help,” Shiva said frowning and shaking her head. “Oh and Fred and George both say they are naming their firstborns after you. I think they want a boy and a girl between them so they can have a Harry and Harriet. Please, whatever the hell you do, kid, disabuse them of the notion that that is a remotely good idea!” Shiva looked rather torn between scowling and giggling. She calmed down after a few moments and reached out to squeeze his shoulder. “How are you, Harry?”

“A little sore and a little cold, but it’s not that bad,” Harry said shrugging. “What happened exactly?”

She turned away to stare out the window for before replying, “You almost died, kid. Pomfrey said that your magical core was bordering on empty when she got to you and that your body was still trying to use your last reserves to fight off the effects of exposure to…whatever that place you hop through is. We think that when you extended your magic to shield Fred, his own magic fought back and created a reinforcing feedback loop or something that completely drained you and left your own body exposed while in transit.”

“That…sounds about right. I think,” Harry commented thinking back. “It felt something like that at least. So I guess I can’t take anyone else through shadow travel huh?”

Shiva shook her head still staring out the window. “Please don’t. Luna talked with her father and both are convinced that this is why shadow panthers are mostly extinct now. It might be easier for
you if you try to take someone whose magic accepts yours and doesn’t fight back, but even then it’d be a big drain. So please don’t try that again, kid.”

“Fred would’ve died, Shiva,” he said softly.

“I know. And that’s why I’m *not* saying what you did was wrong, Harry. I’m just asking you not to *experiment* by trying to take Dora or Hermione through the shadows.”

“Ohkay. Excepting emergencies, I can promise that.” Harry nodded and Shiva let out a breath she had been holding.

“Thanks.”

“So…I didn’t get the key did I?” Harry said sighing heavily.

This time she wasn’t able to hold back her scowl. “No, you didn’t. The bloody box was fucking *open* too which should’ve counted, but you flew after Fred before physically touching the damned key. You passed out and the time limit expired before anyone noticed. The Goddess-be-damned box shrunk and destroyed it and the judges are refusing to make you another one saying you didn’t technically complete the Task.” She started muttering under breath and Harry caught a few choice words he’d have to try and remember later for truly curse-worthy situations. “Dumbledore and Umbridge argued that because you didn’t touch the key, you didn’t complete the event satisfactorily. Karkaroff abstained from judgment, Maxime argued for and Bagman hemmed and hawed long enough that his opinion didn’t end up counting before the official determination period lapsed. Majority won.” She turned back to him and peered calculatingly at him. “You want the score distribution, kid?”

Harry shrugged. “Sure. Why not? Krum was first I’m betting right?”

She nodded. “Yeah. He got 46 points. They took a few off because he didn’t immediately leave after completing the Task. Fleur was after that with 40 points. They didn’t like that she got so many tiny scratches and bites – completely ignoring that against an agitated swarm of Cornish pixies most are lucky to keep their eyes and their life. There’s something to be said about mass numbers of agile, fast and tiny targets.” Shiva snorted in annoyance but kept going. “Fred actually wasn’t docked *too* much for losing focus at the very end. He got 35 points. You…well considering you didn’t technically complete it, you did pretty well. 25 total. The Umbitch gave you 0 of course but Karkaroff and Maxime were actually somewhat fair with their assessments. The sum totals so far have Fleur in the lead with 121, Krum right behind her with 120, Fred and you following with 112 and 107 respectively.”

“Well, that’s not too bad I guess,” Harry said nodding. His face fell into a pained grimace after a moment though. “I’m a lot more worried that I’m not going to be able to unlock whatever or whoever is under the Lake during the next Task…Shiva what if…”

“Don’t even start thinking like that, Harry,” Shiva said forcefully. “Your *Lockpick* tattoo bypasses nearly every type of lock as long as it has some time to work. And even if that doesn’t do shite you can just destroy whatever bindings are holding your girl down there. I’d like to see a chain that can stand up to a concentrated burst of one of your more destructive items, kid.”

Harry nodded. He knew it wouldn’t be that easy, but he wasn’t going to say that out loud. Tempting fate was not a good idea and drawing the dice-rolling deity’s attention by agreeing that he could actually have a decent go at something was certainly playing with fire. Playing with Fiendfyre.
“What were you working on, Shiva?” Harry asked trying to change the subject.

She held out her parchments for him to see and his eyes widened. With his mouth hanging open, Harry looked up at her, eyes wide. “You finished it?!”

“I did,” she smiled. “What were you going to call this one again? The Dementor Anchor right?” He nodded enthusiastically and beamed at her. “Now, I had to modify a few things to make it do what you wanted, kid, but the cluster shouldn’t have any issues and should still play nicely with your other tattoos.”

“Modified it how?” Harry asked.

Shiva pointed out a few sections including the Soul rune in the center. “Well first and foremost this isn’t a defense against an AK. I still have no idea what your mother did to make that work, but it wasn’t this. The AK literally severs a soul’s connection to the body; Dementors on the other hand partially merge with them through the mouth and then absorb the remainder through that tether. They’re completely different principles. This section here prevents that initial partial merge so anyone with this design on themselves will be effectively immune to a Dementor Kiss since the process can’t be completed if it can’t be started.”

Harry nodded along and examined the cluster closer. “And it looks like it will still let the soul pass on normally when the person dies. That’s good.”

“Yeah,” Shiva snorted. “Possessing your own rotting corpse for eternity would not exactly be my version of a fun life after death.”

“No kidding.” Harry’s eyes took on a manic gleam and he grinned wide. “Everyone is getting this tattoo.”

Shiva raised her eyebrows. “Oh? And by ‘everyone’ you mean…”

“You, me, Nym, Mione, Nev, Susan, Hannah, Luna, Daph, Tracey, Fleur, Amelia, Sirius, Remus, the twins, we can ask Viktor, McGonagall and Flitwick if they want it, Bill, probably Ginny, Charlie if he’s interested, Andi and Ted, Richard and Emma, any Auror who wants one unless Nym or Amelia say no – ”

“Oh, okay I get it!” Shiva started laughing and held up her hands in surrender. “When you said ‘everyone’ you meant everyone! Jeez, Harry, you never think small!”

“Harry!” A loud voice screamed from the hospital wing’s doors. Harry had just managed to turn to the doors when he was pinned to the bed by a brown haired missile. “You’re awake! We were so worried! Are you alright?! Harry!” Hermione kept up a barrage until she descended into relieved sobs into his chest as she clung to him.

“Wotcher, Harry. Good to see you conscious,” Tonks said smiling at him and claiming a chair next to the bed. “We couldn’t really sleep so we came back down.”

“Sorry to worry you guys,” Harry said. He patted Hermione’s head with one hand while rubbing her back with the other. “I was just telling Shiva I’m fine.”

“Good. You know it took almost a day before we could get you to revert to human,” Tonks frowned at the memory and glared at him. “That was bloody weird watching a panther lying on a hospital bed, Wonder Boy.” Hermione gripped him a little tighter and nodded against his chest. Her sobs started to slow as he kept rubbing her back.
“I can imagine,” Harry said grimacing a bit. “In my defense I didn’t think I’d be that laid out. Good learning experience though! Something to never ever do!”

“Not funny!” Hermione growled pulling back to glare at him. “Seriously, Harry, are you alright?” she asked wiping her eyes.

“I am, Mione. I’ve had worse.”

Shiva snorted and stood squeezing Harry’s shoulder one more time before walking around the bed. “I’ll let Pomfrey know you’re up, kid. See you three later.”

“Fleur!” Harry called as he spied his retreating target walking around the grounds. Fleur’s eyes widened and she started to pick up her pace trying to look like she wasn’t running. It didn’t work. Harry winced and grabbed her hand to twist her around as he caught up. “Will you please stop running away from me, Fleur!”

“Zat is not what I was doing,” she said glaring. Harry glared right back and crossed his arms over his chest. Fleur scowled and looked down. “Fine. So maybe I was retreating for ze moment. Zree Tasks, Harry and zree times you have nearly died. Zis time I was actually right zere! And still I did nozing! I do not deserve to – ”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence, Fleur,” Harry growled. “No one could do anything the First Task. You didn’t even know what was going on with me in the Second and this time, it was Fred that was in trouble and I just happened to be the closest one and looking in the right direction to do something. Don’t be like me and blame yourself for something stupid that you can’t control!”

Fleur opened her mouth to reply, but she snapped it shut before she could utter a word. Frowning, she slowly crossed her arms and stared at him. “You have already saved my life twice, ‘arry. I seem to be letting you down.”

“It’s not your fault I have a really bad case of a saving-people-thing, Fleur. This was entirely my own fault.”

Fleur just sighed and nodded dejectedly. “Still, I am sorry you were hurt, ‘arry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Harry said smiling. “So no more avoiding me right?” She chuckled lightly and nodded. “Excellent. Now come on, it’s dinner time and I need to talk with everyone after the meal.”

Daphne shivered as she felt Harry’s wand lightly touch her bare right shoulder blade. “You just couldn’t wait to get my shirt off eh, Harry?”

“Well Tonks did say she wanted to do some research on other forms…” Harry teased back. In the corner nearby Tonks doubled over and laughed at his comment while Daphne joined in shaking her head.

“You are getting better at those,” Daphne said smirking. She shook her head lightly as she grew more serious. “It’s rather odd being on the other side of this you know.”

“Tell me about it,” Shiva agreed scratching at her Dementor Anchor a few inches above her heart. “You know, Harry, I didn’t quite believe you earlier in the year when you said they feel like they itch.”
“You get used to it. I think it’s your magic adjusting to the modified flow in the area that creates the sensation,” Harry said while he eyed the location Daphne had chosen and compared it again to his diagram. “Now all of you hush. I need to concentrate.”

Luna was lying down on the couch in the Room with her head on Tracey’s lap and Coco held up above her. The little snorkack kept making extremely contented sounds as Luna repeatedly moved him up and down giggling at the expressions on the critter. Tracey looked at Hermione seated in the couch across the small table reading. “Hey, Hermione,” she said softly so as not to disturb Harry who had started to apply Daphne’s tattoo, “why was Harry so insistent that we get this done immediately?”

“Oh he did you two? At the same time? Or did you take turns? Tell me, does he live up to the legend?” Tracey’s grin grew wider and wider as she continued her relentless teasing of Hermione’s unfortunate turn of phrase. “Tonks calls him Wonder Boy and I can’t help but be curious as to whether that’s due to his equipment? Does the parseltongue come in handy for you two?”

Hermione was gaping like a fish with her face redder than any of the Weasleys’ hair. After nearly a minute Hermione groaned and leaned back. “I can’t believe I set you up for that so perfectly… I’m not going to answer those taunts. Not yet at least. Maybe when I can fire back without blushing.” Hermione paused and grinned evily. “Though I can say this; my Dementor Anchor is on my upper inner thigh. Tonks has hers matching on her opposite thigh. And the positions required for that placement involved quite a bit of flexibility on our parts.”

Tracey laughed and gave the older girl a thumbs up. “Kinky. I approve! I’m just getting mine on my back I think. Should be covered by pretty much anything I wear that way. How about you Luna?”

Luna tossed Coco up again and smiled as her pet came back down with a wide grin of her own. “Well I considered going for the left forearm to show off where my allegiance lies. Just like with Riddle’s people!” Those close enough to hear could only stare at the little blonde. Tracey had opened her mouth to start to say something but Luna continued, blithely ignoring the incredulous expressions around her. “I do like the intimacy of the upper thigh though. I think I might switch mine to the outer thigh instead however. I can match with Susan if I do that!”

Tracey looked imploringly to Hermione who just sighed and leaned back in her chair and pulled her book back out. Giving up on any assistance, Tracey turned back to Luna. “I think that’s probably a good idea, Luna.” The girl beamed and Tracey breathed a small sigh at the potential crisis averted.

Voldemort hissed in frustration. Potter had a magical animagus. Voldemort had never cared to take the time to learn that art. It required far too much time invested for relatively low gains. Yet Potter had managed to break the rules of magic yet again and become something actually useful!

He scowled. He really had no reason to be annoyed with the boy. This merely served to reinforce that Voldemort had made the right choice all those years ago when he went for the fellow half-blood. Purebloods were so foolish and ignorant and set in their ways. They were infinitely easier to manipulate and direct than those with Muggle experiences. Which was ironic since, while it made backing the Pureblood cause easier, it also made running things afterwards far more complicated. He may have to engineer a breeding program of some sort to reintroduce new genes
into the inbred fools after he was in power.

None of that was important at the current juncture though. No, what mattered now was that Potter was making more work for him. There weren’t true animagus wards that he could use for when the boy was brought before him. If he couldn’t keep the boy from changing form then he would have to keep the shadows in the vicinity to a minimum: none large enough for the panther to slip through would be allowed. It was easy enough…just time consuming and annoying. He’d have to direct Wormtail through the entire thing step by step.

Was it really so much to ask to have two competent servants instead of one?

Oh what he wouldn’t give to have Bella back by his side. Ah…Bella…now, there was an idea…he’d planned to wait a bit first…to gather his forces before striking at the prison. But he needed at least one dogmatically loyal follower and it was looking increasingly likely that he’d lose Barty before the term was out. Oh Barty had never outright said he was under suspicion, but his lack of information in some reports was just as telling.

It took very little insight to understand that the shifter Auror was likely poking her head into things. That the woman was still alive testified more to her intelligence than Barty’s failures. She must be keeping regular updates on her suspicions to multiple others. Barty wouldn’t risk his cover to tie off the loose end until at least after the Cup’s portkey had been redirected and layered. At least he was playing the part admirably in the meantime.

Voldemort sighed. He did hope that Barty survived the eventual confrontation. Good help was just so hard to find.

Dumbledore looked over the Treaty of Athens one more time. How the war had ever managed to start to begin with was mind boggling. When one race lived primarily in oceans and lakes and one largely lived in mountain valleys a person could be forgiven thinking that they would never encounter each other. One wrong word between two guests of Atlantis though and suddenly a simple insult and physical altercation turned into an interspecies war lasting centuries!

It was a sad state of affairs that the parties were still so at odds, yet…it suited his purposes. Dumbledore sighed and reached for a lemon drop. Sucking the candy he nodded. “Yes. Distasteful as it is, sacrifices must be made for the Greater Good. The older sister is far too obviously a target. The Merpeople will not approach her until time has expired and they are justified. The younger one though…they will never suffer two Veela in their territory at the same time. And without his key, Harry is sure to still be there trying to free his hostage until Fleur fails to arrive.

“They will go for the sister,” Dumbledore scowled and took another lemon drop. “And Harry will try to save her. With a little luck he may even manage it…I certainly hope he does…More than likely both will perish though…”

Fawkes crooned sadly. Dumbledore sighed and stood to look at his familiar. “I know it is sad, old friend. I simply cannot allow a third Dark Lord of my own creation to arise. It is better this way. The Prophecy will still be fulfilled. And…even if Harry Potter is not the one, then certainly Neville Longbottom has grown strong enough to pose a threat to Lord Voldemort…Yes…if for some reason, Barty entering his name doesn’t count as Voldemort’s hand…Fawkes?”

The phoenix shook his head and let out another sad trill. He leaned forward and gave an affectionate beak tap to Dumbledore’s forehead before taking flight. As Fawkes reached the center of the room, he disappeared in a ball of flame.
“Hmm,” Dumbledore mused rubbing his beard. “Fawkes has not left in a huff in quite a few decades. Oh well, he’ll be back soon enough. He always is.” Dumbledore shrugged and shifted back to his table. “I suppose it’s always possible that Harry has grown callous enough to completely ignore the girl…Well if he does that, then his reputation will be in ruins and his powerful help will take several large steps back. No matter the boy’s choice, this is certainly the best way.”

“Now to figure out just how to convince the girl to help.”
Chapter 29: Lakes and Allegiances

“Back from trying to convince the world that you’re richer than the goblins?” Narcissa asked with a derisive snort as Lucius Malfoy walked into the sitting room. He scowled at her comment and poured himself a drink.

“The Scandinavian representatives were easily dissuaded from causing problems. I didn’t even have to use a tenth of the bribes typical with Fudge. It was almost laughable. The French though,” Lucius’ scowl deepened, “those cheese eater barbarians wouldn’t know a smart deal if it slapped them in their face. We’re just lucky their Champion wasn’t the one injured. I may not have been able to save Fudge had that happened.”

Narcissa laughed. “That idiot will destroy this country. He’s already doing a bang up job at it.”

“That ‘idiot’ is the best, cheapest, most malleable and highest placed asset this family has ever seen!” he retorted.

She snorted derisively showing just what she thought of that assertion. “And he will drag us all into the dirt with his blind insistence on protecting that…woman. This foolish Tournament doesn’t even approach being subtle,” Narcissa said glaring at Lucius. “Damaging the reputation of Harry Potter is one thing, a simple matter really, but actively attempting to end an ancient line is completely different. The Wizengamot will turn on him and you will be caught in the crossfire.”

Lucius gestured dismissively at that. “Neither the Wizengamot nor the public will do such a thing. I may have lost Skeeter, the stupid careless woman…but I still control the Prophet. They will never print anything that disparages Fudge too much. Besides…since when have you cared about ending lines?”

Narcissa shook her head at both his arrogance and his ignorance. “I have always cared about ending lines, dear,” Narcissa snapped scowling, the venom practically dripping from her tone. “Being a pureblood used to mean something in this country. We used to maintain the family grimoires, uphold ancient traditions both personal and national, and we could trace our ancestors back to the original settlers. Now all that ‘Pureblood’ means is destruction and corruption. It is not enough that you poison my son with your hatred and vitriol, but now you again poison the country.”

Lucius’ hand clenched around his glass as he sneered at Narcissa’s arrogance. How dare she insinuate having any right over his child. “Draco has never been your son. He is my Heir!” Lucius growled. “I will continue to raise him in the proper beliefs, in the way I see fit and you will continue to remain quiet if you wish to maintain your lifestyle. You believe the same things I do surely? I fail to see why we keep having this argument.”

Narcissa tossed her hands in the air. Had he been listening at all to anything she had just said? “We keep having this conversation because your tiny brain fails to see the difference between tradition and bigotry. I seek to honor the precepts upon which our society was constructed, that is all. A society which will stagnate and die without new blood now and then. You would understand that if you had ever bothered to study history.”
Lucius glared at his wife for several moments. Slowly he put his cup down and said, “You would do well to be careful what you say, woman. The Dark Mark grows stronger by the day. It is only a matter of time before our old Master returns.”

“He was never my master. I may have played the dutiful wife in public, but that madman would see everything I have ever believed in run into the ground if the whim hit him. All he ever cared for was power and you idiots follow him without a second thought as to how you’re all just his tools,” she said narrowing her eyes at him. “You are quickly falling into old patterns, Lucius, and the only thing that kept me silent all these years for has been torn away from me thanks to you.”

Lucius stood and laughed derisively. “Watch yourself, Narcissa. It is foolish to agitate me. When the Dark Lord returns…I may not be able to protect you.”

She laughed, as much to hide the shiver of dread that ran up her spine, as to spite him. “Oh? And you would give me to his court to entertain them with Draco watching then would you?”

“It would do him well to remember what happens to those who denounce the Master.” Lucius swept from the room his cloak billowing behind.

Narcissa was left alone staring into the fire and contemplating whether this frustrating tightrope was worth walking anymore. Draco was all but lost to her – Lucius had seen to that quite thoroughly. The boy may still care for her but he did not listen to her or believe anything she said. And if the Dark Lord was truly about to return then yet more of the old families and knowledge would be lost in the fires of war. A war that was looking to be far more evenly matched than the first. She hadn’t had any choice in sides the first time when Orion had signed off on this marriage. Yet compared to back then...there was a new Lord Black now. Perhaps one who just might be willing to help her if she took the first step?

Harry stared out at the Black Lake from his spot underneath his favorite tree. The giant squid had taken to tossing several rocks into the air in a passable imitation of juggling. A display which would have been far more entertaining and humorous had his mind not been consumed with worry about the Fourth Task tomorrow.

They had done everything they could to prepare. He had purchased flippers, practiced the *aguamenti maxima* charm, crafted an extra *Breathkeeper*, studied the map Myrtle provided, gotten the *alohomora* to work silently, tested unlocking items with his *Lockpick* tattoo, continually reapplied tracking charms to Hermione, Tonks and Shiva every two hours...Harry sighed heavily.

He heard soft footsteps approaching and caught a faint trace of the rosemary perfume that Daphne liked to wear. He’d noticed a bit better sense of smell since gaining control of Midnight and it helped to pick up on some people. “Worried?” the Slytherin girl asked, sitting down beside him and joining him in watching the giant squid.

Harry nodded glumly. “At least in the first three it was just me in danger. This one though…if I screw up then one of them could die…”

Daphne snorted and shook her head. “While that may be technically true, we both know it’s not going to happen, Harry. You are far too stubborn to let one of the people you care about drown like that. Your luck may be awful, but as Neville loves to say, it’s the ‘worst good luck ever’. Something bad will almost certainly happen, but you will pull through the other side just as your hostage will.”

“I hope so,” he murmured.
Daphne turned to him in exasperation and glared. She reached out and lifted his chin in one hand to force him to stare into her eyes. “Harry Potter, stop moping and being despondent over something that hasn’t even happened yet. You are a Gryffindor. You idiots charge forward like fools and one way or another things work out. This conduct is very unbecoming of a Slytherin Slayer.”

Harry’s mouth quirked up into a small smile. “I never liked that title you know?”

She shrugged philosophically. “Not my problem. We both earned it and you need to continue to live up to it. You’re ready for tomorrow.” She let his chin go and looked back at the giant squid. “Besides, you’ll be in there with three other friends. Stop worrying, Harry. The more you freak yourself out, the worse it’s going to be. Use your Occlumency and damp it down if you have to.”

“You’re right,” he said nodding. “I need to be on my game tomorrow, but that won’t happen if I can’t eat or sleep. Thanks, Daph.”

“You’re welcome, Harry.” Daphne lapsed into silence and they both continued to silently watch the large cephalopod play in the water nearby.

Later that night Harry was sitting on the couch in the Common Room with one arm around Hermione’s shoulder and the other running his thumb over her hand which rested in his lap. “I don’t want to leave this spot,” he murmured.

Hermione chuckled and leaned up to peck his cheek. “Neither do I, Harry. I wish we had been able to spend the night in the Room, but it’s better to let them take one of us instead of forcing them to use someone unknown by hiding in the Room.”

“Doesn’t make this any easier,” he said with a sigh.

“I know, Harry.” Hermione gently sat up straight and turned to face him. “Okay. It’s late enough and we both need some sleep. You’ve already applied the tracking charm to Nym and Shiva earlier. Do mine now.”

Sighing, Harry pulled out his wand and recast the tracking charm onto Hermione. “Tomorrow is going to suck.”

“You’ll be fine, Harry. And so will the rest of us.” Hermione smiled and leaned in to kiss him. After a few moments she pulled back and smiled. “Get some sleep, Harry. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Love you, Hermione.”

“I love you too, Harry.” They hugged and headed off up the stairs to their respective beds trying to avoid thinking of all the ways that the Task could go wrong.

Lavender and Parvati were still in the bathroom and Hermione had barely finished changing into her nightgown when Professor McGonagall came into the dorm room. “Miss Granger? I need to ask you to come with me.”

Hermione drew her shoulders together and stood up straighter. “Very well, Professor. May I get changed back into my normal attire?”

“Whatever for?” McGonagall asked frowning in confusion. “This should just be a quick conversation with the Headmaster. I am not certain of the content, but surely considering the hour
he won’t be keeping you long.”

“I’m to be Harry’s hostage for the Task tomorrow, Professor,” Hermione said as she shucked her gown and started to pull on her normal clothes again. “That seems fairly obvious. I would rather not be on display in front of the entire audience in my night things.”

“Hostage?” McGonagall’s frown deepened. “That’s the first I’ve heard of this…”

Hermione laced up her shoes and stood. “Well, Professor, I guess you’re not kept in the loop either anymore. Welcome to our world.” She walked out ahead of McGonagall trying to hide her shaking hands. Her brusque tone and words didn’t even register through the worry that was springing up inside. “Hello, George. Guess it’s you and not Alicia then,” she said as she stepped in the Common Room and saw the second red-headed twin. He nodded in reply and fell into line with her.

McGonagall’s lips thinned into a line as she followed her favorite student and most annoying prankster out of the portrait hole. “If those fools endanger my lions when they aren’t even entered…” she murmured under her breath as her eyes narrowed into slits. “You better know what you are doing, Albus.”

When Harry made it down to breakfast he was on the verge of taking a calming potion. Seeing Tonks at the table he growled and sat beside her. “Dammit, I was hoping she was just late.”

Tonks sighed and squeezed his knee. “Wotcher, Harry. So it’s going to be Hermione then?”

“She never came down from the girls’ dorm and Lavender said she hadn’t seen her since last night,” Harry said shoveling a piece of toast into his mouth.

“Tracking charm still active?”

Harry scowled. “Tried it as soon as she didn’t show. Nothing.”

Tonks sighed and shifted from squeezing his knee to giving him a brief hug. “She’ll be fine, Harry. Our Wonder Boy doesn’t fail. He may get beat up, but he hasn’t failed us yet.”

Harry shuddered and leaned into her embrace. “Please don’t say stuff like that, Nym,” he whispered barely loud enough for her to hear. “Don’t tempt Fate like that.”

“Champions!” Dumbledore said standing and smiling at the room regally. “Please start making your way down to the Black Lake. The Fourth Task will be beginning shortly.” As he sat back down, loud murmurs and excited conversations broke out throughout the Great Hall. Everyone started to get their things together and begin to move down to the audience seating.

“Come on, Wonder Boy. Let’s go get our girl back,” Tonks said tugging Harry to his feet and marching him outside.

Fred and Viktor caught up as they passed out the doors. Fred frowned, none of usual levity present. “George was missing this morning. They are taking hostages instead of things.”

Viktor nodded. “Yes. Millie vas to meet me this morning. She vas not present either.”

“Hermione was taken last night too,” Harry commented softly. “Anyone seen, Fleur?” Three head shakes met his question causing Harry’s worry to start spiking again.
They were almost to the lake shore before the French Champion was sighted. Her hair was flying wildly behind her as she ran up to the group breathing heavily. “‘arry! She is gone! Zey have taken her! Ze enfoirés have taken her! Tonks, Fred, Viktor, have any of you seen her?!” (1)

“Who, Fleur?” Harry asked grabbing her shoulders and trying to ease her hysterics. “Who did they take for your hostage?”

“My sister!” Fleur cried. “Zey took my sister! Into ze lake with ze Mermen!”

Fred and Viktor frowned, but didn’t seem to get the significance of Fleur’s distress. Harry and Tonks on the other hand swore loudly and immediately started sprinting to the lake with Fleur shortly behind. They skidded to a stop in front of the dock where Bagman was standing and grinning at them. “Love the enthusiasm, but we still have a few – ” he started to say before cutting off as a snarling half transformed Veela stood in front of him with two partially formed fireballs in hand.

“We’ll start now, thank you,” Harry said with ice in his voice and fire in his eyes.

“You don’t even know what’s involved,” the Ministry official said frowning and holding up his hands slowly backing away from Fleur.

“Get to the Merpeople village. Unlock whatever is holding our hostage down. Rescue the hostage. Get back. All in under an hour,” Fred said almost as coldly as Harry. “Not complicated. Start the stupid thing so we can get our people.”

“Yes, well, you see we need to wait for all the audience members. The Task isn’t supposed to officially start for another few minutes and –”

Viktor sneered at the man and lifted his wand to his throat to cast a quick sonorous. “Attention guests. This Task will be starting early as these…people have abducted ones we care for and we will not leave them beneath the waves longer than necessary. Thank you for your understanding.” Cancelling the charm he turned back to Bagman. “Start the Task.”

Bagman swallowed and looked behind him. Umbridge smiled and stepped forward. “I’m sorry, but we must wait for the start. It is only fair to –” she abruptly cut off as five wands pointed towards her with glowing tips. Fleur had shifted almost entirely to her harpy form adding further to the threat.

Harry spoke very firmly and very slowly. “We will start immediately, Madame Umbridge. You are preventing us from rescuing hostages. We would all be perfectly justified in cutting you down and since this is an official Task we wouldn’t even be prosecuted for it. Move aside.”

Umbridge scowled and stepped back. Bagman quickly followed her as the three Headmasters finally came forward. “What is the meaning of this?” Dumbledore asked frowning at the Champions.

Tonks stepped in front of the group. “Get ready guys. I’ll handle this. Headmasters, you have 30 seconds to start the Task because that’s when the Champions are jumping in. One Veela in the water is bad enough, but having two down there…I question all of your sanity.”

Maxime frowned. “What do you mean by zis?”

Tonks snarled. “What do I mean? You stupid, neglectful bitch! You –”

“Tonks, we’re ready! Have them start the damn thing!” Harry shouted over his shoulder and
tossing her his rune clusters and clothes. He was dressed in a simple wetsuit while Viktor and Fred only had swim trunks on. Fleur was in a one piece swim suit and all were standing near the edge of the dock.

Tonks nodded and turned to Bagman. “Start it.”

The man gulped again and raised his wand before the Headmasters could say anything further. A cannon blast sounded and three of the Champions jumped into the water after casting their spells and – in Viktor’s case – eating their gillyweed. Harry immediately summoned his rune stones back from Tonks. He looped the Breathkeeper around his neck and pulled out his extra version from the harness to put it in the knapsack around his waist. He fastened an activated Slow Burn onto his shoulder with a sticking charm to light the way, stuck an Extravagance Rune Show into another slot on his other shoulder and finally put a Fishing Line on the back of his hand. Finally summoning the fins he’d asked Sirius to buy the other day and strapping them on, Harry jumped into the lake.

Harry immediately started swimming down, following the directions Myrtle had helped them with. The first few minutes were easy since he just had to follow the rocky outcroppings along the bottom which were pretty distinctive. Once he passed those however he ran into the hardest part: a large sea bed of kelp that was more or less devoid of any markings whatsoever. If he lost his way at this part it would take a while to get back on track.

Harry was almost past the kelp bed when he saw several strands thrashing viciously. There was a Merman hovering over the violent segment of kelp with a hippocampus next to him. The Merman had a predatory grin on his face and was lovingly petting the sea horse. A feeling of dread crept up Harry’s spine and he twisted to head into the kelp.

Fleur had been overjoyed when her family had managed to get time off to come and see the Fourth Task. It was the last one prior to the finale and while it might be a bit boring to the audience, knowing that her family was there to provide moral support was an incredible buoying sensation. Of course Harry’s continual reassurances in the weeks leading up to it and been most wonderful as well. The young man was slowly opening up to her and was seeking more opportunities to be alone with her whether they were simply studying, training or relaxing. It gave her hope that maybe – by the end of the year – Harry would be willing to allow her into his growing family unit.

And then Gabrielle had come up missing the morning of.

Her parents hadn’t noticed at first, merely assuming that Gabi had run off to pester Fleur like she usually did while visiting. Her absence had only been found as Fleur came to greet them both shortly before the Task was to begin and they inquired where Gabi was. It had only taken a moment before Fleur realized the organizers had decided to use her little sister as her hostage. She had frantically rushed to find her fellow Champions, hoping that perhaps – just perhaps – she was wrong and Gabi was hanging off of her childhood hero. But no. One look at the small group walking towards the lake had dashed that false hope.

By the time she had entered the water she could barely think, sick with worry and fear that she had managed to draw her sister into this nightmare. She hadn’t remembered to wait the five minutes Harry would need to get prepared and she had instead taken off immediately. Viktor and Fred had quickly outpaced her since swimming wasn’t exactly something she did often, but that wasn’t important. Getting to Gabrielle was important. If she was alone for the first part until Harry caught up then so be it.
That was when the grindylows struck. Fleur had been swimming above the kelp bed relatively low to try and save some time when she felt a small fist grab her ankle and drag her into the undersea forest. Fleur screamed in surprise letting loose a stream of bubbles through her Bubble-Head charm. Sweeping her wand down at the unseen assailant, Fleur let out a silent cutting curse. A low grunt of pain carried through the water as the hand let her go. Swimming up, Fleur tried to get back into clear water, but was immediately dragged back down by not one but five sets of hands on her this time. Fleur screamed again as several sets of teeth bit into her arms and legs.

She thrashed violently managing to throw off one of the attackers. That was when she saw the Merman watching her with a large grin from just above the kelp. He gestured and Fleur felt her limbs be pulled tight to either side. Her eyes widened as the Merman pulled the head of a hippocampus slightly to the side. Desperately she tried to cast several wide area spells but all fizzled – she had yet to practice any of them silently or wandless…

The Merman nodded in satisfaction and slapped the hippocampus on the rear. The beast surged and passed close enough to Fleur for her to be pulled slightly in its wake. Thinking for a moment that perhaps she had gotten lucky and the Merman had miss-aimed his mount she tried to draw a breath and come up with a plan on how to get herself out of this and save her sister.

That was when she noticed her Bubble-Head charm had been pierced.

Harry kicked past the Merman and his mount and into the thrashing kelp. His eyes widened as he saw Fleur held down by several grindylows, bleeding from multiple cuts and slashes. He had barely raised his hand when she suddenly gulped in a final shuddering breath and stilled before starting to drift freely in her assailants’ arms with her eyes drooping closed. Harry snarled and stopped raising his wand. Instead he channeled as much magic the Boomstone tattoo on the back of his right hand as it would take.

As the localized silencing charm snapped into life around him, Harry saw the grindylows flee and caught a quick glimpse of the Merman holding his hands over his ears and falling into the kelp bed with the hippocampus motoring away as fast as its tail would take it. Letting the magic lapse, he grabbed Fleur and pulled out his spare Breathkeeper. Pressing it into her hand and wrapping her delicate fist around it he willed her to breathe. The stone wouldn’t work unless she started breathing again.

Not seeing any movement Harry wrapped an arm around her waist and swam desperately for the surface. They were still close enough to the shore of the lake that they weren’t too deep…but it still took far too long to reach the surface. Once their heads broke the water’s surface, Harry twisted to face the dock and prayed his half-baked idea would work. Reaching out with the Fishing Line he latched onto the edge of the top and pulled.

Amazingly, his hasty plan actually did just what he’d hoped: he and Fleur shot towards the dock since it was anchored and he wasn’t. His arm felt like it was going to be pulled out its socket, but he held on and he and his charge were against the dock edge in only a few seconds. Letting the rune fade back to inactivity, Harry hauled Fleur up onto the flat surface.

“Breathe, Fleur! Breathe!” Harry leaned down and started doing CPR. It was one of the things Tonks had started teaching them in the morning workout sessions and he prayed it would actually do something now. All he needed was one reflexive gasp and…Fleur coughed violently and a few meters above them, a shower of water rained onto their heads from thin air. “Yes!”

Fleur took another gasping breath causing a very small amount of water to again rain on them before her eyes fluttered open. Harry heard shouts coming closer, but he ignored them. “Fleur?
Are you okay? Can you hear me?"

“‘arry?” she muttered weakly squinting up at him. “Ze Merman…Gabrielle! I have to – ”

“You are not going back in there! You can barely move, you almost drowned and you don’t have your wand!” Harry shouted. “Give me your key!” Fleur hesitated for a moment before weakly reaching over to pat a pouch on her leg. Harry immediately thrust his hand forward and pulled out the key she had received from the Third Task. He turned back to her and looked straight into her eyes saying, “I swear to you, Fleur, I will get your sister out.”

The judges and Pomfrey reached them just Harry twisted and dove back into the water.

Harry kicked into the Merpeople village as his watch clicked over to show 50 minutes had gone by. He kept going at a frantic pace to make it to the platform in the center square before the time limit expired. As Harry swam up, he saw Hermione and the little girl he assumed to be Fleur’s sister tied to the two rightmost pillars. Both girls’ hair was drifting around their faces, the young Veela’s golden hue making her look like an angel. The light stream of bubbles coming from their mouths let Harry know they were just enchanted asleep and not dying like Fleur had been. Arranged around the platform were nearly two dozen Mermen all bearing large, wicked looking tridents. The man directly in the center of the grouping glanced at a makeshift clock on the back of the stand and turned to glare hungrily at Gabrielle.

Harry scowled, but slowed as he saw the group hadn’t yet done anything. He still had time. Fighting against everything telling him to get the little girl now, he turned away and swam up to Hermione. He wouldn’t be able to free her and fight the Mermen off, but if they didn’t realize he was trying to save Gabrielle and Hermione he might be able to pull it off.

He came up next to the elegant chain holding Hermione to the rock pillar and stretched out with his left hand pressing the Lockpick tattoo to the padlock across her waist. He could feel the magic pull harder and start to shift the tumblers inside the large lock. A quick glance down at his watch had Harry’s eyes widening. There was less than a minute left. Not enough time to let his rune do its work and get to Gabrielle before the Mermen moved in.

Scowling Harry threw caution to the wind and shifted behind Hermione. He took a deep breath, lined up on the chains and brought his arms together. The Lava Bomb roared to life as the rune clusters on each arm touched and a gout of lava spewed forth directly ahead of him. Yelling in pain as the water around his forearms flashed to steam, Harry twisted and the lava flow died. Hissing at the water rushing over the burns along his arms, he pulled Hermione free from the now destroyed chains and moved over to Gabrielle.

A dull chime sounded behind him as he slotted Fleur’s key into the lock and twisted it off. Sounds of delight and frustration in equal measure shouted out from the circle of Mermen. Gabrielle’s eyes fluttered open and she drew in a breath before coughing and clamping her mouth shut, her hands flying to her throat. Harry growled again. Of course the charm would wear off on her at exactly an hour! Thankfully he could feel Hermione still completely asleep in his arms. Harry reached for his spare Breathkeeper to give it to the little Veela only to close on an empty pouch.

His eyes widened in horror as he realized that he had already given it to Fleur and forgotten to grab it as he jumped back into the lake.

Gabrielle had been awake for only a few seconds and looked ready to panic. Harry was about to panic as well. The Breathkeeper wasn’t designed to work with two people. With two sets of lungs each would only have half their volume replaced with air while the other half filled with whatever
fluid they breathed in normally. He knew enough basic biology to know that having that much fluid in one’s lungs might well be a death sentence.

Gritting his teeth, Harry did the only thing he could do – he took one large final breath and tore the Breathkeeper from around his own neck and put it on Gabrielle’s. Her eyes widened but she breathed in and then looked at him in shock, her mouth falling open. Harry tried to smile reassuringly though the lead Merman letting out a deep thundering call wiped the smile off his face. The Mermen surged forward with tridents held point first. Harry wrapped Gabrielle into his free arm and activated his Boomstone again. Most of the Mermen fell back, holding their ears and shaking.

Harry took the opportunity and started to kick towards the surface. Gabrielle clutching the rune stone around her neck with one hand and Harry around his waist with the other. Harry had his wand clenched in his right hand, but with Hermione held under his arm it was mostly useless. Gabrielle being awake and holding on at least gave him some limited range of movement with his left hand.

He was going to try and reach for the Breathkeeper to take a short gulp of air when another battle cry sounding from below him and he saw a Merman riding the back of a charging hippocampus lunge towards the group. He kept kicking towards the surface and twisted enough to be able to send a bludgeoner in the man’s way through the Knockback runic tattoo on his left palm. The hippocampus shrieked and pulled away with the Merman hanging limply on its back.

Before Harry could try reaching for the breathing rune stone again more Mermen swept up from the depths. Harry’s vision was starting to narrow as black bands cut off the edges of his vision. Still he ignored it and kept kicking to the surface and tossing bludgeoner after bludgeoner at the attackers. He felt Gabrielle holding tightly onto his waist and bury her head into his neck. His lungs burning, Harry tried a final burst from the Boomstone causing a few of the last attackers to peel off. He saw more coming but he could barely focus on them.

Just as he was felt he couldn’t resist the urge to breathe in anymore, the small group broke through into clear air. Harry gasped for breath and felt Hermione stir from under his him. “Harry? Are we done?” Her voice took on a puzzled tone. “Hello. Who are you?”

“Je m'appelle Gabrielle. Je crois que Harry Potter vient de me sauver la vie. Peut-être aussi la vôtre,” Gabrielle started to chatter in French while moving her grip to clutch Harry’s neck and not shifting her head from its spot pressed into the crook of his neck and shoulder. (2)

“No time to chat.” Harry wheezed out between desperate gasps for air. “Hermione hold on and hold your breath. Gabrielle, if you can understand me, make sure that rune stone is touching your skin until we stop moving. There’s going to be a lot of water spraying into the air.”

“What? What do you mean – aahh!” Hermione screamed as Harry reached out and pulled on the dock again with his Fishing Line. It wasn’t a moment too soon as just when they started to speed away, three different tridents thrust through where they had just been floating.

Thankfully this time acting like a human water ski – while longer than the first time with Fleur – was a far shorter trip than back to the surface from the village. He only had to hold his breath for about thirty seconds before they reached the dock and he let the spell go. Fleur, Apolline and Sébastien were already on the side and reached down to help Gabrielle onto the platform while Harry and Hermione both gave the girl a boost from below. As soon as the younger girl was up, Viktor, Fred and George reached down and helped Hermione and Harry up.

“Gabrielle! Est-ce que tu es blessée? Est-ce que ça va? Pardonnes-moi, j’ai suis tombée dans une
embuscade et je n'ai pas pu venir jusqu'à toi,” Fleur exclaimed wrapping her arms around her sister and burying her head in the girl’s wet hair. (3)

Gabrielle grinned broadly and gestured wildly around Fleur’s death grip. “Je vais bien, Fleur, maman, papa. Harry Potter m’a sauvée! Il a combattu les hommes-poissons et les a repoussés avant de me donner ceci pour que puisse respirer sous l’eau! C’était incroyable! J’ai eu la peur de ma vie mais c’était incroyable! Il est aussi génial que tu l’avais dis, Fleur, et même encore plus que dans les histoires!” (4)

Hermione’s eyes narrowed as she caught most of what the young Veela said. She peered first at Gabrielle then Fleur then Harry before turning to the approaching judges and snarling. If looks could kill there would likely be five piles of ashes.

Harry for his part had merely collapsed lying down on the dock and breathing heavily. Pomfrey was hovering over him and casting diagnostic charms. “Sorry, mate,” Fred said softly. Viktor nodded his head. Both men were looking anywhere but at Harry. “We thought that you were hanging back with Fleur because she was a slower swimmer. We didn’t realize there was a problem until we were already back and we didn’t think we could make it down again in time to help…”

“Don’t worry about it, Fred, Viktor. It’s not your fault the Merpeople decided today was a perfect day for murder.” His eyes widened and he sat bolt upright almost clocking Pomfrey on the head. “Shite I forgot!”

“Sit down, Mr. Potter!” the mediwitch huffed.

“One moment, Madame Pomfrey! Accio Fleur’s wand!” he said channeled a large burst into his runic tattoo and focusing on the last spot he had seen it while it drifted into the kelp bed. Sure enough only a few seconds passed before the wand flew out of the water and into his hand. “Fleur, here. I think you dropped –”

Harry was abruptly cut off by a sobbing Veela jumping into his arms and kissing his cheeks. “Tu l’a sauvée! Je n’arrive pas à y croire mais tu l’as sauvée! Merci, Harry, du fond du cœur. Je te suis redevable à jamais!” Fleur clutched at him while Harry wrapped his arms around her and rubbed her back. (5)

“You’re welcome, Fleur. I have pretty much no idea what you said, but I get the gist and you’re welcome. Mr. and Mrs. Delacour,” Harry said turning his head towards the French parents still holding onto their youngest daughter. “I think Gabrielle is fine. I gave her the Breathkeeper before she took anymore more than a gasp so she shouldn’t have breathed in much water at all. I kept the Merpeople away too so I don’t think any of them got close enough to scratch or stab her. Fleur, are you okay?”

“Oui. Oui, I will be fine, ‘arry. Zanks to you,” she said quietly, her crying starting to slow.

“Honestly, Miss Delacour, I can’t finish checking the boy over if you keep staying wrapped around him like that,” Pomfrey said glaring at the Champion. “Move or I will make you move. I will not have this young man spend another night in my wing because I couldn’t finish the charms.”

Tonks chuckled from where she was leaning against of the wooden poles at the edge of the lake. “You should just engrave his name over that bed. He certainly winds up there often enough.”

“Hey! It’s not always my fault! I just have the worst good luck ever,” Harry mumbled scowling.
“Eh, hem, I believe we need to distribute the scores still for this event,” the Umbitch said with a wide smile. “Mr. Potter you might as well remain here. Again you did not manage to complete the Task so again you will be receiving – ”

“I advise you to stop talking immediately, Madame,” Sébastien Delacour said very quietly and very calmly. With extreme deliberateness he got to his feet and paced towards Umbridge who hastened to back up a step. Sébastien stopped and stared down at the toad woman. “I know that it was you who suggested this event. I also know that the entirety of this judging body,” he swept a calm hand to encompass all five, “signed off on the hostages. While I would never expect Fleur to be excluded from a Task due to inherent racial tension…including my youngest in this without my or my wife’s consent was very poor judgment. Rest assured I will be investigating this matter to the fullest. And if I find that any of you had any inkling about the continued tensions between Veela and Merpeople…you will find French prisons quite unaccommodating I’m sure. If you make it to them that is.”

Umbridge sneered at the man and held her nose high. “Is that a threat?”

“Oh good, perhaps you aren’t as stupid as you look,” Apolline commented with a snort from her position on the dock.

Sébastien on the other hand simply inclined his head in a small nod. “It is certainly a threat. The Treaty of Athens is commonly taught in all major institutions. Having a Veela as a contestant should have ensured that appropriate safety measures were in place on this Task. That you not only ignored that but also included a second underage Veela without parental consent…Make no mistake, Madame Umbridge, I am making a threat.” He scowled and his control slipped momentarily before he regained his poise. “Had Harry Potter not saved both of my daughters’ lives I very much doubt you would be breathing right now either. As it is, I will see you and as many of the rest of you behind bars as is appropriate. If you have any sense at all you would be already running to your Minister and begging for his protection.”

He turned back to Gabrielle and Fleur and sat beside his wife.

Bagman visibly gulped and tried for a smile that came across looking very faked and very forced. “Yes, well, shall we get to the scoring?”

The four Champions trooped into the grassy field near the docks several minutes later. Gabrielle refused to move too far away from Harry so she walked between him and Fleur and held both their hands grinning like a loon. If he hadn’t seen her terrified in the water he’d think the younger girl was having the best day of her life.

Tonks and Hermione had moved to the side of the field and stood with the rest of his friends along with Apolline and Sébastien. Amusingly, The Umbitch had actually taken the elder Delacour’s ‘advice’ and gone to speak with Fudge rather than participate in the judging. Percy was again taking her slot.

Krum and Fred both received 45 points for near perfect execution of the Task. Krum got an extra nod for thinking outside the box by using gillyweed though he also lost some points for having to wait an extra few minutes for it to wear off before he could climb out of the lake.

Fleur was called forward and Gabrielle rather reluctantly let go of Harry to stick with her sister. “Mlle Delacour,” Dumbledore said standing. “The judges have discussed the situation after receiving a briefing on the events taking place during the Task. As you did not retrieve your hostage the Task was not adequately completed. However, we feel that the tension between your
people and the Merpeople was severely underestimated resulting in a skewed level of prejudice and
difficulty towards yourself. In light of this, we have agreed to award you 25 points.”

Gabrielle snorted as she stepped back into line with Fleur. “Sévèrement sous-estimée, hmph.
Sévèrent sous-estimée mon joli petit cul, oui.” (6)

Fleur rolled her eyes good-naturedly at her sister while Harry stepped forward. “Harry Potter,”
Dumbledore intoned, the twinkle in his eye nonexistent. “You returned outside the time limit for
this Task which should again result in 0 points. However taking into account your…noble actions
regarding the Beauxbatons Champion and her hostage we have agreed that such a score would be
grossly unfair. Taking into account your obvious preparation, skill and quick thinking we have
decided to award you a full 50 points.”

A loud cheer rose from nearly everyone in attendance drowning out anything else Dumbledore had
to say. Harry’s eyes were huge as he stepped back into line. Gabrielle quickly hugged him and
smiled up at him saying in English, “Congratulations, ‘arry. Zat was a great score!”

“Thanks, Gabrielle,” Harry replied.

“Gabi! It’s Gabi, to you Monsieur Potter!” Gabrielle said with a laugh and let him go. Fleur
simply raised her eyebrows at the two.

“Well, this concludes the Fourth Task in the Triwizard Tournament,” Bagman said as the crowd
finally the crowd calmed down enough for him to be heard. “Again we do apologize for the lack
of visual aids as the early start prevented us from getting them into place. Rest assured, the Final
Task will be quite the spectacle!” All four Champions and several of the audience members
shivered at that. “The final event in this Tournament has the theme ‘Face The World’ and will be
held at the end of June. I look forward to seeing everyone there and wish the Champions the best
of luck!”

Newton and Paracela were already sitting in the chairs in front of her desk when Olympe returned
to her office. Sweat beaded on her forehead as she sat down. She didn’t even have a chance to
start speaking before Newton held up a hand. After a moment he slowly lowered it and spoke in a
very soft, exceedingly calm voice with no attempt made to hide the steel present. “Olympe. Please
explain to us just how two Veela wound up in a lake full of Merpeople. One of them as a hostage,
while underage and without parental consent.”

Olympe considered lying for a moment. It might have worked too. She’d been told before that her
giant heritage helped to mask some of the more characteristic tells if she was careful…Sighing she
deflated. It wasn’t worth trying to keep her job. The founders were only here to help and to protect
the students. Something she had obviously failed at. “It happened because I did nothing to verify
the circumstances or details.”

“Explain.”

“Each Headmaster gave their recommendations for suitable hostages to the group and Dumbledore
assured us all that he would personally speak with them and ask for their assistance. My
recommendation for Fleur was Hermione Granger as Harry Potter was already a contestant. My
recommendation for Fleur was Hermione Granger as Harry Potter was already a contestant. It is
blaringly obvious the girl cares for both of them far more than anyone she has ever met in this
school. I had no idea he was going to ask little Gabrielle.”

Newton and Paracela turned to look at each other. Paracela raised her eyebrows and cocked her
head in an ‘I told you so’ expression while Newton just scowled and nodded. “Unfortunately we
assumed that might be case,” Paracela said. “Sébastien is on a warpath. He knows that as one of the Ministry leads on this, Umbridge had to personally sign off on it. Whether she’s just an idiot or actively malicious doesn’t much matter. By the time this term ends, she’ll be destroyed politically and in one of our prisons. Bagman has been hit in the head by too many Bludgers to bother pursuing. And his name is never on any of the signature lines. Apparently someone drilled that into his head during his career.”

“Dumbledore though…” Newton sighed. “As much as I’d like to think otherwise, I have a hard time imagining he didn’t know about the Treaty of Athens.”

Olympe let out a deep sigh and nodded. “I as well find that hard to believe. I ensured that the Giant Squid was to be close to the village in order to hopefully keep the Merpeople from getting bold prior to the end of the hour and it would have shadowed Fleur back to keep her from being attacked if she was late.” The Headmistress laid her hands on the table and shook her head. “I never expected them to be so bold as to attack the girl prior to the time expiration.”

“Technically they didn’t,” Paracela said scowling. “The grindylows attacked the Champion and the hippocampus was meant to scare her. He of course failed to recognize that his mount was just a little too close and that a spine punctured her breathing bubble.” She snorted and swatted the air. “This is why I hate politics.”

“I did speak with Sébastien, Apolline and Gabrielle shortly prior to returning here,” Olympe ventured. “Gabrielle was approached and asked if she was willing to help her sister. No details were given. Sébastien and Apolline had not been approached since Fleur’s initial selection. At that point they made a statement to the organizers that could loosely be considered blanket permission for anything involving their family. If one were to squint and twist their head just right.

“That would likely be why Sébastien is so confident he can nail Umbridge to the wall,” Paracela nodded smiling. “The toad will be tossed to the wolves. It will save the others in Fudge’s administration as well as the judges and organizers so he won’t even try to protect her beyond a token protest.”

Newton leaned back with a sigh and stared at the ceiling. “None of this solves the issue surrounding Dumbledore though. I’ve known the man for so many years…to willing put a 13 year old girl into such a potentially deadly situation…What could he have been thinking?”

“I warned you he was going to end up being the chessmaster here,” Paracela snorted. “He’s careful and willing to play the long game. I doubt we’ll be able to find much of anything concrete.”

“There must be a reason,” Newton argued.

“His vaunted ‘Greater Good’ is the reason! He’s lost his marbles, Nick, and I for one will not stand idly by while he drives more lives into the ground.”

Olympe blinked between the two attempting to remain quiet and invisible as they glared at each other. Finally Newton sighed heavily and nodded. “A compromise then. We continue to investigate the finer points and should the root cause prove to be foolhardy we will pass the information along. If the main players neuter him, then we will jail him. I won’t consign my old friend to the wolves just without knowing why he has faltered. He deserves better than that.”

Paracela narrowed her eyes and lapsed into silence. After nearly a minute she gave a slow nod. “Agreed. We haven’t survived this long by getting personally involved. However, your refusal to admit the man is losing grip isn’t tenable. I propose we approach Fleur and Potter at minimum and inform them of our suspicions.”
“The rune teacher as well, Bathsheda Babbling,” Newton said. “She’s the boy’s guardian and is by all accounts a stable, well-reasoned individual. He may be emancipated, but he’s not an adult yet so she deserves to know.”

Olympe raised her hand to interject. “They may already suspect Dumbledore of being involved. From what I understand, he has crossed them in the past.”

Paracela nodded. “All the same, we have learned to avoid assumptions regarding allies.” Her visage hardened and she glared pointedly at the Headmistress. “I would hope that after today’s events you have learned that lesson as well, Olympe.” The Headmistress quickly nodded in agreement.

Harry ran a hand through his hair as he paced in front of the couch in the Room of Requirement. Fleur, Hermione and Tonks were all sitting on said couch looking on at him in various shades of amusement and exasperation. Harry had asked them all to meet him here as he snuck out of the party in the Gryffindor Common Room. He’d given it a good go, staying for almost an hour before giving up and asking Daphne, Luna and Tracey to provide a decent distraction.

“You really don’t need to be so dramatic, Wonder Boy,” Tonks commented with a light grin. She was leaning against the armrest with feet pulled up and crossed under her obviously trying not to laugh while following his pacing.

“Stop teasing him, Nym,” Hermione scolded. Sighing, she turned to look at Harry and said softer, “Harry, I think we have a good idea why you asked us to come and talk. You can relax a little.”

“At least sit down, ‘arry,” Fleur commented gesturing to an armchair behind him.

Harry stopped his pacing and shook his head. Flopping down on the chair he held his head in his hands. “You almost died, Fleur,” he said quietly.


“I watched you drown. I was right there next to you! If Nym hadn’t taught us that CPR thing…” Fleur moved to get up and go to him but Hermione laid a hand on her arm and shook her head. “Being around me is dangerous,” Harry suddenly said lifting his head up and staring hard at all three of them. “Every single year I or someone I care about has almost died. If you three stay with me, you’re going to be a target.”

Hermione smiled sadly. “Harry, we’ve known that for a while. And I want to be perfectly clear on several things. You don’t have a monopoly on danger.” Everyone turned to look at her with expressions of disbelief. She held up a finger. “Troll. There is no possible way you can claim credit for that thing walking into the same bathroom I was in. Voldemort would have been in the castle regardless and he would have used the same distraction regardless and you had no control over Ron saying what he said.

“Basilisk,” she continued holding up a second finger. “If you think I wouldn’t have been researching that monster without you around you’re barmy. Again, not your fault I was hurt. Also not your fault that Lucius decided to give Tracey the diary. You didn’t even know her or Daphne at that point.

“Luna,” a third finger joined the others. “I love the former Ravenclaw, but you have been literally nothing but a godsend to her. Her life was miserable before you and I can’t think of a single bad thing that has happened to her since you met her. The near rape would’ve happened with or
without the push from the article in the *Quibbler*; those girls would’ve found some other reason to pick on her.

“Dementors. Yes, you helped shine the light that Sirius might be innocent. Yes, Nym used that light to start investigating. But, don’t you dare try to take the blame for the Dementor attack at the end of the year. We had *five* adult witches and wizards with us that night.

“World Cup,” Hermione grimaced as she said that one but quickly regained her stride. “Those… people would’ve tried to go after Fleur whether you had been there or not. They *did* go after Fleur before we got there.

“Finally, the Tournament. Harry, the Goblet also would’ve chosen her even if you had not been entered,” Hermione sighed and leaned back. “While I will admit your involvement has likely ramped up the danger of each individual Task I would again point to the horrid history of death and permanent injury surrounding this. Today…today’s issues were completely unrelated to you, Harry. What happened this afternoon was a remnant of an old war whose reason no one even remembers.”

Harry gaped at his girlfriend. To hear it all laid out so logically rather took the wind out his sails and threw most of his arguments into the meat grinder. Closing his mouth and frowning, Harry considered what Hermione had said. After a few minutes he looked back up at the girls. “It’s still dangerous to be with me. Especially if Voldemort comes back,” he said sounding slightly confused.

Tonks took over. “Wonder Boy, life is dangerous. You’re good luck. Weird good luck, but good luck.”

“And I would like to see if zis Voldemort is fireproof,” Fleur said with a small grin. “His name is quite amusing to ze French. I’d love to test how accurate it is.”

Harry’s confusion deepened. “You all really are still interested in dating me?”

“Harry, you have half the female population of the country interested in dating you,” Tonks said rolling her eyes. “Hermione and I have won and we have no intention of letting you go. Considering Fleur is sitting here too I think she’s got a shoe in for a spot as well and this girl is not one to give up.”

Harry sighed and leaned back bonelessly into his seat. “I hate when people use logic on me. I can’t claim to be a normal wizard when you use logic because things actually make sense and wizards don’t seem to like that.”

“Amen to *that*,” Hermione muttered.

Harry squared his shoulders and turned to Fleur. “Fleur, are you still hoping for a Consort agreement with House Potter?”

Fleur quite nearly jumped up and pumped her hand in the air though somehow she managed to restrain herself to a very emphatic, “*Oui*.”

“Hermione, are you still accepting of Fleur as a potential Consort to House Potter?” Harry asked turning to the brunette.

“I am,” she said nodding.

“Nymphadora,” neither Harry nor Tonks faltered at the dreaded name, “are you still accepting of
Fleur as a potential Consort to House Potter?”

“I am,” Tonks agreed her hair flashing through a quick rainbow before settling back into pink.

Harry stood and moved in front of Fleur taking her hand. “Okay,” he muttered nodding to himself and taking a deep breath. “Okay. Fleur, I would very much like for you to join my growing family.”

Grinning from ear to ear, Fleur nodded and pulled Harry down into a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of French in this chapter. Rough translations for those interested are as follows. A great many thanks to MidnightFenrir who turned this into actual French dialogue! (Any mistakes are my own.)

(1) enfoirés = bastards

(2) Je m'appelle Gabrielle. Je crois que Harry Potter vient de me sauver la vie. Peut-être aussi la votre. = My name is Gabrielle. I think Harry Potter just saved my life. Maybe yours too.

(3) Gabrielle! Est-ce que tu es blessée? Est-ce que ça va? Pardonne-moi, j'ai suis tombée dans une embuscade et je n'ai pas pu venir jusqu'à toi. = Gabrielle! Are you hurt? Are you okay? Forgive me, I was ambushed and I couldn't get to you!

(4) Je vais bien, Fleur, maman, papa. Harry Potter m'a sauvée! Il a combattu les hommes-poissons et les a repoussés avant de me donner ceci pour que puisse respirer sous l'eau! C'était incroyable! J'ai eu la peur de ma vie mais c'était incroyable! Il est aussi génial que tu l'avais dis, Fleur, et même encore plus que dans les histoires! = I'm fine, Fleur, mom, dad! Harry Potter just saved my life! He fought off the Mermen and he gave me this so I could breathe underwater! It was amazing! I was so scared but it was amazing! He's just as awesome as you said, Fleur, and even more awesome than the stories!

(5) Tu l'a sauvée! Je n'arrive pas à y croire mais tu l'as sauvée! Merci, Harry, du fond du cœur. Je te suis redevable à jamais. = You saved her! I can't believe you saved her. Thank you, Harry. I can never repay you for this.

Chapter 30: The End of a Toad

A few weeks after the Fourth Task, Fleur caught up with Harry while he was outside practicing spell chains with Flitwick. The diminutive professor had been gradually pushing Harry towards doing some of the simpler chains silently and while he could get most of them down they weren’t very powerful yet. “Excuse me, Professor,” said Fleur. “’arry, Madame Maxime has requested to speak with you and Professor Babbling as soon as possible.”

Flitwick shrugged good-naturedly and holstered his wand. “That’s quite alright, Miss Delacour. Harry, continue to practice strengthening those. You’re improving quite nicely.”

Harry, breathing hard, nodded and put his hands on his knees as he doubled over. “Sure…thing…Professor.” Flitwick chuckled and headed back inside. After a minute Harry finally regained his breath and stood straight. “Shiva’s on break at the moment. We can go grab her now and head over. What did Madame Maxime want?”

“I do not know,” Fleur shrugged. “She simply said that it was quite urgent and that both of us and your guardian should be here. The phrasing was worrying but she did not seem flustered so whatever the discussion is I don’t think it’s anything immediate.”

“So it might just be something about the final Task?” Harry asked. Fleur nodded and threaded her arm through his.

They walked through several corridors only passing by a few people – for which Harry was rather thankful. Even after almost three weeks of officially dating Fleur he was still getting quite a few nasty looks and whispered comments. While he couldn’t entirely blame them the real issue was that everyone seemed to think of Fleur as simply a piece of meat. They weren’t so much complaining that Harry had multiple partners, they were complaining that he ‘nabbed the Veela’. It wasn’t everyone in the castle, but it was enough to get his blood boiling every time he saw someone whisper to their friend as he walked by with Fleur. Hermione had been required to physically restrain him the first few times.

By now all three girls had found a far better motivator to ensure Harry behaved.

Knocking on Shiva’s office door, Harry stepped inside only to find her standing at the chalkboard with her wand stuck in her hair and a determined expression plastered on her face while she tapped her foot staring at the diagram displayed in front of her. Harry couldn’t resist laughing at that picture and Fleur started giggling a little as well. “Bit of an issue, Shiva?”

“Oh! Here it is!” She reached out and crossed off a rune in the scheme and added a slightly modified one in its place. “Gotcha. Now that will work. What’s up, Harry? Oh hey, Fleur,” Shiva said nodding to them both as she took her wand out of her hair and cast a quick copying spell on the board, transferring the diagram to a nearby sheet of parchment.

“We need to head over and talk with Madame Maxime about something. We think it has to do with the Final Task, but we aren’t completely sure,” Harry said.

Shiva raised her eyebrows. “Oooookkkkaaay…you don’t need my permission to walk across the grounds, kid.”
Harry snorted. “No, I meant Fleur, me and you. Not just Fleur and me.”

“Oh, well you should have said that to begin with. Give me a second.” The professor cast a quick cleaning charm on her robes, straightened her hair and waved them out of the office. Falling into line with the two Champions Shiva looked at them both critically. “So what does she want me for too?”

Both students shrugged. “No idea,” Harry said. “Fleur was saying that she didn’t seem frightened, just a little worried.” Shiva frowned and lapsed into silence.

The trio made it to the Beauxbatons carriage without incident and Fleur showed them into the Headmistress’ office. The large woman quickly stood as they entered and nodded to each. “Hello. Zank you for coming so quickly. I have two guests who wished to speak wiz you all.”

Harry and Shiva frowned at that while Fleur just looked puzzled. “Headmistress, zis seems most irregular,” the blonde said.

“It is,” Maxime said sighing. She took her wand and sent a quick spell towards the door and leaned back. “I assure you zough. No one here wishes to harm any of you. Zis is simply a secure location for ze meeting.”

Shiva narrowed her eyes at the other woman, but before she could say anything the door opened again and two more people stepped into the room. Her gaze shifted to the newcomers. Both were dressed conservatively in something that could pass as either demure robes or fashionable Muggle clothes and carried themselves with a sense of authority. The woman smirked in amusement at the three people sitting across from the Headmistress while the man nodded happily at them all.

“Hello, hello! So good of you three to come and agree to speak with us. I apologize for the bit of cloak and dagger but sometimes it’s necessary,” the man said. He stepped up and offered his hand. Shiva let out a breath and shook her head. She stood to accept the handshake from both the man and the woman as did Harry and Fleur before all five sat down again with the chairs twisted to face each other in a loose arc.

“Newton, you’re forgetting your manners,” the woman said with a lightly scolding tone. “This is my husband, Newton Fulcanelli and I am Paracela.”

“Pleasure,” Shiva murmured. “I assume you already know us, but just in case, I’m Bathsheda Babbling, this is Harry Potter and Fleur Delacour.”

Paracela nodded. “We do know of you. We’ve been taking stock of your ward for some time now actually. Manners are always appreciated though.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. Fleur stiffened beside him and Shiva subtly fingered her wand. “Taking stock of me how?”

Paracela smiled and shrugged casually. “Nothing dangerous or invasive, young one. Simply keeping our eyes and ears open. We like to determine one’s character before we agree to meet with them. The Quibbler was quite useful for once instead of simply being amusing. I must congratulate you by the way. I never would’ve thought that Xeno would be able to resist printing his conspiracy theories!”

Harry relaxed slightly and snorted. If they knew Luna’s father personally then they probably were okay. The man may be not be entirely stable, but he seemed to have a decent head for people from what Luna had said. “Don’t thank me for that. That was all Luna. You can’t refuse that girl
anything and her father is even more wrapped around her finger than the rest of us.”

Newton chuckled as well. “Well I for one rather miss some of the wilder stories. We went on several hunts with him in the past to try and track some of the critters he talks about. Paracela and I actually found a few on our own solo excursions some years ago. It’s a good way to pass the time.”

“I can imagine…” Shiva said trailing off and furrowing her brow. She stared at the two visitors muttering softly, “Why do those names sound so familiar?” Newton sat up a bit straighter while Paracela’s mouth thinned into a line.

Harry’s eyes narrowed as he stared back and forth between the couple. “Fulcanelli was a pretty famous alchemist…”

Newton deflated slightly and Paracela’s grin widened considerably. “Go on,” she said winking at him.

“Newton and Paracela…I don’t suppose you’re named after Paracelsus by any chance? Another famous alchemist?” Harry asked. At her nod, Shiva gasped and stared between the couple.

Fleur just looked between the other four people and grimaced. “I feel I am missing something extremely important in zis conversation.”

Harry ignored her for the moment, focused fully on Newton and Paracela. “So then Newton would be for Isaac Newton…Merlin…” He suddenly shot to his feet and pumped his fist in the air. “Ha! I knew it! Hermione and I were right!” He turned back to the two and smiled wide before bowing a bit. “It’s an honor to meet you Mr. and Mrs. Flamel.” As he said that, Fleur gaped staring goggle-eyed at them.

Paracela chuckled and patted Newton’s leg while he sat there looking dejected. “She was sooo close,” he moaned. “She would’ve had it in another minute or two!”

“And yet I still win,” Paracela said. “We haven’t been back to San Diego in a while. I think this time we’ll go to the International Comic Con.”

“It’s so boring!” Newton whined.

“It’s getting better! They have a new logo and location this year!”

Harry stared between the two and laughed. “Why are you deciding on a vacation?”

Paracela saluted him. “Because you won me our bet, Mr. Potter. Every time we switch to a new identity, Newton and I have a bit of an ongoing wager over whether a Muggle-born/raised or a Pureblood will figure out who we are first.”

“Well naming yourselves after famous alchemists and keeping the N, P, and F initials really doesn’t make it that complicated,” Harry snorted.

Newton groaned and held a hand over his eyes. “See that’s what I said! But noooo, apparently it’s still too subtle for most magically raised. I haven’t won the darn bet since the 11th century!”

Shiva gurgled and struggled for words. “11th century…but…you’re…”

“Far older than 600 something,” Paracela laughed. “I’ll grant you, the Nicolas and Perenelle names lasted a lot longer than we had expected. Plus the manner of killing them off was annoying
to the extreme, but don’t make the mistake of assuming that was the first time we had to do it.”

Newton sighed dramatically and lowered his hand looking at Harry, most of the joking expression gone from his face. “You said you and your girlfriend assumed we were alive? When was this?”

“My first year,” Harry shrugged. “We weren’t sure whether Dumbledore actually believed you would let yourselves fade away or if he just wanted us to believe it, but we didn’t think you’d just give up because of one guy trying to steal your stuff even if that guy was possessed by Voldemort.”

Paracela smirked. “I don’t know what Albus was smoking that year, but it must have been strong. Even just as Perenelle and Nic, we were around for over six centuries. Seriously, to think we’d just roll over and die between a single upstart tried to steal our fake things…idiots. I swear the world is getting stupider every century.”

Fleur finally managed to restart her brain and rejoin the conversation. “You are the alchemist pair?! Ze founders of ze school?! And you are speaking wiz us?!”

“That we are,” Newton laughed. “Peace, little Veela, we’re just two extremely old senior citizens who like looking after our legacy when we have the chance.”

“This conversation isn’t just a social visit though, is it?” Shiva said leaning back and crossing her arms. Her comment wasn’t a question.

Paracela slowly shook her head and mirrored the other woman’s posture. “No, it isn’t. We have some information for you that we felt should be passed along.”

“Why us?” Shiva asked.

“Well to be perfectly honest, we like you. We keep tabs on the big things and young Harry has impressed us,” Newton said. “We were going to consider offering to let you do some research with us in a decade or two. We’ve come forward a bit earlier as events have started becoming increasingly charged each year. Ms. Babbling, you’re a rare one. You’d be amazed at how many educators would’ve simply looked the other way upon discovering a bit of child neglect. That you not only took control of the situation, but actively worked to assist was extremely impressive. Had you spoken French we would’ve tried to recruit you to our school.”

Paracela took up the narrative as she smiled at Fleur. “And you, Mademoiselle, have been consistently exceptional throughout this year. Your previous school performance was noteworthy as well though not quite as flashy.” Fleur blushed and mumbled something unintelligible.

“So, to be blunt,” Newton said shrugging, “we would prefer you and your friends survive and flourish. In the interest of assisting in that endeavor we’re willing to pass along some...interesting bits of info every now and then. Such as who we believe to be behind the mockery of fair play that this Tournament has become.”

“Well the Umbitch is obviously involved,” Harry said narrowing his eyes. “From what Fleur’s said though, her father should be taking care of her soon enough.”

“Oui, he has most of ze necessary documentation and Fudge is starting to back off from shielding her. She will be gone by ze time ze Final Task is complete,” Fleur said fire flashing in her eyes.

“Ah, but do you suspect who pulls her strings?” Paracela asked.

“There’s a couple of possibilities,” Shiva said nodding thoughtfully. “All equally worrying and with potentially multiple players involved. The worst options I think are Voldemort, Fudge or
Dumbledore. I would’ve originally thought attempted assassinations wouldn’t be Dumbledore’s style, but I’m starting to change my opinion on that.”

Harry frowned, “I’d still prefer to think that he’s simply a manipulative arse, but not evil. It is getting harder and harder to entertain that possibility as this year goes on.”

Fleur shook her head. “’arry, no sane individual would place a zirteen year old Veela in zat lake. I do not care how manipulative you zink he is, he is as bad as ze Toad in my mind.”

“Yeah, that was where I hit on him to,” Shiva nodded as did Paracela.

“Agreed,” Paracela said. “We worked with him for quite a few years in the past. Albus was always well educated and did his homework. He’d have known about the Treaty of Athens and the danger involved. He has a hand in recent events and while it might be subtle it is not idle.”

Newton grimaced. “He was a good man once…”

Harry sighed and leaned back into his seat. “Well he certainly hasn’t shown that side concerning pretty much anything dealing with my life. Do you have any proof? That’s always the problem when dealing with Dumbledore. He’s good at working behind the scenes and doing legal gymnastics to avoid being punished for anything.”

“Unfortunately, we still lack that proof,” Paracela said shrugging. “As you just said, he’s good and has been playing this game for a long time. We’re continuing to keep our eyes open and investigating a bit here and there, but we mostly just wanted to pass along our suspicions and warn you to keep your eyes on the man. Forewarned is forearmed and all.”

Shiva nodded and leaned forwards to fix each with a considering look. “Can you help us at all?”

“Can we? Certainly. Will we? Well…that is an entirely different animal,” Paracela sighed.

“You aren’t willing to do anything beyond give us a heads up?” Harry asked incredulously. Fleur also looked rather affronted as she reached over to take Harry’s hand and squeezed softly.

Newton grimaced. “I wouldn’t say that exactly. The thing is though, we made it a policy not to interfere to any large extent. If we stepped in every time things started going to hell we’d quickly become a crutch for humanity. People would stop trying to fix things for themselves and just wait for us to do something. Eventually we’d tire of it, stop helping and then the world would self-destruct when the next self-important idiot stepped forward to cause trouble.”

“This country stopped standing up for itself a long time ago,” Harry muttered.

Paracela shrugged. “True. But it doesn’t change our policy. And besides, we might be unaging, supernaturally healthy and regenerative but we are not immortal. We haven’t survived this long by getting involved in every wannabe Dark Lord or master fool that sprang up.”

“We are however,” Newton said holding up a hand, “willing to help a little. We won’t fight your battles and we won’t publically reveal ourselves. However…I cannot condone what Albus appears to be doing. If you neuter him we will take care of him.”

“Take care of him, how?” Fleur asked shrewdly.

“Leave that to us,” Newton said firmly. “Albus is an old friend. Even if I find his recent actions to be repugnant, I have no wish to see him die in prison or be summarily executed.”
Paracela’s smile had an evil little set to it. “I think you will find his fate rather karmic.”

“Please,” Harry entreated quietly. He stared at the floor scowling and continued, “That man made me live with the Dursleys and has kept everything he possibly could from me since I was a baby. Shiva and I have been trying to get something on him for almost four years now. Please. I need to know what you’re planning before I can agree to let you deal with it.”

Paracela looked to Newton with raised eyebrows. He sighed heavily but waved her to go ahead. Turning back to the trio, she smirked. “Well…Albus is quite old. We were thinking he might be more comfortable in a…group setting. Perhaps a…new home. With his magic properly bound up by a nice little potion we invented a few centuries back of course.”

Shiva’s eyes widened before she started laughing hysterically. “A Muggle nursing home? Seriously? Okay, I vote we let them have the geezer! Imagine how frustrated he’d be trying to tell everyone ‘No, you don’t understand! I’m the leader of the Light! I must return to my fellow wizards!’ It may not be Azkaban but it’s certainly prison.”

Harry considered that, looking to both Fleur and Shiva before finally turning to the Fulcanellis and nodding. “Okay.”

“Excellent!” Paracela said smiling. “You neuter him, either politically or personally and we will take care of the rest.”

“We’ll contact you if we find anything concrete,” Newton said. “I do hope this all turns out well enough. This has been some of the most fun I’ve had in decades!”

Fudge was sitting in his office with his head in his hands. How had things progressed to this point? All he had wanted was to humiliate the Potter boy a bit. Take him down a peg or two and teach him some respect. Now though…now Fudge was facing political and economic censure from nearly the entirety of the ICW unless he acted soon.

He had given Dolores free rein in crafting the Tournament Tasks and that had been such a foolhardy mistake. Even after he realized the damage she could be doing he’d still trusted the woman to take care of it. Now the French were out for blood, the Scandinavians scented weakness and the rest of the ICW were peering at his administration far too closely. If they actually followed through on their threat to examine his practices for compliance…they’d likely find his special vault. From there it wouldn’t be simple disgrace; it would be Azkaban.

Fudge whimpered. He wouldn’t let that happen.

“You called for me, Minister Fudge?” Sébastien Delacour asked with a smirk as he stepped into the office and took the seat across from Fudge.

“Yes, yes I did. I’ve gotten the recent request from your superiors.”

“Oh, good. I was hoping that’d come in before the Task started. I am rather displeased that the attempted murder of my daughters has gone unanswered for nearly two months,” the steel in the man’s voice was frightening.

Fudge shifted several papers around to try and cover his hesitation. “Yes, well it took some time to complete the internal investigation and agree to some of the stipulations…”

Delacour had the audacity to snort. “And your conclusions?”
“Dolores Umbridge is the individual culpable for the continuous safety oversights involving the Triwizard Tournament. She is currently on a leave of absence and left no forwarding address.” Which was actually true. He had hoped to be able to contact her and tell her to run. Or at least tip off Lucius so that her memory could be taken care of prior to any interrogations…Fudge sighed. “I can however, say with some certainty that she will be at the Final Task of the Triwizard Tournament. I can arrange for Aurors to be there to conduct the arrest and transfer her to you.”

Delacour just smiled and shook his head. “Thank you for the generous offer, but I do believe the French officers will handle the arrest ourselves.” Fudge sweated a bit at that. He knew that Lucius had one or two contacts among the foreign Ministry, but their influence was minimal. He’d just have to hope his Undersecretary would be able to resist antagonizing them enough to render truth serum a viable option…or maybe Lucius would know what to do to get around this…

“Yes, of course,” Fudge said nodding hurriedly. Better to keep the man happy for the moment. Even if Dolores did spill some secrets she didn’t know enough that would see him following in her wake and any goodwill he could engender with the damnable French should be sufficient to at least see him allowed to retire with grace. “Perhaps a peace offering as well?”

“Oh? Such as?”

Fudge pushed several sheets of papers to Delacour. “The Final Task is to be a floating labyrinth. There will be magical creatures and enchantments inside the confines to challenge the Champions, but there should be minimal risk as outside personnel will be immediately on hand to assist if needed. The walls will be transparent to observers as well so everyone should be able to watch what is going on inside. I trust these safety precautions are to your liking?”

Delacour took the diagrams and spent several minutes looking them over before nodding. “This is a runic expansion charm? I am slightly concerned about…oh no, never mind. I see the addition that prevents collapse while personnel are still inside. Excellent.” He set the papers down and gave Fudge a genuine smile for the first time. “It’s good to see that your government is finally taking this seriously.”

“We have always taken it seriously,” Fudge said scowling slightly. “I simply trusted my Undersecretary too much and the oversight Bagman was supposed to be providing was horribly insufficient. He will be properly disciplined as soon as the Tournament is over.”

“Ensure that he is Fudge. Ensure that he is. We will take care of Umbridge.”

Harry caught the rosemary scent of Daphne’s perfume as the door to the owlery opened behind him. He lifted a hand in a wave while he kept talking with Hedwig. “I’ll be fine, girl. Yes, if I’m not fine I will give you an extra two treats for every day I’m in the hospital wing. And yes, Hermione, Tonks or Fleur will watch out for you if something happens.” Hedwig barked and started nipping at his finger. “Ow! No, I’m not trying to pawn you off on my girlfriends! I’m telling you you’ll be taken care of in case the worst happens! Hedwig stop!” The snowy owl barked again and glared at him twisting her head. “I told you, I plan on being fine, girl. Okay?” She twisted her head back to him, barked, nipped his finger far more affectionately and took wing back to the rafters.

Harry shook his head muttering, “Crazy bird.” Turning around to Daphne he smirked. “How come you always manage to be the one to find me the day before these Tasks and not one of the others?”

Daphne shrugged. “Probably because they look for where you’d go while I look for you.”
“There’s a difference?” Harry asked furrowing his brow.

“It’s subtle, but yes there is.” Daphne sighed and stepped up to look out the window. “You should stop trying to hide before these things, Harry.”

“I’m not hiding,” he said. She shot him a glance with raised eyebrows. “Okay fine, I’m not intentionally hiding. I just like some time to think beforehand. That gets a bit tough when everyone wants to talk to me and go over last minute things.”

Daphne sighed. “I know the feeling. Harry, I want to ask you something. And I would appreciate it if you thought about it for a time before answering.”

“Okay…”

Daphne kept staring out the window and stayed silent. Harry had started to fidget by the time she finally started to say something. “Harry, I…would you be…are you willing to consider…” she scowled and her mouth clacked shut. “Do you plan to try and win this Tournament tomorrow?” she finished in a rush.

Harry frowned. That wasn’t what she had been planning to ask. He didn’t need to be taking Divination to know that. Well if she didn’t want to ask her real question he wasn’t going to force her. “I may not have entered myself, Daph, but I would like to try and win, yeah. I think I have a decent shot at it. While I don’t need the money, I can use it to help invest in the twins getting a physical shop location with enough room next door for a Potter Runes shop also in the future. Or I could just donate the winnings to an orphanage or something if they have enough and don’t think we need the extra money.”

Daphne shook her head, the ghost of a smile on her lips. “Typical. Both noble and practical options. I’ll admit I’m a little surprised you’re thinking ahead so much. It’s…good to see you can make long term plans beyond a year out…”

“Daph,” Harry said coming up beside her and reaching out to squeeze her shoulder, “what’s going on?”

Daphne turned to look at him and narrowed her eyes. “Why do you have to be so bloody exceptional?”

“What?” he asked shaking his head in confusion.

Daphne didn’t bother to respond verbally. Instead she reached out and pulled his head to hers drawing him into a kiss. Harry’s eyes widened and he froze. She had barely touched his lips before she pulled back and hugged her arms around herself. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. Good luck in the Task tomorrow, Harry.” Without another word, Daphne turned on her heel and practically ran from the owlery.

Harry was left standing and gaping at the door and his vanished friend. “What the hell just happened?” he asked quietly. Hedwig flew back down to his shoulder and barked knowingly. Harry scowled. When his owl knew more about people than he did…there was a problem. He needed to find Hermione. Or maybe Fleur would be better for this.

The door to the Gryffindor Common Room opened and Harry strode through. Seeing Hermione and Luna sitting together on the couch and studying, Harry sighed in relief. “Hey,” he said sitting down next to his girlfriend. “I need your help in deciphering the female gender and I can’t find Fleur.”
Hermione chuckled slightly and put down her notes. “This ought to be good. What’s the problem, Harry?”

He threw up some quick privacy charms and frowned looking at his lap. “Daphne just kissed me a few minutes ago.”

“Oh.” Hermione’s amused expression melted away replaced by a carefully neutral one. “And did you kiss her back?”

“I froze. It was rather unexpected to say the least. By the time I realized what she was doing she had already pulled back and all but ran away saying she was sorry…”

Hermione wrestled with herself for a few moments. Eventually she reached over and patted Harry’s hand. “While I take fault with her chosen method of intimating interest – ”

Harry shook his head and interrupted. “She was trying to work up to saying something when she found me, but she switched gears halfway through. I guess I know what she was trying to say now.”

“Be that as it may, Harry,” Hermione grimaced. “There was a reason that I put Daphne at the top of the list for suitable partners for you over the summer.”

He frowned, thinking back to that conversation before Tonks had been brought into the talk. “Even above yourself if I remember right…”

“I know I am not an ideal partner, Harry,” Hermione sighed. “I’m bossy and overbearing. I’m not beautiful, social, political or tactful. Daphne is all those things. She is also far more of your equal in battle situations.”

Harry stayed quiet for several long moments. “You don’t give yourself enough credit, Mione. None of that should matter anyway!” he exclaimed scowling. “I already have three girlfriends – which are far too many for any one man – and she’s dating Tracey! What the hell do I keep doing that makes every female I know go crazy?!”

“Did you know that Tracey and Daphne have been having problems?” Luna asked quietly. Both Harry and Hermione turned to look at the blonde. Luna shrugged. “You must’ve seen they had issues throughout the year. You are not totally unobservant, Harry.”

“Well sure, but they’ve been better the last few months,” he said. “They stopped arguing and started hanging out alone again.”

Luna sighed and shook her head. “Daphne has spent so much time with you this year that…well Hermione is not the only one who feels that you two fit very well. Tracey and Daphne had previously come to an understanding. I believe I actually factor into it as well though from the other side. It is quite possible that with the end of the Tournament looming and the potential for further lethal complications, Daphne finally was confronted with being forced to act on her attraction. For her and Tracey, this may be the straw that breaks the camel’s back, so to say.”

“But…” Harry said frowning in confusion.

“They will both be fine,” Luna assured him. “They will remain friends and they may even remain lovers. I don’t profess to know the full details of their agreement; you would have to speak with them. The important thing is that both knew and expected this day would likely come for some time now.”
Harry scowled. “Now I’m even more confused. And it still shouldn’t matter! I’m with Hermione, Tonks and Fleur!”

“Daphne was always going to be a Consort, Harry,” Luna said with a sad little shrug. “Her father would never allow for any other option if she wished to inherit any of his estate. She made peace with this as a little girl. As did I after my mother’s death – though, granted, for far different reasons.”

“Luna,” Harry groaned and put his hand in his hands. “You aren’t going to try and convince me to let you be my Consort as well are you? Bloody hell I can only have two anyway!”

Hermione shook her head and patted his hand. “Language, Harry.”

Luna smiled slightly and chuckled. “I don’t know yet, Harry. At this point I don’t think so, but I can’t claim to know the future. For the moment I think I will simply maintain my courtship of Tracey and remain FWBRs with you.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Luna. “I know I’m going to regret this but…FWBR?”

“Friends With Breeding Rights,” the blonde explained with a wide grin. Harry and Hermione both groaned. Luna laughed again and got up to give Harry a light hug. “Relax, Harry. While you will likely have to have a very long, very frank talk with Daphne it does not have to be tonight. The fact that she did it rather impulsively and ran afterwards makes this something better put off for the moment rather than confronted immediately. Instead, rest. Center yourself and focus on the Task tomorrow. Good luck Harry. I’ll see you both in the morning.” Luna smiled at the couple and left their little contained bubble.

Harry sighed and leaned against Hermione. “Why can’t my life ever be normal, Mione?”

Hermione shook her head amused and embraced him. “Somehow I don’t think the forces of the universe would quite stand for that, Harry. Go to the Room. I’ll find Fleur and Nym and meet you there. We can all talk or simply relax and try to get some sleep.”

Instead of moving, Harry just squeezed her hand. “Why aren’t you angry with me, Mione? I kissed another girl. I have two other girlfriends besides you. It looks like at least one of our close friends is going to try and make that into three. Why are you okay with all of this?” he finished the last barely above a whisper.

“Harry, I love you,” Hermione said softly. “I have loved you since I was 12. I knew the type of crazy roller coaster I was going to be getting in for when I chose to pursue a relationship with you. I won’t lie and say I’m fully comfortable with how things have turned out. It would however, be extremely hypocritical of me to berate you for these types of things that are completely out of your control. You need a second wife if you want to stay in this world. Fleur needs someone she is comfortable with and will allow her to maintain her family for at least one more generation. Tonks needs someone who can look at her as more than a sex doll. I have suspected Daphne would be interested in you since she fought with you against that basilisk. This is nothing like what I planned for my life when I was a little girl. But that is a price I am perfectly willing to pay if it means that I get to live with magic and be with you.”

She paused and gave a small chuckle. “And I have to extend that statement to Nym and Fleur now too. I admit my feelings for each approach my feelings for you.” She pushed him back a bit and glared at him. “And for the record from what you said a few minutes ago, you did not kiss another girl. She kissed you. This is a very important distinction, Harry. It means I can be angry with Daphne and tell her off later. Should you be the one kissing someone other than the three of us…
well this conversation would have been quite a bit more heated. Just because I think Daphne is well suited for you does not mean I am willing to have you just up and kiss her without speaking with the rest of us!”

Harry shook his head and grumbled. “I really don’t understand girls at all.”

“No, you really don’t. Most males don’t.” She shook her head and stood pulling him to his feet and pushing him towards the portrait hole. “Go to the Room, Harry. I’ll find the others. Bedroom configuration, please.”

Harry relaxed on the bed in the Room of Requirement with his head resting on Fleur’s chest while she stroked his bare back. “Thanks for not asking anything, Fleur,” Harry said quietly.

She smiled and kept running her fingers up and down his spine sending pleasant tingles through his back. “You will say somezeng when you are ready to, ‘arry. Besides, Nymph and Mione are not here.”

Harry snickered. “Yeah, Nym can really disappear pretty well when she wants, huh? Are you okay for the Task tomorrow?”

Fleur nodded. “Oui. Knowing zat zis is merely a maze makes zings far less stressful. And wiz ze wings clipped for ze Toad…I zink we should be –”

“Don’t!” Harry said sitting up and covering her mouth with his hand. Fleur’s eyes widened a bit and he could feel her laughing against his hand. “Don’t even finish the thought, Fleur. We don’t need to tempt Fate.”

“Don’t need to tempt Fate for what?” Tonks asked as she walked into the room. Her foot caught on the edge of the rug and she let out a squawk of surprise as she was sent careening into the bed. Harry twisted and caught her half on and half off the bed sending them both tumbling to the floor to the laughter of both Fleur and Hermione. “Ow…”

“At least you landed on something soft. Namely me,” Harry groaned from his position underneath Tonks.

Hermione, grinning, walked over and pulled Tonks up while Fleur stayed laughing hysterically in the bed. Harry levered himself up and went back to his previous position. “You make a good cushion, Wonder Boy,” Tonks said as she dusted her jacket off and stripped off her boots. “Fleur, already topless I see.”

Fleur shrugged. “Well, it is a bedroom. It seemed appropriate.”

“Harry, certainly doesn’t seem to be complaining.” Hermione commented also kicking off her shoes and removing her robe.

“Hey I wasn’t complaining about the lack of dress of the hot Veela bedmate. I was complaining they didn’t wait for us.”

Harry snorted. “Well you should’ve been easier to find instead of Hermione having to track you down with her Aide.”

“Oui. Zis is ze night before ze Final Task. You should have expected us to be sleeping togezer, Nymph,” Fleur commented with raised eyebrows.
“How can you pronounce ‘Nymph’ and not ‘that’? ‘P-h’ isn’t *that* different from ‘t-h.’” Tonks asked pulling off her own clothes and hopping into the bed with them. “And I was busy trailing Moody.”

“I can pronounce ‘Nymph’ because Nymph is cute and not ‘zat’ because ze t and h togezer are hard.”

Hermione frowned. “While the latter half of that explanation makes perfect sense the first part with being able to say something because it is cute is…wait, you’re just having us on! Part of your accent is exaggerated isn’t it?”

Fleur dissolved into giggles. “It took you zis long to figure zat out, Mione? Most of it *is* real. I will admit to not putting any effort into improving ze rest zough. I know you zree find it… attractive.”

Tonks snickered. “Not the word I would use. Endearing, hot, sexy, alluring. Those are more appropriate qualifiers.”

Harry just shook his head. “I am so totally outnumbered here. Nym, did you catch Moody doing anything suspicious? With Umbridge about to be arrested tomorrow, I figure we need to watch both him and Dumbledore in case they try anything daring considering the prime saboteur target is going to vacate the premises.”

“Dumbledore being the prime mover here is so frustrating! I still can’t believe you spoke to the Flamels about this in person…” Hermione murmured dejectedly. “I hope they want to talk with the rest of us soon…”

“Let’s focus on our partners surviving the Task first and then deal with the centuries old pranksters being interested in us, yeah?” Tonks said raising her eyebrows. “In answer to your question, Harry…yeah I kinda did. He snuck out of the grounds using the tunnel under the Whomping Willow. I couldn’t follow him any further without risking getting caught unfortunately.”

“Sneaking off the grounds the night before the Task? Yeah, that’s not suspicious at all,” Harry sighed collapsing bonelessly back against Fleur again who proceeded to wrap her arms protectively around him.

“Zis time, I will protect you, ‘arry,” Fleur murmured rubbing her cheek against his hair. “You have been ze hero enough for zis year.”

Hermione growled as she moved to Fleur’s other side and pulled them both into a hug. “I quite agree with that assessment. Nym, why can’t you just have Amelia arrest him?”

Tonks sighed and fell back against the sheets. One arm snaked under the other three while she stared at the ceiling. “Mostly because he’s a retired Auror and we have no proof. Same problem with Dumbledore just a different fashion. Dumbles is protected by his image and the public’s opinion that he can do no wrong. Mad-Eye is protected by the law.”

“What do you mean, protected by the law?” Harry asked frowning.

“Auror veterans are covered by a lot of extra laws, Wonder Boy. If we arrest an ex-Auror without knowing exactly what they’ve done and pre-stating it, even if we find evidence against them, it’s not supposed to count in the court.”

“What kind of stupid idiot decided on *that* policy?!”
Tonks shrugged. “Actually, it tends to work out really well for us. See, the original intent was to prevent anyone we had put away or pissed off while on the job from framing us for something and then having their buddies do a raid to ‘find’ the ‘evidence’. It’s saved a lot of veteran’s arses to be honest so I can’t really fault the law just because it’s inconvenient at the moment.”

“So we can do nozing while he hides behind a cloak of legalese and plots our murders?” Fleur asked narrowing her eyes.

“There must be *something* we can do, Nym,” Hermione pleaded with the older woman.

Tonks snorted and lifted herself up to stare at each of them. “Do you guys seriously think I’d let my partners waltz into that maze without taking some steps to keep them safe?”

Harry held up a hand. “I figured you had a plan!”

“Nobody likes a suck up, Wonder Boy,” Tonks said with an amused note in her voice. Then her face twisted into a wry grin and looked at him hungrily. “Though I can certainly think of another use for that snake speaking tongue of yours…”

Harry felt Fleur make a deep guttural sound of agreement that vibrated through her chest while Hermione just rolled her eyes. He shook his head and reached over to pat Tonks on her bright pink hair. “Later, Nym. First we need to finish this conversation.”

“Always spoiling my fun,” Tonks said shaking her head. She sighed theatrically and her tone grew far more serious. “In all honesty though, I didn’t want you guys to worry. Bonesy is sending over Shack and a few other Aurors to help me keep watch. Shack and her will be on Dumbles duty along with my cousin. I’ll be watching Mad-Eye along with Proudfoot and Scrimgeour. If either of them try anything to hurt you two, we’ll take them out before they get a spell off.”

Fleur nodded and squeezed Harry tighter. “Good. I am getting razer tired of ‘arry continually being injured in zese Tasks.”

“Yeah, it’s not exactly my favorite past time either,” he snorted.

Hermione just leaned into them both and buried her head in Fleur’s side. “I hope you both come through this without injury. When I heard you’d nearly died last time…” she let a short sob causing the others to shift so that Hermione was in the middle. “I’m sorry, this is just all so overwhelming at the moment. I don’t want to see anyone getting hurt anymore!”

“Shhh,” Harry said holding onto the brunette. “We’ll be fine, Mione. We always are. We may end up being banged up a bit, but we’ll be fine.”

“You better be, Wonder Boy,” Tonks murmured. “You’re not off the hook either Fleur. You’re far too hot to get hurt tomorrow.”

“I will take zat as a compliment,” Fleur said affecting a high class tone and setting her shoulders in a haughty air. Inasmuch as that was possible while still cuddling Harry to her chest at least.

Tonks just chuckled. “As it was intended to be. Harry, to take our minds off of this depressing route, Mione mentioned something as we were coming up about Daphne. What happened?” Fleur lifted her head at that and looked at Harry with interest.

Harry groaned and shook his head. “I have no idea. She kissed me in the owlery and ran away saying she was sorry. Luna said she’s interested in the other Consort thing and has been for a while, but didn’t want to act until the stress of the last Task coming up brought it to a head and
forced the issue.”

Surprisingly, Fleur grinned. Tonks on the other hand groaned and lay back down slapping her free hand to her forehead. “Merlin, another one? How do you keep acquiring girls, Wonder Boy?”

“I would say karma, but this is getting ridiculous. I already told Hermione, I can barely handle you three let alone anyone else!” Harry grumbled.

“Well I am certainly not surprised. On zat date to Hogsmeade, I considered joining forces wiz her if she decided to make a move,” Fleur said. Three sets of mouths gaped open and three sets of heads twisted to stare at Fleur. She shrugged. “What? She is very attractive, non? It is also readily apparent zat she is extremely skilled for a fourz year, plus she has history with you zree and has proven herself loyal to ‘arry above all ozers. I don’t really see ze problem.”

Tonks snorted. “Well we know where her vote lies. I’m not sure I’m comfortable with that at the moment, Harry. Daphne is nice enough and certainly a huge ally, but she doesn’t strike me as the type who’d be interested in the rest of us besides you. I mean, yeah, she’d probably be okay with it every once in awhile but it would be primarily just you and her in a relationship – unlike the whole group thing we’re trying to make work at the moment.” She sighed and shook her head. “Like with accepting Fleur I’m going to default to the majority either way, but I would ask that you wait and have a really long talk with her.”

“It’s not like I was going to run to the Slytherin dorms and drag her to bed, Nym,” Harry said annoyed. “Jeez it took me months to accept Fleur into this relationship and I knew she liked me beforehand!”

“Sorry, Harry,” Tonks sighed. “That came out sounding mean. I didn’t intend it like that and I know that’s not what you would do. What do you think, Mione?”

Hermione grimaced and let her hair fall over her head like a curtain. “Well, I always said that Daphne was a perfect partner for Harry. I was perfectly fine with it when it was just him and me. Now though with you and Fleur as well…Daphne is very much an alpha type personality and while I think she’d do fine with just Harry and one other, I’m not sure how well she’d be willing to slot into this many people. So like you said, Nym, I’d like to sit down with her and see what she expected.”

Harry raised his hand again. “Girls, I have zero intention of starting anything with Daphne without everyone sitting down and talking to her. Preferably with Tracey there as well if what Luna was intimating is correct. No matter what it’s not something that’s happening tonight or tomorrow night so can we please drop it and get to the relaxing?”

Tonks raised her eyebrows and grinned at him. “I like it when you get assertive, Harry.”

“As do I,” Fleur said licking her lips.

“It does have a certain attractive aspect to it,” Hermione commented smiling.

Harry looked at the three women staring hungrily at him and gulped. Something told him it was going to be a long night.

Shiva couldn’t stop fidgeting in the seat next to Remus. There were still a few minutes before the Final Task would begin and Umbridge had just shown up. The bitch had the audacity to waltz across the grounds like she owned the place. Obviously no one had bothered to give her the heads up that her arse was about to be arrested and tossed into a French prison.
While two junior Aurors approached the Toad from the stands, Shiva caught her staring at the giant floating egg labyrinth and a huge grin crossing her expression. The professor growled and stood up. “Remus, tell the others I’m going to talk with the Umbitch. She looks way too pleased at the moment.”

“They’ll be interrogating her,” the werewolf said turning to look at the Toad and frowning.

“Yeah, and if she’s already acted they might not get answers fast enough. Everything else has been sabotaged prior to the start. I’ll let you know if I find out anything.” She started pushing her way past the seats keeping her eyes centered on Umbridge. She had just cleared most of the rows when the Undersecretary started swatting away the hands of the Auror trainee who had approached her.

“I am the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic! How dare you! I will have your jobs and see you in Azkaban for this!” Umbridge’s voice carried over most of the crowd and drew several eyes. The Auror said something else prompting Umbridge to rear back in shock. A moment later Shiva saw a snarl curl the woman’s features and she raised her wand. The junior Aurors were too slow to react and Umbridge hit them both with a jet of purple light before turning and starting to run towards the Forbidden Forest.

Shiva cursed and jumped over the last partition rolling to her feet as she hit the ground. She started sprinting after the Umbitch while the two Aurors were mobbed by Pomfrey and another witch. Nobody but her seemed to be going after the Undersecretary. “Damn you, Fudge,” Shiva muttered as she crossed into the forest closing on her prey. “You made sure the newbies would be the ones to pick her up so she’d get away. Not going to happen. Not this time! I let Pettigrew escape, I’m not letting her get off too!”

Umbridge had obviously never bothered to try running from someone before and made no effort to cover her tracks. Nor did the woman seem to be in shape at all since Shiva could hear her breathing hard just a short ways up the path. The forest path grew darker and darker as Shiva drew the gap shorter. She tripped over a root and stumbled, falling to the forest ground. The impact jarred her Comm Stone loose and it bounced away into the brush but Shiva ignored it and the pain in her ear focusing instead on not losing Umbridge. Scowling at the lost time Shiva quickly picked herself back up and activated one of Harry’s Slow Burns to light the way. Assured that she could see the path again, Shiva continuing back on towards Umbridge when a loud shriek sounded from around the bend ahead of her. A satisfied grin crossed her face as she sprinted to finally catch the woman.

Shiva tore around the bend and stopped short with her eyes wide. Her quarry had stumbled directly into a giant gossamer web strung out across the breadth of the trail. Umbridge’s wand was lying on the ground several feet away and she was struggling against the web’s sticky hold. All she managed to do was get her head turned slightly and wrap herself into the strands even tighter. The woman’s face was twisted into a snarl of anger and distaste as Shiva slowly walked forward, wand held high and watchful for any other webs.

“You know, Hagrid has mentioned that there are some Acromantulas if you go deep enough into the forest. Apparently you’ve found them,” Shiva commented.

Umbridge snarled. “Don’t just stand there you conceited little woman, get me down from here!”

Shiva tapped her leg with her free hand and frowned. She really should get the bitch down. There was no telling when the giant spider that spun this web would be back. Instead she asked in a voice that was far more calm than she ever would’ve expected prior to speaking, “Why are you trying to kill Harry Potter?”
“Let me down!”

“Tell me why you are trying to kill Harry Potter, Umbridge,” Shiva said again her voice still deadly calm.

Umbridge’s snarl rang out and her face twisted into hatred and rage. “That jumped up little half-blood mutt thinks he so much more superior than his betters! He thinks he can get away with insulting and degrading Cornelius?! I showed that little runt who really runs this world! I showed him just who has the power! He is nothing! And his little bitches are nothing! Mudbloods, half-breeds, abominations!”

Shiva felt ice run through her veins and it took all she had not to send a piercing spell through the woman’s body. Her lips pulled into a scowl and she had to take several deep breathes before she could speak. “Who put you up this? Who fed you the ideas?”

“You imbecile! Stupid little half-blood! How dare you imply that I’m not intelligent enough to do my own work! Get me down from here and I’ll show you how intelligent I am!” Umbridge screamed.

For a brief moment Shiva entertained the idea that the bitch was actually crazy. If she honestly believed that she was smart while screaming obscenities at the only one close enough to help…no. It didn’t matter. “Who told you about the Aspect Columns? Who mentioned it would be a good idea to use the extra ward on the First Task?”

“That pathetic fool Dumbledore wouldn’t stop touting off about the safety concerns,” Umbridge spat. “I saw the opportunity and I took it! Just like any true Pureblood would! He proved how weak he has become in his old age by ignoring what was right in front of him!”

Shiva shook her head in amazement. Umbridge really was this stupid. None of this would fall back on Dumbledore thanks to his brilliant playing of the bitch, but she could at least use this as a chink in his armor. “What did you do tonight? What sabotage is there on this last Task?”

“None of the fools will make it through quickly enough so they will all die! That trumped up half-blood orphan, his creature whore, the blood traitor and the dimwitted muscle have no hope of finishing in time! They’ll scream as they’re crushed and the world will see what happens to people who think themselves above their place in society!”

Shiva snarled and raised her wand to start and burn down the web so that she could get the bitch back quickly enough to try and undo whatever she had done to the arena. The professor froze solid with her wand half raised as chattering started up ahead and to either side of their position.

Umbridge’s eyes widened as two large acromantulas appeared at the top of the web and slowly started coming down the tree line. “Get me out! Get me out you pathetic little worm! Get me out!”

Shiva’s eyes flicked from the acromantulas to Umbridge and back. Finally she said softly, “If you escape you would just try to kill him again. You’ve already tried to kill Harry four times. Five counting tonight. You almost managed to get Fleur and Gabrielle in the process. If I save you and you manage to wiggle free of this…you’ll just come at him again and again until either you die or he does.”

“GET ME OUT!!” The acromantula chattered a soft laugh as it stepped closer to the bound and screaming Undersecretary.
Shiva stepped back and her features went blank. She lowered her wand and activated her *Ninja* rune stone. “You shouldn’t have tried to kill my son. Goodbye, Dolores Umbridge.” Shiva’s disembodied voice rang as a final bell toll for the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic as she turned and started running back to the arena.
Chapter 31: End of a Tournament; Beginning of a Nightmare

The four Champions lined up at the opening to the labyrinth. The huge maze was floating a few feet above the ground of the Quidditch pitch and shaped like a giant egg. The walls appeared transparent from the outside and Harry could see what looked like three or four different levels inside it. There was a bright shining trophy in the center of it that blazed like a beacon. He squinted trying to take note of a possible route to get past some of the shimmering mists and roaming creatures that he spotted through the walls.

“Ah and we have reached the final part of our Triwizard Tournament,” Bagman said in an almost sorrowful voice as he approached from the side. Harry mostly tuned the announcer out as his eyes caught on a large set of rune engravings etched onto the side of the giant egg arena. “This last Task is quite simple really. All you have to do is get to the center and touch the trophy! Once you do, you will be whisked to the winner’s platform while the floor of the rest of the labyrinth will turn insubstantial and drop the other participants to the pitch. There’s a mild sleep charm at that point so that we can separate out the magical creatures that will also fall through.”

Harry frowned up at the etchings. Something was…off about the configuration. “Of course, inside the labyrinth there will be several different types of obstacles. The creatures I just mentioned are stationed throughout as are different assortments of traps and enchantments.”

The enlargement cluster was fine as was the insubstantial charm segment and sleep compulsion that Bagman had mentioned. What was off? “If you feel overwhelmed for any reason, simply retreat back to the entrance. The path you’ve taken will be marked off by a colored line. Blue for Miss Delacour, Red for Mr. Potter, Gold for Mr. Weasley and Green for Mr. Krum.”

The visibility and marking clusters were fine. The levitation set didn’t seem to have any issues. “As with many of the other Tasks, the time limit will be one hour! Your start will be delayed by one minute for every five points you are behind the leader. Mr. Krum has 165 points so he will be first. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter both have 157 points and will enter 2 minutes later. Miss Delacour has 146 points and will enter 4 minutes into the Task. Good luck one and all! May the best Champion win!”

Bagman jauntily walked off to the judging box while Harry’s frown deepened. He started to go back over the entire cluster again as the hairs on the back of his neck rose. “Mate, you alright?” Fred asked softly. Harry waved him quiet as Bagman started to talk to the crowd in the background.

“‘arry? What is wrong?” Fleur asked softly as she reached over to grasp his arm.

Viktor pointed up at the egg. “He has seen something. Something they missed. Of course it would not be this easy.”

Harry drew in a hissing breath and clenched his fists his eyes going wide as he stared in shock at the rune array. Turning to Dumbledore’s spot in the stands he snarled. “That bloody bastard…guys, no matter what happens one of us has to hit that trophy before an hour is up.”

“Well, yeah…that’s kinda the point, mate…” Fred said frowning.

“No, I don’t mean to win. I mean to live.” He raised his hand and pointed out a cluster as Bagman
started to wind down his speech. “The expansion cluster is linked to the timer. After an hour is up, that whole thing is going to collapse to its original size crushing whoever and whatever is still inside. Everything else looks fine so as long as one of us hits the trophy before time’s up, everyone else drops through and the creatures will be safe as well.”

“Someone else surely would’ve caught something like that…” Fred said staring up at the labyrinth with wide eyes.

Harry’s scowl deepened. “Yeah, Dumbledore should’ve. Shiva’s the only other one at Hogwarts who works with runes and wards enough to recognize it.”

“We have to stop zis from starting zen!” Fleur exclaimed as feathers started to sprout on her arms and she turned to the judges box. Bagman had just started counting down to the start of the Task.

Viktor scowled and shook his head along with Harry. “Ve can’t. Ve vould lose our magic if ve tried to stop it as it starts.” He turned to glare at the judges. “The Toad and her helper played this vell.”

“And…start!” Bagman screamed as a cannon blast sounded. Krum turned to the others and others and nodded quickly before jumping into the gap in the walls and bounding down the corridor.

“Fleur,” Harry said squeezing her hand and but not tearing his gaze from the runes. “Get to the trophy. Just get to the trophy. Don’t worry about anything else. Just touch the bloody thing. Accio utility belt!” Hesitating for a moment, he shook his head and shouted, “Accio prototype belt!” He stepped away from Fleur and grabbed his two rune stone harnesses strapping the main one on and cinching the lashes up. Harry had just finished doing up his secondary, prototype harness as Bagman yelled out for Fred and him to start. “Be careful and touch that trophy!” Harry yelled as he leapt into the corridor ahead of him Fred right behind.

Tonks didn’t know exactly what was going wrong but she knew things had already begun to spiral out of control. Shiva had disappeared off into the forest chasing the Umbitch, Harry had frozen and gotten that same look he had when fighting the Dementors just before the Task started and Fleur was half harpy with her wings fully formed. She had even lobbed a single fireball past Dumbledore’s head before the girl had jumped into the labyrinth after the others. The shite was already flying towards the fan and Tonks felt horribly out of the loop. She couldn’t even afford to watch her boyfriend’s or girlfriend’s progress through the Task thanks to keeping an eye on Moody.

At least Scrimgeour wasn’t being an arse for a change. He had actually listened to her when she laid out why they were watching her old mentor and Proudfoot was a good guy from what little she remembered of him. They’d be decent backup if…

Nope. When something happened. “Look alive people,” she said just loud enough for her Comm Stone to pick it up and transmit it to the Aurors. “Moody’s casting something Krum’s way.”

“I have the listening charm on his sleeve active. Standby for incantation,” Proudfoot replied. Tonks held her breath. A moment later her ex-colleague cursed loudly. “Imperio!”

Scrimgeour grunted. “Merlin be damned, what are you doing Alastor?! Move, move, move! Take him down!”

Tonks hadn’t even waited for Scrimgeour to finish his sentence. She leapt over the barrier separating the audience from the safety observers and shot a spell towards Mad-Eye. Two more
converged on the man from his sides. Surprisingly agile for an old man, Moody managed to dodge the first volley. He leapt to the side and cackled madly. “Nice try, girl! You’ve been a worthy opponent this year! Far better than the Master ever assumed you would be! Avada Kadavra!”

Tonks’ eyes widened and she twisted to the side, lengthening her torso and shifting mass away from her stomach as the jet of green light passed a few centimeters over her belly. It slammed into the wall of the stands causing a small explosion of debris and screams rang out from the crowd.

Tonks’ immediate follow-up shots joined a second volley sent by the two Aurors and several spells tossed from the stands as well. Moody managed to dance out of the way of several but one or two hit him and slowed him down. It looked like someone had hit him with a jelly-legs hex – considering he only had one good leg that was actually a good idea – and something that made his bogeys fly out and start beating him on the head. Tonks shot off an *incarcerous* and a body bind that shattered his shield and sent Moody careening into the egg and falling to the ground dazed. A jet of red from Scrimgeour and another *incarcerous* from Proudfoot had the threat contained for the moment.

Scowling Tonks jogged the rest of the distance to the other two as they pulled up beside the old man. “Imperius and the Killing Curse? What the bloody fucking hell is going on?” Proudfoot asked wiping some sweat off his brow.

“He said something about a Master,” Tonks said grabbing Moody’s wand. “I’d bet my kidney this isn’t Moody. Mad-Eye would *never* call someone Master. Hell, that’d probably be enough to break him out of an Imperius by itself. I don’t know how, but whoever this is has been impersonating him. Scrimgeour, I caught him sneaking out to the Shrieking Shack last night, but couldn’t investigate since the tunnel was too small to follow through in case he had doubled back. Can you send someone over there to check it out? Maybe that’s where the real Moody is stashed.”

The Head Auror scowled, but nodded and at a barked command, Proudfoot was sent running off towards Hogsmeade. Tonks stared down at ‘Moody’ wondering just how it was possible for someone to have swapped names on the Hogwarts internal ward scheme…and if maybe Barty Crouch wasn’t so sick and isolated after all.

Of all the precautions they’d taken over the past four years, putting anti-summoning charms onto the Comm Stones had always, *always* seemed like a bloody brilliant idea. Now however, when she desperately needed one and it was lost in the stupid undergrowth…Shiva tore out of the forest grounds dropping her invisibility and sprinting back towards the Quidditch pitch breathing hard. She glanced up at the floating labyrinth as she got closer and had to fight back a pained cry. She had already known she wouldn’t have made it back by the time it started but…her chest still clenched in panic seeing Harry and the other three running around inside that thing. She skidded to a stop as she stared wide eyed at Tonks kneeling over a bound and stunned Moody. “Mother freaking…Moody was a saboteur?”

Tonks looked up and her hair flashed to pink briefly before settling back to a dark blue. “Shiva! You’re back. You find Umbridge?” The relief in the other woman’s voice was blazingly obvious and caused Shiva to grimace slightly. Maybe she shouldn’t have gone running off after the bitch…

“She’s not going to be a problem anymore. Ran into some acromantulas. We have a much bigger problem!”

“Good riddance,” Tonks murmured. She turned to glare down at Moody. “We don’t know who this guy is, but he just tried to put Krum under Imperius and then shot a Killing Curse around when we tried to arrest him.”
Shiva rocked back on her heels and sucked in a breath momentarily jarred out her worry over the sabotage. “He what?!”

“Tonks! Shiva!” Hermione called as she ran up to the barrier to the crowd. People had slowly started to file back to their seats from wherever they had scurried off to when Tonks was apparently fighting the man. The vultures weren’t even being subtle about listening in.

Head Auror Scrimgeour stalked forward towards Hermione trying to shoo her away. “Girl, this is an active crime scene. Return to your seat!”

Hermione scowled and ignored him holding out the parchment in her hands. “He’s still showing as Alastor Moody! But look; here on the edge of the grounds! This dot with Proudfoot is showing as Barty Crouch Jr.!”

“Crouch has a son?” Tonks asked incredulously.

Shiva shook her head in confusion as well. That was news to her too, but it could wait. Getting those students out was the priority. “We can deal with that in a minute! Tonks, Scrimgeour, we have to stop this Task. Umbridge ranted about the egg arena collapsing before she died. We have to get them out before that timer expires!”

Harry ran around the corner and barreled headfirst into a third patch of yellow mist. This obstacle was becoming horribly annoying. The shifting gravity wasn’t a huge problem especially after the second time through it. That it made his stomach flip-flop was the issue. He didn’t have time to be queasy. 40 minutes had already passed and he was running out of time. It was possible that the Lava Bomb or the Yamato Cannon could break through the layers and drop him on the ground outside but that wouldn’t help the others. And the Yamato Cannon wasn’t fully tested yet.

Getting past the mist he turned another corner and let out a soft curse as this route took him up a level. At least it was still going in the right direction. The walls weren’t quite as transparent from inside as they had been from outside the egg, but it was enough to let the beacon around the trophy show the general direction he needed to go in. If he could at least get over the bloody thing then he could always use Plan L.

He ran further down the corridor until a dark shape burst out ahead of him. Snarling Harry started to let out a curse at whatever had waylaid him before realized that the shape had morphed into a dead body. Looking down, Harry recoiled and started breathing heavily as he saw Shiva’s corpse in front of him. A moment later, the body popped and Hermione was there. Then it was Tonks. Then Fleur. Growling, Harry took aim at the boggart and yelled a blasting hex as loud as he could. There was a shriek of pain and the corpse twisted and jumped down the hall, vanishing around a corner. “Stupid bloody boggarts!” Harry cursed as he started running again. He hit an intersection and stopped for a moment to regain his bearings.

A large chicken covered in scales instead of feathers suddenly hopped up from the corridor ahead of him. “Squawk!”

“What the hell are you?” Harry asked momentarily stunned.

“Tracey, it’s a Jabberwocky! It’s a Jabberwocky!” Luna screamed jumping up and down and holding onto Tracey with one arm while desperately pointing at Harry with the other. Coco peered curiously down her arm from the snorkack’s perch on Luna’s shoulder.
“Uh, Luna, I think that’s a cockatrice. Not a Jabberwocky,” Neville said narrowing his eyes. “Good thing he still has those glasses. A cockatrice is a lot less powerful than a basilisk; he may be able to actually petrify it instead of just stunning it. At the very least he can just ignore it and won’t lose any time. Every second counts right now...”

Luna’s face fell and she sat back down hard. Coco nuzzled her neck in silent support while she looked dejectedly towards Neville. “Are you sure it’s not a Jabberwocky?”

“Pretty sure, Luna,” Neville said nodding.

“Awww...”

Tracey shook her head. “I really hope it gets petrified. Apparently the last time they used a cockatrice in one of these Tasks it got loose and killed three spectators before someone blew the thing up. Might be small and not as good as a basilisk, but it’s still stupid fast.”

The green, scaly chicken squawked again and stared into Harry’s eyes. He felt the frames of his glasses heat up and then the chicken-thing dropped to the side, stiff as a board and slightly gray. “Oh. Petrified. Cockatrice then. Huh, thought you’d be bigger...oh for crying out loud! What am I doing wasting time with a bloody cockatrice?!” Harry jumped over the frozen body of the creature and kept running towards the shining beacon at the center.

A giant blast-ended skrewt lumbered out of a side corridor a few feet in front of him and Harry shifted to Midnight. The skrewt had barely even started to turn towards him before he jumped into its shadow and leapt out on the other side continuing onwards on all four legs.

He was getting closer.

Fleur turned a corner of the maze and nearly ran headfirst into a large sphinx blocking the corridor. She blinked up at the hybrid creature and gaped in astonishment for a moment. “You are close to your objective; it lies shortly beyond me. Should you wish to make the attempt, I will give you a riddle. Succeed and I move aside. Fail and I attack. Walk away and I remain.”

Fleur scowled and tried to resist forming a new fireball. That had been her answer for most of the creatures in this maze. The acromantula in particular seemed quite vulnerable to the fire and she was relatively certain she’d killed a lethifold with one. Whatever hybrid monstrosity Hagrid had created by breeding manticores and fire crabs was somewhat immune to her passionfyre but thankfully it couldn’t fly – so she’d simply soared over it and kept going.

She wasn’t about to roast a sentient creature though. At least not one that wasn’t actively trying to kill her.

“We have five minutes to touch ze trophy or everyzing in zis labyrinth dies,” Fleur stated.

The sphinx stopped moving and peered down at her sniffing the air. “I will not fall for tricks. My people were assured this would be safe.”

“No trick,” Fleur said shaking her head and trying to force some of her panic down. “One of the contestants has been targeted for assassination. Every Task so far has been sabotaged in some form. If one of us does not touch ze trophy before ze time limit ze expansion collapses.”

The sphinx’s mouth twitched. “You speak truth. I can smell you are not lying.” The being uttered a low growl and twisted her large body to face the opposite direction. “Follow me.”
Fleur stared at the sphinx’s backside as it started to lope down the corridor. She shook herself and started running after it a moment later. “I can’t believe diplomacy worked…”

“Stop this Task right now and get them and everything else out,” Amelia snarled. Dumbledore simply sat in front of her with his hands folded into his lap and sad frown plastered over his features.

“I cannot,” he said softly. “Once the Task was started the only way out is through the floor or out the door. If the labyrinth is to collapse shortly, as you say, I cannot justify sending in a retrieval team with so little time left and so little chance to succeed.”

Amelia felt her wand vibrate in her hands and she saw red. The old man wasn’t going to walk away from this one. She would see him behind bars or in the ground by daybreak. First though she needed to get the students and innocent magical creatures out. Shiva, Hermione and Daphne were floating on brooms by the rune etchings with several other upper year students trying to figure out a way to delink the expansion and timer clusters. The prospects didn’t appear promising.

Amelia herself was physically blocking a murderous Sirius and Maxime from approaching Dumbledore. Karkaroff stood to the side leaning against the wall with a slightly stunned and lost look on his face. Bagman had just fallen quiet and could only stare between the judges and the labyrinth.

“Dumbledore, allow me to make myself perfectly clear. If you don’t stop this thing – ” Amelia cut off as a shout of triumph rang out behind her. Twisting, Amelia saw Susan, Tracey and Neville pumping their fists in the air. A moment later a small avalanche of magical creatures fell out of the bottom of the labyrinth and bounced on the cushioned ground beneath. She saw at least two human forms drop out near the center as well as she let out a loud sigh of relief.

It wasn’t a moment too soon either. Barely twenty seconds after they hit the ground the labyrinth imploded with a loud bang. Instead of an arena nearly 50 meters in radius, there floated instead a small egg only 2 meters in diameter.

“Where are they?!?” Amelia heard Tonks’ panicked shout from the ground floor. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion, Amelia turned to the winner’s platform.

It was empty.

The sphinx knocked a charging acromantula out of the way and started battling the giant spider as Fleur scampered past her hind legs. Coming out the other side of the two creatures, Fleur found herself in a round room with several open doorways leading in. She saw Fred and Viktor charging down one of the long corridors across the way, but they were too far. She turned to the trophy and smiled. There was very little time left, but she had made it.

Before Fleur had taken more than a single step, the ceiling to her side fell to the ground with a loud hissing crash amidst a shower of heat, melting stone and glass. She could only stare as Snowball jumped through the hole and landed just outside the still smoking pile of debris. The panther changed back to Harry and her brain slotted into gear again. All four Champions took off running towards the trophy in the center of the room. She and Harry were the closest though and Fred and Viktor didn’t really have a chance.

She reached out and grasped the handle of the trophy at the same time as Harry grabbed the side closest to him with a triumphant shout.
A hook grabbed her by the navel and jerked. She felt the wind whip past her as the portkey took hold. The journey should have only been a moment but it took several seconds. As she jerked to a stop, she stumbled and fell to one knee, dropping the trophy. A pained grunt had her twisting with her wand half raised before she sighed in relief at seeing Harry levering himself up from the ground.


“’arry!” she lunged forward and wrapped him into a hug and pulled back to quickly kiss him. “I am so glad you are alright.”

“Same to you, Fleur,” Harry replied with a soft grin. “But I think we still have some problems. Like where the hell are we?”

She glanced around seeing several gravestones nearby and a large shadowed manor house in the distance. “Agreed. Zis does not seem to bode well.”

“Kill the spare.” Fleur’s eyes widened at the menacing wheeze. She turned to find the source only to see a jet of green light speeding towards her. With no time to react Fleur could only wish she had more time with those she loved as the green light filled her vision.

Then she was pushed aside and a jerk around her stomach had her whisked away into the night again.

Shiva was frantic as they levitated Fred and Viktor to the side waking them up. The two students had barely had time to blurrily blink their eyes before she had grabbed Fred by the shoulders. “Where are Harry and Fleur? One of them had to have grabbed the trophy! Did you see which one? Did you see what happened?!”

“Professor?” Fred asked shaking his head. “Err, they both grabbed it at the same time I think. Viktor and I met up in the middle somewhere and hit the last straight-away as Harry fell from the ceiling in his animagus form and Fleur came out from behind a sphinx.”

“They vere both closer than us. They hit the trophy together. They should be at…” Viktor trailed off as he looked over at the empty winner’s platform. Cursing in Bulgarian, the Champion turned back to the small crowd surrounding him and scowled. “Ve must find our friends.”

Shiva had opened her mouth to reply as a pop drew everyone’s attention back to the platform. Fleur – covered completely in feathers – materialized in midair on the platform falling to the center with the Triwizard Trophy crushed underneath her chest. Tonks and Hermione were already jumping onto the stand as Shiva started to move towards it as well.

“Non! NON!” Fleur pushed herself up and desperately dropped and picked up the trophy. “Ramenez-moi! Ramenez-moi!” When nothing happened she screamed and threw it into the floor before grabbing hold of it again. Fire formed in her hand and her wings tore the back of her shirt as she lifted the trophy again.

Hermione crashed into Fleur from behind and wrapped her arms around the older girl. “Fleur, stop! Stop! It’s not helping! Where is he? What happened?!”

“ Ils vont le tuer! Arrêtez, laissez-moi!” Fleur screamed again clutching the trophy as tears fell from her eyes.
Harry slowly clawed his way back to consciousness. His scar was throbbing in pain and his back and wrists were sore. Keeping his eyes squeezed shut he tried to piece together the last few minutes. He remembered landing in a graveyard. He remembered Fleur kissing him. He remembered someone on a hill shouting out the Killing Curse. He’d moved without thinking – his left hand had been up enough that he’d been able to hit Fleur with a low powered Knockback. She had fallen forwards onto the Triwizard Trophy with the curse sailing by close enough thread through her hair. Fleur had vanished. The figure had launched a stunner and Harry hadn’t moved fast enough. That was when everything went dark.

Fleur was safe.

So were Fred and Krum and the creatures from the labyrinth. They’d gotten to trophy in time.

A trapped trophy that dropped him straight into an ambush and his only way out was now gone. Brilliant. Absolutely bloody brilliant. He had no idea how to apparate, couldn’t make a portkey, a graveyard was not a likely place to find a Floo and lord only knew how close the nearest street was to try and summon the Knight Bus assuming the thing wasn’t too far away. That last option wasn’t even possible unless he could find a wand. And escape from whatever was holding him down.

There was definitely something holding him down. Harry could hear quiet murmurs nearby so he didn’t risk opening his eyes. Instead he concentrated on the feeling in his body and with a slight twitch realized it was ropes. He was tied to a rather large headstone with his arms spread to the sides and palms turned backwards, hanging slightly off from the headstone. He grudgingly admitted that whoever had done that was intelligent. This way he couldn’t use his Knockback tattoo to try and destroy the marker like he could have if it had been under his hand. The Boomstone had potential usage still but that wouldn’t help him break free of the ropes. And Harry knew the Lava Bomb was a lost cause with his arms spread so far.

The light in the graveyard was bright even with his eyes closed so he assumed whoever had him knew about his animagus’ abilities and had taken some precautions. It didn’t matter at the moment anyway with the way he was bound. Shifting into Midnight would just end up suffocating him.

He briefly considered one option to get away, but almost immediately discarded it. There was already only a small chance that whoever had kidnapped him hadn’t destroyed his runes. Even if they hadn’t…Harry’d much rather wander around the woods for hours trying to find a road rather than risk using the tracekey. It was not remotely ready for a large scale test. Not with a living body at least. Especially not through Hogwarts wards.

“It is ready, Master,” the muttering voice suddenly said at a normal volume. Harry couldn’t help the flinch he gave as he recognized that voice. Peter Pettigrew. Brilliant.

“Start the ritual…Wormtail…” a rasping wheeze spoke. Harry’s eyes flew open at that. That was the same wheeze that had said to kill Fleur. And it was horribly familiar too. Something he hadn’t heard since he was 11.

As Harry’s eyes adjusted to the light, he saw Pettigrew pick up a grotesque bundle only slightly larger than a baby. The head was too large, the limbs too small and the entire thing was black with skin that almost appeared charred. The eyes though were blazing red and as Pettigrew turned those eyes locked onto Harry’s and a grin split across its features. “Awake at last, Harry? Just in time…to witness my rebirth.”

Harry felt a spike of fear and dread settle into his spine and his scar throbbed painfully. He tried to ignore all of that though and forced a veneer of calm as he stared at Voldemort. “So you go from
Quirrellmort to Diarymort to Babymort? You’re getting more pathetic every time we run across each other, Riddle,” Harry snorted.

Babymort chuckled confidently. “We shall see…just how ‘pathetic’ I am. Wormtail! Begin!”

“Yes, Master,” Pettigrew said. He cast one final spell at the cauldron sitting inside a large, intricate ritual circle. The liquid started to bubble and churn. Pettigrew stepped carefully over the lines and dropped Babymort into the cauldron. Harry uttered a short prayer that the evil little homunculus would drown even if he knew the odds of that happening were probably close to zero.

“Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son,” Pettigrew said imperiously as he waved his wand and the grave under Harry’s feet shifted slightly. A moment later, a small pale bone soared out of the grave and into the cauldron which turned the boiling liquid into a poisonous blue color.

Harry glared at Pettigrew. “Why are you doing this? Just let him die for good! He murdered your best friend! He’s killed and tortured hundreds if not thousands of people. He’s destroyed countless lives. Why are you doing this?!?”

Pettigrew had grabbed a silver knife and stepped up to the cauldron. He paused and looked over at Harry with a weary expression on his gaunt face. “I chose my lot when I told him where to find James. No matter who I serve now, I’m going to die in pain and begging for it to end. At least with him, I will likely have some sort of mercifully quick death at your side’s hands. If I stopped helping now he would…it would be worse than anything I could imagine. I am sorry, Harry Potter. Flesh…flesh of the servant, willingly sacrificed, you will revive your master.” Pettigrew turned his head away and his chest heaved. A quick downward stroke with the large knife lopped off the man’s hand and a scream of pain and anguish rang out through the graveyard.

Harry twisted his head to the side fighting down the urge to vomit. Pettigrew kept sobbing with his stump clutched to his chest for several seconds before eventually pulling a rag from the side and tying it off around his forearm using his remaining hand and his teeth. Still nauseous, Harry cautiously glanced in the man’s direction and saw that the boiling potion had turned a burning red and was letting off light sparks. Pettigrew finally finished with his hand and tottered unsteadily to his feet.

As his captor started to stumble towards him, Harry tried to twist his hand enough to get his Knockback rune angled correctly. Even if he couldn’t hit Pettigrew he might be able to nudge the edge of the ritual circle which would be hopefully enough to throw a wrench into things. Unfortunately the rat had been very thorough in his application of ropes. His hand was firmly wedged well away from the circle.

Briefly Harry tried to summon Pettigrew himself using his accio tattoo in his other palm thinking that maybe he’d get lucky and the flying body would disturb something in the circle. Again he was hit with failure as absolutely nothing happened. One of them had obviously gotten smart and spelled themselves against that charm. Pettigrew started to step over the last lines when Harry tried his last gamble. He channeled power into the Boomstone tattoo. That was a mistake. A cry of pain almost as bad as Pettigrew’s had been rang out over the graveyard and Harry sagged in his bonds against the stone. His right hand felt like it’d been dipped in fire and he could barely think through the pain. Panting in short, ragged gasps, Harry squinted through tear filled eyes down towards his right hand and saw faint lines cut into the back of it right across the runic tattoo. It wasn’t much but it was enough to disrupt the magical channels.

Pettigrew shrugged as he pulled up and jerked his head towards Harry’s hand. “Barty sent us
Scowling up at the man, Harry snarled as Pettigrew loomed over him and reached out with the knife. “Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe.” Pettigrew drew the knife down as Harry’s eyes widened. *Take it! Take my blood! Go ahead and use it you bloody arse!* He thought defiantly as the knife pierced his upper arm and drew a bloody gash down several centimeters before Pettigrew pulled back and teetered over to the cauldron again. The knife flicked out and the potion turned a steaming, blinding white.

Harry’s heart plummeted. It had been a long shot anyway. He’d done more research after his own run-in with rituals and things like this were entirely intent based. Just thinking that he wanted the traitor and the murderer to use his blood wouldn’t be enough. He’d have actually had to have *wanted* them to use him – not just tried to convince himself it was okay…

A loud bang crashed out and the cauldron exploded sending pieces of metal bouncing away in several directions. Spots danced in front of Harry’s eyes and as his vision cleared, he saw a tall, pale figure with an angular skull and leering visage peering down on him with crimson eyes. “Robe me, Wormtail.” Voldemort’s voice was deeper now and it practically resonated throughout the graveyard. Harry managed to keep his shudder from manifesting. It helped that his hand was still burning and he could use the pain to distract himself.

Pettigrew whimpered and picked himself up from the ground he had fallen to grabbing a nearby black robe and draping it over Voldemort’s outstretched hands. A large snake nearly three meters long slithered through the grass and twined around Voldemort’s feet. Rearing back slightly, it extended a wand from its jaws which Voldemort happily accepted. ~Thank you, Nagini. I can always trust you to keep my treasures safe.~

~Of course you can, Speaker. Nagini will always follow and always obey and always protect,~ the snake hissed.

Harry grunted. A snake familiar. How very typical. He briefly entertaining a fantasy of Hedwig battling the giant snake and plucking out its eyes before he was dragged back to the present as Voldemort stepped in front of him. The man held out his hand and caressed Harry’s forehead above his scar sending a shock of pain and more burning through his head. Letting out a cry, Harry hissed and tried to draw his head away.

Voldemort laughed and pulled back. “Ah, excellent. I wasn’t certain if that would truly work, but it seems I have definitely broken that veneer of protection that surrounds you, Harry. Such a shame for you it does not seem to go both ways, hmm?” Chuckling softly the snake-faced resurrected Dark Lord grinned down at Harry. “We are quite alike you and I. Far more so than either of us would prefer I believe. Both raised by Muggles, both hating that world, both with few friends, both powerful, both geniuses, both orphaned – ”

“I was orphaned because of you, you bastard!” Harry snarled his eyes narrowed to slits and his lips curled.

Voldemort nodded and started back towards Pettigrew who had collapsed to the ground clutching his stump. “Indeed. It need not have turned out that way though. Your father stood his ground as a warrior and gave me pause for a few moments. Had he had more room, he might have even managed to injure me before I killed him. Your mother though…she was promised to one of my more promising servants. I would have let her live had she stepped aside. I doubt I will ever understand why so many always refuse to step aside…” he mused. Harry’s insides twisted. He’d had a long time to think about the memory the Dementors brought up and had long since come to worry that Voldemort had actually come for *him* that night. To have it so bluntly stated though…
“My own mother was just as foolishly stubborn and idiotic,” Voldemort said with an offhand wave. “She was a poor witch who lived near here with her pathetic little family. Her eye turned to the spoiled Muggle upon whom you are standing. When he rejected her, she potioned him into loving her and managed to convince herself that it was real,” Voldemort scoffed. He appeared to be in the middle ground between disdain and amusement. Harry was just stunned into complete silence that Voldemort was monologuing about his family history to his mortal enemy with a whimpering servant in the background.

“Shortly before I was born my mother stopped the potion regime and my father abandoned her. She died in childbirth. Dead of ‘broken heart’,” Voldemort paused and laughed. He shook his head with and shrugged before smiling at Harry. “A broken heart. As if such things exist. At least your mother died of a killing curse. I killed my father myself before I graduated Hogwarts. Ironic isn’t it? Two sides of a coin. Your parents died to save you. I killed both of my own parents. The end result is same; we both grew up never knowing family or love…” Voldemort turned to smile at Harry and he could feel his skin crawl. “Ah look at how sentimental and nostalgic I have been getting. Let’s just call it a side effect of being able to talk without necessary pauses for the first time in years shall we? Now, I think I shall introduce you to my true family. Your arm, Wormtail.”

Harry’s blood ran cold as Voldemort turned to the rat. Pettigrew sobbed gratefully and held out his stump which only caused the Dark Lord to laugh. “No, Wormtail, the other arm.” Still laughing Voldemort reached out and pressed his wand to the Dark Mark on Pettigrew’s left shoulder. Screams rang out yet again. By this point Harry had been convinced they were either very secluded or under very strong wards. Surely the amount and volume of the screams so far this night would’ve drawn someone by now otherwise? “I wonder who will have the courage to show?”

The three present didn’t have to wait long. After less than a minute, pops started sounding from the surrounding air near Voldemort and Pettigrew. Figures resolved in the darkness in various states of dress. Harry only recognized Lucius Malfoy, though he certainly wasn’t surprised to see the man there groveling at Voldemort’s feet.

“Ah, my friends!” Voldemort said extending his arms wide. The false cheer in his voice did absolutely nothing to hide the rage and disgust in his tone. “You come before me again! Malfoy, Avery, Nott, Goyle, Crabbe, Macnair” he said as he turned from face to face still smiling. “Karkaroff is too much of a coward to show I see. We will make him remember why you don’t resign your post at my side…Snape…hmm, should he prove useful still I might allow him to continue breathing. We shall see.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed as Voldemort started to monologue again to the assembled Death Eaters. Snape being a Death Eater really shouldn’t surprise him at all considering the man’s hatred of him. It wasn’t something to deal with right now though. Harry cast about for something – anything – he could do to get out of this. Apparition was looking better. He still had no idea exactly what to do but obviously they could get in that way. Shiva had said something about Destination, Deliberation and…and…what even was ‘deliberation’ anyway? Well, Destination and Desperation would probably work. Unless this was just a ward scheme that had Dark Mark bearers keyed into it. Which was likely. So not only would he end up splinched, he’d be right where he started except minus a few bits. Brilliant.

Sucking in a breath Harry resisted the urge to slam his head into the tombstone as a thought smashed into his mind. “Dobby!” he whispered as Voldemort sent off a few crucios at one of his followers who had arrived in a night robe. The air near Harry stayed defiantly empty and quiet. “Dobby!” he said louder. Still nothing happened. Cursing inwardly he was forced to revise his
opinion of Voldemort upwards. Purebloods in general ignored House Elves. Granted, Voldemort had just admitted that he wasn’t as pure as his followers liked to believe, but Harry had been hoping the man still subscribed to many of the established prejudices…obviously he was a bit smarter than that unfortunately. Another potential avenue of escape closed off.

“You see how generous I am to those who serve me faithfully?” Voldemort’s voice cut back into Harry’s thoughts. He turned his head and caught sight of Pettigrew with a shiny new metallic hand and Voldemort smiling broadly. “Wormtail may be quite pathetic and a true coward above all else…but this coward searched me out. And between him and Barty…we have claimed Harry Potter.”

As Voldemort smiled over to him gesturing, Harry did his best to roll his eyes and ignore the hammering of his heart or the pain in his hand, arm and head. “Careful, Tommy, keep talking about claiming me and all and people are going to think you have a crush on me and are keeping me as a love slave.”

Voldemort’s slitted nostrils flared and his eyes seemed to almost flash. For a moment Harry was worried he might have pushed it a bit far, but then the Dark Lord started to laugh. “Oh, it takes true courage or amazing stupidity to speak such words to one’s executioner. Shall we see which it is you possess, Harry?” He raised his wand and before Harry could do more than grimace, flicked the glasses to the ground and exclaimed, “Legilimens!”

Harry snorted in amusement as he landed lightly on his feet on the walls of his castle in his mindscape. Thankfully, his injuries didn’t carry over into here so all he felt was a dull throbbing instead of true pain. Harry looked out over the boiling moat below him and laughed. Voldemort obviously hadn’t expected there to be a fight in this setting.

Enough arrows to blot out the artificial sun had been launched as soon as Voldemort popped into his mind. A shield had blocked some but not all and the Dark Lord was sporting several wooden shafts sticking out of his arms and legs when Harry’s catapults and trebuchets launched their volleys. These included everything from large rocks, to flaming balls of greek fire, to giant cows and pissed off alligators and monkeys. The second volley had barely left their launchers before the air was split by a deafening crack as hundreds of cannons shot their ammunition at the intruder.

Voldemort had managed to get a more substantial shield up by now and was looking at Harry with a mixture of hatred and respect. Harry raised a hand in a mock salute and as he dropped it, nearly a thousand soldiers came charging out of the castle over the moat’s drawbridges. Many stopped and took aim with rifles, pistols and ray guns while just as many kept charging towards Voldemort with swords swinging and spears held forward.

A scream of frustration ripped from Voldemort and Harry’s mind lurched in dull pain as many of his defenses were sundered and ripped. The Dark Lord launched spells and magic and was shortly able to clear a path through the battlefield. He managed to get over the moat by commandeering a horse and leaping the gap dropping into Harry’s next layer. Harry scowled, but followed after him. This first level was never really intended to do more than delay, annoy and tire people out anyway.

Popping into incorporeal existence next to Voldemort, he started to laugh at the man. The Dark Lord was floating freely in the middle of space looking left and right and obviously trying to figure out just how he was supposed to move from his current position across the vast emptiness spanning between him and the small form of a planet.

“That’s Jupiter if you’re curious,” Harry mentioned offhandedly. “You just left Mars. Seemed
appropriate for an initial mind battle, you know?"

Voldemort scowled. “I did not expect a child to have such well developed shielding. You prove yet again that I chose correctly when seeking to destroy you, boy.” He started to fly forward angling towards Jupiter.

“I had a great teacher.”

“Babbling I assume. Or Black. I doubt either will submit to me once I kill you. Shame. It is so hard to find decent minions,” Voldemort mused.

Harry growled. “You won’t touch them, Riddle. I wonder if I can kill your mind while you’re mucking about in here.”

“Such anger,” Voldemort laughed. “You should follow me. I know you won’t. But you should. We’d be unstoppable and we could – ” He froze and a large grin split his face. “Well, well. This is unexpected. How…ironic.” An instant later Voldemort had vanished.

Harry frowned. That wasn’t supposed to be possible. Especially not in the space layer of his defenses. Voldemort should – Harry let out a scream of rage and frustration as his mindscape finally caught up to where Voldemort had penetrated to.

Harry blinked and he was next to Voldemort again as the man waltzed through the replica of Number 4 Privet Drive. Somehow Voldemort had managed to bypass 90% of Harry’s defenses without a fight and had appeared in his deepest layer. Harry started to raise his hand to bring his last line up when he froze. Behind where Voldemort had walked through, there was a door open with a roiling black mass behind it. Harry hadn’t put that there. It was next to the door to his old cupboard and as he watched the door slammed shut and melted into the wall.

“This is a bit problematic to be truthful,” Voldemort said waving at the door. “I’d hate to have to kill you now after seeing this. Are you truly sure I can’t convince you to join me? You are clearly powerful and accomplished despite your age. I’d be perfectly willing to let you keep your women and pets. If I was willing to let your mother go to a young man who’s only claim to fame was bad hair, a surly attitude and brilliance with potions…there’s no reason why I wouldn’t let you have a mudblood, a half-breed and a whore. I’ll even guarantee the safety of Babbling and Black if you can convince them not to attack me or my followers.”

For a horrifying moment Harry actually stopped to consider the offer. The man had destroyed his family. He had killed his parents and countless others. But…I was going to force a change on the stagnant wizarding world. And if Harry could guarantee the safety of those he cared about most…

Harry snarled and wrenched his eyes away from the wall where the door concealing the black ball of corruption had vanished. Turning back to Voldemort he uttered a simple, “Go to hell.” Jerking his head Harry summoned the final line of defense. A facehugger dropped from the ceiling onto Voldemort’s back while an Alien Queen tore through the front door of the house. Far above the little dwelling, a Super Star Destroyer fired its engines navigating onto a ramming course.

And in orbit around the little asteroid sheltering the replica Number 4, the Death Star centered directly on the house, fired.

Harry’s head snapped back and cracked against the tombstone with a dull thud while Voldemort stumbled back. Harry grit his teeth as his head felt like someone had taken a jackhammer to it.
Voldemort for his part held a hand to his own head and just started cackling.

“Well done, child, well done! Such potential!” Voldemort shook his head and stepped back with a slightly manic grin. “Such a shame that I have to cut you down. You should have taken my offer, Harry. But let’s make this fair at least, shall we?” A quick gesture with his wand and the ropes binding Harry to the tombstone vanished, letting Harry drop to his knees over the grave of Tom Riddle. He hurriedly scrambled to put his glasses back on.

“Fair?” Harry asked scowling up at Voldemort. “I’m exhausted, bleeding out, have no wand and you have my main tools. If this is what you consider fair, no wonder people despise you!”

Voldemort nodded clasping his hands. “Ah, very good points. I see your exhaustion and bleeding and raise you a recent resurrection.” Grinning, Voldemort chuckled, his Death Eaters following along and laughing with their master. “I will grant you however, Harry, your wand and runes should be returned.”

Another wand flick and three shapes flew through the lighted graveyard towards Harry. With his Seeker reflexes Harry surged forward and grabbed all three items. He stared with wonder at his main rune harness and his prototype versions. He’d actually somewhat expected Voldemort to give him back his wand. But to return the rune stones too…Harry scowled. He was likely not going to win this fight, but he’d make damn sure Voldemort regretting underestimating him.

And…he had a chance. He had a legitimate chance to escape. To get back to Hermione, Nym, Fleur, Shiva and Daphne. He had a chance to survive. He was sure as hell going to take that chance!

“You’ve been taught official dueling, Harry? Flitwick has been busy from what Barty tells me.” Voldemort moved back slightly and smiled. “No one will interfere with this. First, we bow.”

Harry scowled, slipped his two harnesses on and stood. He palmed a *Chain Reactor Beam* and channeled a small burst through his tattoos checking over any other potential problems before ramping up to full fighting capacity. Breathing a short sigh of relief, Harry found that the only tattoo they had sabotaged was the *Boomstone* and he at least had an extra in the original etched form.

Turning to Voldemort, he didn’t even have time to react when the Dark Lord sent an Imperius curse at him. The blank feeling washed over him momentarily with a single command to BOW. Throwing it off without much effort Harry cocked his head at Voldemort. “Queen Fleur was a hell of a lot worse than that, Tom.”

Voldemort scowled and jerked his wand sending out a stream of red and purple spells towards Harry. Harry lifted the *Chain Reactor Beam* in response and threw as much magic into it as he could. The energy beam that flew from the stone was twice the size of the one from his battle against the evil overlord doppelganger and two of the Death Eaters arrayed behind Voldemort had to leap out of the way to avoid being consumed in the burst of power. Screaming in rage, Harry kept up the assault until the rune stone crumbled to dust and the beam died. There was a large gash in the ground of the hill in the path of the beam and a section of the manor in the distance appeared to be in flames.

Voldemort though was simply standing there with a glimmering shield in front of him. The shield was glowing a deep red and pulsing slightly as energy seemed to bleed off it and the small cracks in the center healed themselves. Voldemort’s eyes flashed and his features set into a frown. “Impressive. Not impressive enough however.”
Harry jumped to the side as Voldemort dropped the shield and started tossing spell after spell at him. The ground behind, beside and in front of Harry exploded as he leaped and dodged barely staying ahead of the surge of spells. This far surpassed anything that Flitwick or McGonagall had been teaching him about spell chains and silent casting. Voldemort had apparently gained his reputation through actual skill instead of subterfuge. Diving behind a tombstone, Harry pulled out the *Yamato Cannon* from his prototype harness and stood powering it up.

The ball of roiling destruction surged out from the rune stone working just as well as he’d hoped. It let loose a 3 meter wide torrent of energy that left a trail of devastation and ozone as it flew towards Voldemort and his Death Eaters. ‘Well, that gets upgraded to the main harness now,’ Harry thought as he dropped the crumbling dust of the stone and pulled out a *Freezer*. The ball of energy exploded into the midst of the Death Eaters and Harry saw at least one body go flying through the graveyard.

A pop behind him had Harry turning and desperately starting his own weak spell chain with a torrent of freezing water from the *Freezer* joining it. Voldemort had managed to apparate behind him, completely unharmed. The man swatted away all of Harry’s spells and shattered the ice that formed over his legs from the *Freezer* while Harry dived to the side again. He grabbed the *Boomstone* rune and activated it as he hurriedly tried to etch a *Reflector* into a blank stone. If he could finish that he might have –

The tombstone he was hiding behind vanished into a pile of debris and Voldemort smiled down on him. Harry dropped back and brought his arms together letting the *Lava Bomb* complete itself. He noted with satisfaction that Voldemort hadn’t expected that as the man fell back with shock in his eyes as lava poured out at him. As Voldemort blinked out again, Harry dropped his arms and grabbed for a *Ninja*. If he could hide then maybe he could – “Crucio!” Harry fell to the ground screaming in pain as every nerve in his body started firing at once.

The spell wasn’t kept on him for long thankfully and after a few seconds Harry felt it drop off and he could breathe again. His body twitched and his hand again felt like it had been dipped in fire but he could think. Looking up, he saw Voldemort with a badly burned left hand stepping forward. “You really should have joined me boy,” Voldemort said tonelessly. He lifted his wand and Harry’s eyes widened. No! It was not going to end like this!

“Avada Kedavra!” Voldemort yelled.

“Sanguinem Ulcus!” Harry shouted at the same time.

The two spells met in the center and instead of ricocheting, each turned golden and merged into a line between the two combatants. The single thick line sprouted a large golden cage of lines a few meters wide around them and both were lifted a half meter into the air clutching their wands with looks of shock and confusion mirrored on both faces. A song burst into existence and Harry dimly realized it was a phoenix sound and appeared to be vibrating out from his wand and the lines of light.

“No one interfere!” Voldemort screamed as the Death Eaters started to circle the sphere of light. Large beads of energy appeared in the center of the main beam linking Harry’s wand to Voldemort’s and began to edge towards him. His wand began to shake and Harry snarled. He focused everything he had on those beads and the tide shifted.

The light beads flowed towards Voldemort. Sweat ran down Harry’s brow as he forced the energy back into his enemy’s wand. Finally, with a roar of triumph, the light bead touch Voldemort’s side and the wand shook violently. Several phantom spells and rays of light shot from Voldemort’s wand and faded into the air. Harry could only watch in awe as the man’s wand seemed to
regurgitate the last battle in reverse. Suddenly, a torso appeared from the end of the wand dropping to ground. The spectral form of an old man scowled at Voldemort spitting at him before walking towards Harry.

“Doing well, sonny boy. Keep it up and kill the monster for me,” the pseudo-ghost said. Voldemort’s eyes had gone wide and Harry just gaped as another ghost fell from the wand. This one was a frumpy looking woman with a large beehive hair bun who just looked around confused before sitting down where she fell. A third ghost fell from the wand and Harry’s breath caught in his throat.

“Dad?” Harry whispered as the final specter came close and smiled at Harry.

His father’s apparition nodded. “Keep it up, son. When the connection breaks make your escape. Me the geezer will be able to linger long enough to distract the bastard.”

“Right you are,” the old man spoke up.

“Wait!” Harry cried out. Something wasn’t right. It wasn’t right at all. His father had died before his mother. “Where’s –”

“No time, Harry. Your wand can’t take much more of this. Get ready. One, two, THREE!”

Harry reacted on instinct and jerked his wand up breaking the beam connecting him to Voldemort. The phoenix song died and the cage of golden light disappeared. The two male ghosts rushed to mob Voldemort who screamed in rage. Before Voldemort could cast another spell Harry shot a huge burst from his Knockback tattoo at the man and grabbed for his prototype harness.

He lifted the tracekey from its slot and uttered a prayer to whoever was watching that this would work. His last view of the graveyard as he activated the rune cluster was Voldemort screaming out a final Killing Curse. Then a hook grabbed his navel and Harry was jerked away into the night.
“Where is that Pensieve?” Shiva muttered pacing back and forth beside the winner’s platform. Fleur was still sobbing into Hermione’s shoulder on the corner, all of her avian features in stark relief. Her hand was clutching the vial containing her brief, dim memory of where she’d been brought to before Harry had knocked her back into the cup. Amelia and Proudfoot had gone to the Ministry to retrieve a Pensieve so that they could try and see if anything from the memory could be used to apparate to Harry and save him.

If there was even still a living Harry to save. Shiva kept pacing steadfastly refusing to continue that line of thought.

Tonks was to the side with Shacklebolt and Scrimgeour heatedly interrogating Barty Crouch Jr. – the polyjuice had worn off shortly after Fleur had reappeared and the real Moody had been bundled off to St. Mungo’s. The Aurors had agreed to question Crouch here in the hopes that he’d be able to shed some light on where Harry had been taken and time was of the essence. The man’s answers could just barely be heard over the continual noise of the murmuring crowd a short ways away.

“I don’t know why my name shows differently on that map. It was nothing I did,” Crouch’s voice was fully monotone, all of his resistance burned away from the veritaserum flowing through his system.

“It’s been perfected for months now and takes its input directly from the castle wards! You had to do something at the Yule Ball to affect it!” Tonks snarled. Shiva noticed the Flamels in the crowd behind the small group frown and melt back into the mass. Probably avoiding Dumbledore seeing them.

“All I did at the Yule Ball was swap the Polyjuice flask for a whiskey flask and move Moody to the Shrieking Shack after you questioned me.”

Scrimgeour eyed Tonks appreciatively before turning back to Crouch. “That was the only illegal thing you did during the Yule Ball?”

A bit of emotion crept into Crouch’s voice. “Used Moody’s eye to look through the dresses quite a bit. Lots of fancy lingerie that night. Much better than during the rest of the year with those school robes. Girls went all out at Yule. I didn’t even look through the lingerie of a few they were so beautiful.”

Tonks looked like she was ready to cut the imposter’s bollocks off and Shiva would’ve helped if she wasn’t so worried about Harry. As it was, Scrimgeour’s hands clenched into fists and he said in a clipped tone, “Did you contact your master that night?”

“No. I couldn’t kill Potter’s sex toy so without looking even more suspicious and I didn’t want the Master to think me weak or foolish.”

“Who is the Master?”

“The Dark Lord. The rightful ruler of us all. The savior of witches and wizards. The conqueror of death,” Crouch’s tone was practically dripping worship even through the veritaserum.

Tonks’ hair flashed to a deep red and stayed that way as she growled. “And where is his current
“He has no current base.”

Scrimgeour slammed a palm against his face. “We are running out of ways to rephrase this stupid question! How can you keep avoiding answering it?!”

“I spent months trying to get Moody to answer my questions about his past and his precautions before running out of veritaserum. I learned from him how to give a truthful response while answering your direct question instead of what you want to know.”

Shiva tuned them out again. That was going nowhere fast. She wasn’t certain what was worse about this whole screwed up thing: that the man had managed to impersonate Alastor Moody for nearly 10 months supposedly without anyone other than Tonks the wiser, or that the Death Eater had actually been a better teacher than anyone in the last decade barring Remus Lupin.

If Harry had left a tracekey prototype behind she would’ve used it already to track him down herself and damn the consequences. As it was she knew he’d made a few extra modifications to the base diagram and she couldn’t risk making a new one. The working prototype was dangerous enough goddess only knew what the unmodified version would do to her. A dead rescuer wouldn’t be of much help.

She scowled as she took stock of the grounds again. Karkaroff seemed to have disappeared at some point. It made him suspicious but he’d been enough of a coward previously that Shiva was left with worrying conclusions about why he had left, what he was running from and just who likely had abducted Harry. None of that had been allayed from Crouch saying his master was ‘the Dark Lord’. Krum was sitting a ways away with Millicent Bulstrode and just holding her hand. Fred was wrapped up with the Weasleys and several members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Daphne, Tracey, Luna and Neville along with the rest of Harry’s close friends were holding a vigil in the first row of the stands nearest to the winner’s platform. Much of the main audience had stayed seated continuing their whispered conversations and waiting to hear what happened to their star Champion.

And Dumbledore was standing off to the side. The old man had a decent sad look on his face, Shiva’d grant him that. She even fully believed that he had no idea that the trophy’s portkey had been modified with a waystation. But his eyes were practically dancing with triumph and glee.

If Harry didn’t come back soon…she’d have to make sure that someone was with her for the next several days so that she didn’t find Dumbledore in the dead of night to…interrogate him. Someone besides Hermione, Tonks, Fleur and Daphne. They’d all likely have to stick with their own minders as well. Harry disappearing would be bad enough, all of them getting tossed in Azkaban for murder would be worse.

“I fail to see why I you are preventing me from administering judgment immediately!” an annoyed shout cut through to Shiva’s consciousness. She stopped pacing and turned to see Fudge striding forward on Amelia’s heels with his bowler hat in his hands and a scowl on his face.

Sirius growled as he stared back at the Minister. “You can’t have your pet demon Kiss the prisoner, Fudge, because he hasn’t finished his official interrogation yet. I’ve been an Auror a month and even I know that!”

“He is an escapee murderer from Azkaban! That is a Kiss On Sight offense!”

Sirius’ hands twitched towards his wand. “No? Really? I didn’t know that. So we shouldn’t
bother to ensure that he was working alone then? Or that he’s actually the one who did this?”

Shiva tried to find the humor there but couldn’t muster up enough effort. Instead she went to Amelia’s side as the woman brought up the court Pensieve and they both turned to Fleur. “Fleur, we’re ready.”

Amelia sighed as Hermione helped Fleur to her feet. “Remember, don’t expect much from this. You weren’t able to get a good enough view of anything for this memory to be clear enough to do much with.”

“It will be enough. It must be,” Fleur said wiping her eyes and moving forward. They had just poured the memory into the bowl when the air was split by a thunderous crack and a flare of lightning along with a caterwauling from the Hogwarts wards.

Hands clamped over her ears and blinking away the spots in her vision, Shiva gaped at the platform ahead of her. Harry Potter was lying on the ground covered in blood and dirt and clutching a wand in one hand and a glowing rune stone in the other. She gasped and vaulted onto the stand moving towards him. Harry sat up and held up his wand shouting, “Accio blood replenishing potions!”

The glow from the rune stone in his hand started to creep up his arm as four potion vials flew through the air. She reached Harry as he snatched the vials out of the air. Shiva was only a second faster than Hermione, Fleur and Tonks.

All four opened their mouths to say something, but Harry shoved the vials into Shiva’s hand before any words could get out. “When the bleeding starts to slow down to a trickle make me drink this! It’ll mean I’m out of blood. Hopefully that’s enough vials!”

“What?” Shiva asked rearing back in shock. The glow from the rune stone reached his shoulder and started moving towards his chest. She stared at it praying it wasn’t what she believed.

Harry’s next words took the wind out of that prayer fast. “Tracekey grounding backlash!” Harry said doubling over in pain and breathing fast. “Make me drink the potions until the magic is fully dissipated. Shite! I need a Breathkeeper also!” He dropped his wand and grabbed a stone from his harness just as the glow reached his chest and seemed to absorb into him.

“Harry, what – ” Hermione started but then stopped and flinched back, staring at her boyfriend in horror.

Harry had screwed his eyes shut as tears of blood leaked out from their corners. His ears trailed blood down the sides of his face and his nose started spurting blood as well. The cut in his left arm seeped out blood in a minor torrent. Worst of all perhaps was that every shuddering breath he took caused a shower of blood to rain out of the sky above the group.

“Harry?!” Tonks uttered her mouth hanging open and her hair a pure white.

“Shite! Goddess dammit, kid, I told you not to touch that thing until we fixed the grounding problem! POMFREY! More blood replenishers! NOW!”

Fleur turned to Shiva with a scowl. “Explain,” she demanded in a dangerous voice. Focusing her frustration on Shiva probably wasn’t the best thing to do at the moment but the professor certainly couldn’t blame the girl. Her boyfriend was hemorrhaging in front her and she was still beating herself up over having unintentionally left him alone in that graveyard.

“The Tracekey punches through wards at both the start and the destination. It’s the only way to safely track criminals to an unknown location with potentially hostile defenses,” Shiva said,
carefully watching the blood flow trailing out of Harry. Pomfrey finally managed to get onto the platform but she pulled up short as she saw the condition the young man was in. The blood slowed down and Shiva lunged forward and poured a vial down his throat.

Coughing Harry swallowed and a few moments later, the volume of outflow picked up again. Shiva picked up her explanation as Pomfrey shifted to Harry’s arm and tried to close the gash. “The tunneler creates an amount of magical feedback directly proportional to the strength of the wards it’s bypassing. Stronger wards, stronger backlash. Originally the energy grounded out by exploding. We fixed it so that it grounds through the activator instead.”

Harry’s bleeding slowed again and Shiva jammed another vial of potion down his throat praying that the energy was almost fully dissipated. They were running out of vials.

“How is this safer?!” Hermione screamed.

“It’s not!” Shiva growled. “The grounding energy currently centers into the heart and bleeds off through the bloodstream, following the flow to dissipate harmlessly into the air at mucus boundaries. The issue is that the rate of dissipation is too fast and it instead bursts the blood vessels while grounding out leading to extreme bleeding until the excess energy is fully gone. Thankfully all internal bleeding should be restricted to the lungs.” She started breathing quicker as Harry’s bleeding slowed down again and she forced the third vial down his throat.

Tonks looked between Shiva’s pasty complexion and Harry’s shuddering form beneath her. “What happens if you run out of potion before he’s done grounding out?” she asked quietly.

All sound nearby seemed to stop as Shiva steadfastly refused to look up from Harry. “He bleeds out and dies.” She blinked away tears refusing to allow herself to cry yet. Instead she muttered low, “Dammit, Harry, what the hell were you mixed up in that you’d risk using this thing into one of the most heavily warded sections the country?”

His bleeding started to slow once more and she started to move forward with her final vial before feeling a hand on her arm. Snarling and shaking it off Shiva found her arm again restrained. “No, Bathsheda. Not this time. Much less time has passed. It’s done.” The nurse waved her wand and Harry’s body glowed a dim crimson before Pomfrey nodded and smiled. “He’s cumulatively lost enough blood to warrant some of that potion, but not the full thing. Give it to me and let me stabilize him.”

Shiva breathed a sigh of relief and handed the vial over to the healer then stepped back. The girls also quickly surrounded her. “You knew he was working on that,” Hermione accused.

Shiva scowled. “Of course I did! He’s been consulting me on it since the bloody Cup over the summer! He had a working copy in the prototype belt along with other half finished things. It was for emergency usage only and was never expected to actually be needed before we fixed the problems. Harry knew the risks inherent in it and he wouldn’t have used it unless there was no other choice!”

“There wasn’t,” Harry croaked from behind them sitting up and grimacing. “Madame Pomfrey, can you look at my right hand? They cut my tattoo and I didn’t realize it until after I tried to channel magic through it. It still hurts a lot and it’s different from when I tried to use the Knockback while transformed.”

The nurse nodded and shifted her target as the latest spell finished. Harry winced and looked up at the people surrounding him. The crowd had grown in the few minutes he had been knocked out by the Tracekey’s backlash. A quick glance around showed his girlfriends glaring at Shiva who
seemed just as angry, though her ire appeared to be focused on herself judging by the set of her shoulders. Daphne was in the stands with her knees drawn up and her head between her legs. Tracey and Luna each had their arms wrapped around a shoulder while the Slytherin girl shook between them. Neville was between Susan and Hannah who were both crushed against his chest. Harry caught a small reassuring smile flash from his best male friend when he caught sight of Harry sitting up.

Sirius, Remus and Amelia were arguing with Fudge and Scrimgeour over the limp body of someone he didn’t recognize tied to a chair. Dumbledore was close enough to hear both conversations, but not close enough to contribute to either. Something for which Harry was very grateful. One Dark Lord was bad enough for one day.

He scowled as he saw Snape walk up to Dumbledore, argue about something with his hand gesturing toward his left shoulder and then storm off towards the castle gates. Brilliant, Voldemort was getting another Death Eater follower. Granted it was possible the horrible man was being ordered to go, but Harry still wanted to fantasize that Voldemort would just off the bastard.

“Harry, what happened after you touched the trophy?” Shiva asked gently. The concern suffusing her voice was comforting, but even that wasn’t enough to prevent the shudder that ran through his body.

Harry shook his head. “Kidnapped obviously. Voldemort,” he scowled as he felt Pomfrey flinch at the name. “Voldemort had gotten a homunculus body. Barely bigger than a misshapen baby. Pettigrew was helping him.”

“Impossible!” Fudge yelled staring at Harry goggle eyed. A vein was popping out on his forehead which made Harry think back to the man’s resemblance to Uncle Vernon. The twisting lime green bowler hat was the only thing that prevented the image from being perfect. Well and the fact that Vernon was a walrus in human disguise.

Amelia snorted. “Minister Fudge, perhaps you’d like to hear the explanation before you bother hiding your head in the sand?”

Harry gave her a small salute with his left hand while Pomfrey kept casting spells on his right. “Anyway, Voldemort just wanted me. He had Pettigrew try to kill Fleur, but I managed to knock her out of the way before the Killing Curse hit her. She must have landed on the portkey because the next thing I knew she was gone.”

“Oui. I did. And it wouldn’t take me back no matter what I did…” Fleur mumbled. Her voice hitched partway through and Hermione and Tonks both wrapped an arm around the French girl.

“I was knocked out almost immediately. Woke up tied to a tombstone. Pettigrew performed some sort of ritual that used the bone of his father, Pettigrew’s own hand and my blood to give Voldemort a full size body. He’s an ugly bastard. Looks more like the lovechild of a snake and human than a straight up person,” Harry shuddered thinking back to those red eyes and that slitted ‘nose’.

Shiva nodded. “What happened after he got a regular form back, kid?”

Harry flinched. “We taunted each other a bit and he called his Death Eaters. Malfoy, Nott, Avery, Crabbe, Yaxley and Macnair all showed up pretty quick. He said Karkaroff ran and that Sn –”

“Karkaroff disappeared shortly after you were kidnapped, Harry,” Dumbledore cut in moving forward with a grandfatherly smile.
Harry wasn’t fooled. “Protect him all you want, Headmaster, but Voldemort specifically called Sn –”

Dumbledore nodded. “Be that as it may I would prefer to discuss that aspect in private. Lives may well depend on it.”

Everyone looked between Harry and Dumbledore sensing the undercurrent of the battle between the two. Harry scowled but backed down after a few moments. “Full explanation or I tell the press exactly what he said, old man.” As much as he hated to admit it, there was a dim chance that Snape was just an bigoted arsehole acting as a spy. That he had waited long enough to speak with Dumbledore before running off to the master was enough to stay Harry’s hand for a few minutes at least.

Fudge stepped up still twirling his bowler hat. “You are disparaging several extremely prominent, extremely well respected individuals in our society, boy! You would do well to remember that before pointing fingers at people!”

“So I should ignore the men who laughed while Voldemort tortured me?” Harry asked cocking an eyebrow at the Minister. “How did you get elected? All you do is protect the people bribing you. Do they own half the country and pay off everyone? Money runs out you know.” Fudge just spluttered and his face turned red. Harry twisted back to his friends. “So after we taunted each other, Voldemort tried to mind rape me.” A few gasps were heard and he saw Pomfrey scowl. “I fought him off. Barely. He got a lot deeper than he should have been able to – which we need to talk about later, Shiva. After that he wanted to duel me in front of his minions.”

Another shudder ran through Harry’s body but his face set in a firm expression. “I actually managed to burn him a bit before our wands linked. Something really weird happened then. Sort of like a jumbo version of the prior incantato thing. A cage of light surrounded us and our wands linked together with beads of light appearing in the center and phoenix song playing us.”

“That’s Priori Incantatem,” Daphne murmured threading into the group with her head down and her eyes red. “It’s really rare. It’s supposed to only happen with brother wands – when one overpowers it’s twin.”

Harry nodded. “Makes sense then. Anyway, I beat him in the wills contest. Thank god it wasn’t power…he tossed out spells faster than I thought possible and he hits like a lorry,” Harry scowled shaking his head. “So, then some specters of the people he’d last killed came out of his wand. Not quite ghosts…more like…echoes? An old man who I think was Muggle was first then some woman with a beehive hair style and…my dad. They distracted Voldemort as I broke the connection and activated the tracekey.” Harry paused and looked at the ground guiltily. “I didn’t really have any other choice. The Knight Bus only works on roads, I can’t apparate yet – and I’m willing to bet there was a ward against it even if I could – there weren’t any brooms, I was surrounded and the area was lit up enough that I couldn’t use Midnight to escape into shadows.”

Harry frowned and stopped, staring at his hand. “I…don’t think I would’ve been able to concentrate enough to jump through a shadow anyway actually. At least not more than once…”

Shiva sighed and shook her head before reaching out and squeezing his shoulder. “I think that counts as an emergency usage, Harry. We need to make fixing it though a priority now. I don’t plan on watching you bleed to death in front of me again, kid.”

Harry nodded. “There’s two other big things that need to be a priority also…I’ll tell you later,” he said quietly so that only Shiva the girls closest to him could hear.
“Well if the explanations are done I need to move this to the infirmary. Mr. Potter needs rest and several addition potions. Especially for this hand,” Pomfrey frowned. “There’s quite a bit of internal damage. I’m amazed you managed to hold your wand so long.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair and shrugged. “Err, I might have cast a quick sticking charm to my hand…” That elicited mild chuckles from the surrounding personnel.

“This is all preposterous! It’s raving ramblings of an attention-seeking, delusional, fame-hungry liar!” Fudge snarled. “Even if you actually believe that nonsense you just spouted you said yourself that the criminal Peter Pettigrew was one of the first faces you saw. He probably confounded you and you’re too addled to have realized it!”

Harry had to fight down the urge to laugh at Fudge. From the looks on the faces of the women surrounding him, he was probably the only one who wasn’t about to curse the portly man. “You know what, Minister? I’m not even going to try and reply to your insanity. Go ahead and say whatever you want. When Voldemort waltzes through your front door and props his feet up on your desk don’t come crying to me.”

Dumbledore followed the group of schoolchildren and adults into the infirmary outwardly calm and collected but raging inside. Tom had returned. Harry was still alive and now he was too late. He would have to let the boy play this out and be ready to step in as Voldemort was cut down.

Or…or perhaps he could still salvage this nightmare. He could reveal small pieces. Just enough to sway these people. Just enough that they would understand why he had done what he had done. Not enough to incriminate but enough to imply and direct. Just enough to push them down the path that would lead Harry to die prior to his complete fall. Yes…yes that could work.

Dumbledore was jostled to the side and looked up in surprise. When had this many people entered the hospital wing? The boy’s partners and guardians were to be expected. Nymphadora, Granger and Delacour hovered by his bedside along with Amelia, Bathsheda, Sirius and Remus. Nearby others of his close companions gathered, Greengrass, Davis, Lovegood, Neville, Abbott and Bones. What surprised him were the additional personnel against the walls: the three remaining Delacours, the Weasley twins, Ginevra, Bulstrode, Krum, the Gryffindor Chasers, Brown, Li, the Patil twins…even Filius and Minerva.

Harry Potter had an Inner Circle and a cabal of followers. This was even worse than Dumbledore had anticipated.

“Harry Potter Sir must stop being so injured!” a diminutive little house elf berated the boy from beside the bed. Harry just smiled down at the being and reassured him he’d do his best. Dumbledore’s frown deepened. If Harry started recruiting from other races as well…

“This should help finish repairs to your hand, Mr. Potter,” Poppy said shuffling forward and pouring a potion down his throat. “You should avoid casting spells with that hand for two or three days just to be safe, but the major damage should be healed by morning. Expect residual pain for about a week.”

Bathsheda thanked the nurse then turned to Dumbledore and glared. Before she could say anything to him though Maxime appeared in the doors to the infirmary and cleared her throat. “Mademoiselle Babbling, your guests need to speak with you. Immediately.”

Bathsheda looked between the Headmistress, himself and Harry. Finally she leaned over the boy, whispered something and followed the woman out the door into the hallway. Dumbledore peered
down at Harry and slowly shook his head in sorrow. “You are certain that Voldemort has returned, Harry?” he asked. There were remarkably few reactions from the assembled personnel. Normally such a thing would have greatly reassured him but now…they were too entrenched with Harry to fear anything else it seemed.

Harry snorted and looked at Dumbledore incredulously. “Considering he tried multiple times to kill me in the past hour…I’m going to have to say, yes. He’s not the only one who tried to kill me tonight though is he?” Many of the eyes in the room turned to Dumbledore in accusation. He gave his best grandfatherly sigh and opened his mouth to begin weaving the web when he was interrupted by a shout from just beyond the doorway.

“WHAT?! In his office?!” A dull murmuring could be heard as all eyes in the room turned to stare at the portal where Bathsheda’s voice was yelling. “He knew. Newton, you’ll have your prisoner tonight.”

The runes professor stalked back into the room and fixed her stare on Dumbledore. He raised his eyebrows at the woman. He couldn’t help pulling back slightly in shock as she raised her wand and pointed it at him with the tip glowing. “You son of a bitch! You goddess damned arrogant bastard! Not content with just assassination attempts on your own, huh? You had to let Tom fucking Riddle – Voldemort himself – do your work for you?”

Dumbledore frowned. He kept his hands in plain view and well away from his wand. This situation was best diffused without violence for the moment. She had no proof after all and was making a fool of herself in front of – Dumbledore glanced around the room and his thoughts froze. Nearly everyone present had their wands trained on him as well. He was strong and skilled, but…this many…even he would be hard pressed to fight against this many, let alone memory charm them all. “I am afraid that I don’t know what you mean.”

“You know damn well what I mean, old man,” Bathsheda snarled as sparks shot off her wand. “The Hogwarts Ward Anchor is in your office! The Aide takes its names directly from the wards. The only way it could have swapped Crouch and Moody was if someone toyed with the wards. Someone who knew exactly where the Anchor was. Someone who was familiar with the construction of them. Harry, you and I are probably the only people familiar enough with runes and wards in the castle to be able to manipulate them in any sort of decent timeframe.”

Nymphadora’s hair had turned crimson as she narrowed her eyes at him. “You were near me and Moody during the Yule Ball. You disappeared halfway through my conversation with him…you are why the name changed as we checked him out!”

Inwardly, Dumbledore began to sweat. This was unexpected. He could play off many of tonight’s events as unfortunate circumstance or intriguing coincidence, but this was not something he had planned on being forced to explain. No one was ever supposed to know about that little tidbit…the only ones who even knew of the Anchor’s location were long dead or retired to foreign countries. He’d have to divulge quite a bit more than he had intended in order to satisfy them. “The situation is far more complicated than you are aware, Bathsheda.”

“Complicated my arse!” she snarled. “You’ve pulled Umbridge’s strings this entire year! She was too much of an idiot to realize just how much you manipulated her, but she ranted long enough to be pretty clear about who gave her the ideas for her rampant sabotage each Task. You’ve been trying to get Harry killed this entire time and you knowingly let a Death Eater roam the castle!”

“Two Death Eaters actually,” Harry’s quiet voice rang out throughout the room. “Three if you count Karkaroff though we all knew about him already. I wonder just how many people knew that Snape was one too though?”
Dumbledore sighed. “Severus defected during the last war for reasons that are not mine to disclose.”

“I’ve already said that I fully intend to tell the press about Snape if you don’t disclose them, Headmaster,” Harry said with a flippancy that did nothing to hide the threat. “But we can come back to that. I’m far more interested in why you let Crouch wander around.”

“As am I.” Amelia said her tone so monotone and quiet that it demanded all attention. Even Minerva stayed quiet as Amelia stepped forward and the old Scott looked fit to lock him up in irons and throw away the key.

Dumbledore’s lips curled and his eyes narrowed. Who were these people to claim to understand? He had been dealing with this situation for longer than many of them had even been born! “Better the devil you know than the unknown opponent. With Crouch nearby I knew exactly what he was doing and where the enemy was.”

“And yet you were criminally negligent by allowing a known murderer to interact with children and not informing anyone,” Amelia’s voice dripped disgust and sparks started to issue from her wand as well. This was not going correctly at all.

“Again there are deeper concerns present.”

Sirius laughed. There was no humor present in the sound. “Perhaps you should start explaining those then if you want to end up anywhere but at the mouth of a Dementor?”

Dumbledore scowled his grandfatherly façade dropping. “There is a prophecy concerning Harry Potter and it must take precedence. Everything I have done is for the Greater Good of our world.”

A pin could’ve dropped in the room and sounded like a canon. Su Li was the first to break the silence. “For the Greater Good was Grindelwald’s motto.”

“Oh course it was his motto!” Dumbledore said brushing off the girl. “He took our philosophy and perverted it. I have stayed pure.”

“What is the prophecy?” Granger asked softly. Several eyes turned to her questioningly but she continued to stare resolutely at Dumbledore.

He shook his head. “Unfortunately I do not believe it wise to reveal that particular piece of information at this time to this many individuals. It could cause disaster should it fall into Voldemort’s hands.”

Laughter rang out throughout the small room and everyone stared between Tonks and Sirius who were both chortling. Sirius was the first to recover and he wiped his eyes while raising his eyebrows at Dumbledore. “Seriously? That’s your excuse? ‘Oh there’s a prophecy! Oh I understand the prophecy! There is only one way to know what it means!’ Please. Everyone knows that prophecies only make sense in hindsight. Come on then, let’s hear it.”

“Fool. I have lived for over a hundred years! I would think I can interpret the significance quite a lot more efficiently than you.”

Amelia smiled dangerously. “Allow me to make something clear, Dumbledore. Tell us your reasoning fully, including the prophecy or I will see you in Azkaban before dawn.”

“I am afraid I cannot,” Dumbledore said leaning back and folding his hands calling her bluff.
Amelia laughed. “Very well. Have it your way, Albus. Harry, tomorrow morning I’ll escort you into the Hall of Mysteries and we’ll take a look at their record ourselves. If the middleman is going to stonewall we can easily cut him out.”

Dumbledore paled. That would not do at all. He had to salvage this situation. Perhaps he could gain some goodwill by telling them the initial part. Sighing heavily he said, “You would go so far despite my concerns, Amelia?” She simply raised her eyebrows at him. “Very well. You force my hand. The prophecy is as follows:

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches…born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies…”

“And the rest?” Tonks asked. Dumbledore frowned at her as did many of the others. “What? You all think that’s it? That he was worried about that little two line thing? That he would give up something he’s been obsessed about enough to try and kill Harry over with a simple threat? He’s keeping something back. I want to know what it is.”

Neville nodded in agreement. “She’s right. There’s no way that’s all there is because that thing could easily apply to me. I’m also born at the end of July and my parents turned down Voldemort three times before I was born too.”

Dumbledore scowled at the boy. When had he gotten so intelligent? When had he started to grow independent enough to think logically? When had any of them? “I related what Voldemort already knows.”

“So that’s why he went after my family,” Harry murmured. “That’s why he was coming for me and said he’d let my mother go if she had stood aside. But how did he find out…”

“Someone must have overheard that part and told him. They probably got a huge reward for it too,” Bathsheda growled.

“Reward…he said my mother was a reward…” Harry paled before his visage morphed into pure fury and hatred. “Voldemort claimed my mother was a reward for a follower with ‘bad hair, a surly attitude and brilliance with potions’! Snape told him that part of the prophecy and Snape asked for my mother in return! YOU PROTECT HIM?!”

Dumbledore could feel the boy’s rage swirling around the room as a heavy wind whipped aside several curtains. Madame Pomfrey moved forward with a calming drought in one hand but Harry just batted it aside. Dumbledore shook his head sadly. “You presume far too much, Harry. Yes, I will admit that Severus informed the Dark Lord about that aspect. But he did not ask for your mother as a reward for his service. He asked for Voldemort to spare her when he realized her family was being targeted and came to me afterwards to plead for my assistance as well.”

“Her! Only her! He didn’t give a toss about my father or me! She never came out of Voldemort’s wand with the Prior Incantatem! For all I know she’s locked in a dungeon somewhere under him!” Harry shouted. Several of those present had frowned in confusion when Harry said Lily Potter’s echo wasn’t present. Dumbledore was not one of them. He knew that the exact workings of brother wand will battles were not so easily understood and it was folly to assume that was the case.

Dumbledore shook his head and sighed heavily. “Again you assume far too much, Harry. I personally witnessed your mother’s dead body in the ruins of that house. I was not even the first there. Hagrid and Sirius both arrived prior to me and found her first. You can ask either of them. Your mother is quite deceased and not ‘locked in a dungeon’ as you put it. Severus loved your
mother. She was quite possibly the only person he ever had loved. He would not do something as debased as what you imply.”

“You’re just protecting him because gave you a sad sob story,” Sirius growled. “Screw you, Albus. We’ll find out the truth of that particular situation soon enough.”

Remus nodded emphatically. “That we will.

Lavender Brown held up a hand while her wand stayed centered on Dumbledore. “Excuse me everyone, but, he’s avoided answering the initial issue. What’s the remainder of the prophecy?”

Dumbledore gaped at the girl. He’d been rather successful with his diversion…how in the blazes did Brown of all people see through his sacrifice of Severus?! “Again. I caution against revealing anything further. The consequences –”

“NOW!” several different voices at once shouted out.

Scowling again Dumbledore’s control slipped. “Fine! You all wish to know the truth? Fine!

“And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not… and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives…the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies…

“Do you see now? Do you understand?!” Dumbledore yelled. “Harry Potter has no chance of defeating the Dark Lord. He is a mere fourteen year old boy while Riddle has decades of experience, followers and power building rituals behind him! But if Harry Potter dies than Voldemort can be killed by another as the prophecy will no longer be in play!”

“What?” Harry asked blinking at him. Everyone else was perfectly silent.

“Either must die at the hand of the other. Voldemort will be the one to kill you. I had hoped that perhaps Crouch entering you into this Tournament at his orders would be close enough to sway things, but clearly I was wrong. Fate has conspired time and again to save you from impossible situations at unbelievable odds! That more than anything proves what I say. You will die at Voldemort’s hand and then someone else can destroy his evil taint forever.”

The silence again reigned supreme. After several long moments it was broken by a small chuckle from Harry. A chuckle which quickly turned into a laugh. A laugh which spread among nearly half of the watchers in the room. The rest – including Dumbledore – looked on at those laughing as if they’d gone mad. Wiping his eyes, Harry finally quieted and shook his head. “You…are such an idiot. I don’t understand how people could’ve ever looked up to you if you always thought this way. Even assuming that thing is completely accurate and perfectly literal there’s dozens of ways around it. Hermione, you want to take this?”

Granger glared at Dumbledore and held up her hand flicking up her fingers up as she began to speak. “A powerful memory charm on Voldemort. Then, literally everything could be ‘the power he knows not’. Concealment and a piercing spell through the brain from the back. Draught of Living Death administered in his sleep. Actually, anything performed while he’s sleeping would satisfy that condition. Aurors, Hit Wizards, or really anyone subduing him and calling for Harry to perform the final execution. Harry telling a pack of mercenaries or Hit Wizards ‘go act as my Hand and kill Voldemort for me’. Some trap involved the insane runic inventions Harry keeps coming up with. The prophecy doesn’t even specify Voldemort! Any two-bit wizard could go around calling himself a Dark Lord, scratch Harry and be the one it’s referring to. You’ve apparently tried...
to kill him all year – it could just as easily be talking about you! That you assume your
interpretation is the only interpretation is utterly moronic and frankly embarrassing!”

By the time Granger was done speaking even the people who hadn’t been laughing were nodding
their heads in agreement.

“You fools!” Dumbledore snarled. This little witch thought she was better than him? That she was
smarter than him? He’d lived for a century! He’d experienced more loss and combat and
subterfuge than anyone in this room! He’d heard countless prophecies and he certainly knew what
he was doing in regards to this one! They didn’t have all the information and they dared to look
down on him?! “You don’t have half the facts and you assume you know everything. You follow
a nascent Dark Lord and you smile about it!”

Eyebrows rose, wands sparked and wings grew from Delacour’s back. The first to speak though
was Bathsheda. “Nascent Dark Lord? You’re speaking about Harry?” she asked in a quiet, even
tone all the more dangerous for its lack of inflection or emotion. “The boy who has only ever
displayed a worrying lack of self-preservation and a nobility streak larger than Big Ben? The boy
with an incurable case of chronic hero syndrome? The boy who tried to negotiate a peaceful
resolution with a basilisk? The boy who has ignored long standing House divides and made friends
in every single House? The boy with the love of three young women? That boy? That’s your
‘nascent Dark Lord’?”

“He is corrupted!” Dumbledore yelled surging to his feet and pointing at Harry. “You blind
yourself to what you don’t wish to see! His every action broadcasts his disdain and contempt. He
waltzes through tradition and culture with nary a glance. He gains followers and confidants and
allies just like Riddle’s early years. I’ve already watched two Dark Lords rise through my own
inaction. Not again! I can see the signs even if you cannot! He will turn and he will destroy any
who stand in his way. He has already been seduced by the Dark! The Horcrux has corrupted him
and – ” Dumbledore slammed his mouth shut with an audible clack. Too far. He’d let them push
him too far.

“Horcrux? With Harry?” Sirius asked, his eyes slits. “Explain.”

Harry frowned. “What’s a Horcrux?”

Greengrass shook her head and hugged her arms around herself shuddering. “Evil. Pure evil. It’s
like those Soul Jars you showed us over the summer in that…Dungeons and Dragons game thing.”

Granger frowned. “Like a phylactery? It safeguards one’s soul preventing death? I suppose that
could explain why Voldemort survived as a wraith…but what does that have to do with Harry?”

Of course Greengrass would know of Horcruxes. Black was no surprise either. But Granger…had
Harry been so corrupted that he brought an innocent Muggleborn into his long term schemes?
Dumbledore stayed resolutely silent. Amelia shook her head and sighed. “Tonks, go to the
Ministry and get the veritaserum.”

“On it,” Nymphadora moved to brush past him when Dumbledore scowled and shook his head.

“Stop.” The ex-Auror turned to raise her eyebrows at him and Dumbledore’s visage darkened
further. Veritaserum. He was skilled at avoiding the questions, but he knew he did not approach
Moody’s level and they would break through eventually. If he was going to be interrogated then
he was going to control the interrogation. “I will explain.”

“We’re waiting,” Harry said laying his hands carefully down on either side of the bed.
Dumbledore glared at the boy. “Of course you are. But just who is waiting? Harry…” or Voldemort?” No one spoke as Dumbledore continued to stare at their leader. Finally he grunted and shook his head. “You fools refuse to see it. Voldemort created his Horcruxes to defeat death. The diary was one. You already destroyed that,” he said gesturing to Davis who flinched back into Lovegood who wrapped the girl in a hug while Greengrass squeezed her hand. The house elf also cringed and wrung his hands. “Did you think that a mere magical artifact would be able to possess and drain the life of another to take on its own? Preposterous. Perhaps something the Ancient Atlantean had created might be able to do such a thing but certainly nothing from the present time period. That Voldemort continued to be a presence afterward proves he had more. If he created more than one certainly he would have gone for a magically significant number.

“Harry is his last,” Dumbledore continued scowling at the group. “Likely an unintentional one. Voldemort would have expected to have little resistance that night and would have already prepared the initial ritual only requiring the significant death and associated object to be imbued with the Horcrux. When he was instead vanquished himself, the prepared soul shard was thrown loose and attached to the boy as the only other living being present in the vicinity. I saw the taint immediately upon my arrival at Godric’s Hollow and ensured that appropriate steps were taken to ensure that the effects of the corruption were minimized.”

“The Dursleys…” Harry whispered.

Dumbledore nodded. “Of course. With your will beaten down, either your magic would surge to protect you – reinforcing the barriers holding back the Horcrux’s influence – or you would be consumed by it. Once the Horcrux consumed you the prophecy would likely have been considered filled as Harry Potter as a distinct entity would cease to exist. I would be forced to complete what Voldemort started in order to safeguard the rest of the population. It has already begun. Your actions prove that you have been influenced and corrupted. Voldemort’s soul has turned you down a Dark path and you follow in his footsteps. I will not allow a third Dark Lord to arise on my watch. I am sorry. But I cannot allow it to happen. Even if you have avoided full corruption, you still must die to destroy the Horcrux anchoring Voldemort to life.”

Dumbledore’s mouth set in a stern line and he flicked the Elder Wand into his hand. He cast a silent immobilization spell on the room. It would only hold for two or three seconds against this many people, but it would be long enough. Raising his wand for what might very well be his last act, Dumbledore cast the strongest *reducto* spell he could at the bed containing Harry Potter.

Harry watched frozen as Dumbledore adjusted his aim and let loose his spell. If he could move he would probably be in hysterics at that moment. Surviving a duel with Voldemort just to get slaughtered by Dumbledore? The universe certainly had a sense of humor.

“Prewk!!” A loud squawk sounded throughout the room as Fawkes flamed into the Infirmary between Harry and Dumbledore directly in the path of the old man’s spell. The curse collided with Fawkes and a pile of feathers tumbled to the bed below where the phoenix had materialized.

“Fawkes? Why? Why would you...why?” Dumbledore uttered with his mouth gaping open and his wand held limply.

The room unfroze. Harry summoned the old man’s wand with his *Accio* tattoo. At the same instant, nearly thirty spells converged on Dumbledore from the people in the room.

A cacophonous bang rang out almost equal in intensity to Harry’s *Boomstones*. Shaking his head to clear it, Harry peered down the length of his bed to see Dumbledore crumpled onto the floor nearby. He had obviously been hit by several different spells in addition to the standard stunning
and disarming hexes. The Headmaster had sprouted boils, tentacles, bat bogeys, burns, some bleeding and it looked like part of his beard had been wrapped around his neck.

Harry let out a low whistle and looked around the room. “Remind me never to piss you all off, yeah? Thanks guys. And thank you, Fawkes. You saved my life.” The baby phoenix crawled out of the pile of feathers, let out a soft trill of appreciation and sorrow before hopping up and nuzzling Harry’s neck settling in on his shoulder.

Several people were breathing hard, some of from anger, others from worry. Most of the latter group were from the members not in Harry’s core team and they seemed to be taking both Dumbledore’s attack and their own counter-attack much harsher. Pomfrey took charge and shuffled forward to start casting diagnostic spells at Dumbledore. “Well, he’ll live. Though at this point I’m not certain whether that’s a good thing or not…”

“It is,” a resigned voice said from the doorway. Harry turned and nodded to Newton and Paracela as they came into the hospital ward. “We’ll take over from here.”

“And just who the bloody hell are you?” Amelia said glaring at the two alchemists and stepping between them and Dumbledore. “This man has to stand trial and be imprisoned or executed for crimes. I don’t care who his friends are, he attacked a student – a House Lord – with intent to kill in front of thirty witnesses. He can’t get away from this one!”

“And he won’t,” Paracela said calmly pushing Amelia’s wand to the side and glaring down at Dumbledore. “I told you he’d gone round the bend, Nic. Sorry…Newt.”

“That’s a horrible pet name,” Newton muttered. “Should’ve thought better before choosing Newton…”

Paracela shook her head ignoring the incredulous looks of most of the occupants of the ward. “Too late now, dear. He’s senile. Utterly and completely bonkers. How he managed to hide his condition for so long is amazing. He should still have had several decades before getting that bad. Poor old fool. Should’ve asked for help before trying to murder innocent kids!”

“I’ll ask again, who are you?” Amelia hissed through gritted teeth with her fingers whitening as they clutched the wand handle.

“Newton and Paracela Fulcanelli. Or if you prefer, Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel,” Paracela said with a sigh. Loud gasps sounded and Harry thought he caught Padma fainting momentarily. Gabrielle’s mouth dropped open before widening into a huge grin. “We’d very much appreciate it if you all keep that under wraps. We much prefer to fly under the radar so to speak.”

Newton grimaced as he looked at the blank faces. “To use a more wizarding appropriate phrase, we go shopping with a Notice-Me-Not up.” Harry snorted as he said heads suddenly bobbing in understanding. Muggle Studies was so woefully out of date.

Paracela turned to Amelia, McGonagall and Flitwick who had also stepped forward to block her progress. “The old man may be mildly insane – ”

“Mildly?” Tonks muttered drawing an assortment of dark chuckles.

“Yes, unfortunately, mildly. As I was saying, he’s not fully wrong.” A cacophony of shouts rang out before Paracela glared around the room at everyone waiting for them to quiet down. “If you would all let me finish…thank you. He’s not wrong in that, Voldemort did obviously create Horcruxes. Annoying blasted things. Every few decades someone decides it’s a good idea again.
The knowledge of how to create them or who had decided to use them should not be spread. All it would take is one delusional megalomaniac with an ounce of sense and it’d be easier to move to Mars than kill him.”

Newton sighed and nodded. “She’s not really overstating that either. I highly suggest you all take a vow to only speak of this to each other in order to safeguard it from prying minds.”

McGonagall slowly lowered her wand as did Flitwick. Both looked between each other and sighed. “I have to agree. This sounds like the darkest and most dangerous of magic. Filius and I will craft a sufficient magical vow. Everyone please remain present until we are complete.”

Amelia didn’t look happy but she nodded as well and lowered her wand. Shiva stepped forward and fixed the two alchemists with a hard stare. “And what he said about Harry?” Harry shifted uncomfortably on the bed. In less than a second he felt three different hands on him and felt a bit of tension leaving him with the reassurances of the women he loved. He noticed from the corner of his eye, Daphne shift slightly in his direction before planting herself back in place.

Newton shrugged. “I'm an alchemist not a soul worker. Don’t ask me. Once we’re done interrogating Albus I’ll let you know if he has any specific spells to detect a Horcrux or if he’s just going with a gut feeling. Say two or three weeks. Maybe a month or two depending on how good he is at evasion under potions.”

“We can do that perfectly fine,” Amelia said.

Sirius sighed and took her arm slowly drawing the DMLE Head back. “Let it go, Amy. He’s right. We have very few Aurors, even less who wouldn’t be intimidated by Dumbledore and none with the right skill set to ask the correct questions. I doubt, I have the right skill set and I’ve made it my mission in life to avoid answering direct questions if possible just because it’s funnier when people get frustrated by it.” He turned to the Fulcanellis. “What will happen to him after you’re done? I don’t want him ever coming back to threaten my godson.” Shiva made a noise in her throat that could loosely be termed as agreement. Harry thought it sounded far more like something that Midnight would let out when angry.

Paracela sighed. “We already told Fleur, Harry and Bathsheda the initial plan. No matter what we’ll bind his magic. After that it’ll depend on what shape he’s in. Honestly with the amount of spells you people hit him with, I’d be amazed if he wakes up in a month. Dumbles is not a young man after all.”

Newton nodded. “Agreed. If his mind is mostly intact we’ll see about turning him back over to you for judgment. If he’s truly as far gone as that rant made him appear and if your spells have pushed it even further…well to be honest your government is horrible with punishments. He’d likely escape anything beyond being left at St. Mungo’s until the end. I…would prefer the first option if that is the case. Albus would be…comfortable at St. Mungo’s. I don’t really think that’s an ideal solution anymore. However, Harry, you have final say. You were his target after all.”

“Harry Potter Sir should have Whiskers stabbed with his Demon Sword,” Dobby muttered from the bedside.

Harry turned and smiled down at Dobby. “As poetic as that might be Dobby, there is a difference between killing someone in battle and killing them in cold blood. I agree though that if he’s senile he’d probably be sent to St. Mungo’s and it’s too cushy there for him. Go with the first thing you told us earlier.”

“Very well,” Paracela said nodding. “We’ll just take Dumbles then and be on our way. Let us
know how this turns out, yes? I don’t think we’ll be staying around the area what with the megalomaniac on the loose again. Besides, Comic Con starts up soon. Things to do. People to see. Collections to improve. Ta!”

Much later that night, Harry was sitting up and speaking with his girlfriends, Daphne, Shiva and Sirius. The girls had glanced at Daphne initially, but Hermione had taken her aside, whispered a few words of which Harry only caught “later” and most of the tension seemed to diminish. Remus had intended to stay as well, but Amelia had recruited him to help her clean up the fallout and deal with the Wizengamot along with the Delacours.

“Are you alright, kid? Not the bullshit you fed before to the others. Seriously, are you alright?” Shiva asked frowning down at him.

Harry sighed loudly and flopped back into the pillows piled behind him. “Pomfrey said I was in shock. With that and the calming potions she gave me after it wore off I don’t think I could really feel much strong emotion at all at the moment. I could be a lot worse. I can tell you that. My hand is killing me though. Daphne, we’re going to have to retouch up that tattoo when I get out.”

“Sure, Harry,” Daphne said nodding. “That’s really not that important at the moment though.”

Harry groaned and wiped a hand through his hair. “Tell me about it. We have like three or four issues that just jumped to the top of the priorities list…”

Sirius leaned against the wall and chuckled. “Just three or four eh, pup? I’d say closer to 20, but hey good to know you have priorities, Harry! Hey by the way, did you try and use the Sword of Gryffindor on Riddle? It seems like a good primary plan if we know it’ll work. Even if his soul is split like…Dumbledore thought, well a Sword that eats souls would probably be useful.”

Harry shrugged. “Never got close enough to try. Well, I was close enough maybe once, but I was a bit too distracted to try and summon it. Also, same problem as with Midnight. Between the duel itself and my hand, I doubt I’d have been able to concentrate well enough.”

“Hey I’m not criticizing,” Sirius said holding up his hands. “I was just asking.”

Tonks sat down on the edge of the bed, her hair shifting to a dark blue color that hung halfway down her back. “So what’s on the top of your priorities, Wonder Boy?”

Harry frowned. “In order? The soul shard that is in my head. Finding out if my mother was laid to rest correctly. Fixing the tracekey. Then I can worry about the possibility of Voldemort having more Horcruxes that we have to hunt down and destroy.”

“So you are not worried about ze prophecy?” Fleur asked. She slipped under the covers next to Harry and snuggled as close to him as she could eliciting a few raised eyebrows. The relieved sigh she let out and the way that the remaining down covering her arms faded away however only resulted in knowing smiles from those surrounding Harry’s bed.

Harry draped an arm over Fleur and pulled her closer while shrugging. “Not really. Like Hermione said, there’s a gazillion ways to interpret that phrasing without having to definitely focus on a one-on-one duel to the death. Knowing my luck, it’s probably going to come down to it, but I’m not going to needlessly stress over it at the moment. And Nym and Sirius are right, prophecies only truly make sense in hindsight.”

“Good. I left to you to battle zat monster alone once. I have no intention of leaving you alone against him a second time,” she murmured into his chest.
“Fleur,” Harry said slightly exasperated. “You didn’t leave me alone. I pushed you and you hit the portkey. If you want to blame someone for me being alone blame me. And I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” Harry’s face darkened and he knew Fleur could feel his heartbeat pick up since she squeezed him tighter. “You didn’t see how close Pettigrew’s Killing Curse came to hitting you. It passed through your hair, Fleur…”

Hermione moved to Harry’s other side and lightly kissed his cheek. “But it didn’t hit her. And you are both alive which is the important thing.”

“Just for the record,” Tonks said. “We also don’t know for sure that you do have a bit of Riddle in you. That sounds like a load of shite to me. I mean, anyone who spends five minutes with you when you aren’t pissed should realize that, Wonder Boy. Besides the snake tongue thing I can’t see it.” She paused and continued in a much quieter voice that was barely audible, “And I really like the snake tongue thing.”

Harry’s lips twitched upwards for a moment before he lost his good humor and shook his head sadly. “It’s not shite. I wish it was. When Voldemort was mind raping me, he…found something. It let him jump straight to my deepest layer of defenses. And when I followed him, I saw something. Something that shouldn’t be there. A door with…something behind it. The door disappeared almost immediately, but…I know what Dumbledore meant when he said I’d be corrupted. I…” Harry grimaced and clung to Fleur. Hermione frowned and sat down leaning into his other side.

Taking a deep breath Harry nodded and kept going. “Voldemort switched gears. All of a sudden he was willing to do a lot to turn me and keep me alive. That was when he said that my mother was a prize for Snape and he offered me an – incentive I guess. He said you guys would all be spared if I stopped fighting and joined up. I stared at the wall where the door disappeared and…I wanted to take the deal. I wanted it bad.” Harry shuddered. “It was like I could see a glimpse of Evil Overlord Harry, but worse. And not worse because I was being as amoral and callous as him, but worse because I wasn’t. I was perfectly in control, just ruthless and selfish.”

“Oh. Well…shite,” Shiva said succinctly summarizing pretty much the entire group’s feelings.

Harry snorted. “Yeah. Agreed. I don’t think I’m quite up for it yet, but once we get home, Shiva I’d really appreciate it if you help me find that door in my mindscape. I think it’s there, I just can’t see it. I’m pretty sure I can put up more barriers around it and wall it off if someone can show me where it is exactly.”

“Sure, kid. As soon as we get home, I’m all yours. I might not be the best person to do that though. Mind magic isn’t exactly my thing. Are you sure you want me in your head?”

Harry nodded. “I trust you, Shiva.” He winced and looked at Sirius guiltily. “I mean, I trust you too Sirius it’s just – ”

Sirius smiled and waved off Harry’s concerns. “Don’t worry about it, pup. I understand. I was never as good as Andi anyway so I’d probably suggest her. Then again, I certainly wouldn’t want my girlfriend’s mother in my mind.” His grin widened and he wagged his eyebrows at Tonks. “Especially considering what my cousin has apparently been teaching you.”

Fleur, Harry and Hermione’s faces lit up like Christmas lights while Tonks’ stayed perfectly normal. Though it was pretty obvious that she was concealing her own blush with her powers since her hair flashed through several colors before settling on bright red.

“Yes, haha, laughs all around. Thank you for that, Lord Black,” Daphne said crossing her arms
and glaring at the man-child. “I think we really ought to hit on the elephant in the room though. What the bloody hell are we going to do about this hitchhiker?!”

The silence could be cut by a knife after that. For a full minute no one spoke. Finally Hermione asked in a soft voice, “Could we just…cut it away from him?”

“Mione, I love you, but I don’t zink it will be remotely zat easy,” Fleur said raising her eyebrows at the brunette.

Harry on the other hand had a thoughtful expression. “Actually, it might be…maybe. I’d have to craft a rune that could visualize souls as auras or something so we could see if it was centered on a specific body part – like my scar. If it is centered instead of diffused throughout me, then I might just be able to cut off with the Sword…”

“The Sword that eats souls…” Shiva said frowning. “I’m not liking this plan. Not at all.”

“Well it doesn’t eat our souls. That is what the Dementor Anchor is for after all, Shiva,” Harry said his grin growing to manic proportions.

“Yeah in theory. It’s not like we can test that aspect of the darn thing! Look can we at least agree that this will be a backup plan? Like a Plan Z or something? There’s got to be a better way than lopping off pieces of your skull with a Sword. And that’s not even counting that it has basilisk venom infused into it, kid.”

Harry turned his head to stare at Fawkes. “That’s where Fawkes comes in! I know we’re not bonding little guy, and we probably can’t. Hedwig likes you, don’t me wrong, but she’d kill me if I let myself bond with another familiar.” He leaned his head down to whisper conspiratorially to the phoenix. “She’s not as understanding as Mione, Nym or Fleur.”

A loud bark sounded from the direction of the windows and all eyes turned to it. A snowy owl was sitting perched on the bed frame nearest the window and glaring at Harry. Harry paled and clutched Hermione and Fleur closer shifting slightly so that Tonks was between him and Hedwig. “Hey, girl! I meant that in the nicest way possible! You know you’re the only bird for me!”

Hedwig bobbled her head to each side several times continuing to glare at Harry the entire time. Fawkes let out an amused trill and Hedwig finally barked and flew over to perch above Harry’s bed. “Thanks buddy. I appreciate it! See, Shiva, problem solved!”

She glared at him and muttered several choice curses while Sirius dissolved into laughter.

Daphne groaned and wiped a hand down her face. “Pomfrey needs to cut down of the cheering potion dilution in the calming droughts. What were you saying about your mother, Harry? Laying her to rest properly?”

Harry’s laughter stopped and he leaned back into the bed. “Honestly,” he said sounding suddenly very, very tired, “I don’t know anymore. Brother wand effects can’t be well documented or consistent, and that certainly wasn’t ideal circumstances in that graveyard so I suppose it’s possible Voldemort did kill her even without a ghost-echo. He certainly thinks he did. Dumbledore thinks he did. Sir is thinks he did. Hagrid obviously thinks he did. I know I said Snape might have her in a dungeon or something, but now that I’m calmer I can’t see that being the case. He’d probably be
Harry shrugged. “I don’t know what to think. I’m half convinced now that Pettigrew was there that night, that she survived Voldemort’s attempt to kill her, but that Pettigrew finished her off. All I know for sure is I need to see her body now. I may not be able to get answers, but I should hopefully at least get closure. I shouldn’t have let the Tournament distract me from it when the goblins offered back at the start of the year.”

Shiva looked distinctly uncomfortable as she nodded and reached over to squeeze his shoulder. “I’ll talk to Snapfist, Harry. We can go either the day we get back or the day after okay?” He nodded. “Alright. Get some sleep, kid. You need it after tonight. We can work on the tracekey over the summer. Term ends in a few days. Get your rest.” She stood and started walking to the door. “Sirius, Daphne, come on.”

Sirius waved goodbye to the rest and started to follow Shiva out. Before either got far, Harry called out to her. “Shiva! What happened to Umbridge? I forgot to ask with everything that happened.”

“Don’t worry about it, kid,” she said shaking her head and not looking at him. “She’s not a problem anymore. She ran into some acromantulas. Didn’t make it.”

Harry frowned. “That’s not everything…”

Shiva turned and gave him a sad smile. “You know me too well now, kid. Don’t ask, Harry, and I won’t tell.”

His frown deepened. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Harry.”

Slowly he nodded though the frown remained. “We’re going to talk about that when we get home then, yeah?” It wasn’t a question.

Her smile shifted a bit into something less sorrowful and nodded her assent. “Night, kid. Daphne, you coming?”

Daphne looked at the group on Harry’s bed for a long moment before nodding and turning away to follow Shiva and Sirius out.

The hospital wing’s door closed and Tonks frowned at it. “Girls, we need to talk to her. If not before term ends then on the train back.”

Fleur nodded into Harry’s side. “Oui.”

Hermione lifted her head and stared confused between the two other females. “Wait, how are you both riding the train back with us?”

Tonks cocked her head at Hermione and chuckled. “After the craziness that just happened a few hours ago you seriously think I’m letting Wonder Boy ride back without some adult supervision/protection?”

“Zat goes double for me,” Fleur said. “I have already spoken with Madame Maxime. I do not need to be on ze carriage back or at ze closing ceremonies for ze graduation. I do not have many friends at ze school anyway. Gabi was ze only one who would miss me zere but she is returning with Maman and Papa so ze point is…moot?”
“Yes, Fleur, that’s the correct expression,” Hermione said shaking her head with an amused grin. “You two could’ve said something earlier. I thought I was going to have to watch, Harry’s back all on my own.”

“No going to happen, Mione.” Tonks smiled as she looked at Harry with his eyes closed and breathing lightly. “He is so adorable when he sleeps like that.” Two sounds of agreement from Hermione and Fleur met her statement along with a quiet bark from Hedwig and a soft trill from Fawkes. Tonks shifted and laid down so that her head was resting on Harry’s chest while Hermione and Fleur both snuggled closer. “Goodnight, girls. Sleep well and let’s keep everyone’s nightmares at bay for tonight.”
Chapter 33: The Mystery of Lily Potter

“Severus,” Babbling said standing in front of Snape as he walking into the entryway of Hogwarts. “Welcome back; walk with me.”

“I am extremely busy at the moment, Babbling. It will have to wait,” he said in reply eyes narrowing. Why was she accosting him immediately upon his return? He hadn’t immediately attended to Voldemort until after the Potter brat returned. The boy surely couldn’t have told her about him returning to the Dark Lord…could he? Would Riddle have said anything? He certainly wouldn’t have put it past the bastard. Scowling, Snape decided it didn’t matter. Dumbledore would protect his precious spy.

Spy. Sure. More like potion slave. Snape never received any credit for the mass amount of work he did keeping the castle stockpiled on salves and potions. With the amount of injuries Potter received on a yearly basis Snape was certain at least half the budget the staff always complained about was channeled directly down the brat’s throat.

Babbling’s scowl matched his own as she stepped forward nose to nose. “I really must insist, Severus.”

“I have just returned from a strenuous outing and I need to update the Headmaster immediately. Out of my way.” Which was entirely truthful. That he was going to make a short stop to his private supply and grab a few painkillers and something that should help with post-Crucius recovery wasn’t something she needed to know.

“The Headmaster won’t be receiving any reports from you, Snape.” She couldn’t hide the small predatory grin that flashed across her features. It set Snape’s alarms ringing.

“You should know that should I disappear…steps will be taken,” he said slowly fingering his wand.

Babbling had the gall to laugh in his face. “I’m not threatening you, Snape. Not yet at least. That’s why you need to follow me. That way we can see if you need to be threatened. No, I’m merely commenting that our dear, esteemed Headmaster Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore has left the premises. Hopefully for good. Hogwarts is under new management. Now,” her good cheer fell away and she glared at him with wand in hand. “Teachers’ Conference Room. Now.”

Dumbledore gone? What?! Numbly he set off towards the Conference Room. If Albus was gone then who was he supposed to report to? Who was to ensure that he received appropriate updates and sacrificial operations to deliver to Voldemort? How was he supposed to toe the line between the two sides without the primary leader in play? How he supposed to survive without Dumbledore?!

The door slammed shut behind Snape jostling him back out of his thoughts and he looked up at the table in the center of the room. The only hint of surprise he let show was widening eyes as he looked down upon Amelia Bones, Filius and Minerva. “What is this?”

“An inquiry,” Minerva said with a slight rise in her eyebrows and a tinge of Scottish brogue leaking into her voice. Babbling took her seat next to Minerva causing Snape to begin to sweat as he sat down in the lone chair across from the other four.
“Please lift up your left sleeve, Severus Snape,” Amelia Bones said calmly. She might have been discussing the weather for all she seemed to care.

Snape did what he always did when confronted. He attacked. “I believe that it is against the law asking a private citizen to reveal anything he does not wish to without proper authorization. I will assuredly be lodging a formal complaint with the Minister’s office as to your lack of proper procedure, Director Bones.”

“Well, according to Statute 12, the Department Head can conduct a pre-investigation if there is reasonable suspicion that underage personnel are in danger. Considering the recently resurrected Voldemort himself called you by name near Mr. Potter, that already grants me the right,” Bones replied still completely calm. Snape clutched his wand under the table tighter. Of course Potter had blabbed! “In addition, you disappeared shortly after the return of Mr. Potter – also suspicious. To further muddy the situation you, Severus Snape, have been consistently protected by a man who just recently admitted to attempting to murder Harry James Potter for over a year!” Snape’s eyes widened and his sneer was replaced with open-mouthed shock. What the bloody hell had happened in the day he’d been gone?

Amelia leaned forward all hints of civility dropped. “We already know you used to be a Death Eater, Snape,” she hissed. “I can check court records perfectly fine. I wanted to see how you’d react. The answer is ‘not well’ if you’re curious. Now here’s the situation you pathetic bastard: I know Dumbledore helped you in the past. He tried to pass off some story about you turning to protect Lily Potter. If that’s true then as much as I personally despise you, I have a hard time believing you’d have been helping Dumbledore this year with his insane little attempts on Harry’s life. We can’t be certain of that though. So you are going to drink this vial of veritaserum, answer our questions and we will proceed in the most appropriate manner from there.”

Snape leaned back into his seat and finally succeeded in closing his mouth. Amelia leaned across the table and deposited a small vial of potion in front of him. He tried to come up with a response, a question, a rebuttal, a refusal…anything. Nothing came to mind. Albus Dumbledore tried to murder Harry Potter? His protégé? His ‘Golden Boy’? Finally, Snape shook his head in simple denial and grabbed the vial tipping his head back and dropping three drips onto his tongue.

“Severus,” Minerva said, “where did you just return from?”

“Attending the Dark Lord Voldemort,” he replied monotone. “He was quite displeased it took me so long to respond to his initial summons. I barely succeeded in convincing him I still served him and that my position so close to Dumbledore was perfect to spy for him. Afterwards, he kept me longer so that I could treat his wounds from the duel with Potter.”

Filius closed his eyes and his lip curled upwards in a silent snarl. “Do you still serve the Dark Lord?”

“No,” Snape said. He breathed an internal sigh of relief as the other four visibly relaxed slightly. The potion still allowed for feelings even if they couldn’t be expressed. “I ceased to serve Voldemort once he killed Lily. Had he left her alive, I might have returned. But he did not. I serve Dumbledore as he has promised he knows how to kill the man. Voldemort took the only thing I have ever cared for and crushed her under his heel. I will see him destroyed. Beyond that, my loyalty is to me alone. This entire country can destroy itself for all I care. I just want to see Voldemort dead first.”

“Revenge…” Filius sighed but nodded. “I find you distasteful to the extreme, but at least I can understand that motivation. Amelia?”
The Director nodded at the Charms Master and turned back to Snape. “What did Dumbledore have you do?”

“In the past decade I have brewed potions for him primarily – things for both the castle and his personal stock. Last night, I informed him of Dark Lord’s summons and he directed me to return and embed myself into Voldemort’s Inner Circle again so that I could spy for him. I intended to report major engagements back to Dumbledore and bring whatever information he specified back to Voldemort to convince the Dark Lord I was his spy.”

“And you have never tried to harm, injure or murder Harry Potter?” Babbling asked.

Snape sneered even through the haze of the potion. “I have allowed Potter to harm himself multiple times since he arrived at school. Primarily during lessons where I allowed him to test clearly defective potions on himself. None that would cause true damage or be too dangerous, but all had painful or embarrassing effects. If any potions were actually dangerous I stepped in and questioned his intellect. I have allowed Slytherins such as Malfoy to add ingredients to his potions to increase these occurrences as well as and to jinx him in the hallways. I have belittled him and his close allies. I have taken excessive points from him and ordered him into numerous frivolous detentions. He is a fool; impulsive and reckless. He is exactly like his father and the only thing in him of the woman I loved is his eyes. I have however, saved the boy in his First Year when Quirrell cursed his broom. I have done nothing further to aid him. I have never done anything that would cause lasting harm.”

Babbling looked ready to spit fire at him and Snape was very thankful that others were present as it should prevent her from sending him to the hospital wing at least. What the woman saw in the child…what Greengrass and Davis saw in the child for that matter, was beyond him. All Potter ever did was get himself and those around him into trouble. Just like James Potter. At least the son managed to avoid bullying those less fortunate than himself.

“Did you know Albus was trying to kill Harry Potter?” Minerva asked breathing deeply.

Snape shook his head. “No. I wish the boy humiliated, not dead. As much as I hate it, I never satisfied a life debt to the boy’s father. And at the end of the day…he is still Lily’s son.” Babbling pushed back from the table and stalked to the wall grabbing a calming potion and downing it before sitting back down. For a moment Snape wondered if perhaps he had gone a little too far with his torment of the child. Potter was after all just a boy.

“Do you know anything about how Voldemort has maintained his life?” Filius asked.

“It is certainly some form of Dark Magic. I suspect at least one Horcrux,” Snape said. He grimaced internally. If they spoke of this outside these walls…if any hint reached Voldemort that he suspected the man’s greatest secret…

Amelia smiled and nodded. “Do you know where they might be or what they are?”

“No. It is something I hope to discover while spying on him.”

Amelia leaned back and sighed. “Damn. Well it was worth a shot. Anyone got any other questions? No? Okay then.” She handed Snape another potion vial which he took.

Feeling the effects of the veritaserum fade he peered cautiously at the Department Head. “What happens to me now?”

“Now,” Amelia said, “you work for me. Albus Dumbledore has left the building. If you wish to
run feel free. I almost hope you do since then I can just let your old fellows track you down and you can be Voldemort’s problem. If however, you want to stay, then you can continue your spying and inform me instead of Dumbledore of all important developments. You can tell Voldemort whatever the hell you want to in order to make the lie convincing.”

Minerva leaned forward with her lips in such a thin line that they had almost vanished. “And if you wish to maintain employment at this school you will be conducting yourself in a fair manner from this point forward! Consider your Head of House privileges revoked as soon as term ends. I don’t care what your position is with the enemy or your importance to the war effort, this school and these children are my priority! If I had had my way, you would have been curbed years ago! Now that I am Acting Headmistress you will behave or you will find yourself out on your arse, Severus Snape. Do I make myself clear?”

Snape narrowed his eyes, but gave a curt nod.

“Oh and Severus,” Babbling said flippantly with a false smile. “Stay the hell away from Harry Potter.”

Harry had just managed to get released from the hospital wing in time to make it to breakfast the morning before traveling home. When he walked into the Great Hall he had to suppress a smirk looking up at the Staff table and seeing McGonagall in Dumbledore’s old chair. From what Shiva had said, Fudge was trying to suppress news of the man’s breakdown and ‘arrest’. The current story circulating in the Prophet was that Dumbledore had experienced mental trauma in the aftermath of the Triwizard Cup and was busy recovering. Amelia was apparently furious and Shiva had said it was only a matter of time before the actual story got out. Harry had privately asked Luna if she’d wait until about a week into the summer before printing a story in the Quibbler.

As he sat down at the table he found the seats on either side of him taken by rather unusual guests. Su Li sat down to his right, the Patil twins across from him and Millicent to his left.

“Good to see you out and about, Harry,” Su said grabbing an apple from the table. Harry just nodded and raised his eyebrows in a silent question. “What? Did you think we’d all run after what the ex-Headmaster said?” Harry shrugged noncommittally. The core group was never in question, but the others were somewhat unknown quantities after all. Su snorted in reply. “Please, I think we’d have been able to see an up and coming Dark Lord. At least I’d hope so…” She shook her head and took a small bite from the apple. “Anyway, I would like your permission to speak with some members of my family back in China about your potential little problem over the summer. No names will be mentioned and nothing specific will be discussed unless they have a non-lethal solution.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “You seriously think they might know something?”

Su shrugged. “Probably not, but it couldn’t hurt to ask. Either way, I’m willing to teach you some martial moves next year. I’m pretty handy with daggers and I might be able to show you something with your sword if you want. I expect things to ramp up once we all come back from the summer hols. All I ask in return is you teach me some of those spell chain things that Flitwick was showing you. Or something with runes, but I doubt that’s something you can easily teach.”

Harry laughed and smiled holding out his hand to shake hers. “Deal. And yes, as long as no names and specifics are mentioned feel free to ask for some help.”

Su smiled back and left the table letting Hermione slip into her vacated spot. Harry turned to the Patil twins where Padma just smirked. “She already said pretty much what Parvati and I were
going to say. Does that same permission extend to us and our families in India as well?”

Harry nodded. “Excellent,” Padma responded. “We’ll let you know if we find anything. For what it’s worth, I don’t think you have much to worry about long-term. Short-term yeah, definitely. But long-term I think you’ve have enough bad karma to balance things out and leave you with enough good karma coming your way to make it through.”

Parvati laughed. “Or at least to get rid of the hitchhiker. Having three partners might tip the scales a bit there. Oh and Lavender is still behind you too. She’s busy consulting her crystal ball to see if she can see anything. I think she’d have more luck with the tea leaves, but hey, she prefers the ball.” Parvati shrugged and both girls rose waving goodbye to Harry and letting Luna and Tonks shift seats.

Millicent smiled and lightly punched Harry’s shoulder. “The way you gather allies, Potter, you should’ve been in Slytherin. You would’ve ruled the dungeons. You already know where I stand. Before we headed out I just wanted to thank you again for setting me up with Viktor. I’m visiting him this summer. Father has even been talking with him about moving to Bulgaria long-term if we start getting pressured to join up with Malfoy’s lot. Viktor’s basically been directing the Durmstrang operations since Karkaroff pulled a runner otherwise he’d stop by and say something personally. He did want me to pass along a message though that ‘if the tagalong gives up any decent Dark Spells feel free to share the wealth’. That goes for me too.” Millie smirked again at her boyfriend’s joke and got up to go sit back with the Slytherins while Fleur slotted into her usual seat beside Harry.

Harry looked around at his friends in wonder. Everyone started chuckling at roughly the same moment.

The Hogwarts Express had just left the station and Harry was settling in when Hermione stood and moved towards the compartment door. “We’ll be back in a few minutes, Harry,” she said when Tonks and Fleur moved to follow her. “Do me a favor and do try not to get into another life threatening situation while we’re gone?”

“No promises, Mione,” Harry said smirking. “Me and deadly problems are practically neighbors it seems. They like to come and ask for a cup of tea or pound of butter.”

Hermione groaned while Tonks just laughed. “Wonder Boy, if they do come knocking you just slam that door in their face.”

The compartment door slid shut and the girls went searching for their target. Only a few sections down they found her. Daphne was inside leaning up against the window with Tracey beside her and Luna across the way. “Daphne?” Hermione said. “We really need to talk for a few minutes.”

Daphne turned to them, sighed briefly and nodded. Tracey also looked at the three girls filing into the compartment. She snorted and murmured, “Told you to look for them first. Good luck. Come on, Luna, let’s go for a walk.” Once Tracey and Luna had left, Fleur cast several privacy wards around the compartment.

Daphne grimaced and set her shoulders. “Before you begin, allow me to apologize. I never should have kissed Harry, I know that now, I knew that then. I was just…for a moment all I could envision was him not coming back from the last Task and he was sitting there being so noble and heroic and concerned and…I panicked. So I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Hermione crossed her arms and her lips thinned into a line. “Harry defaults to noble, heroic and
concerned. You’ve been our friend long enough to know this Daphne.”

Daphne wiped a hand across her face and groaned. “Trust me, I do. That’s the problem.”

“Daphne, we are not adverse to the idea of you seeking a relationship with Harry. But to just up and kiss him out of the blue is not acceptable.”

“I know,” Daphne nodded and leaned back in the cushion. “I know. Again, I’m sorry. I’m not exactly used to being this concerned about someone. The only one that’s ever come close is Tracey and she’s never been in situations where the odds were strong she’d die. Well…besides the Chamber thing…”

Fleur gave the Slytherin a small smile and reached over to squeeze her leg. “We understand zis. What we need to know now zough is what your intentions are.”

“My intentions?” Daphne asked confused. “I intend to sit here and try to forget it ever happened.”

Tonks groaned and her hair flashed through a few colors before settling on pink. “That’s probably the worst option. Look, you like him, right?”

“Everyone likes Harry,” Daphne retorted with a raised eyebrow.

“We both know that is not what I meant,” Tonks said staring steadily at the blonde. Daphne stayed silent for several moments eventually responding with a small nod. “Okay. Unlike the two beside me, this actually surprises me a bit. However, I’ve gotten glowing recommendations from both Hermione and Fleur regarding your character and suitability for our partner. Ignoring having feelings for Harry isn’t going to work. Trust me on that one – I tried it for months. That said you appear to be in a relationship already,” Tonks said gesturing towards the door where Tracey had walked out with Luna.

Hermione picked up the conversation thread. “Hence why we really need to know your goals here, Daphne. Luna said that you and Tracey have an arrangement. That is none of business until it begins to involve Harry. Do you want to end up with our boyfriend or do you want to end up with your girlfriend?”

Daphne stared back out the window frowning. Again a long silence hung in the cabin. Finally, Daphne whispered, “I honestly don’t know.” She continued louder, “I never thought I’d enjoy being with a girl, but Tracey has been my friend since before I can remember. To my immense surprise we fit extremely well together. I don’t want to lose that. But with Harry…I can’t stop looking at him. I can’t get him out of my head and I can’t stop thinking about how he’s everything I ever dared to hope for in a potential husband. He’s smart, funny, good looking, willing to stand up for what and who he believes in…and he’s my equal. I trust him enough to let him put a runic tattoo on me!”

Daphne scowled and glared at a passing tree. “That’s why I’m going to sit here and try to ignore that kiss. The last thing I want to do is toy with that boy. Or with Tracey or with any of you. Do I like him? Yes, okay, yes I do. But I need to take more time to figure out things out. Tracey has been pushing me to tell him. Well now he knows. Now I need to figure out what I want.”

Fleur moved to sit next to Daphne and wrapped an arm around the girl. “You wish to have zem both?” Daphne winced and slowly nodded. “Daphne…Daphne look at me.” Fleur reached out gently turned the blonde’s head to meet her eyes. “Hermione, Nymphadora and I are all dating each ozer as much as we are dating ‘arry. We understand.”
Daphne rolled her eyes. “I know, Fleur. I’m not talking about dating you three though. I’m talking about dating someone else. That…” she frowned searching for the right word. “That wouldn’t be fair to you three. I would be the outsider in the group and that doesn’t seem right. I like you all, don’t get me wrong and I certainly wouldn’t mind joining you in the bedroom every once in awhile.” That comment caused Hermione’s face to flush though everyone mostly ignored it. “I’m just not interested in dating any of you. You all have a good thing going with Harry. I refuse to be the one to screw that up.”

Hermione frowned. “So your solution is to ignore your feelings entirely?”

“Yeah. Just for the summer though I think. If I still can’t get the boy out of my head by the time school starts again, we can revisit this.”

“Daphne…” Hermione said softly, “when I was trying to determine who would be a good partner for Harry besides myself, you were always at the top of the list. I don’t think this is the best way for you to go about dealing with your feelings, but I’ll respect your decision.” Hermione stood and nodded moving to the front of the cabin.

Tonks stood up as well and followed Hermione. “Just remember, Daphne, Harry Potter is understanding to a fault for people he cares about. He might not mind you being with Tracey instead of us. Hell, he might even prefer it since then he could just deal with three females primarily instead of four…” Tonks shook her head and gave a rueful laugh. “That poor man. Give a holler if you need anything over the summer.”

Fleur pulled Daphne into a short hug before standing and smiling at the younger girl. “If you change your mind and decide that September is too far, call Hermione or me.”

“Not, Tonks?” Daphne asked raising an eyebrow in amusement.

“Tonks lets us take the lead mostly when it comes to these matters. I hope to see you soon, Daphne Greengrass.”

Harry had just finished up his notes on the *Soul Viewer* when the compartment door of the cabin slid open. He set his notebook aside and looked up to greet the girls only to have the smile fall from his face and twist into a frown. “Malfoy.”

“Is that all you have to say, Scarhead? Nothing witty in that empty skull of yours?” Draco Malfoy drawled as he leaned casually against the doorframe, Crabbe and Goyle behind him. The addition of Theodore Nott was new though Harry really wasn’t too surprised to see the other Slytherin there considering his father had been groveling at Voldemort’s feet.

“That’s rich coming from you, Malfoy,” Harry said raising his eyebrows. “I’m betting you all know already how I dueled your master and came out even. Ahead actually since he was hurt and I got away without any additional injuries. Yet you’re coming to antagonize me. Who’s the stupid one here again?”

Malfoy scowled and pushed off from the door. “Luck doesn’t save everyone, Scarhead. You might be able to get away every so often, but the people around you can’t be under the same blessed star. After all,” he said a grin slowly spreading across his face, “your mummy and daddy died for you!” The Slytherin boys started chuckling lowly at Malfoy’s mocking tone.

Harry’s eyes narrowed and he clutched his wand tighter. He could feel his magic flowing into his tattoos begging to be released, but he held back. He was better than that. He was more restrained.
He wouldn’t hurt these gits for some insults.

Malfoy however, wasn’t done. “I wonder what the Dark Lord is going to do to the rest of your little group now that he’s back? I mean, the Mudblood will be probably just be suffocated. She can’t keep polluting our air after all. The half-breed and the metaslut are useful for entertainment I guess. They’ll probably be kept around for a while though I doubt their minds will survive long. Your professor bitch though…well I’ll make sure the Dark Lord has something special planned for her. Maybe a rune of obedience or something? Would you like that, Potty? I could ask him to have her service you before she slits her own throat?”

Harry’s world dissolved into red and he felt Midnight’s rage twine around his own. His nails extended into claws and it was all Harry could do to growl out, “Honor,” before he jumped towards them.

And he was promptly caught in the strong arms of Tonks who swung him out of the way of stunners cast from Fleur and Hermione. Harry shifted fully to Midnight, slipping out of Tonks’ embrace and yowled low as he stalked towards the unconscious boys on the floor just ahead.

“Harry, no!” Tonks said quickly moving in front of him and grabbing his head to force his eyes to peer into her own. “If you touch them, they can bring charges against you. Don’t give them what they want, Harry.”

Midnight bared his fangs while flicking his green eyes back to Malfoy. Fleur entered the cabin and looked down on Midnight as well sighing. “She is right, Snowball. Zey are not worz it. Let Hermione deal wiz zem. I hear she learned zat jinx from Fred zat he used on ze Umbitch at ze Ball. Zat should be sufficient.”

Hermione nodded curtly her eyes fixed on the four boys. “I’ve improved it too. It doesn’t just affect the bowels. It also hits the bladder now too. Let me just drop them back in their cabin and I’ll be back in a moment.” Grinning wickedly, Hermione levitated the four and proceeded forward. Midnight chuffed in annoyed acceptance as he prowled back to the seat and jumped up curling up as best he could.

“That’s a good panther,” Tonks said smiling at him and using a horribly sweet and overly cutesy voice. “Who’s a good panther? Who’s a good panther? You are! Yes, you are!”

“Don’t tease Snowball like that, Nym!” Fleur said grinning herself as she moved to sit next to him and stroke his ears. Midnight rolled his eyes as both girls chuckled. Hermione came back a few minutes later to see a thoroughly relaxed Midnight purring away as his two partners petting him. Grinning to herself, Hermione moved to join in on the entertainment.

Voldemort sat on his throne stroking Nagini’s head with his burned, blackened hand while deep in thought. It wasn’t a truly worthy throne yet – that would come in time. For now he had to make do with an ornate chair at the head of Lucius’ dining room table. Voldemort had remodeled the room of course so that it served as a far more appropriate throne room. Riddle Manor had possessed such promise too…but with Potter’s escape it was compromised. There was no use in casting a Fidelius when he wished to recruit many allies as quickly as possible. There was also the simple issue of not trusting anyone besides Bella and Barty.

Barty. Voldemort scowled thinking of one of his most loyal and devout followers trapped in the Ministry holding cell awaiting a Dementor’s Kiss. He’d have to either act quickly or subvert one of the Aurors to retrieve the man soon. Subversion was probably the easiest goal. Especially since Fudge was blaming everything on Pettigrew and refusing to acknowledge Voldemort’s recent
resurrection. He certainly wasn’t going to complain yet. It allowed him to gain allies far easier.

Allies…such a…distasteful word. Voldemort didn’t want allies; he wanted sycophants and minions. He wanted followers. Followers like Bella, Travers and Rookwood. People who were loyal, ruthless and intelligent. He needed to have his circle complete again.

And he needed to show his Death Eaters that he was still strong. Potter had gotten in a lucky shot with whatever flame rune they’d missed and he’d proved to be able to hold his own for a short while. He’d even escaped after that debasing show with the wands. The pureblood fools would keep fearing Voldemort for a time – coming back from death tended to have that effect on one – but if he did not show them his true strength they would soon only remember that Harry Potter had escaped what should have been certain death.

“Lucius!” Voldemort hissed. It was time to act.

The silver-tongued servant hurried into the throne room and knelt at Voldemort’s feet. “My Lord.”

“Prepare my forces, Lucius. We will attack Azkaban before the week is out.”

“But, my Lord, we barely have two dozen people. We do not yet have the strength or the – AAAHHHHHH!” Lucius’ objections quickly dissolved into screams of pain as Voldemort casually directing the Cruciatus curse at him.

After several seconds Voldemort let the pain lapse and resumed stroking Nagini. “Dumbledore is gone and the Ministry cowers. The Dementors will follow me without complaint or hesitation and there is minimal staff present on the island. Do you think me weak, Lucius?” he said casually.

“No…my Lord! Of course…not…my Lord!” Lucius said heaving his trembling body back to his knees as he prostrated himself. “Forgive me…my Lord! I did not think.”

“No, you did not. The fools removed Dumbledore…they were not thinking either.” Voldemort smiled as he leaned back and chuckled. “Potter will be easy enough prey in the future. We can afford to concentrate on restoring my circle first. After that I will require the prophecy. For now though…Bella and Barty. Ensure you have someone placed to remove Barty while we attack the prison, Lucius. I want my servant back.”

Lucius nodded quickly as he backed towards the door. “It will be done, my Lord. We will not fail you.”

Narcissa scowled as she watched her ‘husband’ limp out of his meeting with the Dark Lord. “Typical. He’s not back a week and men fall over themselves to help him burn our world to the ground,” Narcissa muttered. Lucius didn’t even consider the devastation that the mad fool would be unleashing. Dumbledore, Voldemort – they were two sides of the same coin really.

When she’d dared to raise an objection to the madman invading her house she’d very nearly been subjected to Lucius’ threats of ‘forceful reminders as to her place.’ No more. Perhaps if Voldemort had stayed out of her direct sight she could have forced herself to remain blind for a time once again. But now…he tortured one of his most loyal followers in Lucius’ own home! For pointing out a glaring problem in a plan!

Voldemort was no Slytherin. He was no pureblood. He was no King. He was an unquestionably powerful fool with delusions of grandeur…and with just enough charisma to attract sycophants who could not think for themselves. She would not stand there and let his insanity consume her as well.
“Draco,” Narcissa said as she walked into her son’s room. “Why do look so smug?”

“Hello, Mother,” Draco replied with a smirk his father would be proud of. All it served to do to her was twist the knife in her chest. “I got to Potter on the Express. It was glorious. His eyes lit up and his face went white. You should have seen it!”

Her mask cracked and she growled down at the boy. He’d been raised well by Lucius. An idiot through and through who couldn’t even recognize his own stupidity. “Really? From what I heard, you were mere seconds away from being challenged to an Honor Duel that would have seen you either dead or nameless. You should be kissing the feet of his women for knocking you out and depositing you back in your compartment. Not sitting there gloating over provoking a boy to rage with the rape and murder of his future wives, surrogate mother and deceased parents.”

Draco lost his haughty look for but a moment before it returned in full force. “Kissing the feet of that Mudblood and the beasts? Granger isn’t worth even worth the air she breathes while Veela and Metamorphs are only good for the entertainment they provide! I would never lower myself to touching any of them! And what makes you so certain that Potter would win, Mother? You don’t sound like you have any confidence in your own son.”

Narcissa couldn’t hold back her laughter. “You can barely fight your way out of a bag, Draco. Harry Potter dueled the Dark Lord to a standstill while you still run screaming from a garden snake.” She peered down at him with an inviting expression begging for a rebuttal. “Nothing to say, Draco? I tried to warn both you and your father to beware of just who you toy with. Your father never learned and it’s come back to haunt him with a vengeance. Every time he leaves that madman’s presence it is in pain and agony. You see this yet not only do you proceed to keep blustering, you eagerly ask to serve! And you continue to antagonize the fourteen year old boy that can fight that beast! Congratulations, Draco, you are just like your hero. I offer you one last chance to listen to my advice. Follow me, son. Follow me to a real future.”

“You should not disparage the Dark Lord like that, Mother,” Draco said quietly. “He is a great man who will lead us to where we rightfully belong. If he heard you now…”

Narcissa narrowed her eyes as she gazed into her son’s own. All she saw was pity, fury and disgust reflected back. She considered knocking him out and taking him by force…No. Her son was a lost cause for the moment. All she could hope was that the horrors he would soon witness would shock him out of his delusions and she could try to rebuild his shattered beliefs after the ashes fell.

“You should not disparage the Dark Lord like that, Mother,” Draco said quietly. “He is a great man who will lead us to where we rightfully belong. If he heard you now…”

Sweeping out of the room, Narcissa made a quick stop in her bedroom to grab her jewelry before stepping out into the backyard and making a timely apparition to – hopefully – her new home. Standing on the sidewalk outside Number 12 Grimmauld Place Narcissa took a deep breath and let it out slowly. This was the moment of truth. This was her last chance to change her mind.

Setting her shoulders and shaking off the doubt, Narcissa stepped onto the walkway and upon reaching the front door rapped the regal knocker. Barely ten seconds passed before the door swung open and revealed the man who would either be her executioner or her savior.

“Cousin. Long time no see,” Sirius Black said raising his eyebrows.

Harry collapsed bonelessly on the sofa in the living room with a contented sigh.
“Good to be home, kid?” Shiva asked chuckling as she closed the door to the flat and idly flicked her suitcases towards her room with her wand.

“Wonderful to be home. You put up the protection and warning wards right?”

Shiva snorted and raised an eyebrow at him. “Would I have let either of us set foot in here if I hadn’t? Come on, kid, ask something harder than that!”

Harry’s grin melted into a neutral expression and he twisted so he fully facing her. Warning bells went off in her mind as she realized the rather glaring mistake in issuing that particular challenge. “Harder huh? Alright, what happened with Umbridge?”

Shiva’s insides curled and she had a hard time keeping the scowl from her face. She wasn’t sorry about leaving Umbridge to die. Hell, if she had actually tried to help the bitch the giant spiders probably would’ve gotten her too anyway. No. What she was dreading was the look in his eyes when she told him she saw someone about to die a rather horrible death and just causally walked away. He’d been pretty clear to Dobby a few days ago how he felt about murder vs. self-defense.

“Shiva…you promised we could talk about this when we got home,” Harry said softly.

She muttered a quiet curse. “You’re not even fifteen. How you manage to remember to come back to these things?” she huffed sitting down at the other end of the couch. Harry shrugged though had the grace to look slightly sheepish. “Alright, Harry, fine. She showed up a few minutes before the Task began, knocked back the two trainees who came to get her and ran into the woods. I followed.”

Harry nodded. “And that’s where she ran into the acromantulas.”

“Yeah,” Shiva sighed. “She turned a corner on the path and ran straight into a giant arse web. I barely managed to stop without getting stuck too. Instead of letting her down I interrogated her a bit and let her rant.”

“Okay. And she implicated Dumbledore as telling her what to do?”

Shiva laughed and shook her head. “Please! The woman was far too stupid to realize he played her like a fiddle. She said enough though that it was pretty obvious. She also said how she messed with the runic scheme keeping that arena expanded. I actually looked into that a few days ago by the way. There’s nothing in the way of permanence or enduring sets in the cluster. Variable spatial area is excellent for transport of premade things, but basic safety should still be observed.”

Harry chuckled. “Outback Training Alternative. I know it’s not entirely their fault since this is Dumbledore we’re talking about, but I still think they cut a few corners there. I think I’m just going to buy them out when I can afford it. Or partner with them and fix all their issues. Anyway, we’re off-topic. Umbridge?”

“After she finished ranting I was going to start cutting her down and run back to try and stop the Task when the acromantulas showed up. There were only two on the web, but I heard a few more in the surrounding trees. Umbridge started freaking out more and…well – ”

“You left her and ran back,” Harry said. He nodded to himself and gave a small half grin to Shiva. “So you thought I’d freak out that you left her to die without trying to help?”

Shiva shrugged narrowing her eyes at him. The kid was way too unaffected by this. “A little yeah. I had enough time to get her down and hightail it out. It might have resulted in a bit of fighting…but I could’ve done it.”
“Shiva, she tried to kill me since before she even met me,” Harry said crossing his arms and leaning back. “All you’ve ever done is protect me. I’m not sorry that she’s gone and that you don’t have a scratch on you. All I’m sorry for is making you worry. Not saving someone who already deserves to die is a bit different than driving a soul eating, basilisk venom infused sword through an unconscious man’s heart.”

Shiva sat there gaping at Harry for several moments before starting to laugh. “How the hell do you do that, kid?”

His smile widened and he shrugged. “I’m pretty aware of my surroundings, Shiva. Relic of living with the Dursleys. I noticed you flinching when I told that to Dobby.”

“Remind me to never try to hide your presents from you in the flat.”

“Manor. We get to move to the Manor this summer, remember?” He laughed. “It should be easy to hide them there!”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, kid.” Shiva rolled her eyes at him and finally relaxed completely. “Did you want me to take a look inside your head now or later?”

Harry sobered at that and took a deep breath. “I’d prefer now. I don’t want to leave an open doorway for Riddle to get into my head whenever he wants. Or for it to start corrupting and influencing me or something,” he finished with a shudder.

Shiva reached over and squeezed his knee. “That won’t happen, Harry. If it’s really in there, we’ll figure something out and cleanse the taint. Hell, kid, no one thought Dementors could be killed, yet you somehow managed to do that! And made it somewhat easy to replicate too! We’ll kill this stupid soul shard too.”

“Thanks, Shiva,” Harry said softly.

“Wow…talk about your hodgepodge of stuff…” Shiva muttered as Harry took her through the layers of his mental defenses. “Is that supposed to be Zeus?”

Harry glanced over to the side as they coasted past the Death Star and down towards Number 4 Privet Drive on his private asteroid. He ran a hand through his hair and gave a guilty glance. “Uh, yeah. I figured that if people could get past the Enterprise, and the Star Destroyers maybe they’d get caught by a few of the Greek gods. Artemis and Apollo are on the other side of the planet. The Death Star is mostly for show and intimidation though it does make a good final defense. Once people penetrate into the house they’d never think to look back outside for the last line in orbit above them.”

Shiva shook her head and turned back to Harry in awe. “Kid, when I said go crazy with adding random odds and ends to your mindscape I didn’t actually mean go crazy. Damn…I pity the poor soul that tries to get to something you don’t want them to see…”

He shrugged and walked forward. “I’m a private person. Nobody should mess with my head without permission. It was somewhere around here. I think. Should be to the right of my cupboard,” he said frowning and gesturing towards the wall under the stairs.

Shiva bristled at the flippant mention of ‘my cupboard’. She really needed to do something about the Dursleys. They should never be allowed to get away with hurting a child like that. That was something for later though. When they didn’t have Voldemort to deal with.
“Alright, Harry, which door is the cupboard?”

Harry turned to look at her. “What do you mean?”

Shiva shrugged. “Which door, kid? There’s…two of…fuck you really can’t see the second one can you?”

Harry cursed and slammed a fist into the nearby wall. “I was right. Bloody arsehole! The one with my memories is this one,” he snarled gesturing to the left door. “Wherever the other one is I didn’t make it and I can’t see it.”

Shiva’s eyes narrowed and she pulled out the stick of chalk he had given her as they entered his mindscape. She slowly walked over and traced the outline of the second door under the stairs. As she got closer, she could feel the…alienness of that particular section in Harry’s mind. Standing right next to it there was no mistaking that this thing was not part of her son. It had no place inside Harry. Stepping back from outlining it she nodded to him. “Done. That’s the door to the soul shard. I think you’re right, Harry. This is definitely not supposed to be here.”

He nodded and moved forward. “Slap me if I start looking crazy yeah? Anything to tear my eyes away from that place should be good enough.” He raised his hands and walls of steel and chains flew from the shadows to surround the outline. More steel slotted into the stairs and the wall and padlocks materialized at multiple points along the line. A vault door looking like a hybrid between a normal bank and Gringotts slammed shut on a giant electrified cage that fit flush into place. A layer of some sort of foam that immediately hardened into an amber-like substance filled the gaps. Finally, a bucket appeared in the floor filled with water and a single snapping piranha. Harry stayed looking at the wall for several seconds before nodding satisfied and turning back to Shiva. “Did I get it? I can’t really feel the ruthlessness as much anymore when I stare at that spot.”

Shiva whistled and nodded. “Yeah, kid. You got it covered up alright.”

“There is no kill like overkill,” Harry sighed. “Let’s go. I need to get some food.”

Harry’s friends had gathered in Shiva’s flat to await Snapfist’s arrival. The goblin was coming over to escort them to the Potter Manor and the graveyard in Godric’s Hollow. In the meantime, Harry was planning to test the Soul Viewer. The only one absent was Sirius.

“He mentioned that he was dealing with a houseguest and would be a few minutes late,” Remus said when Harry checked his watch again tapping his foot.

Amelia’s eyes narrowed at that comment. “Oh? What type of ‘houseguest’ was that?”

“Not like that, Amy!” Remus hurriedly said holding up his hands to ward off her anger. “Sirius may be a shameless flirt, but he’d never do anything like that while seeing you.”

“Then what is he doing?” Andi asked with raised eyebrows.

“Seeing to your sister,” Sirius grumbled waltzing into the flat and claiming a kitchen seat. “I forgot how annoyingly superior Cissa could be. Even when begging for help she has this air about her.”

Several jaws dropped to the floor at that statement and all conversation ground to halt. “What?” came from several mouths at once.

Sirius snorted. “Yeah, that was my reaction too at first. Cissa’s with us now by the way. Andi, she’s staying at Grimmauld for the moment though she said she’d like to stop by and visit you at
some point soon.”

“But she’s Malfoy’s mother!” Neville yelled continuing to gape.

“Cissa is a pureblood through and through. She never agreed with Lucius and always hated being locked into that marriage,” Andi said softly. “She finally decided they were causing too much damage?”

“Yeah. She gave me some juicy info about Riddle’s short-term plans too in order to help prove she was on the level. I verified with some veritaserum just in case. I’ll tell you after we’re done here Amy,” Sirius sighed. “Long story short, he wants to try a prison break in the future. Cissa has had enough of and I quote ‘the flobberworm brained fools seeking to destroy everything on both sides while tossing tradition into the mud’. When she walked, she drained any of the Malfoy accounts she had access to which sadly isn’t much, but it’s something. Draco is firmly in the Pro-Voldemort camp though and all she asks of us is that we at least attempt to not kill the little idiot if given a choice in the matter.”

Harry blinked and started laughing. “Wow. You know it’s bad when your own mother runs away. You trust her, Sirius?”

“I do. I do recommend Andi takes a look in her mind at some point, but yeah. I trust her. I’ll have the Malfoy marriage dissolved by the end of the week. Wish I could do the same with Bella…”

Andi snorted. “Bella never cared about a contract for that one sadly. She only married Rodolphus so she could grovel better at Riddle’s heel.”

“Anyway, Harry, you said you had something to show us all before the goblins arrived?” Sirius asked looking to his godson.

Harry nodded and pulled out the Soul Viewer. Luna shifted positions so she could see better and rested her arms on Tracey’s shoulders as she pushed up to look over the crowd. The Slytherin rolled her eyes in amusement while Susan and Hannah just smiled up at the smaller blonde girl. “I call this the Soul Viewer. It’s just a Perception rune tied with a Soul rune and a Visualization scheme. It should just manifest souls as auras. With any luck, it’ll show where Riddle’s soul is concentrated in me so that we can cut it off.”

“Still hate this plan,” Shiva muttered. Tonks nodded her agreement with her hair flashing to black shortly before shifting back to pink.

“Harry,” Hermione said slowly, “you are sure that this rune stone is safe, yes? You’ve mentioned repeatedly how Soul runes tend to be…unpredictable.”

Fleur nodded. “Yes, zis is not going to de-eh…soul you while trying to get a peek is it? It would be quite difficult to marry you if zat happens…”

The low chuckles Fleur elicited met an exasperated look from Harry. “No, Fleur, I’m not going to be desouled. And yes, Hermione, I’m sure it’s safe. It might be a bit weird, but it’s safe. There’s literally nothing in this beyond three runes.” Hermione sighed and nodded her assent.

“Okay then, let’s do this. It has an area effect of about three meters I think so don’t be surprised if you start glowing or something. Each soul should be represented by a different color. I think,” Harry shrugged and charged up the rune stone and he picked up a mirror from the table in front of him.

A tingling wave of magic passed through most of the occupants in the room who suddenly found
themselves suffused with a dim glow surrounding their bodies. Luna squealed with glee as she saw Coco had a small glow around her little body and most of the others were just as intrigued with their own soul auras. Harry had taken to staring into the mirror as he angled it around to check his scar. His own soul was manifesting as an emerald green color which was strangely reassuring. Unfortunately there was a roiling black mass centered on the scar with tendrils slithering out and encompassing a large chunk of his head and torso.

“Damn. It may be centered on my head, but it looks like it’s twined around too much else. Cutting it off probably won’t work. We’ll have to come up with a Plan B I think guys.” Harry scowled. All murmurs and sound stopped as he put the mirror down. Glancing around, Harry saw everyone frozen and staring at him. “Guys? What’s wrong? We knew this was likely going to happen.”

Daphne very slowly and very carefully stepped forward and picked up the mirror. “Harry, look at the rest of you.” She held up the mirror and Harry perplexed, looked back down.

Centered on his chest and twined throughout the entirety of his body was a third color scheme. A bright red one. It seemed to curl most strongly about the necklace he had on under his shirt and as he watched, one of the tendrils of black touched it and recoiled back slightly. Harry’s breath caught in his throat and his mouth went dry. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t swallow, he couldn’t think. He could only blink at the red soul aura suffused inside him.

The charge on the Soul Viewer died and the visible auras around the group faded back into nothing. Someone tried to talk to Harry but he didn’t hear what they said. A dull knock on the door sounded and one of the group moved to open it and let the goblin in. Harry’s eyes settled on Snapfist and his brain jump-started itself again. Harry lunged to his feet and rushed to the goblin. “Graveyard. Now!”

Snapfist rocked back on his heels as Shiva grabbed Harry’s shoulders and jerked him back. “Kid, slow down! We need to – ”

“NO!” Harry yelled. “I need to get to the fucking graveyard! NOW!”

Harry paced back and forth in front of the grave of his parents as several of the adults exhumed the body. He couldn’t stop moving because if he stopped moving then they would try to talk to him. Hermione had been the only one to not try and say anything. All the others thankfully gave up as he kept pacing back and forth.

All the little things over the years were slotting into place like a giant jigsaw puzzle and the conclusion he was reaching was both simultaneously amazing and horrifying. Why his scar looked like a Protection rune entwined with something else. How his mother’s protection was still powerful enough to hurt Voldemort 10 years after it was cast. Lily Potter’s will never activating. James Potter’s will specifically directing Harry to touch her body with necklace in hand. Her echo not coming out of Voldemort’s wand in the duel. How a piece of one of the most powerful wizards in the past century hadn’t been able to take over control of a baby.

Finally the grave was fully exposed and the coffin levitated up. Harry stopped pacing and looked fixatedly at it. Shiva stepped forward and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Kid…Harry…Harry!” Numbly he turned to stare at her. “Harry, look, even with…this,” she said gesturing to his chest, “there’s a very good chance that your mother is…well…”

“I know. Open it, please,” Harry said quietly. He was going to kill Dumbledore for keeping him from this. Intentionally or not the old man had prevented Harry from getting here for 14 years. 14 years that he could have…He was going to find the Flamels and he was going to stab the old man
through the heart with the Sword of Gryffindor.

The lid lifted off of his mother’s coffin and Sirius and Amelia gasped. Remus took one look and collapsed to the side blinking but not seeing. Not daring to breathe himself, Harry carefully stepped forward and looked upon the body of his mother.

Instead of a decomposed corpse like he had expected however, there was a beautiful young woman barely older than Tonks. Flaming red hair outlined a soft face and delicate hands were folded over a modest chest. Lily Potter looked like she hadn’t aged a day since she had been hit with a Killing Curse 14 years ago. Harry steadied himself and took his necklace off reaching out to her.

“Stop!” Hermione cried out grabbing Harry in an embrace. “Harry, wait! Think about this! What if whatever she did is leaving her body in stasis while the protection she imbued into you is still active? What happens if you complete that circuit and the protection deactivates, Harry? What happens if the soul shard can overpower you when she’s gone?!” Hermione sobbed into his back.

Tonks stepped forward and gently pulled Hermione’s arms from Harry. “That’s not our decision, Mione. That’s his.” Hermione cried harder and buried her head into Tonks’ chest while Harry smiled back at his partners.

“I’ll be fine, Mione. I’m a lot stronger than I was as a baby after all.” Without waiting any longer or letting anyone else voice opinions or concerns, Harry turned and thrust his hand out to grasp his mother’s own with the necklace sandwiched between them.

A flare of light lit up the graveyard and Harry felt a surge of magic pulse out of him draining through his hand. The energy pulled and pulled until he felt like it was taking everything he had. Finally, the flow ceased and Harry fell to his knees beside the coffin breathing heavily.

“Harry, are you okay?” Shiva asked kneeling beside him and wrapping an arm around his shoulders. Harry just nodded as he stared at his mother’s body unable to say anything for the moment.

Nobody breathed, waiting with baited breath for something, anything to happen. Some seemed to be watching Harry like hawk just waiting for him to keel over clutching his head and screaming in pain. Others were watching Lily to see if her body started to rapidly decay or otherwise reacted in any way. Harry could only count unconsciously in his head, his eyes unwavering.

With nary a twitch to belie the storm to come, a pair of startlingly brilliant green eyes blinked open.
“Harry, you can’t keep hiding in here forever,” Shiva said in a soft voice from the door to Harry’s room.

He grunted and moved adding another stabilization rune to his current schematic. “I’m not hiding. I’m working.”

“Sure, because everyone works for 14 hours straight. And don’t try to tell me you stopped to sleep because the sheets haven’t been touched and Dobby is forbidden from coming in here without direct permission.” She sighed and grabbed a chair swinging it around to sit down next to him laying a hand on his shoulder. “Harry, you don’t have to talk to me, you don’t have to talk to Fleur, or Tonks, or Hermione. You don’t even have to talk to her but you have to at least come out of this room. You have to put down the pencil and come out. At least come and eat.”

“Can’t stop working,” Harry said curtly squinting down at the page.

“Why?” she asked simply.

Harry’s pencil froze. A moment later it kept scratching away. “Just can’t.”

“Not good enough, kid,” Shiva said shaking her head and squeezing his shoulder. “Give me a legit reason and I’ll leave. Otherwise I’m going to stay right here and be as annoying as I possibly can be until you are tearing that black hair out of your head.”

Harry scowled but kept scratching at the diagrams. She started silently counting to ten. She was at nine before he finally spoke again. “If I stop working I have to go out there. If I go out there then I have to talk to her. What the hell am I supposed to say to her?”

“Well you could start with ‘hello’. That is the commonly accepted form of introduction after all. This is the most you’ve said to anyone since she woke up. Fleur was starting to get worried that whatever you did removed the capacity for speech. I think she was only half joking about that,” Shiva said.

Harry fixed her with an annoyed stare and turned back to his runes. “Thanks for the help, Shiva,” he muttered irritably.

She scowled and leaned back into her chair with her arms crossed. “You think I know what to say? Since Andi and Pomfrey gave her a clean bill of health and left it’s basically been brief splurges of conversation followed by the longest, most awkward silences of my life. I wish Hermione had been able to stay. Tonks is making things worse, Fleur is too worried about you and Lily is…well…Kid you’re not the only one having a hard time here okay?” Shiva let out a groan and shook her head. “Look, Harry, try to see it from her perspective. As far as she’s concerned yesterday you were a toddler who could barely string three words together and now you’re a teenager, her husband is dead and she’s lost a decade and half. This isn’t easy on any of us, kid. You need to talk to your mother.”

“I already have a mother,” Harry whispered. His voice was so quiet that she almost didn’t hear him – he obviously hadn’t meant her to. She blinked and struggled to find something to say. Anything would really do for the moment. “Fine,” he sighed loudly unknowingly saving her from...
her floundering. “Fine. Under one condition.”

“Name it, kid.”

“You stay in the room. I don’t think I can do this being alone.”

Shiva nodded. “If you’re sure…Okay, Harry. Do you want me to ask Fleur and Tonks to leave?”

Harry frowned thinking hard. ‘I’d almost prefer Daphne to be here honestly. She’d just slap the back of my head and berate me for being a ‘typical angst ridden boy’. The girls are going to hover which is just going to make this even harder…can you ask Fleur to go hang out with Hermione for a few hours? Tonks can stay. We might need some laughs at some point.’

“Sure, Harry.” Shiva stood and gave him a warm smile with a half grin. “If you’re not out in the living room in ten minutes though I’m sending Dobby in to drag you out.”

Lily Potter was sitting on the floor in Professor Bathsheda Babbling’s living room surrounded by papers and notes. Her wand was stuck behind her right ear while a pen was behind her left. Another pen was clutched in her hand as she scribbled more notes and questions onto the list in front of her. Twisting slightly so she could look at the book just to her right, she crossed out the last line and replaced it with the correct information.

Trying to get the crash course on fourteen years worth of progress wasn’t nearly as easy as fiction writers made it seem. She was still trying to decide whether or not it was a good thing that the wizarding world as a whole didn’t seem to have changed much at all. The Muggles by contrast had taken leaps and bounds while the magicals just sat there and stagnated.

Nothing made any sense – and that could be laid squarely on her own shoulders. If she had bothered to take the time to tell someone other than James about her crazy, desperate, experimental idea then she wouldn’t have been in this position to begin with. She should have told Sirius. No. That wouldn’t have mattered anyway since apparently he’d been sent to Azkaban. She narrowed her eyes and her lips curled into a snarl as she turned to the left to examine another pile of notes. How had anyone believed that Sirius Black could betray James Potter? The idea was utterly absurd! She could understand Peter and Remus. Remus was a pity party consumed in self-hatred and a werewolf to boot – which already damned him in most eyes. Peter was…Lily sighed. She had never particularly liked Peter, but he really had been a very good friend to James in times past. How he could’ve jumped ship without even bothering to fight…

Lily uttered a sigh of frustration and blew a strand of hair out of her eyes as she shifted and looked at a different stack of items. Her son was hiding and refusing to speak with her. Her son. Her tiny little boy barely old enough to walk was not a little boy anymore. He was a teenager. A teenager apparently not in the custody of anyone she knew and trusted but under the guardianship of a Hogwarts professor barely older than he was! All because Petunia couldn’t look past her jealousy! And because Albus Fucking Dumbledore had a bloody God Complex! When she saw that Headmaster she was going to wrap his white beard around his neck and strangle him with it! Fourteen years! It would have been better to just stay dead at this point!

At least she was still older than Harry. Not by much anymore, but it was something. Her potion/charm/rune combo had worked better than she’d ever anticipated and sent her into stasis while her soul was attached to Harry. This would be a hell of a lot simpler if it had just sent her into an enchanted sleep like it was supposed to. If it had, her body would’ve kept aging and…well actually it probably wouldn’t have been better since Too Many Bloody Names had her buried without even reading the stupid wills so she’d probably have quietly died of dehydration or
suffocation.

Still…to be almost 22 physically and mentally while her son was just about to turn 15…this was all kinds of wrong. At least Babbling was only about to be 23 so things weren’t as awkward as they could have been. A 23 year old watching out for her teenage son…She would’ve met him when she was only 19…

“I got him to agree to come out,” Babbling – Shiva! It was Shiva! – said as she walked back into the room rubbing her eyes. “Fleur, Harry asked if you could make sure Hermione was okay. If you end up needing any help with setting up the wards around her parents’ house and work let me know. I’ll probably be busy here for a bit, but we can always ask Bill to take a look. He’s supposed to be in the country doing some local jobs. Just don’t let Molly Weasley know he’s around.”

Lily looked up and cocked her head curiously at the Veela girl who gave a sad smile and moved forward to say something quietly to Babbling – Shiva. The French girl gave another nod and a happier smile before hugging the professor, kissing Tonks on the cheek and heading out the door of the flat. Lily suppressed another frustrated scowl. She refused to ask which of the three girls was dating her son. She’d always been observant and that was far too personal of a question to ask someone she barely knew. She’d have originally put good money on the brunette with curly hair but that girl – Hermione according to her notes – had gone home around midnight after her parents called which didn’t quite seem like something her son’s girlfriend would do in the middle of this crazy situation.

Her next bet had been Tonks, but then she did some math and realized that Tonks would actually only be only a few months younger than Lily herself. Maybe if they had grown up together originally that wouldn’t have been much of an issue – especially in the magical world – though as it stood she didn’t think it likely that Harry and the girl would have hooked up while he was still this young. Tonks at least had barely changed at all from the adorable little child she remembered. The metamorphmagus was still bubbly, still preferred pink hair and still cracked inappropriate jokes. She’d been a welcome distraction whenever Lily needed a short break from trying to piece together the missing decade and a half.

So Lily was now trying to see whether the French beauty was with Harry. It seemed likely. Not many people would stay over the house of a friend and try to make small talk with his newly re-embodied mother while said friend hid in the other room. Plus the girl had constantly been glancing in Harry’s direction which lent further credence to her guess. The main problem there revolved around the overly affectionate way that Fleur had clung to both Tonks and Hermione.

This situation was just so…complicated.

Babbl – Shiva – laid a cup of tea in front of her and fell back, resting against the front of the couch. “You should probably drink something.”

“I could use a real drink to be honest,” Lily muttered nodding her thanks to the other woman. She took a sip and her eyes widened at the kick.

Shiva smirked. “Figured. Added a bit of rum. Sirius said you used to like that.”

Lily smiled back. “Still do. Thanks.”

“No problem. Got some in mine too. So…you really don’t remember anything?”

“From the past decade I’ve been tied to Harry? No.” Lily grimaced and drained half the tea.
“Honestly, it’s probably a good thing. You’ve only told me a quarter of the things that have happened to my son and I already want to find and murder half the people I know. Knew. Arg, this is so bloody strange! I don’t even know what tenses to use!”

Bab – SHIVA! – nodded in sympathy. “Well at least you didn’t have to hear my horrific attempts at explaining sex to the kid. You’d probably want to kill me too if you had.”

Lily’s eyebrows rose. “You had to give the Talk to Harry? Petunia didn’t – no, of course not, she couldn’t even give him a proper bedroom or food why would she bother explaining sex.” Yet another thing to put on the To-Do List: ruin Petunia and Vernon’s life while ensuring they knew exactly why it was happening. “When did you do that by the way?”

“Um, about three years ago? It was towards the beginning of his second year I think,” Shiva said shrugging. “I was rather true to my last name at the time and by the end started well and truly babbling about stuff like anal, bondage and groups. It was…mortifying,” she finished with a huge blush and a quiet voice.

Off to the side, Tonks started laughing uproariously as her hair flipped to a bright yellow. “I wondered why he asked about a safe word that first night!”

Lily could only blink and stare at Shiva not even registering what Tonks had said – which was probably a mercy. “You told my twelve year old child about groups during the Sex Talk?”

“Hey, I tried to tell him to go to Pomfrey to get it explained properly!” Shiva muttered. “I was 20. I wasn’t exactly planning to have to figure out how to talk about that shite for another decade at least.”

Lily groaned wiped a hand across her face grimacing. “Well at least you tried…I suppose I probably wouldn’t have done much better either. That was going to be James’ job,” her brow furrowed and she had to blink away a tear.

“I’m sorry. About your husband,” Shiva said softly reaching forward to squeeze Lily’s knee.

“Thanks. It’s alright,” she said hurriedly. “It’s just going to hurt for a while. I know to everyone else he died fourteen years ago, but to me it’s only been a few nights. I’m going to miss him.”

“Yeah. I’d be surprised if you didn’t.” The women fell into a quiet silence and Lily turned back to her papers. After a few minutes, the sound of footsteps started coming from behind her.

“Not kicking and screaming, Harry Potter Sir! Dobby would’ve tied up and gagged first to ensure that Great Master Harry Potter Sir does not injure himself as Dobby moves!” a high pitched squeaking voice sounded from the hallway followed by a loud groan.

“Dobby, new ground rule. If you are told to drag someone into a room, don’t take it literally. Just pop in, grab them and pop back to wherever you are supposed to take them. And furthermore, only my partners and I can tie each other up. Okay?”

Lily whipped her head around and blinked in wonder at the house elf crossing his arms and huffing in annoyance. “Dobby thinks that Master Harry Potter is objecting too strongly, but Dobby will agree to new rules.”

Shiva chortled merrily at the exchange and gave a small salute towards the newcomers. “Thanks for getting him, Dobby. Good to see you getting some air, kid. Tea is on the table. Grab a glass and find a seat.”
Lily turned her attention to Harry standing awkwardly at the mouth of the hallway looking utterly lost and terrified. She could see so much of James in him, but his features were so much softer than her late husband. Rounder, livelier, more welcoming. His cheekbones were higher and his ears smaller. His eyes looked just like hers though.

“Err, hi…” Harry said hesitantly running a hand through his hair.

Lily smiled at him in as welcoming a fashion as she could while pushing all of her own panic and doubt to the side. “Hey.”

Tonks winced as she watched Harry sit down on the couch across from where Lily had claimed the floor. At least he hadn’t seemed to hear their previous conversation, but this was still going to be difficult. She almost got up to move next to him until a small shake of his head had her sitting back down in her armchair off to the side. Tonks wasn’t as good at the nonverbal stuff as Hermione was, but she could take a hint. He needed her for moral support and possibly levity to shake things up if they got too serious too fast. She could do that. Probably. Hopefully. Sure.

She’d probably have better luck inviting Snape to a little girl’s tea party.

Actually…if that girl was Lily…well that probably wasn’t the best metaphor. Tonks snorted to herself and refocused on the conversation.

“I can’t believe you’re so big, Harry,” Lily said softly smiling at him.

Harry ran a hand through his hair again. “Uh, yeah. You can thank Shiva for that. She got me on a good set of nutrient potions before I truly hit my growth spurt so I’m about how tall I should be.”

Tonks resisted an urge to slap a hand to her face at that.

“That wasn’t really what I meant…” Lily said grimacing.

Harry’s grimace matched his mother’s. “Oh. Yeah, I guess not. So um, you’re okay?”

Lily shrugged. “As well as I could be I suppose. Clean bill of health at least! Physically. I’m still trying to sort through a lot of the mental side of things. How are you, Harry? Are you…okay?”

He shrugged and Tonks couldn’t really hide her grimace at that. That was his ‘Sure, I’m fine. I just got caught in Spain’s Running of the Bulls, but I’m fine. Just a few gore marks. They’ll heal. No problems.’ shrug. “I’ve been better. It’s just a little overwhelming. Between Voldemort, Dumbledore and now you…it’s been a long few weeks.”

“I can imagine,” Lily grunted.

Shiva leaned forward and tried to move the conversation ahead a bit. “So, Lily, you haven’t really said just how you survived. Was it a rune thing? If it didn’t work right Harry might be able to help with figuring out why. He’s a rune savant by the way. I don’t know if we mentioned that before…”

“A rune savant? Really?! That’s amazing, Harry!” Lily gushed smiling.

Harry blushed a bit and mumbled, “It’s not that special. I’m good with runes. Shiva and Bill are pretty good too.”

Tonks couldn’t stay quiet at that. She and the others had been working far too hard to break him of that annoying habit of putting himself down and not taking credit for things he deserved. “Don’t
let him fool you. Harry here has dozens of inventions and his own owl order store with plans to get a storefront property next to Fred and George Weasley’s joke shop. These earrings were invented by him and modeled after Muggle mobiles. Plus he figured out how to use runes to kill Dementors!”

Harry blushed even harder and muttered something under his breath. Louder he said, “Okay, so I’ve done some cool stuff. I did also blow up a troll’s head with my first invention.” Lily’s just gaped at him. “It wasn’t intentional!” he hurried to say. “I just thought it would daze it for a bit, but the Extravagance Rune Show was a lot more…explosive while it was still incomplete…”

Shiva snorted. “That’s one way of putting it. That’s actually how he met me. I offered some advice afterwards and taught him some basic safety measures. Thankfully nothing else has blown up that wasn’t expected/designed to since then.”

“Mostly,” Harry said nodding.

“ ‘Mostly’?” Shiva said in a low, dangerous tone. “Kiiidd…”

Harry shook his head and held up his hands to ward her off. “It’s nothing! I swear! I exploded a tree by accident when I was testing the Yamato Cannon that’s it!” Shiva just groaned and shook her head in exasperation.

“Harry, if you blow up your house I’m letting Hermione deal with you,” Tonks said laughing. He shuddered at that.

Lily just looked between the three before cracking a small smile. “I think I’m going to need more details about this later. And also about how an 11 year old ran into a troll. For the moment though, you asked about how I survived?” She swept a hand through her hair sending her pen clattering to the floor while her wand stayed put behind her ear. “I tinkered around a bit when I first found out about magic. I really enjoyed Potions, Charms and Ancient Runes. I excelled with the first two though I was rather bad with Runes…I studied and got better, but it’s never really going to be my strong suit.”

Harry nodded. “I found your notebooks on those. Aunt Petunia had them in a trunk in the attic along with the necklace.” Harry clutching briefly at his shirt where the necklace lay before continuing, “I found your introductions to each of them hilarious by the way.”

Lily frowned for a moment before her eyes widened at the memory and laughed. “Oh, I forgot about those! Do you still have them? I could show you the areas I combined to make this,” she said gesturing to herself, “work.”

“No, sorry, Hermione has the one with Charms, Fleur is borrowing the Runes one to help her learn warding and Daphne has been copying some of the Potions book. She was putting together a book with some of the stuff you came up with and adding it to her own work…I could ask her to stop,” he offered.

Lily shrugged. “No, don’t. I’d like to coauthor it actually if she’d be willing. Have I met Daphne yet?”

Shiva waved her hand in a so-so gesture. “Sorta. She was in the graveyard, but she left with most of the others. She’s over here pretty regularly though and when we move into the manor she wants to see the basilisk skeleton so I imagine you can meet her in a day or two.”

“I’m sorry, I misheard that. Did you say basilisk skeleton?” Lily asked her eyes wide.
Tonks grinned nodded towards Harry. “Yup, she did. Wonder Boy here killed Salazar Slytherin’s thousand year old basilisk with a sword through the skull. Pretty impressive for a twelve year old, huh?”

“Damn near gave me a heart attack after that one,” Shiva muttered.

Harry just shrugged. “It attacked Hermione. It had it coming. Daphne helped a lot too.”

Lily again looked between all of them incredulously. Finally deciding they weren’t having her on she drained her cup dry. “I really am not going to enjoy going over your school years am I?”

“Yeah, not likely,” Shiva said laughing. She grabbed Lily’s cup and stood to get her a refill. “It’s become sort of a running joke that the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher is going to try and kill Harry at some point, generally towards the end of the school year. We’re currently three for four. Thanks, Dobby.” Shiva sat back down and passed the refilled mug over to a thoroughly shocked Lily.

“Three for four murder attempts?!?” Lily asked with her mouth hanging open and her hand shaking slightly.

Harry shrugged. “Well as far I know Remus never tried to kill me. You know I’m almost disappointed that he never turned while around me because then I could claim I had the full set…” Tonks had to bite down on her hand to prevent herself from falling off her chair at that comment.

“Remus? He taught at Hogwarts?”

“Yeah, he was pretty good too. The only one who’s come close has been a Death Eater.”

Lily gaped for a moment before draining her drink again and muttering, “I am going to slaughter Albus Dumbledore. I am going to rip out his spleen and feed it to him then strangle him with his own beard while cutting his bollocks off…”

“Lily, we’ll be sure to take you with us when we go visit him in a few months,” Shiva said patting the other woman’s knee. “You were saying something about combining things?”

“Right,” Lily said groaning and shifting to grab a few papers and laid them out in a line on the floor. Everyone shifted a bit to see it better. “This was what I meant. I created a few new linking charms layered into a potion brew to help it bind with a person’s magic. The necklace was in the cauldron during that process to help tie it into the procedure. Then I infused the same set of charms into two anchoring runes, one on each person: the target and the caster – Harry and me. Upon my soul separating from my body, it would be channeled through a rune on the linked necklace that would help bind me to Harry temporarily. The idea was that if my body was left intact and mostly unharmed then I’d be sent into an enchanted deep sleep. All my bodily functions would’ve dropped so low as to be effectively dead though I would still register as alive to any diagnostic charms. We thought that they could repair any physical damage and then follow the instructions in James’ will to have you touch me with the channeling rune and I’d be transferred back over. James kept going on about how I was ‘breaking the accepted natural laws of magic left and right’ but I didn’t pay any attention to it. The Muggle upbringing probably helped there…” she said shrugging.

Tonks raised her hand. “So for the non-academic in the room, what does that mean?”

Lily pointed to Harry’s scar. “Basically, Harry’s scar served to anchor my soul to him when I died. I was the one who cut the mark into his forehead,” she said wincing and wringing her hands.
briefly. “I’m really sorry about that, Harry…It seemed better to do it on your forehead where it would bleed, but only be superficial rather on your chest or something where I might have actually injured you by accident…I knew it was only a matter of time before we were found and I was rather desperate. I thought, if I could anchor my soul to you while still having a tie to my own body, I’d serve as a…buffer for lack of a better word. It had the wonderful theoretical side effect of rebounding the specific magical signature that had forced me from my body if cast at the same power level or above.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed as he worked through that explanation while Shiva gasped. “Holy shite…you mean if Voldemort had killed you with a simple piercing spell than anything he sent at Harry stronger than that spell would’ve rebounded?”

Lilly nodded. “Yes. I was hoping he’d use something that small though I can’t say I’m surprised he went for a Killing Curse. Unfortunately, it’s a huge power hog so the protection didn’t do too much after the first shot. Honestly, it probably worked out for the best. I’m really not sure if my procedure would have actually worked on anything else now that I think about it…”

“All it wasn’t totally useless after that night. It let me burn him when I touched him First Year,” Harry commented. “At least it did until he resurrected properly using my blood. That’s weird though…it should’ve still hurt him going by that…”

Lily frowned. “Yes, it should have still hurt him. The protection was tied into your body through my soul not through blood…”

“Maybe it’s because he touched your forehead, Harry?” Tonks said shrugging. That’s where the soul shard is mostly concentrated after all. Maybe Lily wasn’t able to reach that high after she had bound to you?”

“Makes sense I suppose,” Shiva said nodding.

“Soul shard? What soul shard?” Lily asked confused.

Harry looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Can we talk about it later?” Lilly looked at him for a few more moments before reluctantly nodding. “Thanks. You were saying that you anchored it to me using my scar? Is that why it looks like a protection rune?”

“Well,” Lilly said, “it’s a **Protection** twined through a **Soul** variant and reflected back through a **Channeling** rune. The **Channeling** twin is inscribed on the necklace while my **Transference** one is on my chest above the heart.”

Harry frowned. “Necklace?” He pulled out his chain and started looking at the design. “Where?” Lilly reached up, flipped it over and held it back towards him pointing at the interlocking letters. Harry’s mouth dropped open. “I’ve worn this since I was ten! How the bloody hell did I miss that!”?

“No one’s perfect, Wonder Boy,” Tonks said leaning back with a fond shake of her head.

Harry groaned leaning back. “I feel like an idiot for missing that... Do you think this is something we can modify to work without needing someone to sacrifice their life?”

Lily shook her head emphatically. “No. That was a key part of the charm. There’s no way to get around that component. Trust me. James…well he got rather….angry about that. He started claiming I was suicidal and only interested in being a martyr when we should be coming up with better ways to fight.” She sighed deeply. “We fought a lot in the last year because of it. So no,
Harry, I don’t think this is something that should be looked into large scale. If I die before you again though, it should reactivate.”

Harry, Tonks and Shiva all glared at her. “That,” Harry said in a soft voice layered with pain and worry, “is never going to be Plan A.”

“Oh involved with any plan,” Shiva agreed. “Let’s take a break guys. We could all use some food I think.”

After they had finished lunch, the four returned to the living room with Lily abandoning her nest of papers, books and news articles and moving to sit on the couch instead. Harry and Tonks took the love seat while Shiva perched on the armchair. Lily’s brow furrowed for a moment as Tonks’ arm draped over Harry’s shoulder, but resolved that it was a far less important mystery than anything else going on today. “So, Harry, can you tell me about some of your inventions? Tonks mentioned something about killing Dementors? I didn’t that was possible except for locking them up inside a sealed room and just starving them.”

Harry’s brow furrowed and he let out a small chuckle. “Never thought of that method. I guess that should work if they’re actually getting nourishment from us.” He shook his head and gave a small wry grin. “My method is a lot different. I actually know of two ways to directly kill them and have done both. The first is somewhat mundane. Stab them with the Sword of Gryffindor. I don’t know if that was something innate to the sword, a product of the basilisk venom it’s been infused with or if it was just something it’s picked up through the centuries but it works like a charm.”

Lily blinked. She might as well have just brought the bottle of rum over the rate this day was going. His inventions were supposed to be a safe topic…”You killed a Dementor…with a sword. The sword of Godric Gryffindor?”

Harry just nodded. “Yeah. Well, in fairness, the Dementor was trying to eat my soul at the time. And the second one was trying to eat Hermione’s soul so I stabbed it too.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” Tonks said with a hand over her heart and face morphing into an exaggerated doe-eyed expression.

“Nym, I didn’t save you until after the time jump, remember? That was when we found out that the Silver Spirit kills Dementors too. Only the ones over me and Hermione got the sword.” Harry just shook his head in exasperation at the girl.

“Well excuse me for being unconscious for the good bits,” Tonks said chortling. “I still need to see that memory by the way. My hero saving my soul would be priceless to watch.”

Lily couldn’t stay quiet any longer. “Excuse me, I’m starting to feel like a broken record here, but what the hell are you talking about!”

Harry sighed and considered that. “Dementors mobbed the school when Sirius showed up after escaping Azkaban. Long story short, the core group was caught outside and almost got all of our souls eaten. I panicked, killed a few with the Sword hijacked Hermione’s Time Turner and came back to help out refreshed and with a newly finished rune cluster that sent them running for the hills.”

That explanation was not remotely sufficient. Lily had opened her mouth to say as such before Shiva beat her to it. “Don’t worry about the details. I’ll explain later. Harry, tell her about your Silver Spirit.”
Harry nodded agreeably. “It’s basically just a runic equivalent of a Patronus. Sorta. Partially. Okay not quite. We’re not exactly sure just what it is though I can tell you for sure that it has a tiny little piece of the caster imbued within it while it’s active. Hurts like freaking hell if it gets forcibly dispelled or absorbed.” A quick shudder passed through him before he centered himself again and continued. “Basically I used a Soul rune to link it to the caster so it’s a bit weird. We sell them in Potter Runes and the Aurors got a huge discount on them. Amelia says they’re required for all Azkaban guards now. Anytime one’s active, the Dementors stick far away.”

“Right,” Lily nodded. Sure, like this made any sense at all. “Any other interesting inventions?” He had to have something that didn’t sound like it broke any laws of nature. Not that she was one to talk there…

Harry’s face scrunched up for a moment before smiling and holding up his right hand. The pillow next to her flew toward his hand a moment later. Lily’s mouth fell open. “You can silently cast before Fifth Year!”

“Well, yeah…a few spells at least. I had to get some intensive training for the Tournament last year,” Harry said rubbing a hand through his hair. “That wasn’t what I did though. Look!” He held his hand up palm towards her and Lily gazed in confusion at what appeared to be a tattoo on his hand. Wait…

“You have a runic tattoo?” she gasped. “Do you know how dangerous that is?!”

Harry nodded while Shiva groaned. “Yeah. This is just a summoner though. Super simple and it was just the proof of concept one. Daphne’s the one who gave me most of them though Shiva has watched over us while we added the rest. I needed the leg up to stay alive. I’ve only had two problems with them and both were because I was an idiot. Don’t ever try to channel while transformed. Bad idea.”

Lily slowly counted to ten before giving up. She went to get the rum bottle and returned to her seat. Chuckles quickly came from Tonks while Shiva saluted her. “You lasted longer than I expected,” the older woman said in understanding. “This is the easy stuff too.” Lily just grimaced at that and waved for Harry to continue.

“So, yeah. I have six tattoos. Seven if you count the windrunners, but those are only useful while I’m Midnight. The summoner you’ve seen, on the top of that hand I have a Boomstone one. It’s like a Muggle boombox though I can increase the volume to extremely high levels. A localized silencing field wraps around the caster so it doesn’t affect me. Works kinda like a depth charge underwater and apparently it scares Voldemort since it was the only one he took the time to damage,” Harry said gazing down at his hand. A small shrug and he continued on. “My left hand has a Lockpick on the top which is a super version of an alohomora spell and works on almost anything though it does take some time depending on the complexity of the lock. The palm has a Knockback which is basically a scalable bludgeoner.”

Harry paused and winced a little as he held up his arms to the side bringing the forearms close but not touching. Tonks visibly squeezed him a bit tighter. “This one wasn’t quite my idea, but I’m almost certain I would have come up with it eventually. I call it the Lava Bomb and it’s pretty powerful but also dangerous. I can’t shut it off once it’s active so that’s why it’s in two pieces. I’m sure it has something to do with an aftereffect of the chimera contamination, but the tattoo does seem to hold whatever the problem was at bay so I’m not really looking into it. I have a lot of other things to prioritize first.”

“Chimera contamination, lava…You are certainly your father’s son…” Lily grunted. “I’m rather impressed though all the same. What were the last two?”
Harry lifted his shirt to expose a bit of his side and pointed to a small tattoo there. “The Dementor Anchor is the really important one. Shiva finished the design actually. It keeps the bearer from being affected by a Dementor’s Kiss and it should also protect them from the soul eating aspect of my sword. So we need to get that tattoo on you within a day or two max.”

Lily barely had time to process that before Tonks lightly smacked the back of Harry’s head. “Bad Harry. No tattooing anyone until they understand why.”

“But –”

“No, Wonder Boy. We humored your paranoia while at school with that one. You can wait a week for Lily to settle in and actually understand before immediately going for the magic ink.”

Harry scowled but huffed out a muttered agreement. Lily looked to Shiva for help. The professor snorted and shook her head. “Kid’s scared to death his demon sword is going to eat the soul of someone he likes by accident. Honestly I’m more worried about the basilisk venom at this point.”

“Anyway,” Harry said, “the last one is on my feet. It’s basically just a small concussive wave that helps me jump higher and farther as Midnight. I have a lot of other actual rune stones too.” Harry smiled and started rapidly listing off several of his products. “Some are prank rune stones that disintegrate after one use. Others last longer. I have a rune that works like a fishing pole though I guess it can be used to imitate Spider-Man too funnily enough. I have another that was designed to help prevent poisoning in potion labs by switching your lungs’ contents with clean air, but that one works fantastic for diving also. I have some simple ones just for fun which let you change your hair color. The metahair was actually based off Nym. The freezer is really useful for non-lethal take-downs since it shoots out water that immediately freezes. Can’t be used for long though without disintegrating. The reflector lenses on my glasses reflect any spells directed at them. I had robes that did the same, but I’m never speaking about those again.”

His eyes lit up and his grin widened even further. “Actually, I just finished designing a different version of those that work using a protego base instead! It still doesn’t project past the actual robes but I think I worked out some of the issues with the cloth channeling. They still won’t hold up under concentrated fire though I got it to the point where it’s just the outer layer that should disintegrate instead of the whole thing. I think the Armor Robes will be a vast improvement over the twins’ idea for Shield Hats. I’m also working on a pretty cool thing called the War Gauntlets.”

Shiva sat up straighter and opened her mouth to say something. Harry though waved her off and kept going. “Don’t worry, Shiva. It’s a lot less impressive than it sounds and I haven’t even tried to make the prototype yet since it’s not complete. I’m combining ideas I got from making the tracekey and the Yamato Cannon into one thing. When it’s done, it’s going to basically be a super channeler! I’m going to make it into a set of bracers connected behind the back. Any magic that hits one end will be channeled through the design and get emitted out of the other bracer! Defensive and offensive in one! Hence, War Gauntlets,” Harry said finishing proudly.

“Huh,” Tonks said cocking her head to the side. “That sounds right useful, Harry.”

“Right? It’ll be so cool! I just need to figure out a few issues. It still has a similar problem to the tracekey but this time it looks like it might bleed magic throughout the channel which would suck. Burns when utilizing it wouldn’t be fun at all. So I need to iron things out before I start actually producing it.”

Lily couldn’t help the huge grin from spreading across her face. “You really do love this topic don’t you, Harry?”
He nodded. “I get runes. They’re a lot simpler than people – or really anything else – in most ways. It’s relaxing and fun. I’ve gotten a lot better with a wand the past year and a half thanks to Hermione, McGonagall and Flitwick, but runes are always going to be my first thought for things.”

“That’s wonderful, Harry. I’m really glad you found something you enjoy.”

Shiva nodded in agreement. “Yeah, me too. So, not to be a downer or anything, but we should probably figure out what we’re going to tell the public about you, Lily. ‘I experimented with things using questionable magical combinations’ probably isn’t the best way to put it considering the current climate.”

Harry winced. “Can’t we get Fudge fired yet?”

Tonks and Shiva both sadly shook their heads while Lily just looked confused. “Fudge?”

“The Minister for Magic,” Tonks said with a sigh. “He’s an arse only interested in his chequebook and who is filling his pockets. Plus he’s an idiot, a coward and he constantly jumps for the simple, immediate solution instead of actually figuring out the problem and how to fix it. He’s on the decline now though at least. A few countries are up in arms about how he handled the farce of a Triwizard Tournament and the Umbitch’s repeated murder attempts haven’t helped since she was his direct underling. Sadly, the arse still has enough backroom supporters that we can’t carry a vote of no-confidence yet. Public reactions are helping us though so while we can’t get him kicked out we can at least wring some concessions out of him. The Auror department got a huge budget jump finally, thank god.”

“Oh he sounds like so much fun,” Lily scowled. Some things never changed. Politics was always rotten to the core. “I agree we probably shouldn’t mention exactly what I did. Perhaps we could twist things a bit and just have it as I was in a deep magical stasis while augmenting Harry’s natural protections? It’s mostly true after all.”

Shiva nodded. “I like that. Plus we could say that with the Tournament ended he came to pay respects to you as detailed in his father’s will which is also mostly true since that was the original plan. We can even say his touch revived you and just avoid mentioning anything about souls and we should be golden.”

Harry nodded. “Works for me. I’ll ask Luna to write up an article for it. It can go out at the same time as her Voldemort one. With any luck, the mass questioning will be shifted more to things about him than you.”

“Sounds like a plan!” Tonks agreed nodding enthusiastically.

Lily was trying to think of what else to ask when Harry winced and put a hand to his forehead. A few moments later he stood and stretched. “I’m a bit knackered. Think I’m going to go to bed a bit early. Have a nice night everyone.”

“Harry,” Shiva said quietly stopping him in his tracks. Tonks had already stood and quietly lowered the hand that had been reaching for his back at her words. Lily looked between the three in confusion waiting to see what the issue was. “Kid, what’s wrong?”

Harry sighed and shook his head. “It’s nothing. Just a headache.”

“A headache or a headache?” Tonks asked.

“It just hurts okay,” Harry said grimacing. “I had to throw up extra chains and walls, but my defenses are holding. I could see the bulge in the wall before I added the new stuff so while I can’t...
see the door I can see the effects, which is good to know. If Riddle wants to burst his way into my head then he likely will be able to unfortunately, but I’m still pretty sure I can kick him back out relatively quickly. The Horcrux isn’t a big deal. I’m just going to have to deal with a headache until we can figure out how to remove it.”

“I may not know what a Horcrux is, but that doesn’t sound like a minor issue,” Lily said softly, uncertain of just what she was referring to.

Harry shrugged. “There’s not much we can do about it short of pushing you in front of Voldemort’s wand again which isn’t happening. I can deal with some pain. I spent years dealing with Dudley and Vernon. This is nothing compared to them.”

“We are getting that thing out of you, Harry,” Tonks said reaching out and locking onto his arm.

“Yeah. Shiva, can you ask Bill to stop by the Manor tomorrow? When we first met he showed me something the Egyptians used in their tombs dealing with a soul absorption thing. It didn’t work, but if I can figure out why then maybe I can modify it to get rid of my hitchhiker.” Harry paused and ran a hand through his hair. “I really am tired though. I kinda stayed up…working all night…”

Shiva sighed and nodded. “Go get some sleep, kid. We’ll get to the manor tomorrow and I’ll have Bill meet us there with his diagram.”

Harry smiled back at her and waved goodnight to everyone before heading off up the hallway. Lily watched Tonks exchange a glance with Shiva before bidding the remaining two women goodnight as well and heading for the back hallway.

Lily frowned and turned to Shiva. “Doesn’t she have her own flat?”

Shiva laughed and nodded. “Yeah, but you’d never know it. She usually stayed with Sirius while she was helping him clean Grimmauld, but considering how last year went I wouldn’t be surprised if she stays with us most nights now. I know you didn’t get much sleep last night either. You can take my bed if you want. I’ll kip on the couch.”

Lily gave the other woman a resigned smile and shook her head. “I’m fine for the moment, thanks. I’d rather not sleep just yet. I feel like I’ve spent my entire life sleeping and I admit I’m a bit scared that if I go back to sleep then the next time I wake up Harry have will kids.”

“I can imagine. Want more alcohol or do you want to start going over some of Harry’s schooling in depth?” Shiva asked.

“Both?” Lily replied in a hopeful tone and slight glance towards the refrigerator.

“Both it is!”

Less than half an hour later, Lily needed a break. They had finished going over Harry’s first year of school and she was fit to strangle someone. She didn’t particularly care who at the moment either. Only the knowledge that her son was still alive and relatively well off a few rooms away kept her pacing the room instead. She would just go check on him for a moment. Just to make sure.

Begging a minute’s break from the horror story that masqueraded as Harry Potter’s life history, Lily quietly padded down the hall toward his room. She was halfway there when the flush of the loo sounded and Tonks walked into the hall covered only by an oversized t-shirt. The girl waved to
Lily and stepped past her. It took a moment for Lily to register that Tonks had her hand on the
door to Harry’s room, but as soon as she did her eyes narrowed and her nostrils flared.

She stepped forward to snag the Tonks by the arm. “What do you think you are doing?” she said
in a quiet, carefully controlled voice.

Tonks looked from Lily’s arm to her face. Her eyebrows rose and she waved her free hand
towards the door. “Going back to my boyfriend…Considered I’m only half dressed I would think
that’s rather obvious,” Tonks said.

“Boyfriend?” Lily asked her control slipping somewhat. She leaned in to start questioning Tonks
thoroughly when a hand fell onto her shoulder from behind and another one gently took her other
hand and removed it from Tonks’ arm.

“I got this, Tonks,” Shiva murmured. “You go get back to Harry.”

Tonks shrugged and headed into her son’s room while Lily turned to Shiva snarling. “What the
bloody hell?! She’s –”

Shiva held up a hand and shook her head. “She’s his girlfriend and will most likely be Lady Black
in a few years. Come on, I’ll jump ahead a bit.”

Lily’s lips stayed curled into an expression Severus would’ve been proud of, but she followed her
host back to the living room. While Shiva whipped out her wand and cast a few privacy charms
around the room Lily took to pacing behind the couch breathing hard. When Shiva was done she
waved for Lily to ask her question. “What the hell?! He’s barely fifteen! She’s at least six years
older than him! How can you possibly be okay with this? How can you let this happen?! She’s
taking advantage of him! He’s just he just a child! He is not remotely old enough for her to be in
his room half naked!” Lily finished her rant glaring.

Shiva shook her head and gave Lily a sad smile. “You haven’t been there for his life. I’m sorry,
but you don’t get to go around berating Harry or his girlfriends until you’ve gotten a chance to get
to know them. You may have given birth to him, but I’m the one who has been raising him for the
past four years. So sit down, shut up and listen.”

Lily was stopped and gaped at Shiva. This was the first time that the other woman had sounded
remotely annoyed and it was enough to get Lily to calm down slightly. Once she had stopped
turning over the issue of a barely clad, Tonks for half a second the rest of what Shiva had said sank
in and Lily collapsed onto the couch with her head in her hands. “You’re right…I don’t have the
right to say anything,” she hiccupped out in a wavering voice. “Please though…help me to
understand this? She’s…so much older than him…”

“Only because he’s still in school,” Shiva said sighing. “Any other time period in their lives and
you wouldn’t give it a second glance. As it is, Tonks had a hell of time deciding this was
acceptable.” She paused and gathered her thoughts before continuing. “You’re wrong on pretty
much all accounts, Lily. To start with, Tonks and Harry met at the beginning of his second year at
Hogwarts. She made a really shitty situation a heck of alot easier for him when he couldn’t get
onto the train platform and still massively distrusted anyone over seventeen not named Bathsheda.
They’ve been friends since and he’s basically the best thing to ever happen to her. Despite Harry
having a hand in convincing her to quit the Aurors that statement includes professionally as well as
romantically.”

Lily’s eyes widened at that revelation, but Shiva kept going before she could ask any questions.
“He was the first one to actually take her or her skills seriously and she was the one he trusted to
help him look up information about Sirius while everyone thought he was a murdering traitor out for blood. Tonks helped Harry and his friends prove that Sirius was innocent. Almost immediately afterward, he named Harry his Heir.”

“His Heir?” Lily gasped. What was that man thinking?!

“Yeah, that was pretty much our reaction as well though Harry didn’t get the implications until mid-summer.”

Lily’s face paled as she thought back over the three girls who had been surrounding Harry almost since she woke up. “Wait…he doesn’t have a third title…does he?”

Shiva snorted. “No. Thank god. I doubt the kid could handle three official wives plus three official Consorts. Not that I know many men who could…”

“Then…he’s also dating Fleur?”

“Yes,” Shiva answered. “But Fleur is the Potter House Consort. Hermione is in line to be Mrs. Potter.” Lily’s mouth dropped open. “Yeah, crazy huh? It’s not often we see multiple marriage these days. In case you’re curious, Hermione was first. They’ve been practically inseparable since the troll incident,” Shiva said with a small scowl at the memory of that disaster. “Hermione is actually part of the reason why Tonks and Harry started dating. Girl made a legit list of people she thought would be suitable for his second wife. Three lists actually. Tonks made the top of one of them.”

“Lists…of wives…”

Shiva laughed. “Welcome to Hermione’s mind. When something is causing a problem, make a list on how to fix it. Girl’s amazing and utterly brilliant, but she can be a bit awkward socially. Anyway, Tonks was against it for a while. Everyone could see she had some feelings for Harry, but she was really good at ignoring them. Like you said, the age difference is a bit of problem when one partner has only just hit puberty a few months previous.”

“Then why?” Lily asked glanced back down the hall.

“They have a lot in common. Like him, Tonks has had issues with both peers and authority figures. She’s been taken advantage of most of her life because of her metamorph powers. Harry was one of the first people outside her family to not care about her abilities and to blatantly state as much. He’s only ever cared about how she felt not what she could do. Harry’s…not a child, Lily. He may be young, but he’s not a child. Your dear sister and her family saw to that quite well. Between the Dursleys and the shite he’s dealt with at Hogwarts, Harry’s practically more an adult than most of the people I work with. He’s certainly more mature than Snape and Filch.”

Lily couldn’t help the snort of amused agreement at that. “If Severus is half as bad as you’ve described I can believe it. Still though…”

Shiva nodded. “Something had to give right? It did. Last year, Harry was entered against his will into the Triwizard Tournament. We’ll get to the full details later, but for the moment, just know that most of us assumed it was a polite death sentence. So he called Tonks, asked her for help as a former Auror to come and train him. He…very nearly died in the first Task.” Shiva shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself for a moment. Lily let out a sympathetic sigh and moved closer to hug the woman briefly.

Once Shiva had gotten herself back under control she smiled her thanks at Lily and continued.
“After that Tonks gave up trying to ignore how she felt. Harry and Hermione had already offered to start dating her over the summer and she decided to take them up on that offer. They’ve been going pretty strong since then. That was about eight or nine months ago. Luna managed to spin an article in the *Quibbler* about how Tonks was actually upholding Pureblood values by dating Harry and they were both strengthening an Ancient House. It was pretty impressive actually. Got the entire public back on their side instead of vilifying her. They haven’t had many issues since then. Actually, as far as I know, Tonks has fought with him less than Hermione.”

Lily considered that information and very slowly nodded. “And Fleur?”

Shiva grimaced. “Different story. We went to the Quidditch World Cup last summer. A riot broke out afterwards and Harry and Hermione helped to save her from being raped and possibly killed. Fleur’s part Veela and neither were greatly affected by her Allure. Fleur was part of the team that came over for the Tournament from Beauxbatons and they grew from friendly acquaintances to real friends during the year. Fleur’s flirted with them most of the year seeing a lot of similarities between her history and Harry and Hermione. She’s similar to Tonks that way. Very few real friends due to her nature and abilities and the teens were some of the first to treat her as more than a potential sex toy.”

Shiva leaned back and wiped a hand across her face. “Nothing happened as far as I know until after Fleur’s sister was used as a hostage in one of the last few Tasks. The girl nearly died and Fleur was almost murdered by one of the Mermen shortly before.”

“Mermen? Against Veela?” Lily asked her eyes wide.

“Yeah, that was our reaction as well. Harry saved both their lives – he literally brought Fleur back from the brink. They accepted her into the relationship afterwards. Harry isn’t a typical kid. He’s…special,” Shiva said floundering for an appropriate word. “He could have anyone he wanted, but he’s only made any sort of connection with people he well and truly cares about. Lily, Harry isn’t being taken advantage of. He isn’t being seduced – actually scratch that, he *is* being seduced. Fleur is a bit of a minx. But it’s not happening any faster than all of them are comfortable with and I’m pretty sure they haven’t gone all the way yet. At least I hope not. I think Tonks and Fleur both wanted to wait until he was at least fifteen but I try to make it a point not to ask too much about that aspect of the relationship. All four know the contraception charm which was as far as I was willing to get involved. It helps a lot that this thing isn’t a harem. We joke about it, but it’s really not. All of them are dating each other as much as Harry. If you listen you’ll notice they’re all very careful to use the term ‘partners’ most of the time.”

Lily leaned back with a deep sigh. She summoned the alcohol bottle from the table and took a long pull. “I’m going to end up being an alcoholic before we’re done catching me up,” she mumbled.

“ Probably. I know Harry’s almost caused that reaction in Minerva already so you won’t be alone!”

“He’s made Minnie drink?” Lily gasped twisting to stare at the woman beside her. “At least now I don’t feel so bad. Wow.”

“Yeah. That’s Harry for you.” Shiva smiled and shook her head. “So…Second Year?”

Harry draped an arm around Tonks as she slid back into bed and shifted so he was laying his head on her chest. She smiled and started running one hand idly up and down his back. “Feeling better, Harry?” he heard her ask softly.

“A bit,” he replied. “It’s just really overwhelming. I don’t even know what call her…I can’t keep
using ‘you’…”

Tonks shrugged as best she could. “Well obviously I’m sure she’d love for you to call her ‘mum’ but I know that’d probably make you uncomfortable for the moment. Maybe stick to ‘Lily’? It’s a bit weird to call your mother by her first name but…”

“I already a have mum though,” Harry said so quietly that Tonks barely heard him.

Her grin widened as she squeezed him. “You do, Harry. Now you have two. You should tell Shiva that by the way. She’s probably worried that you’re going to leave now that Lily’s back in your life.”

He shook his head and held her. “It’s not going to happen. I’m not leaving anyone I care about.”


“What do you mean, backsliding?”

She peered down at him and her hair flipped through several colors before she figured out how to best put it. “You’ve been more indrawn and less confident. You’re acting more like when I first met you. You only started to perk back up again when you started describing your newer ideas and your tattoos. I just want to make sure that you don’t start retreating into yourself, Wonder Boy. We’ve put a lot of work into getting you confident and proud and I’m not about to let you start going all teenage angsty on me now.”

Harry chuckled at her teenage angst comment. He considered what she was saying before letting out a small sigh. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to start withdrawing. It just something I learned from the Dursleys and it’s a hard habit to break when a lot of stuff comes flying at me all at once. Between Voldemort, the prophecy, the Horcrux and now…Lily, it just all got a bit much.”

“I understand Harry. We all do. I spoke with Hermione and Fleur during lunch. They’re worried too.”

He nodded and laid his head back down. “I’ll call them and invite them to stay at the manor tomorrow night. You can all proceed to thoroughly remind me of just why I am one of the luckiest men in the country and why I should definitely not be descending into ‘teenage angst’ on you.”

Tonks laughed and shifted a hand to briefly squeeze his bum eliciting an amused grunt from Harry. “Damn, right we will, Wonder Boy. Damn right we will.”
Chapter 35: Manors and Manners

**Dark Lord Tom Riddle aka Voldemort Reembodied Thanks to Nefarious Triwizard Plot!**

*Written by: Luna Lovegood*

We at the *Quibbler* take our news seriously. While many have accused us of fanciful flights and wondrous ponderings we always strive to deliver the story. Our reputation for intriguing and unusual reports is well deserved as the *Quibbler* has historically tried to stay mainly on the fringes of what is known. We do this intentionally in an effort to satisfy the sense of adventure and wonder that is so often missing from other publications.

This story and the one below it however are different. Previously we have interviewed Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived, Triwizard Co-Champion. We have also reported on some of the extreme circumstances that he becomes involved in. We have always reported only the facts when it comes to Harry Potter. Mr. Potter’s life tends to be far too extreme to risk embellishments. That is why we ask you to not assume we have written this story as part of a prank or an unsubstantiated rumor. The accounts in this report have been largely verified by several sources including the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

We originally were asked to hold off on publishing this story, and we wished to allow for initial measures to be taken and for the Ministry of Magic to be allowed to break the news first. Unfortunately, as the largest leading report for the past two weeks was the current winner of Brightest Smile…it appears our hope for action was unfounded. As such, we will not maintain the silence any longer. What follows is a brief explanation of the events surrounding the Final Task in the Triwizard Tournament…

Sirius smirked as he watched Remus finish reading Luna’s new article and nodding appreciatively. “The girl’s good isn’t she, Moony?”

“That she is indeed. You’d never know she was only fourteen from how she writes these articles,” Remus said. “I especially like the bit at the end guaranteeing their readers that a weekly defense column will be included from now on.”

“Oh?” Sirius’ grin widened far enough to split his face in half. “Did you catch who was going to be writing those?”

Remus shook his head. His nostrils flared as he caught Sirius’ far too pleased expression. “You didn’t…”

“I did!” Sirius said pumping his arm in the air. “What better person to write a defense column than a recently inducted Auror, Wizengamot member, Head of House Black and escapee from Azkaban? The job was practically written for me, Moony!” Sirius moved over and clapped his friend on the back as Remus just sighed heavily. “Perk up old buddy. You get to write a few guest sections too you know!”

“I what?!” the werewolf sputtered. “When did I agree to that?”

“Just now. Glad to have your help. I’m a busy man after all.” Sirius laughed and pulled Remus to his feet. “Come on, we have to get going or we’re going to be late.”
Remus nodded and dropped the paper onto the table. The article below the one with Voldemort was face up – the one describing Lily Potter’s ‘miraculous revival’. “I still have a hard time believing all this, Padfoot.”

“Which part, the one with Potter Manor being restored, the one with Voldemort getting resurrected, or the one with our deceased female friend also being resurrected?”

Remus snorted. “Well when you put it like that, all of them. However what I was specifically referring to was Lily. I know we were both there in that graveyard the other night…but it still seems surreal. We didn’t exactly stay to talk to her. I feel like we almost ran away…are we even sure that she remembers anything?”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “We didn’t stay so that Harry could have some time to deal with it without us hovering over him. Or…well…fawning over Lily…And of course she remembers!”

“You can’t know that for certain, Sirius. It’s not every day that someone returns from the dead you know,” Remus said shaking his head in exasperation.

“Well, Moony, unlike you I do know for certain that she remembers us. I called Shiva last night to see if she needed any help and how things were going.” Sirius held himself up in a regal pose. He managed to hold it for a few seconds before his shoulders slumped. “They’re all as good as can be expected I suppose. Harry’s not exactly being enthusiastic, but it sounded like he’s starting to open up a bit. Lily is walling off again like she used to. I just hope she lets it all out before she cracks.”

Remus cringed. “Damn. I suppose I shouldn’t be very surprised. She did just lose James after all.”

Sirius pushed the door to Grimmauld open and herded his friend outside before locking up and walking into the garden. Sighing he shook his head. “It’s not just James, Remus. Bloody hell, it’s probably not even mostly James. You do know how much they were fighting towards the end don’t you?”

Remus paused and looked to Sirius with a frown. “James’ letters made it seem insignificant.”

“It wasn’t. I don’t know specifics – didn’t want to know at the time. But it wasn’t nothing.” Sirius scowled. “Not that it really matters anymore anyway. Harry’s a teenager, Dumbledore is a murderous bastard, her son has been all but adopted by a school teacher barely out of her teens, oh and Harry has a ‘harem’. None of this is going to be easy for her.”

Sirius sighed and turned to fully face his friend. “Remus, you’ve ditched a lot of the old annoying habits of hanging back and being depressing. If you’re going to have a relapse then let me know now so you deal with it before meeting everyone. The last thing they need at the moment is a depressed werewolf.”

Remus’ eyes narrowed for an instant before he started chuckling. “I feel like I should probably take that as an insult. Instead I’m going to take it for the rebuke it was intended to be and humbly state my apology. I promise I will endeavor to be upbeat and totally not depressing today.”

“Good,” Sirius replied his face splitting into a wide grin again. “Then let’s go see our friends.”

Hermione nervously wrung her hands as Fleur slipped on her shoes. “Are you sure? Maybe just you should go? Or just me? Or perhaps I should call Luna? Maybe Daphne? Neville would be good too. Even Fred and George might be better. And – ”
“Mione,” Fleur said smiling as she got up and put her arms on the brunette’s shoulders, “calm down. ’Arry will be fine wiz just you and me. Luna has already said she will stop by later in ze week and I would be willing to bet good money zat Daphne will be around before ze day is zrough. If only to see ze skeleton on display.” Fleur paused and nodded contemplatively. “I admit, I am looking forward to zat part myself. Anyway, you know zat Neville will not be allowed to meet Lily until his grandmuzzer can make it somezing formal which means he can’t meet up wiz ’Arry just yet. And do you really want to subject the poor woman to Fred and George zis fast?”

Hermione’s mouth opened and closed a few times before she chuckled and shook her head. “Well when you put it like that…” Then she shuddered and leaned into Fleur. “I’m still scared though, Fleur. He’s going to be so confused and I don’t know if I can help him through this. This isn’t like the battles or accidents he’s been in. This is social. This is…not my field.”

Fleur pulled back slightly and leaned down to lightly kiss Hermione. “Relax, love. You simply need to be zere for him and to listen if he needs to talk. Both zings that you already do. I can help wiz ze bigger things if needed. I doubt we will need to help much zough. Tonks stayed wiz him last night remember? She will have helped him to feel better and open up.”

“You’re right. I’m being foolish,” Hermione said steeling her gaze and briefly hugging Fleur. “Thanks. I wish my parents hadn’t called the other night. I know they were worried and I know that you and Tonks were still there for him but…”

“It is not ze first impression you wished to leave on ze muzzer of your boyfriend, no?” Fleur teased.

Hermione’s face blushed bright red. “Not really, no. We know he didn’t need all of us hovering, but does she know that? Ugh, this is pointless. I’m just going to get worked up again. Mum, Dad,” Hermione shouted turning to the stairs, “we’re heading out!”

Richard and Emma came down the stairs dressed for work and moved to hug both girls in the hallway. “Good timing, sweety,” Emma said, “we’re just about ready to leave ourselves.”

“Hermione, your mother and I greatly appreciate you coming home when we asked. Next time you go silent for ages please do try and call first. Especially if you’ve said you’ll only be gone for a short while and there’s a known terrorist who dislikes you on the loose.”

Hermione nodded hurriedly staring at the floor. “I’m sorry, Dad. Just everything started happening so quickly and with Harry’s mum…”

Richard hugged her and pulled back smiling. “I don’t pretend to understand just how you four make this work, but it’s blatantly obvious you care deeply for each other. You go take care of your partner girls,” Richard said smiling at Fleur and Hermione. “Fleur, I’m trusting you to make sure she calls if something else major happens.”

“I will, Richard. Zank you for your hospitality last night.”

“It was a pleasure, dear,” Emma said. “Run along girls. Say hello to the rest of your friends for us. Hermione, do try to come back for a bit longer stay at some point this summer if you can. I love you.”

“I love you too, Mum, Dad.” Hermione gave her parents one last hug before walking outside with Fleur holding her hand. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Daphne’s day had not been off to a good start. Tracey had elected to spend time with Luna
ostensibly to keep the girl happy and allow Daphne time to be near Harry without complications. While that was all true and perfectly understandable – it was actually downright sweet – the unforeseen side effect of that was leaving Daphne alone with her father.

Normally this wouldn’t be a huge problem. Marcus Greengrass was not an evil man. He just wasn’t a good man. There had never been much love between Marcus and Daphne. She had originally thought he hated her though eventually realized he was simply disappointed in her gender rather than anything she had done or not done specifically. He needed an Heir to inherit the legacy he’d built. Daphne being a woman made such a thing vastly more complicated and annoying for him. In turn, Daphne had always felt that he used far too heavy a hand in nearly all aspects of life, from his business dealings to his punishments. She’d swiftly grown to distance herself from him while maintaining the veneer of a Pureblood Princess that would always keep him mostly satisfied with her and convinced she could be left to her own devices.

All they’d ever truly needed to function amicably together was a buffer. It wasn’t perfect, but it wasn’t something she’d ever complain about. Unfortunately, this summer had removed all normal buffers from their relationship. Her mother and Astoria had gone to Paris for a week in order to visit with the Delacours. Daphne had been pleasantly surprised to find that Astoria had struck up an odd friendship with Gabrielle. How that little tidbit had slipped under her radar the entire school year was something she’d have to seriously interrogate Astoria about upon her sister’s return. Really, the girl was becoming far too adept at using her perky personality to mask her deeper goals. Hiding things from others was fine; hiding things from her sister was not so fine.

With her sister and mother gone though and Tracey vanished for the day…that left Marcus and Daphne eating breakfast alone together. Her father had been increasingly agitated throughout the entirety of the last year and as Daphne quietly laid the plate of breakfast in front of him he stared up at her with a coldly calculating gaze. A shiver of apprehension ran down Daphne’s spine as she took her seat across from him in the Heir position.

“Daphne,” Marcus said in a perfectly calm and rational tone. That wasn’t ominous at all. “Where do you stand with the young Lord Potter?”

Daphne barely managed to hold in her scowl. Of course he was going to ask about Harry. His precious Heir had to be secured and his continued family name ensured. “I am in good standing with Harry, Father. He respects me and his legal guardian approves of me. His primary partners are amenable to opening talks in the future.”

“According to the papers Lily Potter has recently awakened as well. Where do you stand with her? Her opinion is going to be extremely important to the boy and therefore the negotiations in general.”

This time Daphne couldn’t prevent the twitching of her lip though at least she kept from growling. Her voice was remarkably controlled when she replied. “I’m surprised you heard that, Father. I wouldn’t think you read the Quibbler.”

“I don’t. However Jeannette does and she brought it up while I met with her husband. Your standing, Daphne?”

“I haven’t spoken to her yet. I felt the best course of action was to allow for her to meet and speak with her son before bombarding her with anything else.” Considering she’d only been among the living for a few days how Marcus had expected Daphne to meet with the woman was utterly beyond speculation. “I hope to make a favorable impression while inspecting their restored Manor today.”
Marcus rubbed his chin nodding. “Very well. Ensure you do. I grow tired of waiting for this, Daphne. Either cement your status as the boy’s betrothed soon or I will be forced to pursue other options.”

Daphne froze. Dimly she realized her hands were clenched into fists and made a conscious effort to relax them. *This*, this right here was a large part of the real reason she had refused to accept Harry’s paramours’ offer of speaking with him about her attraction. She was certainly interested. She had Tracey’s blessing. And she had a father who was basically *forcing* her to enter into a political marriage before she hit sixteen. While she wanted to try and be with Harry Potter she did not want it to be because she had been cornered by Marcus Greengrass. This was going to be *her* decision and *no one* else’s! Daphne was in control of her own life and if she had to be thrown out of her family and made nameless in order to prove that then she would do so!

“Oh, Father, I believe I have made myself very clear on this matter. I am maintaining my own course here perfectly well. You need not be concerned,” she said. Her calm veneer shattered ever so slightly more with part of her frustration seeping into her tone.

“If only I could trust that,” her father sighed. “I know of your…dealings…with Tracey Davis. I am no fool and you have learned well from me even if you haven’t enjoyed it. Daphne, I no longer believe that you have any interest in Harry Potter other than a convenient cover for your true relationship.” He scowled and wiped his lips briefly while Daphne just glared and clenched her fists again. “I don’t give a toss if you want to keep that girl on the side for the rest of your life. I don’t care if your husband only exists to provide you with semen for a baby. I do care though that you have a baby and a husband! Appearances must be maintained and I will not let this family disappear to appease your heart. Do not toy with me, Daphne. Use the boy for cover or find someone else. Either way ensure you *do something*, girl! This misdirection and stalling is unbecoming of you and not at all indicative of my Heir. Keep trying my patience and I will assume you are playing power games with me and act accordingly.”

His piece said, Marcus pushed his plate aside and left the room. Daphne finally allowed the angry growl loose as she rose to clean the plates. Taking her father’s plate to the sink she turned back to her own half eaten dish. Starting slightly at the sight of several small blood droplets near her setting, Daphne turned her hands over and noticed for the first time that she had dug her nails into her palms hard enough to draw blood. Letting out another frustrated sigh, Daphne cast a quick healing spell on her hands and finished cleaning the table, her appetite gone entirely.

Checking the time, Daphne moved to the Floo. She was a few minutes early, but it seemed appropriate to take her leave rather than risk running into her father again. Harry would understand. He probably wouldn’t even notice she was early at all, Daphne thought with a small grin. The boy got far too consumed in the bigger picture and lost sight of the minutia at times. Tossing a pinch of powder into the fire grate she called out, “Potter Manor. No hypocrites allowed.” Harry’s version of a pass code was entertaining if somewhat unsecure. The familiar whirling swept over her and the trip was only interrupted by a slight tingling just before she stepped out of the receiving fireplace.

“I will never understand how you all make that look so easy,” a familiar, mildly annoyed voice sounded from just off to her left.

Daphne shook her head at Harry and chuckled. “And we in turn will never understand how you manage to fail so spectacularly from a simple Floo trip. Hello, Harry.”

“Hey, Daph. How’s it going?” Harry asked laughing along with her. “You’re a little early…I think…maybe…I kinda lost track of time and didn’t want to find a clock…”
“You could’ve just used a tempus spell,” she said arching her eyebrows. Harry’s wide eyes and small gape only served to add to her amusement.

He groaned and ran a hand through his hair. “I keep forgetting that I’m not at the Dursleys anymore so I can actually do small spells and things during the summer. You’d think I’d have learned by now.”

“Well it has only been one real summer you’ve been in a wizarding household,” she said shrugging. “You can’t be expected to drop every old habit right away. Besides, I imagine Shiva would try to limit it somewhat if only to at least attempt to maintain the spirit of the underage magic law.”

Harry grunted. “Maybe before we heard a prophecy saying that Riddle is going to gun for me explicitly. Now between her and Lily, she’s probably going to be enforcing mandatory training 12 hours a day soon.”

Daphne turned an intense gaze on him. “I didn’t think either of you believed the prophecy meant you’d be dueling him one on one?”

Harry shrugged again. “Honestly, Daph? Do I think it’s set in stone because of a prophecy? Hell no. Do I think my worst good luck ever is going to end up with me facing off against him one way or another just because Fate apparently hates me? Pretty much, yeah.”

Daphne groaned and managed to avoid facepalming. “Well at least you got your mother back. Fate can’t hate you that much.”

“Yeah cause that hasn’t been awkward as hell,” Harry muttered. Daphne’s eyes narrowed at that but Harry smiled and looked up at her before she could say anything. “Come on, I’ll show you around a bit. Snapfist is with Lily and the others in the study. We’re waiting for the others before the official tour starts.”

“Then how are you going to show me around?” Daphne teased with a grin.

Harry chuckled. “Okay you caught me. I just want to show off the basilisk skeleton. It looks amazing!”

Daphne laughed at his enthusiasm. “Good to know. I admit I’m looking forward to seeing it myself. You didn’t have any issues with Snapfist did you?”

“Huh?” Harry asked looking confused. His face scrunched up then relaxed. “Oh, you mean did he give me a hard time for freaking out the other day?” Daphne nodded. “He pretended to for a minute or so, but admitted almost immediately he understood why I was rather…short. Just asked me to try and be more polite the next time I had a minor breakdown.” Harry snorted and shook his head in exasperation. “Like I can control that.”

Daphne shrugged. “Well you didn’t start tossing spells or kicking up a magical wind so I think you were rather restrained as it was. Anyway, I really think you should change the pass code to open the Floo, Harry. It’s far too simple.”

Harry stopped walking and turned to her smiling widely. Daphne just lifted an eyebrow in response waiting for him to explain why he appeared to have caught the canary. “Nice to see that Gryffersins can outfox Slythindors. The pass code is mostly a funny ruse. I did originally want it to be ‘no Toads allowed’ but with the Umbitch dead it kind of seemed like a waste of a joke. Anyway, it just serves to shunt you from the primary Floo to the personal one. The wards are the
“What wards work through the Floo?” she asked incredulous.

“Shiva, Bill and I added a bit to the goblins’ work. A slight modification to the Anchor lets the ward scheme penetrate into the Floo stream. Anyone coming in without permission is bounced to a random grate somewhere down the line. Anyone coming in without permission and with hostile intent is…basically slapped back to their origination point with a hammer.” He rubbed a hand through his hair and grinned guiltily. “The pass code does help the wards to identify people, but it’s just an initial targeting section. You and most of the others are already keyed in by blood. I still need to get Remus, Amelia, Neville and Hannah when they stop by but the main group is mostly good otherwise.”

Daphne’s mouth fell open and she couldn’t help the shiver of shock that ran through her. She was not above admitting to herself that there was a hefty amount of pride and happiness that he’d trusted her enough to preemptively key her into his home’s defenses. “When did you get my blood to key me into the wards?” she finally asked after floundering for something to say.

Harry shrugged. “Uh, sometime before the Yule Ball was announced I think. It was back when I still planned to come and inspect this place during the winter hols.”

“Impressive foresight,” she said finally pushing down her reaction and managing to smile at him. “Thanks for letting me in, Harry.”

“You’re my friend. Of course I was going to let you in here if you ever wanted in,” he said shrugging. She blushed slightly realizing that to him it really was just that simple.

A knock sounded from the next room over and Harry turned walking forward. “I got it!” he called. “Come on, Daph. Entrance hall is through here.”

Daphne stepped forward quickly to follow her friend but as soon as she walked through the door she gasped in surprise. Hanging several meters above her and twisting idly in the air was the skeleton of the giant basilisk they had killed. Some of the initial effect was likely lost since they were at the tail of the beast though it was certainly impressive enough as it was. Her mouth lifted in a half smirk thinking back to the battle with the creature. Sure she hadn’t actually done much damage, but she’d still participated in bringing it down. It was nice to imagine what she’d be capable of in the future if she could do that at twelve.

“Mione! Fleur! You’re here!” Daphne heard Harry yell and she turned to see the newcomers step into the house. The basilisk’s head turned its empty gaze down on them and opened its mouth in a not entirely silent hiss. Hermione and Fleur both froze and stared up at the thing as it examined them. Harry, completely unfazed, pulled them both into a hug and leaned in to kiss first Hermione and then Fleur. Daphne felt a brief pang of longing though her expression was steeled back into a welcoming smile before any of the three pulled away and looked back at her.

“It’s nice to see you too, Harry. Hello, Daphne,” Hermione said with a wide grin.

“Hello. I see you’ve met Ms. Skelly,” Daphne said walking towards them.

Fleur laughed as she nodded. “I do not know about zis nickname, but ze beast is…most impressive. You two truly slaughtered zis at twelve?”

Harry winced. “I wouldn’t say slaughtered. More like ‘got in a lucky shot’. But yeah, we did.”

“Does it have to hiss at us every time we walk in?” Hermione asked glaring at the skeleton.
“It’s charmed to do that to whoever’s at the front door. Fleur, you can apparate directly into this room now that you’ve seen it so it won’t bother you if you do that. Mione, as long as you use something besides the front door it won’t pay any attention to you.”

Hermione nodded. “Good to know. Harry…” she paused as she ran her eyes up and down his body carefully checking him over, “are you alright?”

He held up one hand and waved it back and forth in a so-so motion. “I’ve been better. Tonks helped last night. I did talk with Lily yesterday and this morning though and it’s not as awkward as it was originally. I feel a bit bad though that I was rather comforted when I woke up and she was brewing a hangover potion.”

Fleur cocked her head at that. “Zat does seem a bit…unusual, ‘arry.”

“Shiva told her most of my life story last night it seems. It’s…comforting to know that she was upset enough to end up with a hangover. I’m not happy she had a headache, I’m happy she cared.” All three girls winced and were suitably impressed at the woman’s ability to be able to brew a potion after hearing all of that. “They stopped just before hitting this last year I think. Shiva mentioned this morning that she wanted Lily conscious for today and not off trying to murder Dumbledore or finding the Umbitch’s remains so she could reanimate her and kill her again.”

“Which was a very good idea if your last year was worse than the first three,” Lily Potter said a trace of both amusement and exasperation as she walked into the entrance hall. “I don’t even want to know who James and I pissed off to give you such bad luck, Harry. Hello girls. Fleur, Hermione, nice to see you again. You must be Daphne.”

Daphne curtsied and nodded. “Yes, Milady. I’m Daphne Greengrass. It’s a pleasure to meet you Lady Potter.”

A wince and flash of pain darkened Lily’s features though both were gone so quickly Daphne almost thought she’d imagined it. “Lily is fine dear. If you’re not comfortable with that, Mrs. Potter is okay too. That one does make me feel a bit…well old, but I suppose I should get used to it.”

“Lily then,” Daphne said smiling back at the woman. She was remarkably polite and upbeat for a dead woman. She also hid her pain well like Harry.

“Er, Mrs. – Lily – has the Manor changed much since you were first here?” Hermione asked waving a hand to encompass the grounds.

Lily shrugged. “I haven’t explored much yet and honestly I hadn’t spent much time here to begin with before it was damaged. Snapfist was saying they kept most of the arrangements the same in the reconstruction. Ragnok apparently got a kick out of the trophy room. The way Snapfist tells it, the man seemed positively giddy that the old wyvern head survived.” She shook her head. “Men and their trophies. Honestly, I practically fainted when I walked in here and saw this thing!” she gestured towards the slithering skeleton above. “I can’t believe Daphne and Harry fought this alone before hitting their teens! Daphne, you have my respect and I seriously hope you have your parents’ too. If not, bring them here and take them through the front door,” Lily said shuddering slightly.

Daphne blushed at the woman’s praise. While she had told her father she wanted to make a good impression she hadn’t actually believed that she’d stand a chance of impressing Harry’s mother. Certainly not this quickly. That Lily was singing her praises without even having gotten to know her beyond second hand stories…and especially after what her father had said just a short while
ago...Dammit she might not make it until the start of September if this was the sort of in-law she could look forward to by dating Harry. “Thanks, Lily,” she finally managed to mumble.

“Let’s go back to others,” Harry said. He wrapped an arm around Hermione and tugged gently. “Come on, Mione, we’re hanging out in the library.”

Daphne had to cover her mouth to stifle her laugh as the brunette’s eyes widened and her breathing picked up. Before any of the others could say anything, Hermione had started walking at a pace that was practically dragging Harry behind her.

Lily watched their guests with a small smile as they explored the small library. Hermione seemed to be a girl after her own heart, eagerly flitting from shelf to shelf and taking notes on what she wanted to read and in which order. The brunette witch had barely paid any attention at all to the other occupants beyond the initial pleasantries though she did still surreptitiously glance at Harry whenever he fell too silent only returning to her books when he started talking to the group again or made a small gesture that seemed to satisfy Hermione.

Fleur was far more engaging now that she wasn’t consumed with worrying about her...partner. Lily suppressed a small grimace at that. The fact that her son was not only dating, but dating all three girls at once was more than enough to spur a return of the headache she’d woken up with. The French Veela certainly didn’t make it easy to forget that fact. She used almost any excuse to kiss or touch Harry and he tended to respond in kind. Fleur seemed easy to like and she definitely had a healthy amount of respect for the young woman’s skills to have gotten through her own set of challenges last year even if the details were still mostly clouded in shadow.

Daphne on the other hand was an enigma. To most appearances, Daphne Greengrass was a typical Pureblood Princess with a haughty air and a superior attitude. When she engaged with most she was brusque, but polite and knowing while still being respectful. However near Harry her demeanor shifted quite largely. She was still thoughtful and careful, but it was tempered with an obvious humor and exasperation. The effect was enough of a difference that Lily was reminded strongly of Andromeda Tonks. One of the reasons she had so adored Andi was because the woman was a perfect blend of the skills and experience in purebloods coupled with the joy and openness in most Muggleborns. Daphne seemed to be quite similar in that regard and it bode well for the girl’s prospects in whatever she aimed to achieve both personal and professional.

Tonks as a direct contrast was busy arguing with Dobby over what color the walls should be painted. The little house elf was insisting that a gold and red scheme be used in the majority of the manor while Tonks was trying to make a case for some Hufflepuff colors. Her efforts to prove her point by standing against various walls and shifting her hair to match her stated preferences was hilarious to watch. Completely unbecoming of proper behavior, but that was a large part of what made it so much fun. Lily had almost fallen to the floor in shock as she caught a quick glimpse of the goblin laughing at Tonks’ antics!

That Harry had managed to get such good friends in spite of his...history...warmed Lily’s heart. It proved that Harry was still her sweet little boy even if that wasn’t quite as literal as it used to be.

A deep knock sounded throughout the hall followed by a pathetic little scream of terror. Several heads turned to the door to the library while Lily just rolled her eyes. “We’re in the library, Sirius!” she yelled. “Stop playing with Skelly and come in!”

“Hey, that thing’s scary!” Sirius pouted walking in with Remus following close behind. While Sirius had obviously played it up, Moony was looking rather pale. Lily couldn’t help the twinge of satisfaction at making the man squirm a bit. Sure, he hadn’t betrayed them – Shiva had cleared
that up – but he still hadn’t even bothered to try and contact Harry before the situation was forced onto him. While she respected that he’d made changes to his life she wasn’t going to give him a free pass until she made certain that he had earned that pass.

“Was the hissing too much?” Harry asked innocently. Lily chuckled. Maybe some of the others could tell if he was genuinely asking or teasing but she certainly couldn’t. “I was originally going to just have it hanging up there, but when the goblins mentioned they could have it animated a bit I might have went a bit overboard with the effects.”

Tonks’ hair and most of her body turned green with her tongue flicking out and lengthening into a split snake’s tongue. “I sssink thisss big brothersssss of mine issssss perfectssss.”

Every single occupant of the house turned to stare at Tonks who just stared back at them all. It took a full ten seconds before everyone was clutching their sides and wiping their eyes from their laughter. Tonks grinned, bowed and morphed back to her normal form. “Aww shucks folks. Thanks.”

When people had finally calmed down Sirius moved to warmly embrace Lily. “It’s good to see you up and about, Lils. I missed you.”

“Well, I wish I could say I missed you too but…” she said shrugging and giving him a small smile in return.

“Yeah, I know. I talked with you friend earlier. I know the basics. Look on the bright side though, Lils, at least you’re still crazy young!”

She snorted and shook her head genially while Remus stepped forward with a sigh. “Sirius, while that may be true, there’s probably a far better way to put it. Hello, Lily. I’m pleased to see you again as well. Also, I hope you’ll accept my apologies for not doing more for Harry while it would have counted. I was rather taken to task with my poor behavior – well deservedly so – and while I can’t change the past I can try to atone for it in the future.”

Lily’s eyes narrowed as she searched his features. He seemed genuine and that he’d freely offered the sentiment before she’d even had the chance to tear into him was something…Slowly she nodded and pulled him into a very brief hug. “Ensure you keep doing right by my family in the future Remus and we’re okay. Step out of line again though and I will not be as nice.”

Shiva groaned. “Ugh, Remus, don’t piss her off. I had a hard enough time keeping her from tearing off after Lockhart and Dumbledore. You might be a werewolf, but you’re still a heck of a lot easier to find than those two.”

“Actually, Flophart is easy to find. He’s still in St. Mungos,” Daphne said nonchalantly. “I hear they’ve gotten him to the point of being able to ask for food and loo trips again. If Lily wants to go torture him a bit I’m all for that. I can even show you his room.”

Hermione paused in her inspection of one of the shelves and peered at Daphne curiously. “Oh really? Daphne, have you paid visits to the man?”

“Well he may have developed some intense itching in rather uncomfortable places while I was checking on some other patients. A few times. That he can’t actually explain what the problem is…was sadly unfortunate,” the Slytherin said with a wicked grin. Hermione just shook her head in exasperation though she didn’t appear to have any actual issues with her friend’s actions.

Lily chuckled and eyed the girl appreciatively. Daphne certainly had a vindictive side to her.
“Well, that certainly helps diminish my need for justice. Though I may have to pay some visits and try out some of my more experimental potions on him.” She grinned widely.

Snapfist stood and looked at her flashing a toothy smile. “I see why you have a good reputation with the Nation, Mrs. Potter. If we aren’t waiting on more perhaps we should start the tour?”

“Sure. Lead on, Account Manager.”

The group passed through the entrance hall again as they moved to the East Wing when the basilisk skeleton started hissing at the door and chime sounded. Harry gave an annoyed sigh. “That’s the signal that someone is approaching who doesn’t have hostile intent against any of the people keyed into the wards. Give me a second to see who it is.”

Daphne gave an annoyed huff and moved to follow him. “It’s quite possible it’s my father. He was rather…forward this morning and it would certainly be in character for him to drop by, introduce himself and see how things were going. I’ll get rid of him if it is.”

Harry pulled the door open and blinked in surprise at two Aurors just stepping up to the door. “Err, hello?” He recognized Dawlish, but while the other one seemed vaguely familiar he couldn’t place a name to the face.

“Mr. Potter,” Dawlish said with his face set firmly into an expression caught between disgust and fear, “we’re here for the abomination. Please stand aside.”

“Abomination?” Harry asked looking to Daphne who just shrugged mirroring his confusion. “Uh, I know the skeleton might be a bit much, but I wouldn’t call it an abomination. That seems rather harsh.”

The second Auror stepped frowned. “Skeleton? So you’ve already killed it!”

“Yeeeaaaah,” Harry said slowly as if speaking to children. “This was really big news over two years ago…Daphne and I killed the basilisk and it’s hanging here…what skeleton did you think I meant?”

“Harry? Either invite them in or lock them out. I want to see the rest of this place,” Lily called.

Both Aurors froze. “It’s alive!” Dawlish yelled. “Savage, protect the kids I’ll get the creature!” Dawlish and Savage whipped out their wands and had time to take a single step forward before staring dumbly ahead.

Harry and Daphne were back to back in front of the two Aurors blocking the door. Both teens had their wands out pointed at one Auror each. Harry had his left hand pulled back with his palm extended, the Knockback tattoo glowing slightly which matched the Boomstone tattoo glowing on his hand clutching his wand. Daphne in turn had pulled a Freezer rune stone from somewhere and was clutching it in her off hand. Harry was carefully positioned so that the skin on his right hand was brushing against Daphne’s left in case he had to use the Boomstone. To helpfully increase their image of unstoppable badasses Skelly leaned her head down behind them and unhinged her toothy jaw letting out a very loud hiss.

“Put your wands down and step back from the door,” Harry said remarkably calmly considering how badly he wanted to curse these two idiots.

“There is no necromantic abomination present in this household, Aurors,” Daphne said all joking gone and steel edging her voice. “I kindly recommend you take your leave immediately before a
misunderstanding occurs. You are in the process of invading a Lord’s manor with faulty justification. You are not here under orders. Director Amelia Bones would have nipped that right in the bud. Head Auror Scrimgeour has also already been informed of Lily Potter’s return to health so he has not authorized this either.”

The corner of Harry’s lip twitched as he saw Dawlish visibly gulp. Savage just sneered. “Out of the way children. You’ve obviously been confounded by someone.”

Harry growled and Daphne’s eyes narrowed to slits. Before either could act the rest of the group stepped up behind them with Lily in the front. “I’m a necromantic abomination now? Well, I suppose I shouldn’t really be too surprised about that. Am I supposed to be decaying and putrid too? Do I eat brains?”

Dawlish gaped at the sarcastic comments, his wand lowering slightly. Savage however shifted his aim to point over Harry’s shoulder. His lips moved to start casting a spell when he was thrown off his feet. Harry’s disarming charm hit the man at the same time that his Knockback blast slammed into his chest. Daphne’s body bind jinx hit him barely half a second afterwards. Both teens turned their wands on Dawlish not even bothering to notice who had raised a shield behind them. “Your move, Auror Dawlish,” Harry said quietly.

Dawlish slowly held up one hand and lowered his wand though he didn’t sheathe it. “I have to take…it into custody, Lord Potter. Necromancy is the only explanation here. I don’t know how it’s tricking you or who’s controlling it, but I promise you we will find out and hunt them down.”

Harry heard the sound of a hand slapping a face behind him though he just groaned. “Have you listened to a single thing we’ve said? Did you even bothering to read the article in the paper or did you just run off half-cocked after catching a glimpse of the headline?”

The guilty expression on the Auror’s face was answer enough. Daphne glared at him. “Allow me to summarize for you in that case. Lily Potter was in a state of deep enchanted sleep while augmenting Harry Potter’s protection. As the specific requirements to break this enchantment were previously unfulfilled thanks to an ignored will only recently was the spell broken. Lily Potter never died; she simply slept. Her status was confirmed by two separate licensed Healers, three Heads of Ancient Houses and the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

“Now get your partner and get the hell off my property!” Harry finished shouting.

“I’ll take it from here, Lord Potter,” Amelia Bones said as she walked up the path. “Tonks, thank you for calling. I see we have a bit of trouble here.” She paused as she stopped by Savage. A flick of her wand had the man standing in front of her next to Dawlish though still frozen by the body bind. “Dawlish, explain.”

Dawlish’s face paled even further as he stumbled over his words. “Ma’am, Savage and I saw the article in the Quibbler on Proudfoot’s desk this morning. We…well it’s only natural to assume necromancy or other Dark Magic when dealing with a reanimation! We didn’t want to waste any time since who knows what someone without any morals like that would do with their creation left near Harry Potter…”

Lily held up her hand from beyond Harry and Daphne. “They did sound like they tried to protect the teens. Sort of at least,” she said jovially. Harry wanted to be frustrated with her for joking under these circumstances, but if she was anything like him he knew she was probably doing it in a deliberate effort to avoid going for her own wand.

“What am I going to do with you two?” Bones sighed. “Unpaid leave for one week. Paid leave for
another week after that. Both of you are then going back through the last three months of the
Auror Training Program. Savage, while this is technically your first offense your general attitude
has been severely lacking especially concerning safety and procedure. Dawlish…goddammit
Dawlish! You are a good Auror when you can pull head out of your arse and we need good Aurors
now more than ever! Initiative is fine and commendable even, but we check facts first for a
reason!” She waved her wand again and the spell holding Savage dropped. He proceeded to drop
his head in shame. “Get out of here both of you.”

The two Aurors hurried off the property and Bones turned to the group with a sigh. “I apologize
for that. Lily…ugh I’ll talk to my department immediately to make sure this doesn’t happen
again. It was scheduled for before everyone went home for the day originally. I’m sorry for the
disruption.” She started to turn, but stopped and gave a small amused shake of her head at Harry
and Daphne who had finally holstered their wands and moved slightly apart. “I’ve seen Dawlish
go up against a werewolf while transformed and not break a sweat. I don’t know what you people
did to him, but I sincerely hope you join our ranks when you graduate. Good day, everyone.”

As Amelia walked back down the driveway Harry slammed the front door and scowled. “They
obviously had hostile intent to…Lily at least. Why the hell didn’t the wards trigger?” he asked
aloud frowning down at the floor.

Shiva laid a soft hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “She’s not entered into them, kid. We were
going to do that when we got to the Anchor. Nobody expected an attack in the half hour we’ve
been here.”

Harry’s scowl deepened further but Hermione moved forward to kiss his cheek before he could say
anything. “That was quite impressive, Harry. I believe I told you once before that Daphne was a
good second for you and an equal in battle. There’s all the proof you need.”

Tonks gave them a thumbs up with her hair a mix between emerald green and scarlet red. Harry,
suitably distracted just ran a hand through his hair and huffed.

“I am so glad I came to this personally!” Snapfist said clapping his hands together and smiling.
“Come, let’s go to that Ward Anchor first.”

As the group moved to follow Snapfist, Harry noticed Lily eyeing Daphne and giving the girl a
very affirming nod of acknowledgement.

Shortly after the Manor tour ended the group had had dinner together with everyone departing
except for Hermione, Fleur and Tonks. Lily found it somewhat hard to ignore that all three girls
were bunking in her son’s bedroom. No matter how many assurances she’d received that this
wasn’t something new it didn’t change that he seemed far too young.

Leaning back against the wall behind her she used her butterbeer to salute a picture of a young
black haired girl on the end table nearby. “Quite the hypocrite I’m being huh, Marlene? I was
sleeping with you at 15 and now I’m getting angry with my son for doing the same thing. I guess
it’s different when they’re our own children.” Lily scowled and drained her drink. Marlene had
died only a few weeks before Lily and James had gone into hiding. While their fling hadn’t lasted
long they’d stayed friends ever since and her death had hurt quite a lot. That Marlene’s entire
family had been wiped out at the same time just made it even worse.

Lily turned from the picture and walked back towards her room. Harry had offered the master
bedroom but she’d turned him down. That room was supposed to be for the lord of the manor and
she didn’t really qualify for that position anymore. Granted, she’d actually never qualified for the
position. James’ parents had died in the same attack that destroyed the Manor so she’d never even set foot in the room before this morning. It was easy to let Harry have that area. The larger quarters would at least make things simpler for his sleeping arrangements.

The hallway split and instead of turning towards her bedroom, Lily found herself going to other way. She stopped in front of James’ old room. Slowly, with a slight tremble Lily pushed the door open and walked inside. The goblins had indeed been thorough. If nothing else in the house had made that clear this room did. There were still some of the pictures and posters that James had decorated hanging in the same spots. Her old attempt at knitting a blanket was draped across the back of the chair just like she’d left it. The bed’s sheets had that same eye-watering combination of brilliant red, blazing gold and fluttering snitches.

Lily sat down on the bed and pulled a small bear from the side table. She’d bought that as soon as she found out she was pregnant. Every kid liked bears and while stuffed dragons were largely the preferred option among magical families she’d wanted her child to grow up with a connection to the Muggle world. Harry had grown up with that connection. He’d grown up with *Petunia*. With the same woman who’d stated multiple times he should die before even being born. With the aunt who’d stuffed him in a cupboard because he was special and she wasn’t. Her son had grown up completely alone because she and James had been too busy arguing to bother telling people how her research was progressing.

Everything she’d ruthlessly pushed down since first opening her eyes and seeing a coffin bubbled up to the surface. Lily clutched the bear to her chest, squeezed her eyes shut and started sobbing. Her breath hitched and her arms trembled. She couldn’t fix this. She couldn’t fix anything. She’d damned her son to hell while trying to save him. How was she supposed to justify that?

Lily barely even registered when a soft arm wrapped around her shoulders and pulled her head down to rest on a shoulder. She could only cry harder and squeeze the bear tighter. “Shh, it’s okay,” a quiet voice said. Lily shook her head and kept crying. “Let it out. Harry does the same thing. You can’t keep this shite bottled up because it just gets worse and worse.”

At the mention of her son Lily’s breath hitched again. She tried to pull back vigorously shaking her head. “I left him alone!” she shouted. “I left him alone for years!”

“You saved him.” Lily finally managed to pull enough coherent thought together to recognize that Shiva was the one holding her and trying to calm her down. “Did he end up having a shitty childhood? Yeah. That’s not on you, Lily. We read your will and your husband’s. Harry doesn’t blame you at all for being stuck with the Dursleys. You had no way of knowing that your wishes would be completely ignored.”

“It doesn’t matter! I *should* have known! I knew what bigoted arses the wizarding world created. I ranted about them enough to realize that it was likely to happen! I should have *told* someone about what I was trying to do! If I had told someone than I could’ve raised him!” Lily gave up trying to move away and collapsed back down into Shiva’s embrace. “I was too busy trying to make James understand why I was so determined. Why I was set on that course. Why I couldn’t afford to do any other research. Why I wasn’t trying to be a Merlin-be-damned *martyr*! We gave up understanding each other’s positions! I ignored everything except finishing it! I didn’t *explain* anything!”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Shiva said quietly. The complete incongruity of that statement jolted Lily out of her sobs. She pulled back to stare wide eyed at the other woman. “I don’t mean that I’m glad Harry grew up the way he did or that you got trapped in stasis for a decade. I mean, I’m glad you got it working in time. If you hadn’t been so focused your son would’ve died, Lily. You
saved him. You gave him a chance. I’ve patched over his wounds, but I never would have even met him if you hadn’t saved him to begin with.” Shiva smiled and hugged Lily. This time instead of a comforting embrace, it was a thankful one. “I love that boy like he was my own flesh and blood and I can’t thank you enough for letting him live long enough that I could meet him.”

Lily started crying again at that and she clung to Shiva tighter. She hadn’t looked at it from that angle before, but the professor was right. If she had stopped working, there was a good chance she wouldn’t have been ready for when Voldemort showed up on their doorstep. Harry’s life had been hard…but Shiva was right. He was alive. And she could start doing everything in her power to make sure that she made up for all the years she had missed with him.

Severus Snape sat down to his breakfast and morning tea without his usual sneer. Dumbledore had been removed long enough that Snape was beginning to see the benefits of having one of his masters gone for good. Bones a hardass bitch who made no secret of disliking him, but she was fair and forthright with her explanations and orders; two things that Dumbledore had never been. To make matters even better, the idiot Lucius had managed to let Narcissa walk away from him! While she was unable to make a deep dent in the man’s finances the money she had taken was rather impressive and rumors were running rampant that Black was going to file for a divorce on her behalf on ‘breach of contract’ grounds reclaiming a sizable dowry. The Dark Lord’s displeasure was firmly centered onto Lucius leaving Severus free to do whatever he wanted in the meantime. All in all, it was an excellent start to the summer months.

He opened yesterday’s papers to see what amusing anecdote the insane Lovegoods had come up with this time. Reading the article on Voldemort’s return was rather anticlimactic as there were no embellishments or conspiracy theories. Moving on he flipped to read below the fold. The headline of the article barely registered on his first pass.

*Lily Potter’s Miraculous Revival! A Strengthening Ritual Gone Wrong Thanks to Wizengamot Mismanagement*

**Written by: Luna Lovegood**

*Many of you may think a joke article. As was stated in the first section, it is not. You read that correctly. Lily Potter has regained consciousness after remaining in an enchanted sleep for nearly fourteen years. She –*

Snape spit out the tea he was drinking as he stared at the paper in front of him. Moving so quickly the table bounced backwards, he lunged forwards and gripped the *Quibbler* like his very life depended on it. Hurriedly he started reading the entire thing.

*She was initially forced into the magical slumber during the night of Voldemort’s attack on the Potter household in Godric’s Hollow. The Dark Lord unknowingly completed the final component of an ancient ritual that allowed Mrs. Potter to strengthen her son’s natural defenses. This is what led directly to Voldemort’s initial defeat. The final segment after the danger had passed was for the young Harry Potter to come into contact with his slumbering mother passing back the enhancement and allowing her to wake.*

*In a tragic series of events, this never came to pass. The Chief Warlock of the time, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore sealed the wills that explained this step of the ritual thereby refusing to permit it to be performed. It is unknown whether Dumbledore took this step knowing the true ramifications or not, but the fact remains that he vastly overstepped his bounds in this instance. By ignoring the final stipulations of James and Lily Potter, Albus Dumbledore led to the burying alive*
of a healthy if unresponsive woman for over a decade.

Upon the recent completion of the Triwizard Tournament and with the return of Tom Riddle, Harry Potter felt it was appropriate to follow the last wishes of his parents. Upon paying his respects, Mr. Potter and all others present were quite surprised to observe the long overdue completion of the original ritual and the revival of Lily Potter. She has since been examined by several certified Healers and pronounced in perfect health. The Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has also signed off on Mrs. Potter’s status saying, “There is no evidence of Dark Magic here at all. While Mrs. Potter does not remember the exact ritual she used, it’s evident that this was family magic and likely is unable to be spoken of with outsiders to begin with. Mrs. Potter’s survival is certainly unexpected, but rare and unusual Light magic should not be mistaken for Dark.”

Mrs. Potter is currently recovering from her lost time with her remaining family. Any inquiries into her current health and status are authorized to be directed through either Quibbler staff or Madame Bones.

Snape’s hands shook as he finished the article. “It’s a trick. It has to be a trick. I held her body. She was dead. I know she was dead!” He stood up so quickly that the kitchen table flipped over on its side. Running to the door, Snape took just enough time to grab his jacket before rushing far enough off his property to apparate. He didn’t notice at all when he arrived at the Dursley household missing a bit of hair above his left ear. Moving to the door he knocked twice. He waited for a moment and knocked again. He waited less than a second and proceeded to knock again. And again. And again. His hand was raised for another knock when the door opened and Snape’s fist nearly collided with the horse-faced woman instead of the wood.

Rearing back and resisting the supreme urge to curse Petunia Dursley née Evans out, Snape took a shuddering breath. “Is she here? I need to see her.”

“I know you…” Petunia said her eyes narrowing. Her lips twisted into a grimace a few moments later. “Snake something. Snake, that was it. Snake Snape. What do you want? The boy hasn’t been here since the beginning of summer last year. He’ll never be back now and thank goodness for that. We want nothing more to do with your kind!”

Snape’s fists clenched and he only barely managed to not draw his wand on the obstinate bitch who was every bit as horrible as he remembered. “I don’t care about Harry Potter! I want to see Lily you imbecilic woman!”

Petunia snorted and moved to close the door. “Try the graveyard then. In case you haven’t heard, that woman died fourteen years ago. If you people even use graveyards.” The door slammed shut.

Snape growled and twisted on the spot apparating away. He landed in the alley near Babbling’s flat minus more hair a bit of his right shoe. He knew his colleague’s address through the benefit of working at the school not to mention her recent status regarding the Potter spawn. Never as grateful for that as right now Snape charged around the corner and up the steps tripping ever so slightly at his unbalanced right leg. Snape scowled at the delay. He’d been stupid to try Petunia first. Of course Lily would never go back that woman! She’d have gone to her son.

He pulled up outside the door and started knocking continuously. When no one responded after nearly thirty seconds he was about to start banging and casting spells at the door. Before he could start on that though, the flat across the hall opened at an annoyed man poked his head out. “Will you keep that racket down! Some of us are trying to sleep in you know.”

“I need to get into this flat. It is extremely urgent,” Snape snarled.
“Well unless it’s burning down come back when they’re home, idiot.”

Snape froze. “You know they are gone? Where did they go?”

“How the hell should I know? We’re not friends. I just saw the women and her kid heading out yesterday morning with their friend and they never came back. Now stop knocking on the bloody door and go the hell away before I call the police on the disturbance you’re making!”

Another door slammed in Snape’s face and his lips lifted in a snarl. Where would they have – Potter Manor.

Snape ran down to the alleyway tripping over more stairs on the way and apparated again. This time he lost a bit of the end of his robes as well as more hair from above his left ear. He didn’t bother slowing down and ran full tilt to the front door of the manor. A dim hissing sounded beyond the barrier to his progress but he paid it no mind. He started banging incessantly on the door. His jacket was only half put on still and it flapped hard enough to slam into the door with dull thuds after his fists landed. Finally after what seemed like an eternity, the door opened and the Potter spawn stared out at him.

“Snape?” Potter asked in confusion. He rubbed his eyes and yawned. “This is weird dream.”

“You are not dreaming you dunderhead,” Snape growled. “Where is she? I need to see her. Is she here?!?”

Potter frowned and stood straighter, most of the tiredness in his gaze swapping for annoyance. “Oh, of course you’re here for my mother. Finally got around to reading the paper huh, Snape?” Potter scowled and glared at him. “She’s sleeping right now. Come back at a decent hour.”

“Let me see her now;” Snape snarled.

Potter’s scowl turned into a wry grin. “Sucks being on the other side of things doesn’t it?” The boy’s gaze took in Snape’s appearance and he groaned. “Luckily I’m not as cruel as you are. Wait in the lobby. I’ll go see if she’s awake and interested in talking to you right now. If not you have to promise to leave and let her be the first one to contact you. Deal?”

Snape’s lips curled, but he gave a curt nod. It would at least get him into the Manor. He knew she’d be willing to speak with him. It was Lily. Lily was always willing to listen.

Potter pulled the door wide and gestured him inside. Snape took a single step beyond the threshold and froze solid as a giant skeletal snake head settled in his path hissing with its jaw hinged wide. Potter’s snickering followed shortly after. Snape turned to glare at the boy’s back as he left the room while the basilisk skeleton drifted back up to slither nearer to the ceiling.

Snape looked down at his clothes and for the first time noticed his lack of decorum. With a wince he finished pulling his jacket onto his other arm and tied the laces on his left shoe before tucking in his shirt. He was still trying to figure out what he could do with his right shoe when footsteps sounded in the hall. Abandoning his current attempts at damage control, he turned his eyes upwards.

Standing in the middle of one of the hallways was a vision of beauty. Her red hair framed her face just as he remembered it. Her clothes were the same style she always preferred, toeing the line between magical and Muggle. Her arms were crossed in the typical manner she always reserved for when she was annoyed with someone and her face was set in the careful mask that he had never quite been able to read. It was true…Lily Potter was alive!
“Lily…” Snape said stepping forward, his voice thick with emotion.

Lily’s eyes narrowed and the edge of her mouth twitched. The voice that issued out of those perfect lips was cold and laced with disgust. “Severus. You have a lot of nerve showing up here like this. Just what do you want?”

Paracela Fulcanelli stood up from her weekly chat with Albus Dumbledore all smiles. “Well,” she said, “thanks for finally telling us about that thing with the ring. I don’t get why you’re obsessed with that at all. You realize what I’m missing by talking to you for so long about this don’t you? I missed three different autograph sessions to have this chat!” Albus scowled and tried to respond. The frustrating woman had silenced him as soon as she stood though so nothing came out. “Whatever, you deserve a reward for finishing up your tale I suppose. How about a paper, Al? Don’t worry, it’s enchanted so that it just looked like one of the Muggle tabloids if anyone non-magical looks at it. Well, Squibs too. You’re excepted thanks to a bit of sympathetic magic. Enjoy. I particularly enjoyed the second article on the front page.” Paracela gave an evil little grin that set Albus’ hairs on end. She left the paper and walked out laughing to herself.

Albus frowned and picked up the copy of the Quibbler to see what could be so ill boding that Perenelle would think it fit to torture him with. He skimmed the article regarding Voldemort. Unsurprising and matching mostly what Harry had previously stated with a few additional details. Getting to the second article caused every muscle in Albus’ body to freeze.

Lily Potter was alive.

He reread the article.

He reread the article a third time.

All color drained out of Albus’ face. “He’s finally done it,” Albus whispered dimly noting that he had use of his voice again. “Harry has broken the boundaries that even Voldemort feared to tread. I knew he needed to be stopped before the worst could happen and now…this?! The sheep believe it to be a good thing too?! Harry was masterful in his acquisition of such a powerful spinster so early in his rise…To reanimate his mother into a nefarious Dark Creature…I must get out! I must stop him! The boy will be the end of us all!”

Albus clutched the paper like a lifeline and ran to the door leading into the courtyard. He wasn’t as spry as he used to be but he could still force the gate with a long enough lever. The pool skimmer might work. He’d just managed to get the skimmer lodged into the gate hinge when one of the orderlies came over and gently put his hands over Albus’. “What seems to be the problem, Mr. Brian?”

“I must leave! It is urgent! Look!” Albus thrust the Quibbler into the man’s hands. “You see? They believe he’s justified in what does! They believe her reanimation is good when all it proves is that Harry has fallen to depths not seen since the times of Egypt and Atlantis! I have to get back and save them from him before his evil can spread across the globe!”

The orderly examined the paper carefully nodding slowly. For a brief moment, Albus’ eyes shown with righteous promise and hope. “Al, I can understand why you would think that the alien bringing someone back from the dead would be a bad thing, but you have to remember that tabloids doctor these types of photos all the time. It’s not real, it’s a just a fake. Nobody is going to corrupt the world with alien resurrection machines or Atlantean death beams.”

Albus tore the paper out of the man’s hand and scowled. “You fool. It’s not aliens or death
beams! It’s MAGIC!”
Chapter 36: Old Friends

Harry walked towards’ Lily’s room trying to decide exactly how he felt about waking her up to go talk to Snape. On the one hand, supposedly they were friends when they were kids. On the other hand…she’d seemed pretty ready to go beat the snot out of him when the man’s name came up by chance yesterday. That and the fire in her eyes at the time had been what convinced him to let Snape in the house – he really wanted to watch her tear into his most hated professor. Maybe Daphne and Tracey were rubbing off on him…

Harry knocked softly and pushed her door open only to frown in confusion. It looked like the bed hadn’t even been touched. “If she didn’t sleep here then where did she sleep?”

“Master Harry, Sir?” Dobby said popping in behind him. “Your mother is being in James Potter’s old room.”

Harry blinked and turned to look at the elf. “Thanks, Dobby. You didn’t have to get up. It’s still super early.”

Dobby rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “It’s Dobby’s job to get up to help Master. Dobby would’ve opened the door and told Greasy to leave but Master Harry didn’t let Dobby make him wait long enough.”

Harry suppressed a chuckle. “Great minds think alike, Dobby. I’ve got it from here, mate. You can go back to sleep.”

Dobby huffed and turned to walk down the hall muttering. “Dobby just has coffee and Master says to go to sleep. Dobby get pictures of Greasy beating first then sleep.”

Harry rubbed his eyes at his friend’s antics and moved to the other wing to find his mother. He shouldn’t have been surprised that she slept there. He just hoped that she hadn’t had too many problems last night being here. If things were weird for him…he could barely even imagine how overwhelming everything was being for her. Coming up on the door, he set his shoulders and schooled his features before softly knocking again and entering. Once the door was open though he could only blink in surprise as he looked at the bed.

Lily and Shiva were both on top of the mattress covers fully clothed. Shiva was sprawled out on the far side while Lily was curled up with a small stuffed bear clutched to her chest and one leg hanging off the bed. “Damn. Guess that answers whether she had a good night,” Harry sighed. It was great that Lily and Shiva were apparently getting along but that things had apparently been bad enough that both fell asleep before even pulling back the covers wasn’t exactly comforting.

He walked closer and gently laid a hand on Lily’s shoulder. “Lily,” he said softly. “Lily, someone’s here to see you.”

Blearily Lily reached an arm up and swatted in front of her. “Five minutes,” she mumbled.

“Lily, wake up. You need to at least be conscious enough to tell me whether to send him packing or not.”

Shiva groaned and turned her head into the pillow. “Tell them to go ‘way,” she said not quite awake. “Sleeping here.”
“It’s, Snape,” Harry said.

Lily went to bat his hand away again but her movement froze mid-gesture. Her eyes fluttered open and after a moment focused on Harry. “What? Harry? What were you saying?”

He shrugged and moved back a bit to give her room to sit up. “Snape just showed up demanding to see you. I left him in the entrance hall. Do you want me to tell him to take a hike or do you want to talk to him?”

Her eyes narrowed and she growled. “Severus is here? That miserable git…give me a second to wake up and – ” she cut off as a glass of tea appeared on the table next to her. “You seriously have the best friends, son. That elf of yours is amazing.” She took a quick gulp of the tea and shifted to kick her legs over the side and stretch. Shiva just clutched her pillow tighter. “Let’s let Shiva sleep. We had a bit of a long night.”

Harry grimaced. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault, Harry, so don’t apologize,” Lily said softly smiling up at him. “Like I said, you have good friends. Shiva kicked me out of a self-induced guilt trip. We talked and cried a lot later than I had intended.”

She stood and followed Harry out of the door. He glanced down and smiled at the bear still in her hand. “That’s an adorable bear. Was it yours or my dad’s beforehand? I would’ve thought he’d have a dog or a dragon or something.”

Lily’s smile grew and she held the stuffed animal out to him. “It was supposed to be for you actually…You really think it’s cute?”

Harry nodded and took the offering grinning down at it. “Yeah, I do. Look, it has a tuft of hair right here that doesn’t stay straight just like mine,” he said pointing to a section just behind the right ear. He continued softly, “Thanks, Mum.”

Lily caught Harry’s murmured thanks and her smile grew so wide she felt like it would split her face. This may not have been the way she thought things would be with having a child, but it was certainly something she could work with. Her mood darkened slightly as they got closer to the entrance hall and she remembered why they were awake. “So…Severus is here?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. I’m a little curious if he realized yet that his coat was only half on or that he was missing most of one shoe…”

Lily’s eyebrows rose at that. “Too bad you didn’t get pictures…I certainly don’t condone cruel pranks, but private viewing later on is a bit different. And after what I’ve been told of how he’s treated you I certainly wouldn’t blame you, Harry.”

He snorted. “10 galleons says Dobby got some. Actually, Dobby? Could you take this back to my room please?” Harry asked holding up the bear. A short pop later, Dobby appeared with a camera around his neck and calmly took the bear.

“Dobby takes it back. Also, Master Harry is correct. Dobby has evidence of Greasy being in too large a hurry. If Greasy didn’t want evidence he should have dressed prior to leaving his house.” Dobby popped away with a grin of such superiority that Lily couldn’t help but laugh.

She paused before stepping into the entrance hall to call up sufficient amounts of annoyance and frustration. Walking out and laying eyes on Snape her eyes narrowed, the edge of her mouth
twitched and her nostrils flared. Her attempt at working up a head of steam was utterly pointless.
All she could think about while looking at the man who used to be her friend were the things he’d
done – everything from telling Voldemort about the prophecy to abusing students to **mentally
torturing her son.** The voice that issued out of her lips was cold and laced with disgust. “Severus.
You have a lot of nerve showing up here like this. Just what do you want?”

Snape rocked back on his one and a half shoes blinking like she’d just slapped him. Good. Her
lips curled and she had to resist the impulse to stalk forward and **actually** slap him. What kind of
role model would she be for Harry if she didn’t at least try to maintain some restraint in front of
him?

“Lily?” Snape asked looked utterly confused. He reached out halfway towards her before his hand
fell though he took a step forward. “You really are alive…I thought…I held you…after…”

“After what, Severus? After your **master** slaughtered my family?” Lily snarled. “After Voldemort
himself broke down my door looking to kill my **son**?”

Snape gulped. “I never meant for that to happen…Lily I asked – no I begged – him to leave you
alone! To save you! I begged for him to not hurt you!”

Lily clenched her hands tight enough for her nails to dig into her skin while she heard a snort of
derision from the wall near where she knew Harry was. “I heard all about that, Severus. The
people interrogating Dumbledore have been sharing some rather interesting facts with us. I heard
about how you were perfectly willing to let my husband and son be murdered like dogs as long as I
was left alive. What did you think, **old friend**? That I would just leap into your arms after that?
That I would hail you as my savior? That you’d become my entire world after I learned you let my
family be killed? **How did you think I’d react, Severus?**” she yelled. Her hand drifted down to
her wand and she clutched it like a lifeline sparks shooting out and singing the floor.

Snape shook his head back and forth and took another few steps forward. “I’m sorry. That’s…I
wasn’t thinking back then. I just panicked. I never should have…I went to Dumbledore! I told
him everything! I begged him to help as well!”

Lily snorted and her stare drilled holes into him. “You went to him only because Voldemort
couldn’t be trusted to keep his promise. What would you have done if I wasn’t the family being
targeted, Severus?” she asked. Cocking her head to the side she drilled the point home. “You
never bothered to ask about the Longbottoms. Alice and Frank were only ever nice to you. If I
remember correctly both even kept talking with you long after I broke off contact with the
‘Muggleblood’ incident. Did you even bother to stop and think about them? What if it had been
some random Muggleborn family? Did anything matter to you besides me?”

“The only thing I’ve ever cared about was you, Lily,” Snape said softly. He took another step
though his head was down. He had covered almost half the distance between them now.

Lily’s scowl deepened and she barked a harsh laugh. “You know, most Muggles would term that
an **obsession**, Severus. Generally that’s considered rather unhealthy. But you know this isn’t even
the worst of it. Tell me the truth, Severus, for old times’ sake: did you honestly believe that
Voldemort would come back before Harry ran into his shade his first year?”

“No,” Snape’s voice was barely audible but the excellent acoustics in the entrance hall carried the
word to her ears with little difficulty.

“That’s what I thought. So,” she said tapping her wand against her leg, “you proceeded to torment,
belittle, ignore, unjustly punish and hate **children** for over a decade! Why? It couldn’t have been
because you were maintaining a ‘character’ in case he came back. Why then?” It was a rhetorical question and Snape just shuffled his feet, cringing. “That’s what I thought. You did it because you are a miserable, hateful human being who failed to protect the object of his obsession and you took out your self-hatred on preteens! What in god’s name were you thinking?! Is that supposed to endear me to you? Am I just supposed to ignore that you’ve single handedly been responsible for a massive drop in jobs ranging from Healer to Auror to Apothecary? Britain used to be the second leading nation in Potions O.W.L.s, N.E.W.T.s and Masteries under Slughorn. In the time that you’ve taken over, we’ve dropped to 36!” She scowled. “I looked it up. I didn’t want to believe you could be quite as petty and vindictive as I was told, but no, if anything they didn’t embellish it enough.”

Snape shook his head in denial and scowled over her shoulder. She knew he was looking at Harry and her opinion of him dropped even lower. Before she could continue berating him Snape spoke. “I can’t help that the quality of students have gone down while you were gone. The dunderheads have no idea how to behave in a classroom and they have no concept of the art required to make a proper potion.”

“Maybe if you bothered to actually teach,” Harry muttered.

Lily snapped her fingers to draw Snape’s attention back to her. “Severus,” she said lowly in a danger laced tone. “Did you know that I’ve asked Harry to brew some potions over the past few days? He’s rather good at it actually. Not excellent, but he’s still above average. Apparently, he and Neville have learned more from tutoring themselves and with their classmates’ assistance during study hours than they have in four years under your tutelage. Do not make the mistake of blaming a child for the adult’s failure.”

His eyes narrowed and she talked forward breathing hard pointing at him with her wand which started sparking again. “Even if I disregarded everything else there remains one rather large fact.” Her eyes narrowed to slits and her voice dropped several decibels. “You’ve been essentially mentally and emotionally abusing my son for four years.”

He looked chagrined momentarily before rallying. “I saved the boy’s life during his first Quidditch match. Did he bother to tell you that, Lily?” he scoffed.

She chuckled darkly. “One good deed does not make up for years worth of hatred, Severus. Points and detentions for no reason. Debasing his efforts in class. Knowingly allowing for sabotage of his work and punishing him for it. Humiliating him both in and out of class. Refusing to curb or punish your House members for acts against Harry or his House. Insulting his friends. Denigrating the name of people he is close to as well as his father. Should I go on?”

Snape looked at the floor and sighed in defeat. “You seem to have already made up your mind. You’ve gotten a very one-sided view of me and it’s colored you. I admit I’m slightly biased against him, but he is just like – ” Snape cut off abruptly as Lily’s hand lashed out and slapped him so hard that his head snapped to the side and a handprint was left outlined in bright red on his face.

“Just like who? Like James, Severus?” she snarled lowering her hand. “The only thing of James in him that I’ve seen is his looks and his tendency to attract trouble. You bigoted arse! You see my son’s face and that’s it! His temper is like me. His focus and obsessions are like me. His love of magic is like me. He has friends in each House like me. You see his face and ignore everything else! How dare you try to preach to me that I’ve gotten the biased explanations! How you heard anything I’ve said?! Have you, Severus?!”

His mouth stayed shut though she saw a wet sheen cover his eyes as he brought a hand to his face. Her wand sparked again she had to fight to avoid cursing him. “Get out,” she said so quietly that
the sound barely carried even in this room.

“Lily, I…I’m sorry…I just…”

“Get. Out. **Now!**” Lily snarled. Her wand leaped up and spat a small gout of flame at him causing the man to jump back to avoid it. “**Get out of my house!**” She launched another spell at him that had his jacket twist and start tightening around him. “**Get out!**” Snape hurriedly nodded as her wand glowed again and he stumbled towards the door fighting to get the jacket off. She watched him cast a cutting curse at one sleeve before he stumbled outside and the door slammed shut behind him.

Breathing heavily Lily turned to see Harry only a few paced behind her with wide eyes. Her face reddened and she hurriedly holstered her wand. “Harry. I – um – I uh, forgot you were here for a minute. I uh, that was…um…”

“That,” he said a smile spreading across his face, “was awesome.”

Julian Woodman was having a thoroughly typical evening. Normally, drawing the late shift with watching prisoners wasn’t such a bad deal. Drunks and shoplifters didn’t really tend to make a fuss so it was relatively easy to sit back and just read or play a card game. Unfortunately, ever since that arse Barty Crouch Junior was tossed in his holding cells his nights had been exceedingly annoying. Waiting for the bastard’s trial was taking so bloody long. Even a blind man could see that money had to be exchanging hands to have delayed for this long with such a clear cut case! Crouch certainly wasn’t making things easy on them either; the man loved to chatter on and on and he always interrupted the good bits of whatever form of entertainment Julian brought.

Tonight was no different. The monotony and frustration of the evening was finally broken when one of the newbies walked into his hall looking lost beyond belief. “Hey, Rook!” Julian called out. “Yeah, you trainee. You’re not supposed to be down here until you pass Basic.”

“Where is **here**? I got turned around…is the cafeteria nearby? I was looking for a snack,” the guy said looking around.

Julian shook his head. The kid couldn’t be more than 17. They sure were recruiting young these days. “This is the detention hall, rook. You’re in the completely opposite direction. Come on, I’ll show you how to get there.” He walked past and started to raise his hand to point out the correct section to go down when a warm blissful feeling invaded his mind. Julian felt like he should be remembering something, but the calm and happiness quickly washed it away.

“Oh that was easier than I thought!” the voice of his master said. “I knew those Muggle whores were easy but I figured it would take some actual effort for a wizard. You’re pathetic! Get your keys and open the cell.”

Julian turned to obey his master and quickly opened Crouch’s bars. A quick twinge felt some satisfaction that finally the annoying bastard would be gone for good. “Nice job, kid,” Crouch said nodding to his master. “Don’t suppose you smuggled my wand out of the evidence room too by any chance?”

“Yes. Here.”

Crouch caught the piece of wood and grinned wider. “Excellent. What’s your name, kid?”

“Flint. Marcus Flint. My father’s joined up too. He’s with the others at Azkaban. The Dark Lord wanted to make sure that you were freed at the same time too,” his master said beaming with pride.
“Well you’ve done pretty good. Azkaban eh? Well then this place is going to be damn near empty while they rush about…let’s take care of a little side mission while we’re here. Guaranteed to bump you up in favor if it works.”

His master smiled and laughed. “Do we get to kill anyone? I’ve only got a Mudblood so far. Love to get a few Blood Traitors while we’re here…I could even have some fun with this idiot and watch him kill his friends…”

Crouch shook his head. “Like the enthusiasm but nah. Not yet. You got to be smart and pick your battles. Stealth, Flint. Stealth. Department of Mysteries for us. Shame Rookwood’s not here. He’d be able to hit the right door first bat. We’re just going to have to try a few first off.”

“What’s in the Department of Mysteries?” his master asked as Julian let them out of the detention block and down the hall towards the round room. A small section of his mind started saying that this was a bad idea and that that room was totally off limits but again the bliss just washed that voice away.

“Tons of crazy shit. Time room is massively booby trapped though so unfortunately we can’t go for the Time Turners. Rookwood never had clearance for that one. You’d have to have the luck of a Felix Felicis potion to get into that section without setting off any traps or blaring every alarm in the building. No, we’re just going for the Prophecy room. They don’t even bother to alarm that one because you’d have to be crazy to steal a prophecy.”

His master narrowed his gaze at Crouch as the doors spun around them. “Oh, why?”

“Cause, Flint, unless you’re the subject of the prophecy you can’t pick it up off the shelf without going insane,” Crouch said offhandedly as he walked to one of the doors and threw it open. “Oh wow, that was lucky! Death Room. Come on, the Hall of Prophecy is just a few doors down from here.”

Julian followed behind his master as the young man glared at Crouch’s back. “So just how are we supposed to steal this thing for the Dark Lord then?”

Crouch barked out a laugh. “I take back my praise of your intelligence. You’re toting a Blood Traitor. Take a wild guess how we’re getting it.”

Julian’s inner voice started gibbering before quieting down again and his master just cocked his head to the side. They had just stepped through into a room filled with glowing balls of mist as Flint’s face widened into a grin again and he chuckled. “Ah. I get it. What if he can’t get it off the shelf though?”

Crouch shrugged. “Then we go to Plan B and cut the section of the shelf and drop the prophecy into a bag. I have a Plan C if that doesn’t work.”

“Tens of thousands,” Crouch said completely unconcerned. “They’re arranged by date. The one we want is probably somewhere between rows 95 and 102. Depends on how many Seers got their ‘Inner Eye’ working right back in ’80. You check 95, have the Blood Traitor check 96 and I’ll go for 97. Look for the initials for Dumbledore. He’s the one who heard it.”

“How am I supposed to know Dumbledore’s initials?” his master asked annoyed.

Crouch groaned and slapped a hand to his face. “How the hell did they let you come to get me
out?” Julian could hear him mutter. “Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. Seriously, Flint, pick up a book sometime. Or a chocolate frog card. Merlin, each generation gets stupider and stupider. The Dark Lord really needs to fix what causes this pattern after he takes over…”

Julian started looking at the little plaques on each glowing ball for the next several minutes before hearing a triumphant croon from Crouch and running over to meet up with him along with his master. Crouch pointed to a ball labeled:

‘S.P.T to A.P.W.B.D

Dark Lord

and (?) Harry Potter’

“Pick it up,” his master said grinning widely. For a moment Julian hovered there with his hands in the air halfway outstretched, his mind gibbering in fear. Flint aimed his wand at Julian scowling. “I said…Pick. It. Up!”

Julian’s mind quieted its protests under another wave of bliss and he finished reaching for the ball. As soon as he grabbed it and tried to take it off of the little pedestal though the bliss washed out his mind. It was replaced by a screaming sound inside his head and Julian actually felt his mind shatter. He collapsed to the ground drooling and blinking while a scream and random images kept looping over and over inside him. Bits and pieces of Julian were aware that something was horribly, horribly wrong but he could barely even remember that the sounds the people in front of him were making were words let alone how to stand up and do something to quiet the screams.

“Damn. Well that sucks,” the older man said. “Alright, try cutting the section around it, Flint.”

“Why do I have to do it?” the other man said holding a hand to his head and glaring. “That bloody hurt!”

“You’ll do it because I told you to,” Crouch growled.

The other one scowled and held out his wand. Julian watched a pretty pink light come out of the end of a stick in his hands though the light fizzled out as it touched the wood by the scary balls. “Damn. Oh well, Plan C it is. Flint, I’ve have to silence you.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

The older man just smiled. “Well I could kill you instead. You did free me though so I figure I owe you one. You’re not remotely high enough yet to hear this.” Julian watched the trainee scowl and stalk back down the aisle with a silencing spell shooting after him and another flaring to life around Crouch. A moment later, Crouch lifted his stick and shot a spell at the scary glowing ball. The man leaned in and listened to the tiny figure that had lived inside the ball and after a minute or so smiled and stood up straight with the figure apparating away into the air.

“Got it! Come on, Flint. Let’s get out of here before they cotton on.”

The trainee came back down the aisle and jerked his head towards Julian. “What about the Blood Traitor?”

The older man shrugged. “Leave him. They’ll find the prophecy destroyed soon enough. My jailor here can be a bit of a lesson with what happens to those who defy the Dark Lord. It’s always so much more fun when they’re broken instead of dead after all!”
Julian heard the two laughing as they walked away leaving him curled up on the floor in a growing puddle of his own spit and urine. Some tiny part of Julian screamed out obscenities at the men. The rest of him went back to staring at the pretty glowing lights around him.

Voldemort stared down at the little fortress of obsidian and steel with a scowl. He had intended for only his followers to attack the prison yet it was looking like he would personally have to take the field. It was…problematic. While the Ministry as a whole was still denying his return he’d have an advantage. It was not an overly large advantage considering how many departments, groups and individuals saw through Fudge’s excuses, but it was an advantage.

Now, with the utter failure he was watching from on high, he’d have to reveal himself far sooner than he’d hoped. To publically announce himself in such a pathetic little backwater like Azkaban though…Voldemort scowled, this was Lucius’ fault for not being able to control his pathetic bitch of a wife. Not only letting Narcissa leave, but letting her leave with information was unacceptable. He’d have to come up with a suitable punishment for the silver tongued fool if the man survived this night.

Sighing Voldemort took stock of the situation. The Dementors were beginning to scatter. All had turned on the Ministry as soon as he’d arrived. They remembered the bounty of harvests he’d given them during the last war and they required little persuasion – merely opportunity. Unfortunately, it seemed that the rumors Potter had managed to create something that could kill the beasts were true. Even worse, the boy had managed to sell his idea to the Aurors who had obviously had a rare moment of sanity and outfitted their small group on the island with the creations. There were only two Aurors present on Azkaban initially. Voldemort had intended to have the Dementors suck the life from those without any real threat to his followers.

It hadn’t worked.

By the time he’d realized that the Aurors were able to kill Dementors, four of the creatures had died and the rest had fallen back. The guards had been able to call for reinforcements and his easy operation had suddenly become a pitched battle.

It still wasn’t much of a battle. The Aurors only had about ten personnel here so far and after he’d destroyed the Floo connection any remaining reinforcements were forced to travel to the island via their tiny boat. Such a shame.

Voldemort’s followers were not nearly so limited. With their portkey link, he’d be able to recall them all through the outer wards at the same time. It was not so dissimilar to how Potter had managed to escape him. It was simply one of the hazards of facing off against a genius. Voldemort allowed himself a minor note of satisfaction before returning to his scowl.

The reinforcements for the Aurors were annoying. They’d arrived with more of the damnable creations to keep the Dementors at bay. A quick push by his followers had killed three of the defenders though enough remained that the Dementors had decided discretion was the better part of valor and took to the skies. Voldemort was frustrated, but he couldn’t call the creatures back. The Ministry was at least slightly prepared for this. It would be better to save the survivors and use them in the future. Scare tactics or Muggle raids would certainly be a better use for them. Not everyone could have one of those infuriating rune clusters after all.

The end result was going to be the same and the longer he delayed the more annoying it would be to rebuild afterwards. He touched the ring on his finger for a brief moment of comfort and safety. Retrieving his Horcrux had been a necessary precaution. With Potter powerful, Bones taking security measures and allies of the Light gathering…he hadn’t felt safe without at least one anchor
close by. That Nagini was almost always nearby was a large comfort – but the familiar was alive after all. Killing her would be difficult, but not impossible for any attacking group. She would definitely be a target as she’d likely be killing multiple personnel herself.

His ring though…well that was perfectly safe. Enough people believed – or at least were interested in – the legend of the Deathly Hallows that someone would take note of the ring if by some impossible circumstance he was slain. It would survive long enough for him to regain a body again and take it back. Perhaps the fools would think he simply wished to acquire the Hallows even! Ha! Ludicrous legends from yesteryear held no interest for him – the Diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw aside – the Hallows did not exist. Even if they had the Stone and the Cloak would be useless. The Wand would be…intoxicating, but it was not necessary. True, Potter had managed to do something unusual in the graveyards several weeks back, but Voldemort had no doubt his wand would still destroy the boy. There was no need to waste time on tracking such a notoriously easily lost wand down through the ages. The Deathstick never stayed with a master long.

His mouth lifted into a brief smile until another explosion below drew his attention. Voldemort scowled and narrowed his eyes. The Auror reinforcements were only a few minutes out by boat. It was time to end this and remove his followers from the field.

Streaking down to the ground, Voldemort landed amidst a torrent of spellfire. He brought up a brief shield to batter the initial wave back and then strode forward. His wand flowed and his magic roared. His every movement was death incarnate and his every spell struck his targets. Within less than thirty seconds, 6 of the remaining defenders had fallen. The final two ran. Voldemort picked off one of the runners though the second managed to peel around a corner to safety before he could hit the large black man. Voldemort scowled though he hid it before any of his followers could see. Let them think he’d allowed the Auror to escape to carry the story of horror he’d seen.

“My Lord,” one of the sycophants said scurrying forward. “Thank you, My Lord.”

“You fools have forced my hand. Do not expect me to save you next time,” Voldemort said softly turning a stony gaze on the man who dared speak to him. The Death Eater quailed and hurried bowed back. Voldemort turned back to the prison. “Where are my loyal subjects?”

The man lifted a hand and pointed down one of the partially destroyed halls. “This way, My Lord. Just around the bend. We were almost upon them when we were waylaid by the squad.”

Voldemort didn’t waste any time on thanks or reassurances. Instead he simply stalked forwards into the corridor. He had barely turned the bend when his face lifted into a smile. “Ah…finally…” Voldemort said gleefully. “My most loyal…Bella, Rookwood, Travers…”

Bellatrix Lestrange lifted her head from the bars of her cells with a radiant expression. “I knew you were alive, Master. I knew I would be able to serve at your feet again one day. I have waited so long for this day!”

With nary a glance, Voldemort waved his wand and the doors to the cells popped open with a resounding clang. “Any who wish to serve the Dark Lord Voldemort…to me!”

A flood of bodies flew from the cells. Many were his former Death Eater servants but there were some simple criminals and murderers who had not been with him before but were willing to do anything to escape. Voldemort would sort out their status later and see if it was worth keeping them or simply turning them loose in a Muggle neighborhood. Smiling, he handed a portkey out to his new group of followers and turned.

The Aurors had arrived. At the head of the group was Sirius Black and Amelia Bones, both looked
absolutely livid. Voldemort simply smiled at them and raised his wand. He let off one final overpowered blasting hex before activating his master portkey. He and his followers vanished into the ether leaving behind death and destruction.

The world would shake at his return. The foundations of Magical Britain would crumble then…the world.

He would remake this horrible little planet into his own image. One way or another, the world was going to change.

“They hit Azkaban last night,” Shiva said sitting down at the breakfast table. Harry froze for a brief moment before flipping the eggs and scowling. He turned off the heat and shifted the bacon onto the serving plate and finally turned to the main table. As he set the food down he took quick stock. Shiva looked like she had aged a decade overnight while Lily looked tired but otherwise unsurprised. Hermione was pale as a sheet while Tonks had reached the other extreme with flame-red hair and a thunderous expression. Fleur’s eyes were narrowed and a light smattering of down was appearing and disappearing on her arms.

“We knew it was going to happen soon,” Harry said sitting down and offering a slice of bacon to his owl. Hedwig nipped his fingers in approval and took her treat without further comment simply choosing to sit on his shoulder. Crookshanks leaned his head up from the seat near Hermione and started to lap at his own breakfast. Harry still found it mildly amusing that Hermione had begged for a seat specifically for her cat. That mangy orange moggy had his partner wrapped around his little finger.

Shiva sighed. “That we knew it was coming doesn’t make it much better.”

“How bad was it?” Hermione asked.

“According to Amelia Crabbe Senior is dead as well as a few other Death Eaters. It doesn’t look like many more were from his inner circle unfortunately. And they got the maximum security prisoners.” Shiva paused while everyone frowned. “To make matters worse we lost 8 people ourselves. Tonks, your old partner, Shacklebolt, he made it out relatively unscathed. Hestia Jones should be okay in a day or two. She got hit with a nasty curse, but the Healers got to her fast enough so she’ll pull through.”

Tonks visibly relaxed at that and it was a testament to how tense she was that she didn’t even try to make a joke. Fleur reached over a hand and squeezed the older woman’s own. Tonks flashed a quick smile in return though it lacked her typical joviality.

Lily turned to Shiva and frowned. “That’s not all is there? What else happened?”

Shiva scowled pushed the food around on her plate. “Crouch.”

Fleur’s lips curled and a tearing sound rang out as her clothes ripped where her wings sprung out. A brief look of embarrassment and chagrin passed Fleur’s features and hurried she scrunched up her face. Wings vanishing, Fleur mumbled, “Sorry. I zought he was dead already…”

“No,” Tonks snarled. “Fudge apparently wanted him to confess that Pettigrew was behind everything so he held the trial up. My cousin was convinced it was the most convenient excuse whoever was lining his pockets provided for the idiot. He actually seemed to believe it too.”

Lily raised a calming hand and turned to Shiva. “What happened?”
One of the new trainees apparently bribed whoever did the background checks. Marcus Flint made it into the group." Shiva’s words had Lily, Tonks and Fleur just looking mildly confused. Harry and Hermione however darkened considerably. They both reached for their wands before consciously taking a mental step back and letting their hands drop to the tabletop. Shiva scowled. “Yeah, that was my reaction to when Amelia told me. She was livid and when Susan heard it the girl apparently was ready to march into the Ministry and curse whatever idiot had taken that bribe to a bloody pulp.”

“Who is zis Flint?” Fleur asked looking between the three.

“Wait…I remember that name…” Lily said frowning in concentration. “Flint…that was third year? Something about that freezing water rune…Luna!” she shouted in triumph. Looking to Harry and getting a brief nod she continued. “Fleur, Tonks, Flint was the reason that the group was able to get Luna out of Ravenclaw. He…he chased her right?”

“Tried to molest her, but yeah,” Harry said grinding his teeth. “I thought we’d taken care of that bastard.”

Hermione’s stormy look wasn’t any more calm. “Generally being expelled tends to make one’s prospects diminish. Apparently we didn’t go far enough. We won’t make that mistake again…” This time it was Fleur who laid a calming hand on Hermione. Though she did take a deep breath, the brunette didn’t end up truly relaxing. “So he released Crouch?”

“Worse, he released Crouch, they basically permanently incapacitated the guard and probably heard the prophecy surrounding Harry.”

Lily blinked. Shortly after she growled. “What? What kind of incompetence let that happen?”

“Welcome to my world, where anything that can go wrong does,” Harry muttered darkly.

Shiva snorted in an annoyed agreement. “Apparently between the mass reinforcements being sent to Azkaban and the late hour there were few guards near the Department of Mysteries. Amelia said that the only evidence of destruction was the single orb that contained the prophecy meaning that Crouch probably heard it as he destroyed it.”

Hermione groaned. “Seriously? A prophecy that plays upon destruction of the recording device? What kind of safety measure is that?”

“A typical Wizarding one,” Tonks said with a sigh her hair flipping to a dark blue. “The things we think are common sense are woefully lacking in any actual ‘sense’ generally.”

“No one else was hurt?” Harry asked.

Shiva shook her head. “No. Just the one guard at the Ministry and the 8 at Azkaban thankfully. Unfortunately in addition to Crouch and the prophecy he also managed to free most of his followers strung up there.”

“My aunt,” Tonks snarled quietly.

“Travers,” Lily said her expression darkening just as much as Tonks’. Harry briefly wondered just what the man had done to her but decided it was a question better left for another day.

“Yeah,” Shiva said. “A few others also. The really important one was probably Rookwood after those two. Rookwood used to be an Unspeakable. I suppose we should be thankful he wasn’t there to help when Crouch raided the DoM, but he probably knows all sorts of obscure juicy bits of
odd magic for Voldemort to use.”

Harry gave a heavy sigh and stabbed his food. “Well that’s just great.”

Shiva let out a dark chuckle. “On the bright side, Bill should be coming over soon with the rune cluster you asked about, Harry.”

He looked up at his guardian with suddenly wide eyes. “Seriously? Thank god. My head has been killing me. The sooner I can get this damn thing out the better.” Everyone turned narrowed eyes on Harry. He blinked, realized he’d probably just said a bit too much and dug into his eggs. “How’s everyone like their breakfast?”

“Oh no you don’t,” Lily said keeping her intense gaze on him. “I finally got this whole story with the…soul shard. Harry, don’t try to keep this from us.”

He shrugged and refused to look up. “It’s fine. It’s like I said earlier, it hurts and it’s annoying and I’m irritable but I have the stupid thing locked up tight. It can’t get out. It’s just frustrating because I have to keep at least partly focused on it every now and then to shore the walls back up.”

Hermione sighed and got up to move over to him. She gently took his face in her hands and gave him a quick kiss on the forehead. “You noble idiot. Harry, swear that you will tell us if this becomes a true problem. Before it actually gets that bad.”

“I promise, Mione,” Harry said rolling his eyes. “I’ve learned my lesson. I’m not hiding things from you guys. I just don’t want you to worry. It’s not like we can do anything about it anyway.” The group collectively sighed, but nodded and leaned back in their chairs while Hermione sat back down. “So, when is Bill coming over?”

A chime sounded throughout the house in answer to Harry’s question and Lily cast an amused look towards the door into the kitchen. “Apparently now. Dobby, would you please go tell Bill that we’re in here?”

“Dobby retrieves Mr. Cursey!” a perky voice shouted back quickly move down the hall outside the kitchen.

Tonks started laughing. “Mr. Cursey? Oh god I can’t wait to tease Bill with that one. He’s never going to live it down!”

Harry chuckled and pointed at Tonks. “Hey don’t forget he likes to call you Tonksie and Mistress Colorful.”

Tonks blushed and immediately shut up while the rest laughed. Bill walked into the room shaking his head in amusement a minute later. “Morning all. That is certainly an…interesting elf you have, Harry. Love the basilisk skeleton by the way. Goblin animated I assume? They do love their creepy guardians.”

Harry smiled and nodded. “Morning, Bill. And yes to all accounts. I know you know Shiva and Tonks but have you met the others?”

Bill shook his head. “Not personally, but I know of you guys. Miss Delacour, a pleasure. I was very impressed with how you made it through most of those Tasks last year. Hermione, from what the twins say, if you ever want a job just let me know. You’d be brilliant with the Curse Breakers! Mrs. Potter, hello. I’m sorry for your loss, but I have to say, it’s a bit of an honor and if you ever get the chance to explain the actual reason why you’re alive and Harry survived I’d love to hear it. I’m willing to swear any sort of oath you’d want.”
Lily blinked and turned an amused eye to Harry. “It seems you’re not the only one with fanboys, Harry.”

Bill blushed and shrugged as he sat down. “Hazard of the job,” he murmured. “Harry, you asked about the Egyptian Soul Render? Don’t know why it’s called that considering the thing is supposed to absorb not rend but what do I know. I just ‘break the curses I don’t name them’ Bloody pompous git.”

Harry chuckled in amusement as Bill passed the paper over. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” the redhead said. “It really is useless though. I have no idea how they planned to get that thing working. You can’t absorb souls. Whatever the Dementors and the AK do, it doesn’t absorb the soul.”

“I’ll figure something out,” Harry said waving away Bill’s remark, his attention already completely focused on the scheme in front of him. “I wonder if I can shift this one out of the alignment and add a focusing segment…no maybe if I…”

“Annnnnddd, we’ve lost him,” Tonks said smiling. “So, Bill, what else is new with you?”

Amelia sat behind her desk trying to organize her notes. Ostensibly trying to organize her notes at least. She was mostly just attempting to do something, anything really, to keep her mind off of what she was about to ask her friends to do. Sometimes being the boss wasn’t all it was cut out to be.

A knock sounded on her door and several people walked into her office. Amelia nodded hello and cast several privacy and locking spells to ensure that their conversation remained secret. Finally, satisfied that her room was secure Amelia leaned back and sighed. “Hello everyone. Thank you for coming. I feel like this conversation might end up being one of the key discussions for this coming war. First off, let’s ensure that everyone is on the same page. Remus, Tonks, Fleur, Sirius, I know you were all present during Dumbledore’s…breakdown several weeks ago. Shacklebolt, you’re here because I trust you and you are one of the best Aurors I’ve seen in over a decade. There are few people I trust with this and if I don’t start working on it soon not only would the war effort be pointless but…well going from prior experience I imagine Harry Potter would start going off on his own trying to take care of it.”

Shacklebolt’s eyebrows rose in question while Tonks and Fleur started chuckling. “Yeah, that is definitely something Harry would do if he felt you guys weren’t doing enough,” Tonks said. “So I’m betting this is about phylactery thing?”

Fleur rolled her eyes and patted Tonks’ knee. “Phylacteries, dear.”

“Right. Phylacteries.”

Amelia nodded. “Yes, that’s right, Tonks. We are going to be discussing Voldemort’s Horcruxes.”

Shacklebolt sat up straighter and stared at her. “A Horcrux! He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Merlin be damned! No wonder the man is still alive!”

Sirius turned to Shack in surprise. “Wow. I know about them because of my family. The others know about them because Dumbledore’s an arse. How do you know about them?”

The large man simply looked at Sirius incredulously. “I have been an Auror for years and I
actually take my job seriously unlike some.”

“I take…” Sirius started saying before Amelia glared at him and he switched midstream, “some things seriously.”

Amelia groaned and rubbed her forehead. “Siri, stop. Shack, don’t antagonize him – you’ll lose. All of you, let’s focus. Shack, we know the Dark Lord has multiple Horcruxes, we simply don’t know how many for certain. The Fulcanellis have sent word that Dumbledore suspected six in total. However he has never been able to find conclusive proof for that theory and it is quite possible that Voldemort chose to stop with other powerful magical numbers such as 3 or 5.”

“Wait, six is not a magically powerful number. I studied arizmancy, Madame,” Fleur said.

“Sorry, that wasn’t what I meant. I meant that he would have six Horcruxes and one piece remaining inside his own body. The others would then be two and four Horcruxes respectively.”

Remus sat back nodding. “Yes, I suppose that would make sense. We already know that one is destroyed with the diary gone. We are still assuming that the…other we know of was accidental in placement if not intention yes?”

“That’s correct,” Amelia said. “I’ve consulted with the Unspeakables and they concurred that seven total soul pieces would be the likely number. A soul would only be unstable enough to unintentionally split off with a ritual performed repeatedly like that.” She paused and looked vaguely ill. “Croaker still said that such an event would have been highly unlikely to begin with and that his first thought would have been a minimum of 11 pieces. I…would like to think that even Voldemort is not quite insane enough to try for that.”

“And if he is? Hate to play Devil’s Advocate here, but you know once we reckon we’ve taken all of them out if we’re wrong we tip our hand pretty hard,” Tonks said, all of the playfulness gone from her voice.

Amelia frowned and shook her head. “Croaker went on to say that if someone tried for eleven separate soul pieces they’d be so amazingly insane that they likely wouldn’t be able to breathe let alone string together a sentence; and they would probably start sprinkling soul shards around every time they bumped into a wall. So let’s assume that he stuck with six intentional and one unintentional shall we?”

Fleur shuddered. “Yes, zat mental picture is not preferable at all. Six is enough.”

“Okay then,” Amelia nodded and grabbed one of her notes. “Here is what the Fulcanellis sent along. Dumbledore believes that Voldemort has a particular interest in relics from the Hogwarts’ Founders. It is very likely that he made a Horcrux out of Hufflepuff’s Cup, Slytherin’s Locket and something from Rowena Ravenclaw. Another of the remaining Horcruxes is probably a family heirloom from Voldemort’s mother’s family, the Gaunts – a ring was Dumbledore’s guess. This one in particular should be our target as we have a potential location for it.”

Sirius leaned forward. “You should have told me that last night, Amy. Where did he hide it?”

Amelia sighed again. “Buried somewhere underneath the Gaunt household.”

Tonks eyes narrowed. “Well that’s just stupid. That’s the first place anyone would look. Unless…it’s not a dummy then it’s probably the most heavily guarded piece and is a trap. If it really is there we have to assume it’s bait. Voldemort might have left it there just to kill whoever goes for it and also to hopefully convince someone who stumbled across it that it was his only
“That is quite possible,” Shacklebolt said nodding. “It would be the only logical reason to hide something in such plain view.”

Fleur snorted. “If zere is one zing zat being around Harry has taught me it is zat most wizards do not use logic.”

Amelia laughed as well. “I have to agree. In this case though, I agree with the others. It’s real and it’s bait.”

Shacklebolt leaned back in his seat and steepled his fingers. “What about the last one?”

“That would be the one that Voldemort was intending to create the night he tried to kill Harry Potter. Since he never finished that before dying the first time, we believe that he rushed to complete it upon his re-embodiment. It is possible he chose his familiar as his final Horcrux. The snake would have been close and it is reasonably able to defend itself,” Amelia said.

Remus shrugged. “It makes as much sense as anything else. It’s not like he’d have made a Horcrux out of Wormtail’s new hand. While it’s well below suspicion, Wormtail is not nearly trustworthy enough to risk something like that.”

“So what exactly are you asking us, Amy?” Sirius asked.

“Well,” Amelia said. “It’s really quite simple, I want you all to find and destroy these Horcruxes. Actually, everyone except you, Siri. I need you to work on searching your library in order to find anything that might be useful. The Black’s may just have a method to detect these things from long range. Once one is found you can participate on the actual raid but for the meantime I need you on research.”

Tonks raised her hand. “About that, Ma’am. Harry has said that if we can get him an intact Horcrux he might be able to reverse engineer a tracking system to home in on the others. He… can’t do anything with the one we know about since its ‘signal’ for lack of a better word is tied up with another.”

Amelia nodded. “Very well.”

Sirius looked frustrated but understanding. “I’ll do what I can. Amy, should I tell Minerva that I can’t take that position?”

“No, Siri, keep the job,” Amelia said shaking her head. “It’s a good cover and when we have legitimate leads I can send a substitute for you so that you can participate on the raids.”

Sirius nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

Fleur spoke up next. “Should we involve any ozers in zis?”

Amelia shook her head. “You may tell Harry and his mothers about this as it directly impacts them. While I’d like to ask you to keep it from Hermione Granger I’m going to be realistic so I know she’ll be involved. Please try to minimize any further interested parties though. Obviously the more people who know about this the more danger that our activities get back to Voldemort and everything is for naught. At the very least anyone else involved absolutely must have well developed Occlumency skills.”

All heads nodded. Amelia leaned back and smiled at them. “Okay, everyone let’s be careful and
deliberate on this. Voldemort may think he outsmarted us, but the problem we have here is simply in need of some good old fashioned detective work. This is one Dark Lord who is going down.”
Chapter 37: Birthday Shenanigans

Lily poured the mix into the bowl and started opening cabinets with a slight frown on her face. “I could’ve sworn we had a beater in here somewhere…”

Shiva raised an eyebrow as she tapped Lily’s wand on the table. “Uh, hon, we are witches you know. We can just flick our wands and mix the batter without going full Muggle here.”

“Cakes always taste better when made without magic,” Lily said distractedly. “You agreed that we could do this my way this year and my way is the Muggle way. The Muggle way needs a beater… Aha! Found it!” She pulled back from the cabinet triumphantly raising her hand high with a mixer clutched in it. “I knew I saw this the other day! Now we can finish it.”

Shiva just rolled her eyes good-naturedly and moved to the second bowl. “Well while you finish the batter I’ll get the icing done. How long does this thing cook for again?”

“Well the box always says 30 minutes, but I find if you ‘turn up’ the heat a bit you can get it done in 20.”

“Turn up the heat? I thought you said no magic,” Shiva said laughing.

Lily shrugged. “No magic in the cake. Magic to speed up the baking a bit…well, I can be a bit impatient at times.”

Shiva laughed harder. “Hypocrite.” She teased lightly, shaking her head as she finished up with the icing. “I’m surprised the girls didn’t want to help out honestly.”

“I’m not. I asked Hermione yesterday and she was saying that they got to monopolize Harry in the evening so we should get to monopolize at least part of his day,” Lily said. “What I’m amazed at is that we managed to get Dobby to let us help out.”

“I bribed him,” Shiva stated. “Promised the little guy he could make the next two weeks worth of meals – well lunch and dinner. Nobody steals breakfast prep from Harry if he’s up.”

“Why is that? I haven’t gotten around to asking him yet,” Lily asked as she slotted the cake into the oven and leaned back against the counter.

Shiva grimaced and hopped up on corner next to Lily. “It’s partly because he enjoys it, partly because he feels it’s one of the first things he was ever good at, but…largely it’s because of habit.”

Lily frowned. “My sister?” she guessed.

“Yeah. Sorry, Harry had to make them breakfast since he like five or something. Young enough that he needed a stool to reach the stovetop.” Shiva’s lips curled into a scowl and her fists clenched. “Don’t ask him about it, okay? I only found out because I made him tell me about one of the scars on his arm. Apparently he spilled boiling water when the pot was too heavy to carry because of his age. Vernon hit him afterwards for ‘getting the floor wet’.” Shiva shuddered and continued in a quiet voice, “God I hate those people.”

Lily’s mouth had narrowed into a line. “Don’t worry, we’ll make them pay. My darling sister and her family aren’t going to get off scot-free for treating my son like that. Dumbledore too for
leaving Harry with *them.*” Lily heaved a sigh and shook her head. “Enough of that. How are you doing, Shiva?”

Shiva’s eyebrows rose. She chuckled and leaned over slightly to bump Lily’s shoulder. “How am I doing? I’m not the one who came back from the dead here. How are you doing? Seriously, Lily, you’ve barely even mentioned your husband for weeks now. Are you doing alright?”

Lily grimaced, but nodded. “I’m okay. Really, Shiva, I’m okay. With James, I…I just…” she picked up her wand and cast a privacy charm around the room. “Look, don’t tell Harry what I’m about to say please. I don’t want him to get the wrong idea.”

“I promise,” Shiva said cocking her head at the other woman.

“Thanks.” Lily shook her head and crossed her arms. “James and I probably shouldn’t have gotten married.” Shiva’s eyes widened at that, but she remained silent. “I did love him. I really did. The man was just a bit too…immature and impulsive. I can be fiery and impulsive myself and I…well I always thought I’d wind up with someone a bit more methodical than me. Someone who could balance things out. James never did that. I was always the grownup in the relationship. He mellowed out a lot during his last two years when he actively pursued me and we started dating, but…he was a prankster at heart and that never fully went away.” She laughed and gave a little smirk to the air. “He was a lot like Sirius is now actually.”

Shiva nodded knowing. “Fun loving but can go a bit too far with the jokes sometimes?”

“Basically yeah. We were good together and I firmly believe we could have been great if we had had more time and he had grown up a bit. As it stood though…” Lily shrugged and sighed heavily. “Without the war going on I probably would’ve ended up dating him for a lot longer rather than jump straight into marriage and motherhood. Harry was an accident, a happy accident to be sure! But well…we had just survived a large battle and we well forgot our wands in the other room when we fell into the bedroom. I’m not sure if I’m explaining this well. I just…”

Shiva leaned over and pulled Lily into a one-armed, short hug. “I get it, Lils. You loved him, but you’re not sure if he would’ve been ‘the one’.”

“Yes, that,” Lily said smiling up at Shiva. “James was a good man. I really did love him – I’m just not sure if he would’ve been *my* man had things gone differently. Especially with how things were going towards the end,” she finished with a scowl.

“You’ve mentioned a few times that things got frustrating.”

“It just felt like we were fighting almost constantly. Between the stress of hiding, being confined to the house, not knowing who was betraying us, my research, everything all piled on top of a toddler…It strained things so much.” Lily paused and let out an annoyed sigh. “Anyway, my point is that I’m okay. I miss James and I probably always will, but I’m not going to let his death destroy me. I will *not* become like Alastor.”

Shiva reared back goggling. “Mad-Eye was married?”

“You didn’t know? The poor man’s wife was murdered at some point by one of his targets. I don’t know the whole story, but I can tell you for certain that it shattered him. Mad-Eye was never the same afterwards; it was when he became the paranoid old arse that he is today.” Lily shook her head. “I will not become like him. I’m adapting and I’m moving on. I have others to think about, others that I have to worry about.”
Shiva lightly punched her shoulder. “Good. If you feel any paranoid urges let me know and I’ll knock it out of you.” She paused and rubbed her chin in thought. “Actually…maybe I’m not the best woman to promise that. I don’t have a great track record of deterring paranoia. Harry’s a prime example of my failing in that respect.”

Both women started laughing and were still going as Harry walked into the kitchen yawning and rubbing his forehead. “Something smells good. What are you guys laughing about? And why is there a privacy screen up?”

“Well, kid,” Shiva said hopping down from the counter and giving him a hug, “we were laughing about your growing paranoia and my horrible failure of curing you of that problem.”

“Oh, thanks for that, mum,” Harry said rolling his eyes as he squirmed away from her. “I appreciate the vote of confidence there. All my stuff turned out to have great uses.”

Shiva had been reduced to a blinking, gaping mess while Harry obliviously hugged Lily. Lily raised an eyebrow at Shiva and steered Harry towards the fridge to keep him distracted until she had a chance to pull herself back together. “We were just talking about women issues, Harry. No need for your delicate male ears to hear about it.”

Harry grimaced and pulled out a carton of milk. “Yeah, agreed. Thanks. Tonks is bad enough with talking about that stuff. Anyone seen her by the way? She was gone when I woke up in the middle of the night. Fleur too actually now that I think about it…”

Shiva sat down with him at the table with a wide smile. “I wouldn’t worry, kid. They’re big girls; they can take care of themselves wherever they went.”

“Why were you up in the middle of the night?” Lily asked sitting down as well.

Harry shrugged. “Nightmares, headache, nothing major. That’s why I’m up so late in the morning now though.” He gave them a rueful grin. “Guess for once I get to sleep in on my birthday though huh?”

The two women chuckled at that for a few moments. Eventually Shiva saluted the rest of the little family and stood up. “Well folks, now that the cake is in the oven, I’m going to take a short shower. Harry, if I’m not back before it’s done, kindly vacate the kitchen to keep the decorations a secret, yeah?”

Harry waved off her comments and opened the paper. His attention diverted, the boy missed seeing Lily’s eyes lingering appreciatively on Shiva’s bottom as she sashayed from the room.

Voldemort reclined on his throne idly stroking Nagini with one hand and rolling his wand in the other. The frustrating Azkaban assault still grated yet it was not at the primary point of his ponderings. Only one Inner Circle member had fallen during that and Crabbe was…no great loss. The man had been a fantastic brute and an excellent attack sponge, but he’d had no intelligence to comment on. Like father, like son in that respect as the spawn was just as dimwitted. The loss of the six additional new recruits at this early stage had been costly, but with so many of his original followers saved it had been a decent exchange.

No, what Voldemort was deep in thought about concerned the prophecy. That Barty Crouch had managed to return with the addition of the prophecy in ‘hand’ was beyond gratifying. Voldemort had rewarded the man greatly for that bit of forward thinking. Flint had received a slight compensation. Voldemort was wary of gifted the lad too much as the boy was unstable and
foolishly impulsive. Even Crabbe and Goyle had been able to curtail their urges when appropriate though Flint did not seem to contain that capacity. He didn’t need another Macnair getting a large head.

Ah well, the prophecy was what was important at the moment. “‘Power the Dark Lord knows not,’” Voldemort murmured. “Perhaps I should have studied the runic arts more deeply. Yet, it does only state, ‘the power to vanquish’ not ‘the one who will vanquish’.” Voldemort grinned. “Harry Potter is indeed strong as well as resourceful; yet to think that a mere boy of 15 could defeat me in a proper battle…ludicrous! I have half a century of experience and power at my fingertips. He has a simple 4 years. Dumbledore was such a fool to pin his hopes to the child.”

Voldemort leaned back and nodded. Yes, Potter’s runes would be dangerous, but they were not a trump card. Not against someone with such esoteric and ancient knowledge as Voldemort himself. Instead he turned his mind to the more confusing line of the prophecy. “‘Either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.’ Nagini, this is intriguing. I wonder if perhaps we are both immortal until slain by the other? It could certainly help to explain just how Potter has managed to survive so many situations that should have killed him.” He paused to consider and laughed. “How ironic that would be! To have pursued my own version of immortality with all the risks it had entailed only to have already been immortal through Fate’s design! Well, I shouldn’t worry about such a thing. I never was one to trust my destination to chance.”

Nagini hissed her amusement and Voldemort frowned as he thought of a remote option. “Still…it is not wise to simply dismiss such a potentiality. Perhaps…perhaps I should approach Potter with an offer. If he leaves me Britain to do with as I please I will leave him – and his chosen companions – alone. Both of us could be assured an immortal life until the end…He would likely refuse, but if he took it…My pet we could have centuries of time to work before we had to turn our eye to whatever corner of the world he holed up in. It could be perfect. It could…no,” Voldemort said abruptly. “No. I cannot risk it. Potter would never be content to allow me to reshape the world. It is better to simply kill him now while he is still weak and trust in my Horcruxes to carry me through the ages.”

Voldemort’s attention shifted and his eyes narrowed as the Gaunt ring heated up in a distinctive pattern. “Bellatrix!” he called. Immediately the doors to his chamber were thrown open and Bellatrix Lestrange ran into the room throwing herself to her knees at his feet.

“You called, my Lord?”

Voldemort allowed himself a smile at the woman’s eagerness. Just like the Bella he remembered. She was too thin from her time in Azkaban but she had managed to retain at least some of her original looks in addition to…a modicum of her sanity. Not much of the latter granted, but it was enough that she was still a valuable member of his retinue. Insanity did have its own perks too. “Bella, someone has invaded the Gaunt shack. Take your team and…send them a message,” he said softly as he reached out to stroke her cheek. Bellatrix reacted just as he’d expected, a shiver of appreciation, adoration, and desire crossing her body.

“It will be done, my Lord. My Lord, some of the key members are…still recovering. Might I take others in their place?” she asked.

Voldemort considered that request. On the one hand he could potentially eliminate any who were investigating his immortality – or were simply too curious. On the other he’d have even more who knew details that Voldemort had long kept buried. Details known only to a handful of his most trusted. “No. Take who is available and combat ready. Learn what you can of the invaders, but
do not lose any of our own. If you can kill the interlopers do so. If there are too many for your group then send your message and leave.”

“It will be done, my Lord!” Bella said nodding. She stood and ran back out of the room shouting for her chosen Death Eaters. Voldemort smiled and went back to stroking Nagini. He lifted his ring and eyed it chuckling darkly.

“Will you two get a room already?” Sirius groused good-naturedly at Fleur and Tonks with his arms crossed.

Tonks pulled back from her deep, long kiss with Fleur and smirked at Sirius. “We have a room dear Cousin. We would be curled up in bed naked if we weren’t here.”

Sirius snorted. “Well don’t let me stand in your way. Feel free to disrobe here.” He stopped to consider who he was talking to and paled. “Actually never mind. Forget that teasing. You’d actually do it and I don’t need to see my cousin naked.”

Fleur raised an eyebrow and turned to Remus. “Does he actually zink zat we would disrobe prior to going into a dangerous situation?”

Remus shrugged. “I stopped trying to figure out how Sirius’ mind worked ages ago after I caught him with Brian Friarbush in McGonagall’s chambers.”

Sirius shook his head. “I still maintain that boy came onto me!”

“Please, you were like a lost puppy for that month. And I wasn’t questioning your choice of partners. I was questioning your choice of locations.”

“McGonagall’s room eh?” Tonks said appraisingly. “That’s ballsy. I might have chosen Flitwick’s myself. He’d be less likely to go on a hexing spree.”

Fleur sighed heavily. “I am working wiz children. May we please get started? I want to get back early enough to shower before ze party for Harry.”


The group started up the overgrown path towards the small Gaunt shack.

“This is where Voldemort’s mother grew up? Seriously? No wonder the man turned insane,” Sirius grimaced looking at the tiny, rundown hut.

“I doubt he ever saw zis place until after he was a teenager. By zat time he was likely close to ze edge already,” Fleur said shrugging.

Tonks snorted. “Close? Hon, he was as insane as a psych patient by then. Getting all chummy with a basilisk and killing Myrtle should probably count as leaping over the line.”

The group split up with Remus and Shacklebolt moving around the corner to the back checking for wards the entire way. Fleur took one side of the hut while Sirius moved to the front door. Tonks was about to head to the other side when she heard an odd noise that sounded somewhere between hissing and scales sliding against each other. Frowning she turned to Sirius and tried to remember where she had heard that noise before. Sirius reached out his wand towards the door and Tonks gasped as she finally placed the sound.

Lunging forward she yelled out, “Sirius, get back!” She dove and tackled him to the side of the
door just as a giant spectral snake flew from the doorframe. It flailed about in midair for a few moments before dissipating as the others charged around the corner. Tonks breathed a sigh of relief as Sirius shakily got out from under her.

“Thanks, Tonks,” he said. “What the hell was that and how did I miss it?”

“Some sort of parselmouth magic,” Tonks said getting her breath under control. “I remember that noise from when Harry was reading from Slytherin’s book we found in the Chamber of Secrets.”

Shacklebolt stared at her. “You found more than just the diaries in that Chamber?”

Tonks nodded. “Yeah, Shack. There was a parseltongue book that described a lot of the different snakes Slytherin knew about. Completely harmless beyond a few minor spells but no publisher wanted to touch the thing even translated.” She shivered. “Harry tried the few spells in the book, but said they made his skin crawl so he left them alone. Everyone nearby felt the same thing. It was just like whatever sprang from that door.”

“Damn sneaky arse,” Sirius said scowling. “Didn’t even show up on the diagnostics or detection spells. We need to be more careful.”

“I can take care of ze door. Stand back everyone,” Fleur said moving forward. The group dutifully moved further away and Fleur cocked back her arm. A feral grin crossed her features and a fireball formed in her hand. “Let’s see how your magic reacts to ze Veela shall we?” Tossing the fireball in a perfect overhand pitch, Fleur’s passionfyre spread over the Gaunt shack’s door in moments and soon only charred cinders remained. “Zere. Much better.”

“I love you babe,” Tonks said giving Fleur a light pat on her arse as she walked past her and headed inside. She let out a low whistle upon seeing the manky interior. “Bloody hell, the outside looked better than this.”

Once everyone else had filed in Remus started casting a multilayered detection charm. It quickly brought up a positive response on a section of flooring just under a collapsed bed. Pushing the bed to the side Remus sighed in frustration at seeing the paneling already ripped up and the exposed hole empty. “It looks like we’re too late. Either Voldemort himself or someone else has already retrieved it.”

“You sure?” Sirius asked.

“Relatively certain yes. All of the dust and grime in this area is gone and these planks were removed in a hurry,” Remus said. “Whoever came here wasn’t particularly interested in a good job; they were rushing and used little stealth.”

Shacklebolt frowned. “We should assume it was He-Who – Voldemort. The parselmouth magic on the door was reapplied after all and besides Harry Potter we don’t know of any other parselmouths.”

Sirius swore. “Back to square one then. Merlin’s balls, I was hoping we could get at least the one.”

A cackling sounded outside and all eyes turned towards the portal back into the space beyond the shack. Sirius paled and Tonks’ blood ran cold. She remembered the horrible laugh. It resounded through her nightmares enough that she’d never quite forget it.

“Come on out of there and let’s plaaaay!” Bellatrix Lestrange sang.
“Hey, Cousin!” Sirius shouted in reply. “Seems you’re just as crazy as the last time I saw you!”

“Why Siri is that you?” Bella said. Shacklebolt quickly motioned for everyone to take up defensive positions along the walls. “Well I bet that your mangy dog is with you then too! And who else would have been recruited for this hmm? Let’s see, let’s see...Oh I know! Nymphadora are you there too?”

Tonks growled at her insane aunt’s use of her full name. No one got to use that name beyond her partners and parents. “Well good deduction, Auntie! If you’d rather live longer though I suggest you run back to your master!” Tonks yelled. She ignored Fleur’s narrowed eyes. Sure she shouldn’t let Bellatrix antagonize her, but still...

“Ah my adorable little niece. You are on the wrong side sweetie,” Bella crooned in her sing-song voice. Tonks felt shivers of fear running down her back. “Come with me and join the winning team. The Dark Lord would find such...amazing uses for your talents!”

“I’d rather not be a fuck toy for Voldy’s groupies thanks,” Tonks replied.

From near where Bellatrix seemed to be a deep laugh rang out. “Shame,” the unknown man called, “from what we hear you seem to love being Potter’s little bitch. We thought you might appreciate some real men for once!”

Tonks lips curled. “Can we please kill these arseholes already?”

“I’ll take Bella,” Sirius said with narrowed eyes. “Remus, Shack, you guys get Dolohov. I’d recognize that voice anywhere. Tonks, Fleur, backup where needed.” All heads nodded and Sirius held up three fingers counting down. When he clenched his fist, the group sprung up.

Sirius leaned around the edge of the door and fired off several quick shots before ducking back behind cover. Tonks jumped up to the window next to Remus, both of them blasting it out of the way and firing out into the yard. Shacklebolt used a blasting hex on a section of wall near him and used the resulting hole to fire from cover. Fleur shifted to the side and started lobbing fireballs out the door from one hand and tossing spells from her other.

Quite a lot reflected back at them though a cry of pain resounded through the early morning air signified that at least some of their attack got through. Bellatrix and Dolohov didn’t stay idle however. They sent bone-breakers, blood-boilers and exploding curses screaming into the shack. Tonks danced to the side and just barely managed to avoid a killing curse sent by Bellatrix though the witch’s follow-up cutting curse dug into her back eliciting a grunt of pain.

Abruptly the spell barrage ceased. “Well, it’s been fun sweets! Tata! I can’t wait to play more with you another day! If you live at least!” Bellatrix cackled. Tonks’ eyes widened as she saw a jet of Fiendfyre streaking towards the Gaunt shack.

“Everyone out!” Sirius yelled. Tonks ignored the pain in her back and ran for the back wall with the others. Shacklebolt sent another blasting hex at the wall even as the front of the building was consumed in leaping figures of flame. One of the chimera flame beasts jumped for them but was met in midair by a ball of Fleur’s passionfyre, both fizzling out.

Sweat ran down Fleur’s face as she said, “Everyone out now please. Zis zing does not like me.” She holstered her wand and used both hands to let fly fireball after fireball at each lunging flame figure as the others charged outside. Fleur flew through the open wall after them and the five ran down the hill. Once they passed beyond the tingle of the anti-apparition ward, they all twisted and apparated away from the inferno.
Harry checked his watch again with a frown. “Where are they?”

“Harry, you need to calm down,” Hermione said laying a hand on his leg. “You never used to be this protective and worried.”

“Voldemort never used to be around gathering followers either,” Harry muttered. Louder he continued, “Sorry. I just don’t like not knowing, Mione. Our unusual relationship isn’t exactly hidden. You, Nym and Fleur are one of the easiest ways to get to me.”

Tracey chuckled slightly and gestured to her friend. “He’s right, Hermione. Honestly, all anyone has to do to nab Harry is to grab one of you girls and send him a place to meet. Granted they’d probably all end up as paste on the floor afterwards but the point stands.”

“Paste on the floor?” Luna asked cocking her head to the side. “I don’t think that Harry would be that messy. He’d use something that would be far more efficient.” Luna frowned and raised a finger to her lips in thought while Coco snorted in laughter from the cushion nearby. “Actually, I suppose they could end up as streaks across the floor. Midnight does have quite sharp claws after all. And the Spiker is a bit messy. Though if he used the Freezer to completely encase his foes then I imagine there would be minimal cleanup required. Transporting a block of ice is rather simple.”

Hermione visibly resisted the urge to plant her face in her palm while Shiva and Lily looked at Luna with a mix of amazement and fear. “Luna,” Hermione forced out, “can we please stop talking about how Harry would go about removing the threat to our partners.”

“You know, he could always just use his Lava Bomb. It would leave burns, but little blood and has almost no cleanup required,” Neville added helpfully eliciting a series of spreading laughs.

Lily leaned over to Harry and whispered, “Are all your friends as insane as you?”

“Pretty much,” Harry whispered back with a smile on his lips. Mother and son laughed while Hermione glared daggers at Neville.

“You really do need to stop worrying so much, Harry,” Daphne said as she stepped into the room and sat down next to Tracey. “They still have their Comm Stones so if either were in true danger they could easily call for help.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Harry blushed and Hermione squeezed his hand in sympathy. “I forgot about that…”

Shiva shook her head in amusement. “Well that’s why you have us, kid. Anyone interested in a movie while we wait? I think we had decided on The Mummy for the next one right?”

Augusta Longbottom and Amelia both stared wide eyed at Lily completely aghast at Shiva’s callous suggestion. Harry smirked. He wondered how long it would be before his mother mentioned that it had been her pick and she chose it specifically for the irony. He steadfastly refused to think about Lily’s idle comment about Rachel Weisz and Brendan Fraser both being hot.

A crash from the study rang through the house as the chime that signified arriving visitors rang out. Harry’s head jerked up but Dobby had already appeared in front of him with his hands held out. “Harry Potter is asked to stay seated. Mistress Colorful and Mistress Flower not being presentable and Dogfather and Wolfy both being tired. All four said theys would be joining the party in a moment.”
Harry narrowed his eyes at Dobby but huffed out an annoyed agreement.

“I told you they were fine,” Hermione said smiling at Harry and giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

“Yeah, I know.” Harry rolled his eyes and leaned back into the couch. “At least it’s not Halloween.”

Lily narrowed her eyes and moved to sit next to Shiva leaning in. “What’s wrong with Halloween? Besides the obvious I mean. It’s not the first time Harry has mentioned it being bad luck,” she murmured.

Shiva shrugged. “That’s basically it. Something horrible always seems to happen to him on Halloween. At Hogwarts it was the troll, the first basilisk attack, the thing with the boggart and the First Task. Back with the Dursleys it was less major but always something. Halloween just sets the kid on edge and he’s becoming convinced that it’s cursed.” Shiva let out a small chuckle. “Honestly I’m starting to agree with him. It may be superstitious, but the coincidences on October 31st are becoming rather hard to ignore.”

Lily groaned and laid her head on Shiva’s shoulder. “How the bloody hell am I supposed to break over a decade of bad luck in a few months? I’m a mother not a miracle worker.”

Shiva lightly punched her shoulder. “Don’t worry so much.”

The door to the living room pushed open and Remus and Sirius walked in collapsing onto the couch. Harry’s nose crinkled as an acrid smell wafted from the two. “What is that?”

Sirius sniffed his sleeves and grimaced. “Nothing much to worry about, we just got a bit singed.” Amelia sat down next to him and frowned at him. Harry didn’t miss the questioning look in her eyes though he knew Sirius wouldn’t have kept something important from him so he didn’t push. There would be time for that later.

Harry had started to get up to go and find Tonks and Fleur, but the door opened again and both walked in. Harry breathed an internal sigh of relief and sat back down. Fleur smiled at him and quickly moved onto his lap eliciting an amused look from Hermione. Harry’s eyes though were glued to Tonks as she moved far more stiffly than normal. As she sat down beside him a wince flashed across her features so quickly that Harry almost thought he had imagined it.

“What’s wrong?” he asked softly.

Fleur nibbled on his ear wrapped an arm around his neck. “We’re fine it’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing,” Harry responded. “Please?”

Tonks shook her head. “Later, Harry. I’ll be fine, I promise.”

Harry bit back on his retort that she wasn’t fine now. The others were right – both Tonks and Fleur were adults and could make their own decisions. They didn’t have to report to him everything they did. He sighed at himself. He really was starting to become like Moody. Well…the real Moody. Probably. He’d barely spoken five words to the man since Crouch had been unmasked. “Okay.”

The party went on without any more interruptions for almost an hour. It wasn’t until Tonks got up to get some popcorn that things deteriorated again. As she stood, Harry noticed that the back of her shirt was wet and darker than normal. His indrawn breath drew Hermione’s attention as well. Hermione immediately sprang up and pushed Tonks out the door. Harry was only a few steps
behind and made it outside quickly enough to see Hermione pull Tonks’ shirt up exposing the older girl’s back.

“Bloody hell, I thought I healed Fleur healed that thing,” Tonks hissed in pain.

Hermione reached out and hovered her fingers over a large gash down Tonks’ back barely a few centimeters from her spine. “This looks bad, Tonks,” Hermione murmured. “You should have said something. I’ll get Lily. She’s supposed to be good at healing.”

Tonks sighed and nodded. Harry stepped closer and leaned his head against her shoulder. “Voldemort?”

“Bellatrix,” Tonks said quietly. “It was a lucky hit. I’m a little embarrassed about being the only one to get tagged but I was also the only one to have to dodge AKs too so I consider myself lucky.”

Harry’s breath hitched. “Killing curses? She was sending killing curses?”

Tonks nodded. “Only a few, Harry. The Fiendfyre at the end was worse honestly. Fleur was amazing. Did you know her passionfyre works against Fiendfyre? I sure didn’t. Actually I don’t think she did either…we should write a paper on it or something.”

Harry scowled though Lily walking into the hall with Hermione just behind stopped him from commenting. “Let me see,” his mother said in a commanding tone. Tonks shifted slightly and Lily started casting diagnostic charms. “No wonder your healing spell didn’t hold. This was a dark cutting curse not the usual one. Severus invented it while we were in school. Hang on a moment, I remember the counter-curse. This will sting a bit.” Tonks hissed again and clamped a hand in her mouth as Lily cast something on her back. Hermione moved to hold her other hand while Harry just helped hold her still. “Done. It’s going to be a bit tender for a few days and you might have a slight scar. You’re lucky this wasn’t on your spine, Tonks.”

“I know,” she said with a groan. “Thanks, Lily.” Harry’s mother nodded and moved back inside after a quick glance at him.

Harry guided Tonks to a seat against the wall and pulled her into a hug. “Don’t scare me like that,” he whispered into her hair which had grown long enough to cover his head. He dimly felt Hermione place a hand on his shoulder and Tonks’ arm shift so that the girl could slot into the embrace.

“This is not remotely the worst shape any of us have been in, Harry. Don’t let Voldemort being back freak you out like this. You’re just giving him what he wants,” Tonks said.

“While I agree with that sentiment, Nym,” Hermione commented, “please do endeavor to tell us if you’ve been injured. We aren’t children and we deserve to know if you – or any of our friends – have been hurt. I assume you and Fleur were searching for a Horcrux when this happened?”

Tonks sighed. “I’m sorry for not saying something right off. I thought we healed it and I didn’t want to spoil your birthday, Wonder Boy. Yeah, we were hunting for a Horcrux. It was already gone though so we have to start the search over again. We’re pretty sure he moved it. My aunt showing up so quickly after we got there just goes adds more proof to that.”

Harry pulled back and affixed her with a hard stare. “Nym, I love you. I love you just as much as I love Hermione and Fleur and Shiva and Lily. If you’re going to go after a potential Horcrux in the middle of the night wake me up and tell me! Please!”

Sighing again Tonks pulled him back down into her arms. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again; I
After Harry and his partners moved to the bedroom Lily and Shiva relaxed on the couch. “You were right,” Shiva admitted. “The cake did taste better without magic.”

“I thought the Snitch on the top was a good touch,” Lily commented. “How did you get it to flutter like that without any spells?”

“I put a layer of cake on the bottom of the icing in a rune shape. I’m amazed it lasted long enough for people to see it move honestly. Who knew cake could conduct magic?!” Lily eyed her causing Shiva to hold up her hands and laugh. “Hey it skirts the line of acceptable but if you can use magic to bake the thing then I can use magic to animate the icing a bit.”

Lily laughed. “We are both such hypocrites.”

“And proud of it!”

The light, distant chime interrupted the two’s amusement and Dobby popped into place in front of them. “Mistresses Destruction and Fire, there be Ms. Strict and Mr. Halfsies at the door. Should Dobby let them in?”

“Ms. Strict and Mr. Halfsies?” Lily asked blinking in confusion.

Shiva quirked her mouth to the side for a few moments before raising a hand in triumph. “Minerva and Filius! Right?”

Dobby gave a theatrical sigh and hung his head. “Mistress Destruction wins again. Dobby go lets the Professors in.”

As Dobby popped away Lily turned to Shiva and arched an eyebrow. “You’ve made a game out of guessing Dobby’s nicknames?”

“Yup,” Shiva replied looking far too smug. “So far I’m ahead by about four though I never did figure out who Grouchy was…” Shiva huffed. “Little guy was smart with that one. Far too many people fit ‘Mr. Grouchy’ to make that easy.”

“What do you get if you win?”

“Mostly just the right to cook a few meals without fuss if I want to. Though once I did ask him to take off a few gloves when doing work,” Shiva said shrugging. “I know he loves those things, but really, six pairs and being forced to use magic to hold up the tray because he couldn’t grip the thing? Too much.”

Lily chuckled. “Yes, that sounds like Dobby. Hello, Minerva, Filius. It’s so good to see you both again!” she enthused as her two teachers walked into the room. Minerva looked slightly pale while Filius was snickering and mumbling something under his breath about fantastic charm work. Lily quickly got up and hugged each before beckoning them to a seat on the chairs across from the two women.

“It’s wonderful to see you as well, Lily,” Minerva said cracking a genuine smile. It was a touch odd to see the stern woman looking so incredibly happy though Lily certainly wasn’t averse to being the cause of such an occurrence. “I must ask though…was the hissing necessary?”

Shiva laughed and waved her colleague’s question away. “Blame Harry. He felt if he was going to
make it slither in midair he might as well go for the full monty. I didn’t feel right talking him out of it – it is his house after all.”

Lily just smirked. “I was still mostly dead when it was decided on.”

Filius shook his head grinning like a loon at her joke. “Oh how I missed you, Lily! That boy of yours certainly stirs things up just like you and James!”

“I’ve noticed,” Lily said smiling. “So to what do we owe this visit? Or is it just a social call?”

Minerva smiled. “A bit of both. We wanted to come and see you now that things seem to have settled down a bit. It helps that I’ve finally got most of my house in order. Albus…well Albus left quite a bit of a mess behind and I’ve had my work cut out for me with reorganizing everything at Hogwarts.”

“Which is the second reason why we’re here actually,” Filius commented.

Shiva sighed. “I thought I had til next week to send over those lesson plans for the Newt courses.”

“Oh you do, you do, don’t worry,” Filius said dismissing her concern. “We’re here for Lily this time.”

“What do I have to do with Hogwarts?” the woman in question asked blinking in confusion.

Filius’ grin widened. “Hopefully quite a bit.”

Minerva groaned and shook her head in exasperation. “What my Deputy Headmaster is trying to insinuate is that we have an opening.”

“I am not teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts,” Lily immediately answered. “From everything I’ve heard and researched, the position is completely cursed. I am not going to teach that and make my son nervous that I’m going to succumb to whatever horror show is affecting that post and end up almost killing him.”

The other three stared at her until Shiva shook her head in amusement and laid her hand on Lily’s thigh squeezing slightly. “I rather doubt you have to worry about that, Lils.”

“Yes, well, actually I was talking about the Muggle Studies course…” Minerva said hesitantly. “Charity Burbage decided to take a leave of absence for a few years. She seems to have taken the news of You-Know-Who’s resurrection rather badly and wished to get as far away as possible.” She sighed. “As bad as this is to say, this actually saves me quite a bit of effort. I took a look at a list that Miss Granger compiled of all the ways that the course was…rather dated. It was ten feet long…”

Lily smirked. “That certainly seems like the type of thing that Hermione would make a list of. I remember Muggle Studies being a bit old, but I only took it third year…Charity really got that far behind the times?”

Filius grimaced. “Well like most of us she didn’t expect the Muggles to have advanced like they did. She never bothered to check her sources to see any changes made in recent years. When I asked her about the recent advancements she looked at me like I’d grown a second head!”

“That’s not the only position that I’m seeking replacement for. Severus is on probation and if he doesn’t ensure that the students are treated fairly I won’t hesitate to sack him.”
“Well you could always talk to Slughorn. He was quite good in my day. Does he still teach?” Lily asked shrugging.

“I’m a little surprised you’re not sacking Sybill,” Shiva said chuckling. “You haven’t exactly made a secret of what you think about her or her course. One actual prophecy aside and all.”

Filius smiled at her. “I talked her out of it. As much as we may not believe that Sybill is perfect there are precious few Divination teachers worth much more and fewer who are willing to come to Hogwarts at this time. She’s been placed on probation and told to make improvements to the course work, but she has the year to make the changes before we take action.”

“We have strayed quite extensively,” Minerva said rolling her eyes. “Lily, would you be interested in teaching the Muggle Studies course?”

Shiva nodded towards Lily. “It would let you stay close to Harry during the school year without having to keep making trips to Hogsmeade on various weekends.”

Lily considered her options for a minute before slowly nodding. “That’s true. I was considering trying for a potion’s position in the town…this would pay just as well I assume?”

“Hogwart’s pay is quite competitive I assure you. That is one area that Lucius Malfoy was not willing to try and force budget cuts on,” Minerva said.

“And I’d be able to conduct the class as I choose to?”

“Of course.”

Lily sat back and crossed her arms with her mouth quirked in concentration. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

Harry’s partners had been sleeping for over an hour when he gave up falling into Dreamland himself. Every time he closed his eyes he just saw the hidden door in his mind bulging and horrible images of Tonks dead with a huge gash down the middle of her back. After he managed to push those nightmares back they were replaced by mental pictures of Fleur glassy eyed, lying bonelessly on the dirt. Shortly after those it switched to Hermione completely limp and tied to a bed with Malfoy grinning nearby.

With a growl Harry dived into his mindscape and threw more and more restraints around the Horcrux until finally the images stopped seeping out and his irritation level lowered. He had hoped that the ‘activities’ with his partners earlier would have been able to tire him out enough to fall asleep without having to deal with the regular nightmares, but apparently he wasn’t that lucky.

“Never should have made that stamina rune,” Harry muttered sitting up. Rubbing a hand over his aching scar, his eyes fell on the completed prototype schematic for his **Soul Cage** sitting on the desk. Grimacing at another twinge of pain from his head Harry made up his mind.

The Horcrux needed to go.

Gingerly crawling over Fleur – the heaviest sleeper in the group – he got out of bed, pulled on his boxers and sat down at the desk. Harry pulled out his tools and activated one of the privacy runes stones so that he wouldn’t wake the girls with his work. Half an hour later, Harry had finished carving out his **Soul Cage** prototype. He held it up to the light and twisted it around several times examining every facet. The core of the scheme was similar to the Egyptian Soul Render, but the modifications were extensive. He’d checked and double-checked everything. He’d run the design by Shiva. He’d even outsourced parts of it to some of the researchers at Outback Training
Alternatives to make sure that the sections worked independently. It should be ready. It should be fine. It should be safe. It should take care of his Horcrux problem.

Idly Harry turned to rub his *Dementor Anchor* tattoo. Would it protect him if something went wrong? It wasn’t remotely designed for something like the *Soul Cage*. The tattoo had a very specific function and with as complicated a design as the *Soul Cage* had become…he wasn’t sure if the tattoo would do anything in a worst-case scenario. It…might help.

“I should wake the girls. I should wake my mothers,” Harry murmured even as he lifted the rune stone closer and blew the last bits of stone dust from its etchings. “This is stupid. I promised them I wouldn’t do things like this anymore. They’re right there. Just drop the *Privacy Stone* Harry. Just drop it and wake them up first.”

Except…if he woke anyone else up he’d have to admit how much he’d been downplaying the Horcrux issues. How little sleep he’d been able to get for the past few weeks. Lily would blame herself. Shiva and his partners would blame themselves for not stopping him from touching Lily before they’d figured out what to do with the Horcrux first. Harry’d have to admit how worried he really was about losing control. About letting his guard down at the wrong moment and the thing pushing through and trying to wrest control. About how scared he was about hurting the people he loved if he didn’t *get rid of this thing*!

His lips curling in scowl, his scar flared in pain again and he felt the mental bonds holding the Horcrux in strain. “Just die already!” Harry yelled. He swept a hand across the desk not noticing as he knocked the *Privacy Stone* across the room. Clutching the *Soul Cage* with his other hand Harry charged the rune scheme and slammed it onto his forehead.

The next instant pain flared in every nerve of his body and all of his muscles locked taught. He felt like he was seeing double. One view was his normal vision while the other was from just slightly above his body. He felt his entire being straining against some invisible bond and he felt the life being practically choked out of him. Distantly he heard an ear piercing scream from somewhere. It was only when Hermione leapt off the bed and ran to him that he realized the sound was coming from him.

“I can’t get it off! Help me!” Hermione screamed to Tonks and Fleur as they jumped to her side. All three grabbed his hand clutching the rune stone to his head and started tugging.

Harry’s double vision got worse and he felt the things tying him stretch further. Part him noted the brightly glowing *Dementor Anchor* tattoo on his side and the way that the spectral part of him seemed to be pulling against that. Most of Harry though was too consumed with pain to really truly notice much.

The door to the room banged open and Shiva and Lily charged in. Harry watched them take in the naked forms of the girls clustered around him as well as the way he was contorted on the chair still screaming. Harry felt himself stretch further and the *Anchor* glowed brighter peeling back from his skin slightly. Dobby popped into the room and blinked at them all, his mouth hanging open.

Lily started to raise her wand, but Shiva jerked it down. “No! No magic! It’ll just make it worse!” Shiva shouted.

Hermione managed to wedge her fingertip underneath the rune stone and lurched back with all her strength. Harry snapped back into his body as he felt skin tear from his forehead under Hermione’s nails. His partner fell backward and the *Soul Cage* went flying across the room between his mothers. Harry fell backwards only staying off the floor thanks to Fleur catching him. His entire body ached and the area around the *Dementor Anchor* burned.
Turning and burying his head in-between Fleur’s breasts Harry cried at the pain and shame. “I’m sorry! It was supposed to be safe! Everything said it should be safe!”

Lily started to say something until Shiva clamped onto her arm and shook her head. The older woman instead grabbed the blankets and draped them over Fleur and Harry, handing one to Tonks and Hermione.

The brunette witch padded over to Harry and gently brushed a lock of hair behind his ear. “Harry,” she said softly, “why didn’t you wait for us?”

“I don’t know! I didn’t want you to worry,” he sobbed. “This thing keeps making me see things every time I close my eyes! I can barely think through the headaches sometimes and it keeps trying to get out! I’m scared I’m going to lose control and it’s going to hurt you! I need it gone! I just need it gone!” Harry clung tighter to Fleur and cried harder. Tonks frowned and stood up, moving to the side with Shiva and Lily.

“Did you know it was this bad?” he heard Lily ask.

Tonks sighed. “No. We knew he’d been having nightmares and headaches, but it didn’t seem this bad.”

“The kid’s good at hiding things when he wants to.” Harry didn’t need to look up to see Shiva frowning. “It’s damn near impossible to read him when he’s actively burying things. Hermione’s the only one who can even come close and even she misses things when he’s being careful. Dammit, Harry…”

“Shh,” Fleur murmured. “Shh, it’s okay, mon chéri, we will fix zis.”

“You’re not going to hurt us, Harry,” Hermione said continuing to stroke his cheek with one hand and his back with the other. “You’re one of the strongest willed people I’ve ever met. Even if by some catastrophe the soul shard took control momentarily you’d beat it back down a few moments later. I know this is hard, Harry, and I know it hurts. But you need to remember everything that you’ve been through and everything that you’ve overcome. This is just more of the same. It’s bigger in scale, but the principle is the same. You are strong, Harry. You will beat it back down – just like you always do.”

Hermione paused and Fleur hugged him tighter. After a few moments Hermione continued, “And, Harry…if you don’t feel like you can trust yourself, then trust us. We won’t let you fall.”
Harry let out a murmured groan of pleasure as he felt Tonks’ fingers digging into his forehead. He had thought that it would just be Hermione and him on the Hogwarts Express until Tonks had announced that there was no way he’d be on the train without an escort. Harry hadn’t been able to tell whether she was going because she was actually worried about a potential attack or if she just wanted to spend a few extra hours with him before school started back up and their time together would drop precipitously. Either way, he didn’t particularly care since he was getting to spend just a bit longer with his partner. Fleur surprisingly hadn’t actually tried to tag along. She had claimed she was busy doing research at the moment and that she was simply going to monopolize the first Hogsmeade trip.

He didn’t know how Tonks had done it but she’d found a way to make her head massages actually relieve some of the issues he’d been having with the Horcrux. She’d apparently taught her technique to Hermione as well so that his first partner would be able to keep helping him during the school year. Fleur hadn’t been able to replicate their efforts unfortunately. Ideally none of their massages would be needed soon. Hopefully…maybe…if Merlin decided to come back from Avalon and personally tutor him perhaps…

His efforts on fixing the Soul Cage were hitting wall after all. The main problem seemed to be that the rune stone was trying to pull the larger soul – his own – instead of targeting Voldemort’s hitchhiker. It wasn’t something that should be happening since he’d included a targeting aspect to the scheme and every expert he’d talked to had agreed that the rune stone should be working. Shiva and Harry had been trying to figure out just what was going wrong nearly every day since his birthday with no noticeable progress at all.

He let out a sigh and then grunted as Tonks dug hard into his head. “Stop angsting, Wonder Boy. Concentrate on your massage.”

“I’m not angsting,” he muttered.

“Sure you aren’t,” she said amused. “And my hair isn’t pink.”

Hermione flipped a page in her book and gestured to Tonks without even looking up. “Your hair is blue today, love.”

Tonks’ fingers froze for a moment and Harry opened his eyes quickly enough to see her hair flash to pink and a blush spread across her features. He smiled up at her and chuckled as he closed his eyes again and relaxed back onto her lap again. “Nice, Nym.”

“My point still stands,” she said starting up her fingers again.

“Sorry, just musing on why the stupid Cage isn’t working.”

Hermione reached over and lightly flicked his arm. “We’ll figure it out. There is a reason that the Egyptians didn’t get it working you know. With all the modifications that you’ve made, Harry, I’m sure that it’s going to end up being something incredibly small that has been overlooked. Just keep focused on how things will be after this is all over.”

Harry felt Tonks nodding above him in agreement. “Mione’s right. You can’t be expected to fix
something in two months that those crazy pyramid builders couldn’t get right in two thousand years.” She paused and he felt her silent chuckle ripple all the way down through her legs. “And I just heard how depressing that could sound so let’s treat it like a joke instead, yeah? The positive thoughts are still holding the soul shard back right?”

“Yeah. That’s not the secret to the massage thing is it? Because that would be kind of lame to be honest,” Harry said smiling. Amazingly enough, keeping positive and happy had actually helped to keep the bonds around the Horcrux from straining too often. He wasn’t naïve enough to think that it was because of any actual power behind the feelings hurting the Horcrux; it was far more likely that simply by keeping his spirits up he subconsciously reinforced the power in his mental walls. Whatever the actual mechanism behind it, the shard hadn’t been able to influence him enough to convince him to try the slightly modified Soul Cage a second time. He was still getting nightmares, but at least it wasn’t every night anymore.

“No, happy thoughts are not the secret to the massage, Wonder Boy,” Tonks said laughing. “The secret is pressure points. Mum showed me some of the things she used when learning a bit of the Healer stuff and I adapted it.”

“Ah,” Harry said uttering another low contented groan as she hit a spot just to the side of his scar that sent tingles down his spine. “You are amazing, woman.”

Tonks preened. “I prefer ‘best damn woman ever’ but amazing works too.”

“Careful, Nym, say that around Dobby and he’ll actually start calling you that,” Hermione said distractedly.

Harry chuckled. “Nah, I think he’s settling on Mistress Colorful for the moment.”

There was a knock on the door to their compartment and a few moments later it slid open. “Heh, nice, Harry. Glad to see you’re still in one piece and enjoying the benefits of a relationship,” Su Li’s amused voice drifted down to him.

Harry shrugged and waved to her popping his eyes open but not moving from his position. His grin widened as he saw Parvati and Padma stepping into the compartment next to the Asian girl. “Eh, got to enjoy it while it lasts. How are you, Su, Padma, Parvati?”

“Well,” Su said with a feigned sigh, “I was going to say better than you, but considering you’re apparently a necromancer now, you weren’t targeted by the local incarnation of Hitler over the break and you’re currently the recipient of a head massage…I can’t really use that opening anymore.”

Parvati grimaced. “Please don’t say he’s a necromancer. That’s a bad omen.”

Padma smacked her sister on the back of her head and rolled her eyes. “Will you stop with the Divination shite already! Harry, we wanted to let you know what we found out from talking to our families over the summer.”

Harry gently pushed Tonks’ hands away and sat up. He pulled a Privacy Stone from his bag, activated it, schooled his features and nodded to the three newcomers. “Okay. Any good news?”

“Unfortunately not really much from our end,” Padma said grimacing. “Most of the stories my family found were pretty inconclusive. We know similar things have happened in the past, but the resolutions tend to be killing the victim. Other alternatives are mostly lost to myth. One story had Vishnu himself step in to save the girl. It makes a nice story, but I doubt you want to waste time
searching for a god that probably doesn’t even exist.”

“I had marginally more success,” Su Li said sighing. “Sadly, it’s not really useful for our purposes. Depending on the level of contamination, Chinese wizards had great success with simply removing the affected limb.” She smirked at Harry. “Somehow I don’t think even you could survive without a head.”

Harry snorted and shook his head. “Yeah, I’m not quite that awesome. Plus, it’s been in me long enough that it’s probably tied too closely to my own soul for that option to work well.”

“Agreed,” Su said. “My mother had an old friend that knew of a potential potion combination that might work. It’s…I think it should be a last resort personally.”

Hermione frowned and took out a notepad. “How dangerous is it?”

Su shrugged. “Well from what my mum remembered it pretty much kills him for a few minutes. The potions should bring him back afterwards, but I checked into some of the ingredients and it’s basically the same chance as getting resuscitated in a Muggle hospital.”

“Agreed, killing Harry is not going to be our primary option,” Hermione said nodding.

Tonks raised her hand. “I fail to see how killing him would even help. Isn’t the goal to not have to die?”

Parvati shook her head. “Well it clears his aura and – ” She cut off and dodged her sister’s hand before huffing and turning back to the others. “Fine, it tricks the Horcrux into thinking the vessel is destroyed and it loses its anchor. The trick is to keep him ‘dead’ long enough that the extra soul is kicked out, but not so long that you can’t bring him back.”

“So like I said, last resort,” Su said crossing her arms and leaning back.

“Agreed.” Harry breathed out and leaned against Tonks. “Thanks for checking girls. I really do appreciate it. Hopefully I’ll get my rune option working before things get desperate enough to have to resort to an Only Mostly Dead alternative.”

“I love that movie!” Parvati said perking up. She blushed immediately and sank back into the cushions. “Sorry.”

The rest of the compartment just chuckled. Within another minute they were chatting about their respective summers while Tonks hummed and went back to massaging Harry’s forehead.

“Remember, Harry, Fleur and I are just a Comm Stone call away,” Tonks said as she leaned against one of the pillars on the Hogsmeade train platform. “If anything happens – and I mean anything – call us and let us know.”

“I will,” he promised.

“Good,” she nodded. “I’m going to miss you, Wonder Boy. Hopefully by the time I get to spend the day with you again we’ll have a few things taken care of. We’ll keep you in the loop. Just keep yourself on your toes and keep your training going. I love you, Harry.” Tonks’ hair shifted to a deep red and she leaned in to capture his lips. Harry responded in kind and though they only stayed connected for a few moments both felt warmed as they pulled back.

Tonks turned to Hermione and pulled the younger girl into a kiss as well though theirs was slightly
chaster. Hermione blushed as she stepped back. “I’ll watch out for him in the meantime and endeavor to minimize the trouble that he gets into,” Hermione said. “You and Fleur make sure to watch out for each other.”

“We will, hon. Go get on the carriages and tell Lily and Shiva I said hi,” Tonks said smiling at them. Both students returned the grin and slotted into the queue for a seat. As they hopped up into a seat across from Luna and Coco Harry’s mind wandered.

He wasn’t sure what to expect from this year. Voldemort’s martial strength was growing, but they were starting to galvanize some of the masses against him. Progress was slow, but Sirius and Remus’ defense articles in the *Quibbler* seemed to be helping. The last minor attack by Death Eaters had actually seen five nearby civilians fighting back. They hadn’t really done much damage, but they had kept the terrorists from hurting anyone until the Aurors showed. Harry felt he should be doing more to help the fight directly rather than just sitting around in school…Well either way, with his luck he’d probably get dragged into something by the end of the year so maybe he could use Hogwarts as a way to establish a large group of people willing to help in whatever craziness May/June would bring…

The Welcoming Feast yielded a few surprises for Harry this year. That Lily was the new Muggle Studies teacher was something he’d known going in so that didn’t ruffle any feathers. When Headmistress McGonagall announced it though, the huge cheer that broke out in the Great Hall did see him rocking back on his seat a bit. He’d expected some people to be excited about his mother coming to teach; he just hadn’t expected it to be quite so many or quite so enthusiastic.

The real surprise was Sirius. How his godfather had managed to stay quiet about landing the Defense Against the Dark Arts position was a mystery for the ages. Harry supposed he should be happy about this. He tried to think of it in a good light. He really tried. He thought about Remus and how great the werewolf had been. Then the fact that out of four Defense teachers, three had actively tried to kill or permanently injure him crept back into the forefront and Harry scowled. Sirius should have warned him. Now he was going to have to be careful to ensure that Fate didn’t throw him into a situation where his godfather would be raising a wand against him even inadvertently. Fantastic.

For his part, Sirius seemed perfectly jolly sitting up there and chatting with Sinistra and Sprout. Snape was entertaining to watch as he shifted from muted disgust while looking at Sirius to almost sad longing when he gazed at Lily. Harry turned from the man and dug into his food waving away Hermione’s raised eyebrows. “Snape,” he murmured filling his glass with pumpkin juice.

“Ah,” she replied following his lead and moving food onto her plate. “Well try to reserve judgment on him this year. There’s always the chance he could take what your mother said to heart after all.”

“Or pigs could fly,” Harry said.

Luna looked up at his with a devilish gleam in her eyes despite her dreamy smile. “Daddy made pigs fly over the summer actually. He thought it might attract a Drifting Kelburg – sadly it didn’t work. I don’t think those are real myself, but it did seem to worth attempting at least.”

Hermione chuckled in amusement at her friend and patted Harry’s knee. “See, even Luna thinks that the arse has the potential to change. Well…I think that’s what she meant. That is what you meant right, Luna?” Luna just smiled wider in response and started eating.

Dinner was almost over when Harry’s *Comm Stone* buzzed. “Harry, it’s Daphne. Would you and Hermione be willing to meet me in the Room after the meal for several minutes?” Harry frowned.
His friend sounded far more uncertain than usual and it set him slightly on edge.

“Sure,” he replied. “We’re Prefects this year so we have to lead the Firsties up to the Common Room first though. Is everything alright?”

“Yes, it’s fine,” Daphne said a bit of amusement creeping into her voice. “I’m Prefect as well remember? We sat across from each other in the compartment during the meeting, Harry.”

“I was…a little distracted…” he mumbled.

Daphne laughed and he could see her shaking her head at the other table. “Noooo, really? I would never have guessed. Just head up to it afterwards. Whichever of us get’s there first please set it to the Lounge configuration.”

“Okay. I’ll see you then I guess.”


Harry turned to Hermione who was already nodding. “Daphne wants to talk?” she asked.

Harry just stared at his partner incredulously. “How do you do that?”

Hermione smiled and patted his leg. “Woman’s intuition.” She finished her dinner and leaned over to whisper in his ear. “Also, you turned to look at her while talking. Pretty big hint, love.” She stood and waved the First Years over to her as the Hall started to empty out. Harry shook his head in amusement and took his place at the back making sure that none of the new students got lost along the trek to their dorm.

Harry followed Hermione into the Room of Requirement to find Daphne already there pacing. A somewhat amused Tracey was sitting cross-legged behind her on the couch. Harry felt sweat start to bead on his forehead as he flashed back to Daphne’s actions immediately prior to the Final Task a few months back. Daphne’s hesitation earlier suddenly made much more sense.

“Oh, you’re here. Good. That’s good,” Daphne muttered. Abruptly she stopped pacing and took a deep breath visibly centering herself and seeming to calm down a bit. Harry on the other hand had to fight down a rising panic. He had expected this. His partners had been pretty clear throughout the summer that this conversation was likely going to be happening soon. He just hadn’t expected it on the day he got back to school. He had hoped to have a bit more time to get used to the idea.

It was funny. None of his partners had been actively pushing him to accept Daphne as a potential Concubine, but they’d all made it perfectly clear that they were okay with the idea. Harry figured that he was probably one of the only men in the world whose girlfriends were trying to help him recruit more harem members instead of dissuading him from it. He felt like a character from a Japanese manga…

“Harry, you can sit down you know,” Hermione said from the couch, her lips curled up in amusement. Harry blushed and quickly sat down next to her.

Daphne nodded to herself and sat on the edge of the cushion next to Tracey. Tracey just waved a hello. “Harry,” Daphne said. “I’ve been thinking – for some time now. I already spoke to Hermione, Tonks and Fleur on the train home last term. I think it’s no secret anymore that I am attracted to you; however…before I continue I would like to know something. Harry, are you attracted to me?”
He looked to Hermione who just raised her eyebrows at him. Silently Harry cursed her ability to smirk at his awkwardness. What was this now, three times that she got to see him in this position? Where was Tonks when he needed her? Actually…no, Tonks would’ve made it worse. Fleur however would’ve been nice backup. Suppressing his inner turmoil, Harry turned back to Daphne and nodded slowly. “Yeah, I am. I’d have to be blind not to be, Daph. In case you haven’t noticed you are rather beautiful, incredibly intelligent and one of the people I trust the most.”

“Well more specifics beyond generalities would’ve been nice, but you appear almost as nervous about this as I am so I’m not going harp on that,” Daphne said chuckling slightly. Hermione snorted. “Trust me, this is calm compared to when I first brought up dating Tonks. Poor boy completely shut down.”

“Men,” Tracey commented rolling her eyes and causing herself and Hermione to begin laughing in earnest. Daphne and Harry each glared at their respective partners until they quieted down.

“As I was saying,” Daphne continued, “Harry, I’ve spent this past summer thinking about quite a few topics. You, Tracey, me, my father, my feelings. It’s…confusing to say the least. I don’t like being confused.” She scowled for a moment before smoothing out her features again with a deep breath. “To be perfectly honest my father complicated things quite a bit. I’ve been attracted to you for some time now. I tried to ignore it and we both saw how well that worked out before the Final Task.”

“Yeah, that was a bit of a surprise,” Harry commented dryly.

Daphne grimaced. “I am sorry about that. I was rather overwhelmed at the time. It’s why I’ve spent so long thinking about where I stand. My father has been pushing me to make an official alliance for several years now. Initially when we became friends I used you as a convenient target to make him back off. He recently started pushing me harder on that front and I needed to…I needed to make sure that what I was starting to feel for you was me and not what I was supposed to feel. Not – arg! Does this make sense at all?”

Harry frowned and cocked his head a bit. “You wanted to know that you liked me because you liked me and not because you’d simply been telling your father it enough that you’d started to believe it by proxy or something?”

She nodded. “Close enough. What I ended up deciding was…that I do like you on my own. I like you a great deal. Harry, you are as important to me as Tracey which scares me. I…” she stopped and shook her head before looking him directly in the eye. “I would very much like the opportunity to try dating you and to throw my hat into the ring for the House Black Concubine position.”

“And Tracey?” Harry asked gesturing to their friend.

“’That is where things get a bit more complicated,” Daphne said. “I don’t want to give her up. I don’t want to break things off with her. Like I said, you and she are on equal levels to me. Just like Hermione, Tonks and Fleur are all on equal levels for you. I understand that you four are trying to maintain a polyamorous relationship. I’m certainly not adverse to that at all. I am willing to try and slot into that to a degree though I can’t promise miracles. I like Fleur very much though it’s not love – at least not yet. I’m undecided on Tonks though I do respect her a great deal and her humor is rather ideal at times. While Hermione and I tend to be rather opposite in terms of approach and philosophy I think we strike a good balance between the two of us. We also both excel in our love of our studies.”
Daphne looked to Tracey briefly and turned back to Harry. “Tracey however is not interested in joining your group. Nor is she looking for a Line Continuation option as her family doesn’t particularly care about those things. What I am saying, Harry, is that I want to try dating you, I am open to seeing if something grows between me and the other women in your group and I want there to be an understanding that I will continue dating Tracey separate from the main group.” She grimaced and continued in a quieter voice, “I don’t want to say I’m asking your blessing to have a mistress but…well that’s basically what I’m asking.”

Harry leaned back into his seat and rubbed his scar. He wasn’t sure whether to be disturbed or impressed that a large chunk of this conversation had gone just like Hermione had predicted. “Daphne, I’m a little surprised that you’re willing to try and build something with my partners, but your reasoning here seems a bit…well forced. We’re all in this because we want to be, not because of conditions or because we feel we have to.”

Daphne winced. “I didn’t explain this well. That’s not what I tried to imply. I…dammit this should not be this hard to talk about!”

Tracey sat forward a bit and rubbed a hand down Daphne’s back. “Let me try. Harry, Hermione, Daph isn’t saying she’s going to force herself into loving the girls in your harem. She’s saying she’s not going to wall herself off into a little box of just me and Harry. Tonks and Fleur didn’t love each other before joining your group. Well, Tonks didn’t love her at least. That’s all that Daph is saying.”

“Oh, well why didn’t you just say that?” Harry groaned shaking his head in exasperation. “I swear girls get more confusing the older we all get.”

“So…that’s pretty much all I had planned to say,” Daphne said quietly.

Harry crossed his arms and leaned back thinking. Most of his time over the past two months had been consumed with the Horcrux, his mother, Voldemort and the manor. Whenever he hadn’t been dealing with those though he’d been thinking about how he was going to respond to Daphne when this came up. Was he okay with her having a mistress on the side even if said mistress was a good friend? Considering his current relationship status – and life in general, not to mention his atypical family – he certainly wasn’t leading a normal life. Was a girlfriend who had a mistress that big of a deal in the grand scheme of things? It really wasn’t.

There was also the fact that Daphne was basically his best friend outside of his partners. In some ways she was even closer to him than Fleur or Tonks. Somewhere along the line he’d come to rely more on Daphne than Neville, his closest male friend. She’d consistently backed him up even in situations where she would have been better hanging back. Almost every confrontation with Snape and the few times with Fudge were prime examples. Then there was the incident early in the summer with the Aurors and how he and Daphne had taken down two trained Dark Wizard hunters without even breaking a sweat because they worked together smoothly enough that they knew how the other fought without having to communicate. Was he willing to risk damaging what they had in the hope that they might find something even better?

“Daphne,” Harry said slowly. “I’m okay with your conditions. I want to be clear on something though. When I started dating Hermione we agreed that our friendship always came first. We agreed that if things got weird then we would drop the relationship aspect of things and try to go back to being just friends. I care about you too, Daphne. Besides my partners, you’re basically my best friend. If we try dating, I want the same assurance that me and Hermione had. Friends first, partners second.”

Daphne smiled and nodded. “I completely agree.” She grimaced then and quickly continued,
“One thing though. There is a chance that my father would…try to forcefully move matters along quicker than any of us are comfortable with. If that happens I fully intend to pull back and deal with my family issues on my own rather than inconvenience the group.”

Harry rolled his eyes and stood up. “Daph, I swear you and Hermione have the exact same problem. You both think far too much sometimes.” He quickly glanced to Hermione who nodded to him with a satisfied grin. A similar encouraging smile from Tracey saw Harry pulling Daphne up from the couch.

This time *he* was the one kissing *her*.

Draco Malfoy had skipped his annual taunting of Harry Potter on the Express this year. He had better things to do this time. Plans to finalize, allies to acquire, research to complete. He’d seen the Greengrass bitch and the Davis slut waltz out of the Common Room just a few minutes ago so it was finally time to pool his forces.

Potter would pay for stealing his mother from him.

Shutting the door to the Fifth Year Boys’ Dorm, Draco cast several privacy and silencing spells and turned to his gang. Crabbe and Goyle were, as usual, sitting and staring at him dumbly. Pansy Parkinson looked up at him with desire and longing. Theodore Nott had some intelligence in his eyes – something which would make him difficult to control, but Draco knew he needed the extra muscle for this job. The bitch couldn’t be underestimated otherwise his entire plan would backfire. “Gentlemen, welcome back. I think you all know why we are here.”

“Revenge,” Crabbe muttered.

“We’ve all lost family to Potter and his whores,” Draco said ignoring his bodyguard. “They – ”

“Hold on a second,” Theo said cutting in with a scowl. “Pansy hasn’t lost shit. Neither have you, Draco.”

Draco snarled at Theo. How dare the little bastard question him! “Potter did something to entice and seduce my mother. She’d never leave Father or me; especially not when we are on the eve of winning everything that we always wanted! Everything we always believed! I don’t know what he did, but he did something! He’s brainwashed her and I’m going to show him just what happens when he crosses followers of the Dark Lord!”

Theo just snorted. “I want to hurt the son of a bitch too. He killed my father barely two months ago! Unfortunately nothing that you just said explains why we can trust Pansy to be here. I won’t be discussing anything against anyone until I know that everyone here has a personal stake in the matter!”

Pansy raised her eyebrows at Theo and held out her hand. She wiggled her fingers drawing attention to a – very small – diamond ring. “I’m Draco’s betrothed. Satisfied?”

“Seriously?” Theo asked incredulously. He looked from Pansy to Draco and burst out laughing. “Wow Pansy I know you haven’t exactly won the beauty lottery but *Draco*? Either you must be really desperate or you actually love the little ponce! Whatever, consider me appeased.” Theo waved for Draco to continue. The blonde had to actually bite his tongue in order to prevent himself from cursing his fellow Slytherin. That wouldn’t do…not just yet at least. No, he could wait until after they took out Potter’s slut before reminding Theo just who had the ear of the Dark Lord.
“Now that we’re all happy,” Draco snarled, “we can continue. The best way to hurt Potter is to hurt his whores.”

“I call dibs on the Mudblood,” Goyle said raising his hand. The others turned to stare at him and the giant just shrugged. “What? Since Brown helped her out the Mudblood’s gotten hot. Did you see her at the Yule Ball? If we’re going after them, I want dibs.”

Draco rubbed his forehead in exasperation. “Goyle, use your brain for once. We can’t go after the Mudblood, it’s exactly what they’d expect.”

Theo nodded. “We also can’t try for Loony. The girl’s smarter than she looks and Flint had a firsthand demonstration of what happens when she has even half a chance to run. There are better options.”

“We should probably avoid Bones and Abbott too,” Pansy said frowning. “They don’t travel with a pack, but unless we kill them, Susan would make sure her aunt killed us. If she didn’t do it herself.”

“Agreed,” Draco said.

Crabbe scowled. “So who the bloody hell are we supposed to attack then? The metaslut isn’t here anymore, the French tart’s probably back in her cheese-eating cesspit and I ain’t killing an owl. That’s bad luck.”

Goyle shrugged. “The runes teacher is decent looking for a teacher. We could go after her. Keep her from her runes and she should be easy to take out. Or we could just go for the mother. Lily Potter is hot.”

“Is that all you think about?” Pansy asked grimacing and glaring at the boy.

Goyle chuckled and jerked his chin to her. “Didn’t hear you complaining last year. Besides, the Potter woman’s only been up and moving for like two months. She can’t have all her old reflexes back yet. Shouldn’t be much of a fight.”

Theo groaned and slapped a hand to his head. “Talk about famous last words. I’d love to watch you try just so I could be there laughing as she rips your dick off and shoves it up your arse before cutting out your intestines and strangling you with them. Stay away from Lily Potter if you value your life. That woman’s temper and skill were damn near legend before she came back from the dead.”

Draco sighed and nodded. “As much as I’d love to go after Lily Potter, I agree. The Dark Lord would surely reward us all immensely if we humiliated or killed her, but I doubt we would get a good chance. She’s going to be watching her back just as closely as her spawn and the Mudblood. We have a far easier target that should hurt him just as much.”

“Which one are you thinking? Greengrass or Davis?” Theo asked completely unsurprised.

Draco nodded to the boy; this was why he needed someone who could think a bit in the group. “Greengrass. The whore thinks she’s too good for me – us – and she’s been practically drooling over Potter since second year. What makes it even better is that she’s with the half-blood so she’s not doing jack squat with him. When we get her bent over, we can make sure the pictures get back to Davis. There’s no way that lesbian bitch will be able to deal with her lover fucking a man. We take care of both of them in one shot while hurting Potter!”

“Snape should protect us even if the bitch talks,” Pansy put in. “We’re just showing a Blood
Traitor what happens if you don’t choose the right side. He’ll back us up in private and make sure any punishment is barely a slap on the wrist.”

Theo shook his head and shot Draco an evil grin. “She won’t be able to talk when we’re through with her.”

“With any luck we can break her enough to land her right next to Lockhart,” Draco said, his answering grin just as disturbing. “Now, here’s the plan.”

The first day of classes went by relatively quickly for Harry. He had switched his schedule to add Muggle Studies so he could see how his mother taught and that had jumbled his schedule up enough that he had last period free on Mondays. Charms class had been even more fun than usual today. Flitwick seemed to be ecstatic for some reason and he had wanted to share the mood with everyone so they all got to review Cheering Charms – in preparation for the O.W.L.s of course.

Harry was still smiling and laughing with Hermione, Neville, Su and Padma as they walked out of the classroom.

“I’m heading down to the greenhouse. I’ll see you guys later,” Padma said waving.

Harry lifted his own hand but froze halfway through the gesture as his *Comm Stone* started screaming in his ear. “You bastards think you’re going to get away with this?” Daphne's voice snarled. Harry flinched and fell backwards into the wall in his surprise. “All you’re doing is marking yourself as surely as your *master* would. Except his mark just means you’re a bigoted fool while *this* one is going to see you killed.”

Harry growled low, all the effects of the cheering charm blasted away. “*Where?*” He focused solely on his friend’s voice ignoring the looks of concern and confusion on the others’ faces.

Something like a muffled laugh came over the link before Daphne spoke again. “*Idiots! Throwing someone into the third floor classroom near that obstacle course doesn’t guarantee privacy. Touch me and you’re living on borrowed time.*” Another muffled reply was soon followed by a loud slap, a scream of pain and the link went dead.

Harry barely even noticed. He was already running. His vision went red and something inside him screamed to rip and tear and hurt. He didn’t even try to fight the urges this time since he could use them to power him forward. Dimly he heard shouts from behind him, but they weren’t important. His blood boiled and his brain raced. As he tore down the corridor and rounded a corner he reviewed the rune stones in his utility belt, discarding several options. He pushed through one of the tapestries to leap into the secret passage and as soon as he reached the other side Harry shifted to Midnight for better speed.

The panther’s improved hearing made him aware of pounding footfalls behind him that were falling further behind as his leaps carried his forward. Students emptying out of a classroom jumped out of his way as he bounded off a corner wall just outside their door. A shouted “*Mr. Potter!*” in McGonagall’s shocked voice echoed behind him but Midnight didn’t even pause. His eyes narrowed as he saw the corridor open up into the Grand Staircase just ahead. The stairs were shifting to align better for him, almost as if the castle itself was helping.

They weren’t moving fast enough. Midnight jumped using the *Windrunner* tattoos to give himself a boost and he shifted back in midair. Harry landed just long enough on the railing ahead to push forward across the gap in the staircase. Exclamations rang out behind him as he dropped a floor down, grabbed the bottom rungs of the banister and used it to swing himself into the next corridor.
He didn’t land perfectly and had to roll to his feet losing some speed, but it was better than waiting for the stairs.

He was only one corridor away when Filch stepped out of a broom closet just before a sharp turn directly in Harry’s path. Harry didn’t bother trying to move out of the way, he just stuck out an arm, wrapped it around a surprised Filch’s elbow and used his speed and the counterweight to take the turn without losing any momentum at all.

He heard Filch start shouting behind him and McGonagall appeared to have gotten close enough to shout something back. Harry’s eyes just narrowed as he took in the sealed door ahead of him that Daphne had managed to pinpoint. He stopped pumping his arms and held his hands forward, wand clutched in one hand and the Knockback tattoo glowing in his other.

Daphne fought down the urge to scream in rage and panic. She wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of seeing her hurt let alone desperate. This was her own damn fault for getting careless. Even then though…Malfoy shouldn’t have been able to come up with this by himself. They’d been too smart for the arrogant little shite to have been the brains behind the plan. Having one of them polyjuiced to look like a Firstie then stun her had been a good strategy. She hadn’t even realized something was wrong until it was too late to dodge.

When she’d woken up her hands had already been tied to the desk in front of her with her legs spread to the side. Her face had turned red as she realized that the breeze in the room was hitting bare skin everywhere and that the little pile of rags in the corner was her clothes. She took a bit of relief in knowing that despite being naked they couldn’t see much of her beyond her bare back and arse. Yet. That was when Malfoy had started laughing and taunting her.

“Still too good for me you little Blood Traitor whore?” Malfoy asked grinning sadistically. Daphne’s eyes narrowed as she spied Pansy in the corner with a smirk on her face and her arms crossed. Malfoy’s bodyguards were leering at her and Theodore Nott was up on one of the desks grinning. Four boys and the worst bitch in the year. Daphne had to shut her eyes and slam down every mental shield that had been ground into her since birth. Just like sharks, weakness would only make these assaulters more excited.

“Wow, what big strong men,” Daphne deadpanned. She was proud of how she kept the tremble out of her voice. This was bad. This was very, very bad. She couldn’t do wandless magic yet beyond a few spells and they all had to be directional. Dammit she should’ve asked Harry to tattoo a Boomstone or something onto her! “Was the child Imperiused or were one of you getting your jollies on in her shape?” Crabbe scowled. Well that answered that question – not that it helped her at all. Except for stalling. Stalling was good. They were obviously still in a classroom so if she could keep them distracted long enough she just might get lucky and have some random student walk in on them.

Sure and maybe Ron Weasley could learn how to pronounce ‘electricity’ while she waited for that.

Malfoy strode forward his grin falling a bit. He grabbed her hair and jerked her face up. “You bitch. You think you’re better than us? You think you can spurn me without any consequences? You think that you can sit there and make out with the half-blood slut while making googoo eyes at Potter? We’ll show you what it’s like to be with a real man. We’ll show you just what happens to people who laugh at the Dark Lord. You may not be one of Potter’s whores yet, but you’re close enough to him that this works to teach him a lesson too. I get to kill three birds with one stone.”

Daphne’s mind raced even as he dropped her hair and her forehead smacked into the desk and she blinked away tears of pain. They didn’t know she was dating Harry yet. That was good. That
meant even if she couldn’t escape she’d likely survive. Probably not fully intact… while Goyle would likely be satisfied with just raping her and being done with it, Crabbe was enough of a brute that he wouldn’t let her leave without several bruises or broken bones. Malfoy seemed to have legitimately lost a few marbles so how far he’d go was up in the air. That Nott was here was… worrying. Theodore didn’t do anything halfway so she’d have to be careful just how much defiance she showed until she found a way out. “Funny, I only see two birds here. Is one of your bodyguards going to volunteer their arse or does Pansy count as two?” she asked deliberately misinterpreting his meaning.

Daphne silently cursed herself. So much for watching how far she took the taunts. She bit her tongue to try and reframe and ignore the mounting sense of helplessness and fear. She couldn’t afford to slip. There was a very small chance that if she made Pansy awkward and guilty enough that the other girl would leave and send someone here to stop things quickly enough to matter.

“Will you just fuck the bitch already? I’m not keen on watching you guys verbally wank off and I want to get these pictures before someone comes,” Pansy said glaring at Daphne. Well there went that hope. Daphne felt her eyes burn again and tried to convince herself it was just from blood dripping into them.

“Nobody’s going to come,” Nott said rolling his eyes. “People are ‘afraid’ of this corridor. Ever since that giant arse dog was in the next room no one has had the bollocks to wander here long. It’s right moronic. If you’re going to avoid a room, avoid the bathroom with the 60 foot snake climbing up the pipes.” He snorted and hopped off the desk running his eyes over her back.

Daphne couldn’t help a slight shudder from his wandering gaze. “I do agree though, we should move this along.”

Malfoy squatted down so that his head was level with hers and he stared right into her eyes. “Do you think your slut will get wet looking at the pictures of us taking you or will she cry and refuse to ever touch you again? I’m honestly a bit curious myself. I wonder how Potter will feel when he too gets these tomorrow morning?” He stood back and grinned wider while starting to loosen his robes. “You may be the Slytherin Ice Queen but you’re pretty hot. This is going to be so much fun.”

It was all she could do to hold back a scream of rage at her impotence. She was Daphne Greengrass! She had a boyfriend and a known, accepted mistress! She was the Heir Greengrass! She was Harry Potter’s Right Hand! She had fought a fucking basilisk! She had killed a Dementor! She was not going to simply sit here tied to a blasted table and let inbred cavemen rape her!

Daphne ruthlessly beat back the shivers running down her back and fanned the flames of her rage. She ran over everything that even might help. She’d been trying to pool her magic to do that wind thing that Harry did when he was close to losing control, but nothing in the room had even fluttered let alone done anything strong enough to break her bonds or signal for – Daphne’s thoughts froze and she blinked, cursing her panic and how it apparently killed her brain cells. They’d taken her clothes and her wand, but the arrogant arses hadn’t removed her earrings! “Comm on, contact Harry,” she muttered as quietly as possible. She should have paid more attention when he’d mentioned how to use the emergency broadcast mode. Harry was good, but a dozen saviors would have been better. “You bastards think you’re going to get away with this?” she snarled loud enough to be just shy of yelling. “All you’re doing is marking yourself as surely as your master would. Except his mark just means you’re a bigoted fool while this one is going to see you killed.”

A growl came across the Comm Stone line and Daphne refused to smile despite knowing that Harry had heard her. He was coming. She wasn’t going to have to face this – or face Tracey and
Harry afterwards. Harry was coming and everything was going to be okay just like always. “Where?” the growl said in her eye. Daphne started to hyperventilate as her perfect solution crashed to a halt. Where was she?

Wait! Daphne flung her mind back to a few minutes ago. What had Nott just said? Giant dog… giant dog… where had there been a giant dog in the castle lately?

Malfoy laughed. “Big words from a whore splayed out like you are.”

First year! Before she’d ever even met Harry and the others, they had gone through some sort of trapped area with a cerberus guarding the entrance! She could have pumped her arms in triumph. “Idiots! Throwing someone into the third floor classroom near that obstacle course doesn’t guarantee privacy. Touch me and you’re living on borrowed time.”

Malfoy scowled. “I was just going to have my fun with you, bitch. Now I want to see you break,” he said quietly. Drawing back his hand Malfoy slapped her hard enough that her head smacked into the desk again. A second later, he grabbed her ears and tore out both the Comm Stone and her regular earring. She couldn’t hold back her anguished shout as her ears felt like they were on fire. Malfoy straightened up and blood from her ears dripped down his hands to land at his feet under his open robe. Daphne’s head rang from the pain, but she tried to focus on her impending rescue. Harry knew where she was. He was coming. He was coming.

“So who gets her first?” Nott asked.

“Me,” Crabbe said stepping forward and running a hand down her back before clamping onto her arse. Daphne bit her tongue again to keep from crying out. “I had to be that pipsqueak and I was the one who hit her. I should get first crack.”

“You can wait your turn,” Malfoy snarled glaring at his bodyguard. “This was my plan so I get to start. You can have her mouth.” Daphne’s eyes narrowed and hatred burned through the fog that was starting to descend over her. If Malfoy had started with her mouth then at least then she could have walked away with a ‘souvenir’ that the boy would never forget.

Malfoy dropped the remainder of his robes and moved behind her. Daphne screwed her eyes shut and tried to force her breathing to slow down and get back under control. She was Daphne Greengrass and she would not break! Harry was coming. She just had to hold on a little longer. Rescue was coming. Just a little –

The door to the room exploded inward. Pieces of wood from the hinges and the lock flew off to either side while the door itself soared through the air landing nearly in the middle of the classroom. Riding it down was Harry Potter, looking like the Angel of Death himself. Messy black hair completely disheveled, glowing wand in one hand, glowing runic tattoo in the other, glowing rune stones emblazoned in twin arcs across his chest from his bandoliers, eyes wide and bright, robes billowing out behind him in an unseen wind and his face set in an expression promising pain and vengeance.

He was the most beautiful thing Daphne had ever seen. It almost made her fragile control shatter seeing him here.

Harry had barely touched ground when spells lashed out from his hands. Daphne could barely follow his movements he was going so quickly. Crabbe was blasted into the wall with a wave of force from Harry’s hand while his wand shot out a sparking blue spell that Daphne recognized as a bone-breaker. She didn’t see who it hit but a grunt of pain told her it hit home. Harry was already rolling and casting from a rune stone held up in each hand. An instant later, Pansy was frozen to
the wall completely encased in ice with just a small section around her mouth and nose exposed to the air. Something shot out from Harry’s other hand at the same time, but Daphne couldn’t see what it was. The high-pitched scream from Malfoy sent a shot of ruthless pleasure down her spine and she decided identifying what Harry had done wasn’t important – only that it had hit the would-be rapist. Harry finished his roll and shot another bone-breaker from his wand felling Goyle with a hit on his tailbone.

The entire ‘battle’ from the time the door had exploded to the time all opponents were down had taken barely five seconds.

Daphne heard Harry grunt and a second later a flash of silver crossed her vision and the table jumped slightly. Her bonds went completely slack and she saw him drop the Sword of Gryffindor as he moved forward and swept her off the table, draping a robe around her body and pulling her into his arms. She leaned her head against his chest and let him embrace her. She didn’t know how long they stayed crouched on the floor, but it was barely enough time for her to regain a measure of her composure before more people burst into the room. She raised her head slightly and was momentarily distracted by the wet spot on Harry’s shirt front right where she had been resting. Had she been crying? Scowling and shunting her confusion to the side, Daphne twisted slightly and gasped slightly at seeing Filch at the head of the pack of personnel. McGonagall was almost right behind him followed by Neville, Hermione, several more of Daphne’s friends and a thoroughly winded Flitwick.

Everyone froze at seeing the scene in the room. Daphne turned her eyes to the side and her mouth fell open in shock at seeing Malfoy. He was pinned to wall by a spike through his right thigh and one through his left shoulder. The little piss stain was whimpering and holding a hand to the spike in his shoulder. He was also still very naked. Daphne reveled in the karmic justice in front of her for a moment, but started to scowl as it didn’t seem to be quite enough. She wrapped Harry’s conjured sheet around herself tighter and pushed back from him enough that she could stand. Well, enough that she could try to stand. The fucking bastards had apparently kept her tied long enough that her legs had gone numb. Thankfully Harry caught her before she wobbled too much and he looped an arm around her waist for support.

Daphne squeezed Harry’s arm in thanks and returned her malevolent stare to Malfoy. Before she could say anything though McGonagall spoke. “Miss Greengrass? Are you…are you alright?”

“Do I look alright, Headmistress?” Daphne asked turning her glare on the professor. She knew that they were supposed to ask those types of questions but really! She was wrapped in a sheet, could barely stand, her ears and head were still bleeding and she was still practically hyperventilating – did she look remotely alright?! “I was just molested by some of the biggest pigs in the school! Harry may have arrived and interrupted them prior to any actual...before they managed to...before they could complete their intent but let's please not forget that I was just tied to a table naked with four leering men and one leering woman standing over me. My injuries to pride and mentality aside, things are mostly superficial. As long as you discount my ruined ears, my repeatedly smashed head and that I can’t seem to stand on my own!” Daphne’s voice had been steadily rising throughout and she knew she was ranting, but couldn’t be bothered to care much. Harry squeezed her to him tighter and she forced herself to take a large breath and simply return to glaring at Malfoy.

“We should get you to Madame Pomfrey, Miss Greengrass,” Flitwick said his own breathing having returned to normal as he walked forward. Harry’s grip tightened on her and Daphne turned to him in confusion. Harry’s eyes were flashing as he looked at the approaching Flitwick and one of his tattoos started to dimly shimmer. She didn’t have a chance to speak before Hermione had swept forward from the group, hurried past Flitwick, grabbed Harry’s chin in her hand and gently
moved his head so that he was staring into her eyes. After a few moments Daphne felt the tension in her new boyfriend loosen considerably and he took a shaky breath.

“Thanks, Mione,” he murmured just barely loud enough for the two girls to hear. “I’m good now.”

Filch scowled and looked up from the prone body of Nott and jerked his head towards McGonagall. “Headmistress what about these others? They seem rather bad off.”

“Should just let them bleed out,” Su Li muttered. Daphne couldn’t tell whether the comment had been intentionally loud enough to carry or if she just didn’t care. Either way, Daphne wholeheartedly agreed with the girl. Neville and Padma were also nodding their concurrence.

McGonagall however, sadly did not share their ruthlessness. Her face contorted into a grimace of disgust and she flicked her wand tying up the three on the floor. “Filius, please assist Argus in removing these…students to the infirmary. Then contact the Aurors; this will not go unpunished. I will see to Mr. Malfoy personally. Mr. Potter, is there a special way to unfreeze, Ms. Parkinson?”

“No,” Harry said shaking his head. “It’s just ice. You melt it or chip it off. Should probably do it soon though. She’s going to be freezing in there. Sorry about grabbing you, Mr. Filch. I was… kinda in a hurry,” he mumbled running a hand through his hair. Filch narrowed his eyes, but nodded slowly as he took in Daphne still held tightly against Harry’s chest.

A pained whimper alerted the occupants to McGonagall getting Malfoy off the wall and hovering ahead of her. “Filius, please extricate Ms. Parkinson before heading out with the others.”

“One moment, Professor,” Daphne said angling herself and Harry so that she was standing in front of Malfoy. “If I may?” she asked. McGonagall seemed to struggle with an internal battle before turning with Flitwick and Filch as all three moved to intensely study Pansy and begin chipping off the ice. Malfoy remained hovering in midair though he now had a sheet tied around him in a perverse foil to her own ‘attire’.

Daphne’s eyes narrowed and her lips curled into a snarl. This inbreed had…Daphne’s voice came out low and laced with venom. “I did warn you that you were marking yourself by touching me. Harry, may I borrow your wand? I don’t know where they put mine.” He nodded and passed it over. Daphne felt the holly wood warm in her hand. It wasn’t quite as good a match as her own, but it was better than she had expected and would do well for the task at hand. “Allow me to show you just why my nickname is Ice Queen you fucking bastard.” She took aim at Malfoy’s nether regions and shot off the spell that her mother had taught her before she’d ever left the house. The hovering boy uttered a high pitched warble causing Daphne to smile in triumph and lean back into Harry. “Headmistress, if you’re done with Pansy, I’d appreciate an escort to the hospital wing.”

McGonagall turned and nodded, waving her wand to get Malfoy floating out into the corridor. “Of course, Miss Greengrass. I’m sure the others can handle things here. Come along.”

Marcus Greengrass scowled and crumpled the letter in his hands. Those uncivilized buffoons had tried to despoil his daughter! His Heir! They had nearly ruined everything for him!

If Daphne were to be sullied like that her bride price would drop precipitously. She would be used goods. Dirtied. Unworthy. He’d never be able to marry her into a respectable family that’d allow him to keep his line and name intact. He cursed having a daughter for an heir yet again. This would never be a problem with a boy. He’d never have to think about contingencies for having a son that was raped. That it had barely been averted was practically immaterial.
Time was up. He’d given Daphne years to cement her alliance with Harry Potter and heard nothing but stalling words and misdirection from her. This incident was just the final nail in the coffin. It was time to secure the Greengrass family.

Aligning with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would be a foolish avenue to take. Even if Daphne’s assailters hadn’t been in that crowd, he’d never particularly liked the man or his methods. Marcus’ actions and allegiances over the past few years more or less prevented him from even approaching anyone from the Dark Lord’s camp. However, he couldn’t go to anyone from the Light contingent either. Those fools would take his business holdings and squander them ‘for the greater good’. So who was left? There were precious few Gray personnel these days and those numbers dwindled with every day that the Dark Lord ‘recruited’.

Hmm, perhaps the Zabini’s? Viktoria was not highborn but she was *certainly* crafty. To leave seven dead husbands behind she’d have to be. Marcus doubted she’d be against Blaise taking the name Greengrass. Black Widows were never too attached to names. It would ensure the boy had means and a decent family name without having to rely on his mother or her…method of employment.

Yes, yes that might just be a viable solution. Marcus nodded to himself satisfied. Daphne had been playing around long enough and this close call would hopefully make her see that. The Greengrasses would continue – one way or another.
“Wotcher, hon. Wotcher, Remus,” Tonks said as she dropped into the only cushion not covered with papers. Remus lifted his hand in acknowledgement while Fleur briefly looked up and smiled before turning back to her papers.

“Bonjour, mon amour,” Fleur said before scribbling a notation on a photograph and nodding happily. “Did you have success?”

Tonks shook her head and let out a sigh of frustration. “Nada, zip, zilch. The elf dropped off the map completely. I couldn’t even find out which family Hokey went to after the Ministry trial. Dumbledore found her, this shouldn’t be that hard.”

“It’s likely a dead end anyway,” Remus said flipping a page one of the old newspapers in front of him. “We already know that Riddle framed her for the poisoning. It is very unlikely that the poor creature knew of any further details.”

Tonks grimaced. “It probably doesn’t even matter since she’s almost definitely dead by now unfortunately. If Dobby was remotely capable of stealth I might ask him to pop around and check but...yeah you’re probably right. How about you guys? You fare any better?”

Fleur picked up a photograph with a large red circle on the bottom corner and held it out grinning largely. “I believe so. We zink zat zis could be one of the cave systems zat Riddle may have used to hide a Horcrux in near ze orphanage. We cross-checked several maps of ze shoreline as well as any potential magically significant sections of ze coast.”

“There are about four or five caves that we think he might have used,” Remus said frowning. “I think we’re going to have to check each one individually as it seems unlikely we can narrow the list down any further.”

Tonks perked up and looked over the few photos smiling. “Excellent. Hopefully we’ll get lucky this time. Fleur, you want to go check if Sirius can get free on Saturday to go spelunking with us?”

Fleur nodded emphatically. “I zink zat is for ze best. You never know how many of ze locations will be trapped as ze Shack was. Sirius would be useful in a fight.”

Remus smiled at the two girls. “And getting to see Harry and Hermione has absolutely nothing to do with going to see Padfoot in person of course.”

“That of course,” both girls responded with matching grins. Remus just rolled his eyes.

“One moment,” Fleur said raising her hand and pointing to her ear. “Hello, Hermione. No, ‘arry has not spoken with me yet. Nym, has ‘arry spoken with you recently?”

Tonks shook her head. “Nothing since telling us yesterday about Daphne. He hasn’t already gotten into trouble has he?”

Fleur shrugged and turned her attention back to Hermione. “He hasn’t reached her yet eizer. Okay. Okay.” Fleur’s eyes darkened and she scowled. “Daphne is alright? How bad? Zat...zat does not sound promising. What did zey try to do? Please tell me it was not what I am zinking...Ces fils de chiens galeux! Ils devraient être castrés et jetés dans le plus sombre et plus
profond des cachots sur le continent!” Tonks’ hands clenched at Fleur’s tone and she felt her throat close up as feathers rippled down her partner’s arms before disappearing again. “Apologies. I said they should be castrated and imprisoned in the worst place imaginable.”

Tonks could keep quiet any longer. “Did they kill her?” she asked softly.

Fleur gasped and looked up hurriedly shaking her head. “Non, no, she was assaulted, but help arrived in time. She is recovering. Hermione, what is being done to ze animals? Zat is good but I still say…oh, well at least zat is something. We will be over shortly anyway so we will stop in and see how she is in person. Zank you letting us know Hermione.” Fleur frowned again and Tonks felt her hair shift several colors at the concern that flashed across the Veela’s face. “Zat is…not good. We are closing in on a potential hiding place so hopefully he will have one to experiment on shortly. We should begin exploring other options beyond ze rune. If he cannot get it working we will have to be prepared for drastic action. I agree. Take care, Hermione. We shall see you soon.”

As soon as she tapped her Comm Stone Tonks was sitting up and staring at Fleur. “Short version?”

“Draco Malfoy and several ozers molested and assaulted Daphne. Harry dealt with zem, but not before zey had several minutes alone with her. Daphne is putting forth a good show, but she is not unaffected and eizer Harry or Tracey are staying wiz her at all times.” Fleur’s mouth spread into a predatory grin. “Ze attackers are being expelled and zere wands will be snapped wizin ze hour. Draco can no longer father any children zanks to a family spell delivered by Daphne at ze end. Aurors are involved.”

“Thank Merlin,” Tonks breathed out relieved and sank back into the cushions as she forced her hair back into a deep blue. “Okay, we definitely will be stopping by the Hospital Wing then. What was Hermione saying about our boyfriend?”

Fleur grimaced and turned to look at Remus who took the hint and excused himself to grab a drink. “He is…not well. During his rush to get to Daphne ‘arry apparently allowed many of his bonds around ze Horcrux to slacken. They have been strengthened again, but Hermione is…worried. He nearly attacked Flitwick after ze assault was stopped. She is convinced zat he is downplaying his continuing difficulties again.”

Tonks’ hair shifted to black and she grimaced. “Shite. We can’t wait til Saturday to search for this thing. Let’s ask Sirius if he can get away.”

“Agreed,” Fleur said nodding. “Is it bad zat I almost hope we get attacked? It would be nice to take out some anger and frustration on acceptable targets.”

Tonks laughed mirthlessly. “I find myself with similar feelings, hon. Hey, Moony, you get your drink yet!”

Remus walked back in sipping some tea. “It takes some time to get these things perfect, you know. So are we moving up the timetable?”

“We’ll try for tomorrow if Sirius can get away,” Tonks said nodding. She paused before continuing and frowned grabbing a lock of hair. Scowling she shook it and changed the black into a bright yellow. “Stupid hair,” she muttered. “Tomorrow work for you, wolfie?”

“There isn’t a Wizengamot meeting so yes. I’ll just have to Floo Narcissa and move our tea date until Thursday, but that shouldn’t be a problem.”

Fleur’s eyes widened. “Tea date wiz Narcissa Malfoy?”
“Narcissa Black,” Remus corrected gently. “She actually isn’t all that bad. Her views aren’t quite modern, but she’s far more flexible than you’d think.”

Tonks snorted. “Flexible huh? Personal experience there, wolfie?”

Remus flushed. “That would hardly be appropriate considering she just divorced a few months ago.”

“And how long before that was the last time she had sex with dear old ex-Uncle Lucy?”

His silence was all the answer the girls needed.

Daphne’s eyebrows rose as her mother, Cassandra Greengrass, walked into the Hospital Wing. Walked was a bit of an understatement as the woman was moving quickly enough that she was just a hair below inappropriate running. Daphne wasn’t about to complain. It was also a good indication that her father wasn’t coming at this time. Not that that really surprised her at all.

“Would you like me to leave so you two have some privacy?” Hermione asked softly leaning over the bed. “I can always go back to the library and make double-check my latest project…”

Harry sitting nearby started mumbling in his sleep. “Don’t eat the pie, the pie is for Dobby. He wants to hit Dumbles with it…” Both girls ignored him.

Daphne shook her head. “It’s fine. You can stay, Hermione.”

Cassandra quickly brushed past Madame Pomfrey and sat down next to her daughter. “Daphne, my sweet, sweet little girl…” Cassandra reached out and grabbed Daphne’s hand prompting an embarrassed blush to spread over her cheeks.

“Mother. You really didn’t have to – ”

“Of course I did!” Cassandra scowled. “Though your father seems far more interested in your continued marriageability. He’s been locked behind closed doors for most of the past day making Floo calls and ensuring your options remain open.”

Hermione frowned and wrote a short note on a nearby notebook. Daphne shrugged. “Would you have expected anything different? I certainly did not.”

“He was a good man once…But enough about that, is there anything you need my dear? Is there anything that I could do to assist?”

“You could get them tossed into Azkaban,” Hermione muttered.

Daphne chuckled. “I don’t suppose there is any chance of that happening, Mother? It would be nice, but seeing who they back I doubt they’d be in there very long anyway.”

Cassandra shook her head with a pained expression. “Draco Malfoy was a bit smarter than I would have given him credit for. He and the others are all blaming the entire incident on Nott. It’s ingenious really. His mother passed years ago and with his father having died at the end of last term there is no one to protect him or advocate on his behalf. I imagine Theodore will likely meet an unfortunate accident along the way to his Azkaban cell in order to ensure that he can’t implicate or accuse the Malfoy boy any further.”

“So Draco gets off with no repercussions?” Daphne asked narrowing her eyes and lowering her
tone to dangerous levels.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Cassandra said smiling and chuckling. “McGonagall is planning to snap all five of their wands in a few hours at the gates to the castle so you can go witness that first hand. In addition, I have spoken with Andromeda Tonks and Narcissa Black. Lucius has claimed that with Draco’s expulsion and snapped wand the boy should be considered a Squib and as such cannot be held accountable in a Wizarding court for his participation in the assault.”

Hermione snarled and got out a notepad hurriedly scribbling. “Yet another law that we will have to change. Loophole after loophole for these privileged cretins. They think they are so smart…wait until I get a chance to write the new versions…”

Cassandra lifted her eyebrows at Hermione’s mutterings. Daphne patted her friend’s hand nodding along before she turned back to her mother. “How are they punishing Nott then? Shouldn’t he fall under the same twisted loophole? And I assume that you three are using Lucius’ attempt against him concerning Draco?”

“With Nott they are claiming that his punishment was already decided prior to his wand being snapped and if that is not grey enough, they are claiming that as he attacked a Pureblood Heiress he should still fall under our laws. Their arguments are circular and would never pass through an uncorrupted system. Lucius on the other hand…Yes, we are using his own reasoning to attack,” Cassandra confirmed. “Draco will be stripped of his Heir status and forced to live in the Muggle world. I give him a few months perhaps before he annoys the wrong person and gets himself killed in a back alley somewhere.”

“That’s assuming he manages to feed himself and make enough money to survive that long,” Daphne said smirking. “He would have been stripped of his Heir status anyway.”

Cassandra blinked, momentarily confused before laughing. “Oh, you got him with the Ice Crusher then?”

“Yes. Little Draco will never be able to sire offspring and he should be singing soprano forevermore.”

Hermione cocked her head to the side as she looked curiously at Daphne. “So that’s what you meant…did you freeze them off or simply crush them as the spell implies?”

“Freeze,” Cassandra said. “It’s a family spell my grandmother invented to deal with unruly men. There are different levels it can be used at from simple deterrent to, well, that.”

“Actually, Mother, I would like to teach it to several classmates and friends. Considering the times…” Daphne trailed off.

“Of course dear. Just ensure that you trust those you teach.”

Daphne nodded. “What of the others?”

Cassandra shrugged. “About the same as Draco unfortunately. There is some good news though. Fudge has spent too much capital with allowing this oversight in justice to occur. The Black sisters and I are gathering our votes and leaning on the Prophet. By this time next week, Fudge will have been sacked, resigned or facing a lynch mob.”

“Well that’s something at least. It’s not ideal, but I suppose I can take comfort in Malfoy living his worst fears for now,” Daphne said sighing. “I admit, I’m surprised that Narcissa Black is accepting this.”
“She was unhappy about it, but agreed that it was better than many of the initial options presented. Narcissa was also…very unhappy about the depths to which Draco had sunk. I don’t think she had quite realized just how like his father he truly was. I feel bad for the poor woman and thank Merlin that you and Astoria have never had those issues.” Cassandra gently squeezed her daughter’s hand. “I’m sorry I can’t do more at the moment. Perhaps you and your friends will be able to prevent these types of things in the future. I am becoming more and more confronted with the flaws in our current system. Perhaps it truly is time for a change.” She leaned back and smiled over towards Harry’s sleeping form. “Now, tell me a bit about your savior. Is the young man still simply a friend or has more developed?”

Daphne blushed again. “You used to have more tact, Mother. We are officially dating. I was going to tell Father whenever he bothered to show up here.”

Hermione chewed the end of her quill frowning. “Daphne, perhaps you should write a letter and ask your mother to let him know as well…”

Cassandra waved it off. “I’ll inform him. If he’s up to something though it won’t make much difference. Marcus no longer believes that Daphne is legitimate concerning Harry Potter and without a ring on her finger nothing is likely to convince him otherwise.” Hermione’s frown deepened though Daphne just sighed.

“I did play that card far too often so it’s my own fault. I won’t make such a mistake in the future,” Daphne commented wearily.

“And what of Tracey? I expected to see her here,” Cassandra asked.

Hermione answered before Daphne could. “Tracey and Harry have been switching off. She’s showering at the moment and will be bringing up food with Luna when she comes back.”

Daphne rolled her eyes but couldn’t fully suppress the heat spreading over her cheeks and the warmth in her chest at her partner’s attentions. “I told them it was unnecessary – especially seeing as I leave here this afternoon – but they insisted.”

“They would not be very good companions if they hadn’t.” Cassandra smiled and chuckled lowly. “You are very lucky my dear. Now, about this study schedule for the O.W.L.s I’ve heard about…”

Blaise scowled as he crumpled the letter from his mother. ‘Good match my arse. ‘You’ll have a decent name, Blaise. You’ll have a business empire, Blaise. You’ll have a pretty wife your age, Blaise.’ Go screw your next husband, mum!” Blaise contemplated setting the letter on fire out of spite but decided to hold off – for a few minutes at least.

Still scowling Blaise started stalking down the halls of castle. “Now where would she be? Hospital Wing maybe? No, she should have been released a little while ago. Slytherin Common Room? No, she’d probably avoid that until Malfoy’s gang is officially destroyed. Maybe the Gryffindor Common Room…hopefully not, I don’t know where that one is. Maybe…” Blaise glanced out a window he passed and stopped midstride. Chuckling he turned on his heel and headed for the doors out of the castle. “Of course, she’d want to watch.”

Blaise joined a few other students streaming out of the doors of the castle and filing down to the Main Gate. The assembly wasn’t supposed to start for another few minutes, but it seemed like
quite a lot of his schoolmates wanted to be early. Wanted to get a good view was more likely. Malfoy’s squad hadn’t just restricted itself to Harry Potter after all and there quite a few who would be cheering as the idiots’ wands were snapped.

He tried to slot into a section of the crowd near Daphne, but didn’t even make it within five feet of the girl. She was surrounded by Potter’s group. They weren’t visibly acting as bodyguards despite it being clear to an observant eye that they considered themselves as such. Longbottom was covering the rear with Bones and Abbott on either side of him. The Patils with Brown and Li were stationed on the left edge while the right side was covered by the Weasley twins, Weaslette and the Quidditch Trio. Potter, Granger, Tracey and Lovegood were in the center with Daphne. Blaise decided discretion was the better part of valor. He could wait until afterwards.

McGonagall stepped up to the gates after several more minutes and raised her wand to her throat casting a *sonorus* spell. “Good afternoon students. Thank you for all arriving promptly. I realize this is highly unorthodox however things at Hogwarts will be changing drastically this year. There has been a disturbing lack of action on the staff’s part to curb bullying and inappropriate practices in the past. That trend ends now. Every one of you carries a deadly weapon at nearly all times and your actions have consequences. Personal responsibility and morals are essential. The five students you see before you recently assaulted a fellow classmate with intent to perform heinous acts. This behavior is unacceptable!” McGonagall turned to glare at Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Parkinson and Nott. All five were magically frozen just in front of the gates with two Aurors behind Nott.

She quickly turned back to the main crowd and continued her speech. “Expulsions are typically handled in private however due to the current political state of the country as well as the lack of visible punishment in prior years an exception has been made. Watch well students. I expect each of you to behave as gentlemen and gentlewomen. I expect a level of respect for each other as well as common decency. Attacks on others will no longer receive a slap on the wrist. You will be held accountable.”

Turning back to Malfoy’s gang McGonagall strode forward to Draco first. “Draco Malfoy, you are in violation of the code of conduct at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. You are forevermore expelled from this institution. May God have mercy on your soul and Merlin have mercy upon your magic.” Without any further preamble the Headmistress took out his wand and snapped it, incinerating the pieces afterwards. Blaise smirked at the look of shock and loss on Malfoy’s face. Served the pompous arse right.

The same scene repeated down the line. The only difference was in Parkinson who burst into tears as her wand’s pieces went up in flames. For a moment Blaise felt sorry for the pug. Then he remembered that she was standing by while four guys were about to rape his friend and all commiseration fled. As the last wand was snapped, the five were sent out of the gates. Nott was immediately apparated away by the attending Aurors while the other four followed a robed individual down towards the path to Hogsmeade. If Blaise hadn’t have known better he’d have said they were just being taken back to Voldemort’s camp and given new wands. Thankfully he had his own sources and he knew that Cassandra Greengrass had made some calls. They would disappear into the Muggle world before the Death Eaters even thought to retrieve them. Good riddance.

The assembly broke up and Blaise started searching for his target again. Most of the formation around Daphne stayed intact which was annoying. Blaise heaved a sigh and squared his shoulders. Oh well, he’d never had a problem with Potter before so he shouldn’t be worried about approaching them. There was just something in the Golden Boy’s eyes that promised pain that
sent shivers down his spine. Blaise had seen it reflected in his mother’s eyes enough that he’d always recognize it.

“Excuse me,” he said as he walked closer. The ranks subtly moved inward, Daphne and Tracey both placed a hand on those close to them waving him in. “Thanks, Daphne, I need to speak with you for a few moments. Alone would be preferable.”

Daphne frowned and nodded. She headed off towards the large tree near the lake with most of her friends hanging behind out of listening range. Blaise followed quickly after her. “What’s this about?” she asked forgoing most of her usual subtlety and tact.

Blaise leaned down and picked up a few nice flat rocks to try skipping stones. He tossed the first one and held out the letter from his mother in his other hand. “You should read this.”

Daphne frowned and took the parchment. She scanned the contents and scowled. He skipped a few more rocks as she reread it and proceeded to crumple the paper. Blaise chuckled. “I did the same thing about an hour ago. You want the honor of incinerating that thing?” Daphne didn’t even bother nodding, she just took out her wand and the letter ignited. “So, no offense, Daph, you’re pretty and all, but I’m not particularly interested in marrying a lesbian.”

“I’m bisexual actually,” Daphne said still glaring at the ashes. “And I’m already dating Tracey and Harry. Well, I was until this. Dammit! He just couldn’t leave well enough alone! I’ll find a way out of this.”

“I’ll try researching some options too,” Blaise said nodding. “I have a girlfriend myself. She’s going to be pissed if I break things off because my mum’s a bitch who can’t keep her greedy little paws out of my business.”

Daphne turned to look at him with a calculating gaze. “Make certain your mother doesn’t find out that you’re searching for ways out because of the girl or she may disappear.”

“Nah, mum likes poisons not disappearances. I already taught Sally-Anne detection spells and the like. But thanks for the sentiment.”

“Let me know if you find anything before I do,” Daphne said turning to go. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention.”

Blaise tossed out his final rock and nodded. “Sure thing. Good luck to us both.” Blaise leaned against the tree behind him and watched her walk back to the group. “Damn, Wizarding politics.”

Harry walked around the cupboard under the stairs poking at rotting sections of the boards up against the wall and frowning. “This wasn’t here last time. I should ask Shiva to come back in and take a look.” He scowled and punched the wall flinching back afterward at the pain in his hand. “Stupid Horcrux. Stupid Voldemort. Stupid Dursleys. Stupid runes. Stupid impulsiveness. Stupid, stupid, stupid!” He punched the wall again and turned around. He’d already shifted his memories to a different section of his mindscape and he proceeded to wall off the entire segment of his mind again.

He’d been an idiot to think that positive thoughts had worked to hold back the thing earlier. Whatever damage he’d done with the Soul Cage had been healed and the soul shard was pushing back out again. Harry had shattered quite a lot of the restraints when he’d dropped all his inhibitions in the rush to get to Daphne the other day. He still didn’t know if the urge to kill Malfoy and his goons had come from him or the soul shard – or which option was more disturbing
for that matter.

Many of the protections Harry had initially placed were rebuilt and he’d added even more. It didn’t matter. This was a losing battle in the long run and all he was doing was stalling. He hadn’t wanted to admit it – not even to himself. Unfortunately, this was becoming a huge problem. If the *Soul Cage* didn’t work soon, he’d ask Su to get that potions recipe. If this stupid thing kept fighting, it was going to start affecting every aspect of his life soon enough.

Dropping out of his mindscape Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead. The Common Room was mostly empty. Hermione was reading a book on the couch while Luna was playing with Coco in the corner. The twins were looking over business expenses and comparing locations for their shop while Ginny offered her opinions. Angelina and Alicia had already ranked their choices for the two which brought a slight smile to Harry’s face. Life went on despite the turmoil roiling around him.

Harry took out his sketches for the *Soul Cage* and the base design shifting to the couch next to Hermione. Holding the pages in front of himself he tried to layer them to be able to see both sheets at once and started slightly turning them.

“Trying for a different way of seeing things like Luna?” Hermione asked marking her page.

“Yeah. I’m missing something. I think maybe I broke the targeting section when I started modifying the power rune.”

Hermione quirked her mouth and reached out to tap a segment of the scheme that had just overlapped. “Was this in the original? A containment cluster here might wall off the two different souls wouldn’t it?”

Harry blinked and moved the papers apart then layered them again. “Hermione you’re a genius!” Harry exclaimed. He dropped the papers and pulled his partner into a deep kiss.

As they broke apart Hermione murmured, breathless, “Thanks. It’s not a guarantee though, Harry.”

“Guarantee, no,” Harry agreed pulling out a new piece of paper and starting to modify his design. “But, I think it’ll work. If I connect this cluster with that and shift this one over a bit to this link then the containment cluster will work synergistically with the targeting cluster!”

Hermione laid a hand on his wrist and gently turned his eyes to meet hers with the other. “Harry… you’re not about to test this immediately are you?”

“I won’t,” he said quietly. “I promise. I’ll wait until Tonks and Fleur come back with a test subject so that we can conduct a *safe* test. And if they take too long then I’ll make sure that everyone else is nearby when I try it out.”

Hermione smiled and leaned in to kiss him again. “Thank you, Harry. We’ll get that thing out of you soon enough.”

Hermione waved Harry into the Room of Requirement rolling her eyes at her boyfriend. It was incredibly cute and oddly sexy to see him walking down the corridors with parchment in front of his face, making notes and corrections. He’d been at it for over an hour and she’d barely been able to get him to stand and start walking when Daphne had called to meet up. Hermione was acting as his eyes as they walked along making sure he didn’t run into the walls or trip over the stairs. As they finally reached the Room she gently took the papers from him and pushed him towards the couch. “You can finish afterwards, love.”
“I’m basically done…” Harry muttered exasperated. He sat down on the couch and Hermione joined him with a chuckle. It was so nice to see him in a good mood again. Things had been so chaotic for so long that such an event was far too rare an occurrence these days.

The door to the Room opened again and Daphne walked in with Tracey right behind. The blonde gently pushed Tracey to sit down next to Hermione who gave the other Slytherin a querying look. Tracey just shrugged in response.

“Thanks for coming,” Daphne said. “I apologize in advance for this. Earlier Blaise gave me some information about plans that my father has made.” Daphne scowled and Hermione frowned, fingering her bag. Damn; sometimes she hated being right. It was a good thing she’d finished the corrections Snapfist had recommended earlier. “He’s initiated contract negotiations with Viktoria Zabini, Blaise’s mother. I’m to be his bride before the month is out. As such I think it is only fair that we end…this,” she said softly gesturing to the three sitting students with a pained expression, “before things get too far along.”

Harry frowned and leaned forward. “Wait, are you saying you’re breaking up with us two days after starting to date us? Because your dad is being a bastard?”

“That’s…not really how I would have put it…” Daphne said fumbling.

Tracey glared. “I’m with Harry on this one, Daph. That’s what it’s coming across like. I think we all deserve a bit more credit than that.”

Daphne frowned and started pacing. “You don’t understand. This is my problem. This is my family. I have to handle this before I can justify bringing any of you in the firing line. My father is difficult enough when he feels threatened, but with the addition of Viktoria Zabini? It’s madness! I can’t keep dating any of you while betrothed to Blaise! She’ll kill you to secure his inheritance! She’s killed seven husbands!”

“And the Slytherin Slayers have killed a basilisk, several Dementors, survived a chimera, fought off trained Aurors without a scratch and went toe-to-toe with Voldemort – multiple times,” Harry said ticking off items on his fingers. “We’ve stood up to an entire school House, faced off with Dumbledore and killed Death Eaters. Hell, Daph, I have a piece of a freaking Dark Lord in my skull and Tracey was possessed by the bastard for almost a year! I think we can deal with a pissed off Black Widow!”

“But…it’s not fair to you,” Daphne said frozen in place and looking between them in complete confusion. “If I can’t find which contract he is using and search for the loopholes none of it matters. I’d be locked into it and we could never have anything real. I won’t kill Blaise, he’s a good guy – in spite of his mother. It’s not fair to you…I have to deal with this before I can commit…”

Harry rubbed his scar and groaned in frustration. Tracey just glared at Daphne. “When has anything been remotely ‘fair’ for the past few years for any of us, Daphne?”

“I…I just…but…” Daphne collapsed into the couch facing them and covered her face with her hands. “I just want to do what’s best for you all!!”

“What’s best for us is staying with you and helping you through the mire of Pureblood politics,” Hermione said gently. “Daphne, would I be correct in saying that whatever contract your father and Ms. Zabini try to use would be precluded by an earlier one and rendered null and void?”

“Of course, but I don’t have any previous contracts to fall back on! Father was always one for
keeping his options open and he was willing to let me have my own say until recently,” Daphne exclaimed. Hermione could hear the strain in her voice recognizing the other girl was close to breaking down completely. Harry moved to say something and Hermione quickly shook her head to keep him quiet. Tracey almost jumped in before Hermione also quieted her.

“Daphne,” Hermione said reaching into her bag. “I started drafting this after the attack. It’s why I spent so long in the library the last two days. Initially I was working based on a worst-case scenario in which your father acted something like this. After your mother’s visit I grew more convinced it might be necessary. I’ve triple checked it to ensure that it is accurate, legal and follows all guidelines. I contacted Snapfist just before dinner to run the wording by him and he agreed that the contract is sound.”

Hermione held out a document inked on official looking parchment towards Daphne who had dropped her hands from her face and simply stared at Hermione mouth hanging open. Harry and Tracey were locked into similar expressions of shock. “Mione,” Harry said slowly and carefully. “Mione, did you draft a betrothal contract?”

“I did.”

“How the bloody hell do you know how to draft a betrothal contract?” Harry asked completely incredulous.

“Well,” Hermione said blushing, “I took notes from the contract you had with Ginny. There were some books in the library with examples of typical contracts as well as advice on how to adjust several terms. I consulted with some of my Muggle books to close a few loopholes that seem to be endemic to the Wizarding world as well as to add other clauses to allow either of you to break the contract at any point in time up to the time you say your vows.” Hermione shrugged. “It wasn’t really that difficult. All it involved was a lot of double-checking and attention to detail.”

“Merlin be damned, the woman’s a genius…” Tracey muttered.

Harry rubbed his forehead and groaned. “Mione, a little warning next time would be nice.”

“Well I wasn’t expecting to have to pull it out the same day I finished it,” she replied slightly annoyed. “I was planning on bringing it up over the weekend so we all had time to get the week’s homework out of the way before turning to potentially dramatic topics. The excitement of this year is starting rather early.”

Daphne gently reached forward and plucked the contract from her friend’s fingers. “Every time I think I’ve hit the limit on the amazing things surrounding Harry something else pops up. Give me a moment to read this.”

Tracey whistled and leaned back into the cushions. “I think there’s going to be a copy of your face next to ‘crazy-prepared’ in the dictionary, Hermione.”

“Is that a real word?” Hermione asked.

“If not, it should be.”

Harry raised a hand and waved it around a bit. “For those less skilled in legalese can I ask a question? This is basically a less restrictive version of the thing with Ginny that Daphne or I can cancel anytime for any reason right? And it keeps her from being forced to marry Blaise?”

“Correct,” Hermione said nodding.
“And why doesn’t her father have to sign it as her Magical Guardian?” Harry asked.

“Because it’s written using a Young Lovers contract base…” Daphne said astonished. “I never thought of modifying that section like this. This is brilliant. The way this is worded all we’d need is McGonagall to sign off as ‘a person in a position of authority acknowledging the mental state, health and comprehension of the undersigned’.”

Hermione smiled and nodded. “Actually I checked. ‘Position of authority’ is not limited to the Headmistress but is also covered by any faculty member. You could just ask Shiva or Lily to sign it if you’re uncomfortable with asking Professor McGonagall.”

“This even specifies ‘Consort to House Black’ and states that at least one child should carry the Greengrass name…Merlin, Hermione you really do think of everything!” Daphne exclaimed.

“Not everything,” Hermione protested weakly. “I messed up with Shiva’s name origins and I certainly make my fair share of mistakes.”

Harry snorted in amusement. “Not when it counts.” He held up his revised Soul Cage design and pointed to the contract with his other hand. “Cases like 20 and 21. So what do you think, Daph? Still want to break up or do you want to commit?”

Daphne froze and slowly looked up to meet Harry’s eyes. “You would be okay with this? As you said, we’ve been dating for barely two days, Harry…”

“And as Fleur kept telling me over the summer we’ve apparently been dancing around each other for years. I think she’s biased, but I’ll admit she has a bit of a point.” Harry shrugged and leaned back into the couch. “If it can be cancelled at any point without a fuss then who cares about a piece of paper? The thing with Ginny was horrible because I had no control. Here I do. If things don’t work out between us we tear it up and search for other partners. By then you’ll probably be old enough that you wouldn’t need its protection anyway.”

Tracey nodded agreement. “I’m with him. It’s a good idea, Daph. As long as it doesn’t specify exclusivity…” She trailed off and looked to Hermione who merely started laughing lightly and shook her head at the absurdity of that question considering her current relationship configuration. Tracey chuckled and turned back to Daphne. “Yeah, I’m all for it.”

Daphne took another look at the paper in front of her, shook her head and laughed. She reached over and pulled a quill from her pack, signing it with a flourish. “In for a knut, in for a galleon!”

Fleur and Tonks apparated into Hogsmeade and made their way up the path to Hogwarts. Fleur smiled at seeing the castle coming into view. “It really is magnifique isn’t it?”

Tonks quirked an eyebrow at Fleur. “Unlike Mione I get like two out of every 100 words you say in French, hon. If you’re saying the castle is beautiful then I agree completely.”

Fleur rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue at Tonks. “It means ‘magnificent’. Zis word is not complicated. It sounds nearly the same in English.”

“Sure, sure, whatever you say,” Tonks teased, pushing open the gate and holding it for her partner. “After you.”

“Why zank you.” Fleur waved hello to Hagrid who was tying up some bundles of herbs in his garden and moved forward to hold the Entrance Hall doors for Tonks. “Now, after you, Nym.”
Tonks chuckled and moved in. “Don’t mind if I do. Hmm, Daphne’s probably out of the infirmary already…Easy way or hard?”

Fleur frowned in thought for a moment. “Easy. We still need to find Sirius before it gets too late.”

“True. Comm on, contact Hermione. Hey, sweetie, you wouldn’t happen to know where Daphne is would you? Fleur and I just – oh. Well that makes things easier. We’re on our way up.” Tonks disconnected and shrugged at Fleur. “Apparently both girls, Tracey and Harry are up in the Room of Requirement. Mentioned having to talk to us about something anyway.”

Fleur raised her eyebrows. “Too bad ‘arry is still shy otherwise I might’ve dared hope for something naughty.”

Tonks laughed. “Just because we know it’s not that doesn’t mean we can’t tease him with it!”

Fleur rolled her eyes and they continued to the Room in relative quiet only passing a few students out and about. Tonks opened the door for them and Fleur watched in amusement as she strolled in with a wide smile and arms thrust wide. “Alright, peeps, clothes back on! Delicate eyes on the premises!”

“Delicate eyes?” Harry asked amused. “You two are the most perverted people I know. Well… okay maybe Luna would take that title, but still, my point is solid.”

Fleur laughed. “Poor, poor, ‘arry surrounded by deviants. Hello, Hermione, Tracey. Daphne, we heard of ze assault. Is zere anyzing zat we might be able to do?”

Daphne’s mouth hung open slightly before she shook her head and laughed. “I’ve been friends with you people for years. You’d think I’d stop expecting Slytherin behavior from you all. I’m better, Fleur, Tonks. Thank you for asking. Harry and Tracey have been wonders and Hermione has helped as well. I’m better, Fleur, Tonks. Thank you for asking. Harry and Tracey have been wonders and Hermione has helped as well. I won’t lie and say I’m fine, but there’s nothing I would ask for at the moment.” She paused and grimaced. “Actually, I take that back. I humbly request that neither of you throttle me in the next few minutes.”

“Why would we throttle you? Were you guys actually doing the naughty? You know it’s cool if you were.” Tonks said falling into a chair.

Harry subtly placed Hermione between him and the newcomers. Fleur raised her eyebrows at that but held her tongue for him to speak. “Err, I kinda just got engaged to Daphne…”

Any response Fleur had fled from her mind at that. Tonks wasn’t quite as lost for words. “Run that by me again, Wonder Boy?” she said her voice completely strained and her hair a blur.

“Honestly, one would think you try to explain things in the worst way possible,” Hermione huffed lightly smacking the back of his head. “Girls, Daphne’s father is being a right bastard and forcing a marriage between her and Blaise Zabini. No one wants this beyond her father and Blaise’s mother. I had a betrothal contract drafted just in case this happened. Either of them can cancel it at any time they wish but this prevents Daphne from being forced into a marriage she can’t escape. We deeply apologize for not informing either of you prior to signing, but we are very worried about timing as our copy needs to be legitimate prior to whatever Marcus and Viktoria are drafting. There’s no telling how long it will take them to finalize terms, but we expect it to be quite soon knowing both of their personalities.” She paused and shrugged. “Also, it’s written so that Daphne is a Consort and not a Wife.”

Fleur let out a breath. “We really must teach ‘arry a better way to summarize events.”
Tonks nodded emphatically. “Definitely. Shiva and Lily okayed this?”

“Well, yeah. This like just happened less than five minutes ago, love,” Harry said with a sigh.

Fleur shook her head and ruffled Harry’s hair. “Make certain you do ‘arry. While it may be easily voided, it is still somezing zey should know immediately.”

“Ugh, I was going to go and tell them, but then you two arrived,” Harry mumbled.

Hermione held up a hand. “Plus it was mostly my idea.”

“Make certain you do ‘arry. While it may be easily voided, it is still somezing zey should know immediately.”

Fleur shook her head and ruffled Harry’s hair. “Make certain you do ‘arry. While it may be easily voided, it is still somezing zey should know immediately.”

“I was going to go and tell them, but then you two arrived,” Harry mumbled.

Tonks paused and, shifting her hair to pink, saluted the Slytherin, “welcome to the family.”

About an hour later Harry was standing outside Shiva’s quarters gathering up the courage to knock. He ignored the twinges of pain and worry seeping out from his scar and raised his hand to rap on the door. Going to Shiva first was smart. She’d known him a bit longer than Lily and probably wouldn’t get as annoyed as his birth mother over him signing the betrothal contract without telling them first. Though on the other hand Shiva had been there for the first contract so maybe she’d end up being more annoyed…

Harry suppressed his groan and walked over to the couch. Well at least he’d get to kill two birds with a single stone this time. “Err, you knew that I was going to talk?”

“I was wondering how long it’d take you to come talk to me,” Shiva smirked holding the door open and waving him in.

Harry grinned and walked over to the couch. Well at least he’d get to kill two birds with a single stone this time. “Err, you knew that I was going to talk?”

Lily smiled and patted his knee. “One of your best friends was just attacked, Harry. Of course we figured you’d want to talk. How is she?”

“Right. Daphne.” He hadn’t had a chance to see either of his mothers about Daphne’s assault yet. He’d been too busy in the past two days to get down to them. “Um, she’s okay. Not good, but okay. I think she’s focusing more on her anger and such to avoid thinking about it, but Daphne does that a lot so I think she’ll be alright. The assembly earlier helped a lot. You could really see her relax afterwards. Tracey is going to stay with her in the Room of Requirement tonight though since she didn’t want to head back to the Slytherin rooms for another day or two just in case Draco arranged anything with some of the people left behind.”

Lily grimaced. “I hate that things have gotten this bad. What about you, how are you, Harry?”

“Okay.” Both women raised their eyebrows at him and simply waited. Harry groaned and flopped back against the cushions. “Fine, I’m not okay. The stupid Horcrux is acting up and it’s keeping me on edge. Something made it a lot worse when I ran to help Daphne and it hasn’t settled down. The corruption is spreading. Not a lot, but the walls of my cupboard are starting to rot which can’t be good.” Harry’s eyes cracked open enough to see Lily’s flash of fury at the mention of his old bedroom but she didn’t mention it just yet.

Shiva moved over and ruffled his hair before sitting down. “And yet you have a plan otherwise you’d be completely freaking out instead of just frustrated.” Lily turned to her friend in surprise as Harry chuckled.

“You know me too me, Shiva,” Harry murmured. “Hermione gave me an idea on what might be
missing from the *Soul Cage*. If the changes don’t fix it then I really have no idea what else would. Tonks and Fleur stopped by and let us know they were going after another Horcrux in a day or two. I’ll wait to see if they get lucky so we can test the rune stone. If it doesn’t work then I think I’ll just ask for Su Li’s potion and roll the dice.”

Lily frowned. She crossed her arms over her chest and studied him carefully. “If you truly think it’s better than living with the soul shard I understand, Harry. Get the recipe from her and I’ll see if I can change a few things to make it safer. I was always good with potions.”

“Sure, mum.” Harry rubbed his scar and sighed. “That’s not why I’m here though. Daphne’s father decided that her assault was too close of a call. He’s trying to get her to marry Blaise by the end of the month.”

“Some father he is,” Shiva muttered scowling. “Let me guess where this is going, kid: you’re giving her an out?”

Harry ran a hand through his hair giving her an awkward grin. “Actually, it was Hermione’s idea but…yeah.” He held out the contract to both women. “It’s a betrothal contract for Daphne to become Consort to House Black. Mione wrote it herself and ran it by Snapfist. It’s similar to Ginny’s, but can be broken whenever either of us want. Her father doesn’t need to sign it because of some weird base contract that Hermione used. Went way over my head. Long story short, any teacher here can sign it and it will be a legal document.”

Lily silently read the contract while Shiva turned to Harry with a deep frown. “I’m not sure I like this, kid…we had a lot of trouble with the last contract you were in…”

“I know, mum. I just…this is something I’m choosing. Not something that was forced onto me. Marcus has Daphne scared enough that she tried to break up with me and Tracey both. Blaise isn’t too happy about it either. Signing this thing only helps us all. And…” he shrugged and gave a sheepish grin, “I really do like her.”

Shiva leaned back and took the offered contract from Lily. The redhead regarded Harry and asked carefully, “Harry, if Hermione missed something – not that it looks like she did but humor me – if she missed something…would you be okay with Daphne being your Consort?” Harry nodded. “This is your decision. If you want this, then I’ll sign it,” Lily said closing her eyes. “I agree that I’m not exactly ecstatic over the idea, but I can see why it appears to be the best choice.”

Shiva laid the contract and the table and crossed her arms leaning back in thought. “Daphne was okay with this?” She asked slowly. Harry nodded again. “Obviously Hermione doesn’t mind. Fleur and Tonks?”

“They were annoyed I didn’t ask them first,” Harry said blushing red. “I have no problems admitting I should have and no excuses for why I didn’t beyond being worried about getting it finished before Marcus Greengrass. But yeah, they’re accepting of it.”

“What about Tracey?” Shiva asked.

Harry nodded. “She was there as we discussed it. She didn’t have a problem.”

Shiva shook her head and gave a small huff of laughter. “I swear you kids get into the craziest things at the drop of a hat. Alright, where do I sign this thing?”

Harry smiled and leaned over to tap the appropriate blocks for his mothers to write in.
Tonks led the way into Sirius’ quarters forgoing her usual flare and simply opening the door and beckoning Fleur inside. Sirius sat behind his desk grading papers; he waved hello and gestured the girls to two chairs in front of him. “One sec, just gotta finish this last paper…and done!” He leaned back groaning loudly while stretching his arms wide. “Being a teacher is harder than I had expected!”

Fleur laughed and rolled her eyes. “You have been a teacher for all of two days. I would even say you are being rather strict giving zem homework already!”

“Have to keep them on their toes,” he commented with a smile. “So to what do I owe the pleasure of your company ladies? Checking on your hareem-mate or business?”

“Both,” Tonks said rolling her eyes at him. “It's not really a hareem you know. Besides, if it's anyone's hareem it's basically Hermione’s. That girl somehow managed to rope me into dating a teenager, got Harry to accept dating a French Veela and apparently managed to convince three people that getting the Slytherin Ice Queen betrothed to the Gryffindor Golden Boy was not only a good idea but a great idea. Thank Merlin she's not related to the Blacks because then she’d be unstoppable!”

Sirius gaped at her. “Wait, wait, wait! When did Harry get betrothed? How did I miss this happening?”

Fleur chuckled. “It was about two hours ago. I'm sure word will spread quickly.”

Sirius wiped away an imaginary tear. “I'm so proud. So should I be looking for rings on your fingers anytime soon as well now?”

“Hold your hippogriffs there, Cousin,” Tonks said her hair flipping through several colors before settling on a bright red. “It's mostly to screw Marcus Greengrass over and to help Daphne out. We have to add the git to our growing list of people to go after later.”

“Once Daphne has control of the Greengrass companies we can leave him penniless mon amour,” Fleur said patting Tonks’ knee in agreement.

“Alright as fun as gossip is, you mentioned business? Find out anything worth pursuing?” Sirius asked glancing between the two girls.

Tonks nodded. “We think so, yeah. We narrowed down several of the caves near Riddle’s orphanage. It should only take us a few hours to inspect them all. We were hoping that you’d be willing to beg off classes tomorrow to help us scout and raid. Remus is good for it and I checked with Shack already too.”

Sirius frowned. “I’d hate to get a sub for my third day of classes. Are we absolutely sure that there’s a Horcrux there or is this something that can wait until the weekend?”

“Zere are...extenuating circumstances,” Fleur said grimacing. “We want to get one of the saloperies back to Harry as soon as possible. He needs to test the Soul Cage soon.”

Sirius scowled. “I can’t wait until we kill this bastard. I’ll call Amy and make sure the sub is here. Meet you at the Manor first thing?”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Padfoot. Have fun with the grading tonight and make sure you get some sleep old man,” Tonks say congenially as she and Fleur got up to hug him and head off back the way they came.
Harry tossed and turned in his bed. Ostensibly he was asleep yet sleep rarely let someone remain as aware as the Boy-Who-Lived was at the moment. Harry wasn’t aware of his dorm surroundings however…no, Harry was currently watching a slaughter in the making.

Thousands of miles away, Tom Marvolo Riddle – aka Lord Voldemort – was sitting on a rooftop and observing his Death Eaters attacking a market. They had arrived a few moments ago and were currently busy torturing and killing people everywhere Voldemort turned his eyes. He had needed an outlet to show the new recruits what they were signing up for and this had been perfect. A gathering of Muggle lovers, Blood Traitors and half-bloods at a flea market.

The man could have laughed at how easy this was. The foolish puppets danced to his music. He was a conductor on the stage of life and death. He was maestro of the country. He was Mozart of the new age. He was –

The music changed abruptly. Two spells from the victims shot towards his Death Eaters. One struck the young man in the face and his mask exploded, the body falling limply to the ground. The second shot went wide soaring harmlessly through the throng of revelers. It’s follow-up spell unfortunately was not so erratically aimed. It struck true and the unlucky Death Eater flew through the air striking a brick wall and not getting back up.

More spells were shot at the Death Eaters now as many of the cattle stopped hiding and started fighting back. The recruits desperately tried to shield themselves and started sending more and more destructive spells back into the fray. What had just moments earlier been drunken fun and highborn privilege descended into chaos and destruction.

Voldemort scowled. Some time ago one of his newest followers had returned from a raid claiming that the sheep had fought back. He’d made a ridiculous statement that the entire force had been killed by the masses. Voldemort had dismissed the fool as a lying coward who ran when the Aurors turned up earlier than expected. The Dark Lord had been so disgusted by the pathetic fool that he hadn’t even bothered to read the man’s mind before killing him. Now the proof of that report was laid bare.

The cattle were growing fangs.

A series of pops sounded and red robes suddenly flooded towards the embattled street. Voldemort roared in frustration, rage and hatred. He raised his wand for a parting gift –

And Harry rolled out of the bed falling to the ground panting, his clothes soaked in sweat and his scar burning. Harry’s landing roused a loud snore from Ron but otherwise the dorm stayed resolutely quiet. Shaking, Harry curled into a ball for several minutes, waiting for the pain and terror to pass. When the shuddering stopped, Harry dived into his mindscape jumping straight to the Horcrux. The stone and metal surrounding the thing was bulging and corroding. Harry cursed and went to work hammering everything back into place, adding a few young dragons, xenomorphs and T-1000s to watch over it and act as an alarm system to hopefully give him some warning the next time he entered Voldemort’s mind.

Next time…Harry slammed a fist into the wall of his mindscape. This wasn’t working. His walls weren’t going to hold forever. Maybe he could use it though…maybe he could root around inside the monster and find where the Horcruxes were and…

“NO!” With a roar Harry turned and launched an energy bolt into the Horcrux sending it mewling back down to whatever hole it hid in. The crazed, suicidal suggestions died down and Harry felt his mind clearing somewhat. Intentionally opening that connection would let the door swing both ways. Voldemort did not need direct access to his mind.
Harry surfaced from his mindscape still breathing hard. He grabbed his invisibility cloak from his
trunk and stood up. For a moment he contemplated comming Hermione, but discarded that. She’d
had almost as long a day as he had and it would be selfish to wake her up just so he could lay down
on the couch with her for a few minutes. Tonks and Fleur were too far away to bother. He
considered going down to the Room of Requirement and asking to sleep next to Daphne and
Tracey for several moments before again decided it wouldn’t be fair to the girls. Daphne had her
own issues at the moment and didn’t need him to add to them.

So instead going towards any of his partners, Harry found himself walking down the corridors
towards Shiva’s room again. This time it wasn’t a matter of which mother to search for. It was
practicality. He needed distraction. He needed to work. Shiva was a better helper with his work
than Lily.

Standing outside the door, Harry paused. He knew the password so he could just walk in, but it
was the middle of the night…Sighing, Harry knocked softly. Better to be safe than sorry. Walking
in on Shiva in her nightclothes would be exceedingly embarrassing and he didn’t need that right
now.

The door opened and Harry pushed the hood of his Cloak back enough for Shiva to see him.
Blinking in surprise the woman quickly pulled him inside. “Jeez, kid,” she muttered looking him
over. “You look like death warmed over. And you’re using the Cloak instead of a
Ninja…fuck. Give me a sec. Comm on, contact Lily. Lils, can you come to my room for a few minutes? Yeah.
Thanks. Disconnect.”

“Didn’t want to waste time looking for where I put the rune belts,” Harry murmured sitting down
on the couch and rubbing his forehead. “Hermione’s asleep and I didn’t want to bother Daphne.
Mind if I stay here for an hour or two? I just need to work on something for a bit.”

“Sure, kid. Here, I have the designs we’ve been looking at for the Tech Assist. Let’s try to finish
those up, yeah?” Shiva said pulling some cluster schematics out of a drawer and walked over to set
them in front of him. A deep frown was still etched across her features.

The door to the chamber opened and Lily rushed in. She pulled up short momentarily, gaping at
Harry who was still half invisible. She recovered fast and quickly shifted targets to take the Cloak
off his shoulders and drape it over a chair. “What happened?”

“Voldemort got annoyed at people actually fighting back,” Harry said quietly. He shifted the
papers in front of him and started to mark a few of the clusters and erase some of the individual
runes that seemed to be problematic. “They did a good job too. Took down several Death Eater
recruits and stalled long enough for the Aurors to arrive. He ran away about that point, but not
before sending off one spell of his own towards the crowd. Don’t know what; managed to kick
myself out of his head before seeing it.”

Shiva sent a pointed look at Lily and glanced down at the parchment covering the small table.
“We’re about to try to fix one of Harry’s inventions if you’re interested in helping. It’s supposed
to locally suppress magic to allow for Muggle electronics to function in high-magic areas.” She
pointed to a few spots that Harry was working on. “These sections of the cluster are giving us
some problems. We’ve already determined why it can’t be adapted to work on living tissue and
unfortunately I doubt we’ll be able to fix that in this lifetime. The idea still works for inanimate
items, but we’re having some issues with affixing it to tech without shorting the things out before it
activates.”

Lily took the hint and pulled up a chair. “Well, you both know while I enjoy this stuff, it’s not my
strong suit. I can’t promise I’ll be much help, but I’d love to assist.”
Harry just nodded and crossed out another rune adding a different one to the changed weave in its place.

The next day at breakfast, the entire group sat with Daphne at the Slytherin table. It was a calculated move. It showed both that she wasn’t afraid of the remaining House members and also that if one of them tried anything against her they tried it against nearly half of the Fifth Year students. Daphne kept a careful control of her expression. It wouldn’t due to grin at these fools like a madwoman. Harry’s group of friends had grown considerably and he hadn’t even truly realized his influence. How Draco thought that he would have been able to simply walk away after assaulting her was something that only made sense to the ferret.

One thing dampening her good mood were the bags under Harry’s eyes and the slight paleness to his expression this morning. She’d caught Hermione’s eye and the brunette shook her head in confusion as well. While the boy was distracted Daphne leaned over to Neville. “Did Harry get any sleep last night?” she whispered.

Neville let out a low frustrated sound. “He went to bed at the same time as us, but he was gone when I woke up,” Neville responded softly. “His bedding was mostly on the floor and his trunk was hanging open. I closed it up and tidied things up a bit before the others noticed.”

“Thanks, Nev,” Daphne said sighing. She glanced at Harry again. His smile was slightly strained, but his laughter at Luna’s newest comments was genuine. “I’ll let you know if we need to keep watch for anything. I’d hazard it was simply a horrible nightmare that hasn’t quite let him go yet.”

Neville raised his eyebrows and smiled at her. “We should all take lessons from you on how to have two conversations with one dialogue.”

Take lessons from you…Daphne cocked her head to the side and a huge grin split her face stretching from ear to ear. “Actually…that’s not such a bad idea, Nev.” She cleared her throat and raised her voice enough to be heard by nearly everyone surrounding her. “Everyone, how would you all feel about taking some extra Defense lessons?”
Chapter 40: Muggles, Horcruxes and Elephants – Oh My!

“Good morning everyone!” Lily said with a bright smile on her face. She looked over her students trying to figure out with a glance just who was taking the course solely to see her and who was genuinely interested. Her lips twitched briefly into a frown as the number seemed rather extremely biased towards the former. It wasn’t much of a surprise, but it was still exceptionally frustrating. Well, at least it got them in the door. Now they were hers.

“Professor, is it true – ” The fifth year Ravenclaw boy cut off as Lily held up a hand. Wide smile firmly planted on her face and a sickeningly sweet tone, Lily answered the kid. “Before you finish that statement I want to make sure that it’s relevant to the topic of this class. Questions such as ‘Is it true that the Muggles can destroy cities with a single push of a button?’ or ‘Is it true that Muggles can turn on lights without candles, gas, oil, runes or magic?’ or ‘Is it true that Muggles can communicate over long distances instantly?’ are completely appropriate!” Her smile widened taking on a distinctly dangerous appearance despite her continued feigned cheer. “On the other hand questions such as ‘Is it true that you died?’ or ‘Is it true that your son is the Chosen One?’ will see the questioner in detention for a month. With Filch.”

The Ravenclaw gulped and slowly lowered his hand. Lily swallowed the chuckles that threatened to boil over and sent a pointed look at Harry who wasn’t even trying to hide his quiet laughter. Lily noted with amusement that Hermione was alternatively rolling her eyes at Harry and glaring daggers at the Ravenclaw.

Su Li raised her hand and Lily nodded to her. “Professor Potter, could you elaborate on what you mean by Muggles destroying cities with a button? I’ve heard about that from family in China, but details are hard to find in this country and many magicals seem to regard it as exaggerated rumors.”

Lily blinked a few times before slapping her hand to her face and groaning. “Exaggerated rumors? Seriously? Oh dear, please tell me you’ve heard of World War II at least…All Muggleborns and Muggle-raised put your hands down.” Lily groaned louder as a grand total of two Purebloods had their hands still in the air. The look of complete confusion on the Purebloods’ faces were only matched by the incredulity of the Muggleborn/raised. “I knew this course had needed updates but…Merlin this is going to be harder than I had thought.”

“Please,” Zacharias Smith scoffed. “We all know that Muggles can’t do that. Wizards and giants can destroy a small town in about an hour, but even we can’t wipe out a city that fast!”

“Professor Potter, perhaps we should jump ahead in the syllabus to the atomic bomb lecture?” Hermione said wincing. “It might encourage the others to pay more attention to the rest of the course.”

“Unfortunately I think you’re right, Ms. Granger. Especially considering current events.” Lily clapped her hands together and turned around to rummage behind her desk. Letting out a short exclamation of Viktory she moved to the center of the classroom and plopped an old projector onto Harry’s desk. “This, everyone, is called a ‘movie projector’. Think of it like an advanced version of wizarding photos, but with sound added. The specifics of how it works will be covered later on.”

Harry snorted in amusement and lifted an eyebrow at her. “Guess it’s a good thing we got the Tech
Assist working last night, huh?”

Lily just smiled at him and patted him on the head. “Good boy helping your mother out before she even knew she needed it!” Lily put a roll of film onto the reels and turned down the lights in the room. “Alright everyone, pay attention. While many sections of the wizarding world have somewhat stagnated, the Muggles have chugged right along outright surpassing us in a surprising amount of areas. Watch. Watch and learn why following – or allowing – Tom Marvolo Riddle to provoke these people into attacking us is a supremely bad idea.”

The movie was a short one. She’d picked a half hour documentary on nuclear weapons that spliced together footage from the initial tests to the reasons for their deployment to the actual usage at Japan. She felt…odd showing that film to the students. On one level, that it was even necessary was supremely disturbing. On another, she felt some small amount of satisfaction showing sheltered magicals just what the supposed ‘inferior’ Muggles could do.

As the movie reel finished playing, Lily noted with a pleased warmth that Smith was as pale as a sheet. “So, Mr. Smith, still think that the Muggles can’t destroy a city with the push of a button?”

The boy just swallowed and shook his head mutely. “Good. Now, that was a highly destructive use of Muggle technology and is quite shocking indeed. They have a great deal of other inventions as well that are just as good as magic and not nearly as dangerous or devastating as bombs. Even with such explosive technology as bombs, these items can be turned to good or scientific pursuits. Rockets are the only way to get to the Moon after all!”

Millicent leaned forward grinning widely. “Oh, oh, Professor Potter! I read about that over the summer! The Muggles have actually walked on the Moon?! Why did they even want to do that?”

“Wait, what!” someone shouted from the back of the room. “The Moon?!”

Lily smiled and jumped up to sit on her desk with legs crossed as some of the Muggleborns started to proudly affirm Millicent’s declaration.

This. This was what Muggle Studies was supposed to be like.

Fleur shivered wrapping her arms around herself even tighter. It was times like this that she wished her fireballs could be conjured just hovering in the air beside her and providing a bit of warmth. The wind was strong enough, but the addition of the icy cold ocean spray borne by said wind made things so much colder. Fleur couldn’t even appreciate the way that the cold caused Tonks’ nipples to stand at attention she was so miserable. Not she had much chance to glance back and notice that anyway, Fleur noted with a scowl. This stupid rock path was both slippery and treacherous so she couldn’t afford to take her eyes off it for long at all. Sirius had already nearly fallen into the sea. He’d only managed to avoid that fate by Kingsley’s quick reactions.

Tonks’ leather jacket effectively covering her wonderful assets also might have had a slight hand in preventing Fleur’s gaze from wandering.

“Oh thank Merlin! Finally!” Remus exclaimed from just around the next bend. “We made it folks! Fingers crossed now.”

Fleur turned the corner and let out a breath of relief. The cave system ahead of her was somewhat small. It looked like the entrance would be at least partially underwater with high tide though they could wade through it with little difficulty at the moment. Unfortunately, it seemed to reach a dead end rather quickly ruining any accomplishment Fleur had been feeling. “Yet another location zat is a ruse. Wonderful.”
Tonks pushed forward frowning at the wall. “Hang on there, babe. Shack, you feel that?”

“I do…” Kingsley leaned forward and peered at the same rock wall that Tonks was examining. “There is some sort of ward on this section. Could it be a hidden door?”

“If it is, be careful,” Remus cautioned. “And Tonks keep your ears open for any more parsel magic like the Gaunt Shack.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes and started to reach out to the wall running a single finger over it. “This is Black family magic. It needs a sacrifice to open. Bloody hell, we got the right cave people.”

“Sacrifice?” Fleur asked scowling at the wall/door. “Perhaps we should go find a Deaz Eater and zrow zem at it.”

Sirius snorted. “As nice as that suggestion is, it’s nothing that dramatic. A sacrifice ward of that magnitude would be sending out waves of magic felt for at least a mile. Good old Tom didn’t seem to want to advertise this place that well. This just needs a bit of blood.” He ran his hand over a sharper section of the rock and pushed in hard enough to leave a small trail of red on the stone. Fleur felt the ward touch the blood and the wall seemed to fold inward.

Frowning Tonks looked between the now open door and Sirius. “That was it? A simple first level healing spell would fix a cut like that. What was the point? To be an arse?”

Remus lifted his eyebrows and shrugged. “This is Voldemort we’re talking about. Brilliant and powerful he may be, but nobody is going to hand him a sanity award. He might well have done it just to spite anyone coming along.”

“Whatever the reason, we should press forward before any further uninvited visitors show up,” Kingsley commented moving into the new chamber with wand out. Fleur followed along behind him and gaped slightly at the view. The inner chamber was far more like what she had been expecting. It was large and circular with a small bank leading down to a lake of black water. The water was glassy enough to be visibly unnatural. “Don’t touch the water in here.” Fleur nodded her agreement with the Auror’s statement.

“Should we go back and get brooms?” Tonks asked looking at the water with suspicion. “I don’t think I’m a good enough flyer to get down the cliff on them.”

Sirius shook his head. “There’s going to be something here to get us across. Voldemort would have protected the thing, but he’s paranoid too so he’d want to be able to check on it relatively easily I’d imagine.”

“Perhaps we should use the chain?” Remus said pointing to a rock outcropping with a chain wrapped around it that disappeared into the water.

“Worth a shot,” Sirius said. He stepped up and started hauling the chain in. After a few moments a small barely stable boat appeared floating closer to the shore on the end of the chain. As it bumped into the shore, Fleur stepped up and started running several diagnostic charms.

“Merde, zis boat is cursed,” she said. “Only one of us may go at a time. Unless we wish to go get ‘arry or someone else underage.”

Tonks glared at Fleur. “Not funny. I don’t like this. There’s an anti-apparation ward in this place as well. I doubt Portkeys would work either. That island is a perfect for an ambush.”

Kingsley sighed. “Unfortunately there’s not much we can do about it. Unless Fleur is willing to
fly us to the island we have to go one at a time. However, I agree – this is hitting nearly every alarm bell I have.”

Fleur eyed the boat before turning to the lake and gauging the distance to the island. After a long moment she nodded and turned back to the others. “I can take Tonks to ze island. I may be able to carry Remus zat far as well wiz a featherlight charm applied, but I would razer not take ze chance of dropping you in zat lake.”

“Yes, let’s not drop the werewolf in the middle of the ominous lake please,” Remus said raising his eyebrows. “I think I’d rather be safe than sorry. Tonks, Fleur, if you two fly, we three could stay and stand guard on this side. Then we wouldn’t have to worry quite as much about being stuck.”

“I like it,” Sirius nodded. “Any objections? Okay. Fleur, whenever you’re ready. Girls if you need help call immediately and one of us will hop in the boat.”

“Will do,” Tonks said saluting. She turned and, holding her arms out wide, grinned at Fleur. “Try not to drop me, babe.”

“And lose my little pink minx? I zink not.” Fleur shifted enough that her wings grew out and took off. She’d really have to find the tailor who had designed these Veela specific clothes and thank them properly one day. Avoiding ripping her shirts or jackets was definitely an improvement. She gently picked up Tonks and started flying towards the island.

Barely a few seconds into the flight Tonks’ hands tightened around Fleur’s forearms. “Hey, uh, Fleur? Any chance you could fly a bit faster?” she asked her voice very strained and higher than usual.

“My wings are designed for my weight not a passenger. I am going as fast as I can, Nym.” Fleur glanced down in concern and noticed Tonks’ hair had shifted to her natural mousy brown. “Nym, I’m not going to drop you.”

“Good. Because that lake is filled with Inferi, love. Please hurry.”

Fleur nearly skipped a wingbeat at that. “What?”

“Saw a body float just below the surface. Please hurry. I don’t like zombies – magical or mundane,” Tonks said. Her voice was so incredibly calm that Fleur knew her partner was barely holding it together. Tonks was never that calm.

Fleur increased her speed as much as she was able and after a few more seconds she squeezed Tonks’ arms. “We’re there, mon amour.” Gently Fleur touched down and hugged Tonks who shuddered for a few moments before she pulled back.

“Sorry, hon. Really don’t like zombies. And there are at least hundreds if not thousands down beneath the surface.” Tonks gave one final shake before turning and walking towards the cauldron sitting in the center of the small island. “Let’s just get this done and head back.”

Fleur frowned, but nodded and followed behind her partner. She cautiously peered over the edge of the cauldron. Inside was a partially transparent, greenish potion with a glint of gold at the bottom. “We might have –”

“Shhh!” Tonks exclaimed clamping a hand over Fleur’s mouth. “Don’t finish that sentence! Don’t even think that sentence! You’ll curse us!” Fleur chuckled into the hand over her mouth and calmly nodded. Tonks sighed and removed her hand. “Okay, let’s get this potion out yeah?”
Five minutes later, Fleur and Tonks were both quite annoyed. The recalcitrant potion was being very uncooperative and simply refused to vanish. Spells didn’t work, spooning it out didn’t work, soaking it up didn’t work…they’d even tried to tip the cauldron and the potion and Horcrux stayed firmly inside.

“Zis is stupid. What type of potion can be spelled to require someone drink it?” Fleur huffed glaring at the solution.

Tonks threw up her hands. “Screw it. Let’s just conjure a donkey or something. Then we can feed Voldemort’s potion to an ass.”

Fleur shook her head in exasperation. “Zat pun works better in ze United States, mon amour. Let us hope zat Voldemort’s potion has a sense of humor zough.” Fleur raised her wand and quickly transfigured one of the nearby rocks into a small goat. It seemed real enough…whether the ephemeral nature of the thing would fool the potion though…

“No donkey?” Tonks asked raising her eyebrows.

Fleur winced. “Donkeys…zey don’t like me. A goat will have to do.”

“Babe, it’s a transfiguration, it does what you want for the most part…”

“But zis way we can make fun of ze Old Goat, no?” Fleur said conjuring a pair of glasses and plopping them onto the goat’s head along with a large purple wizard’s hat. “Doesn’t he look like Dumbledore now?”

Tonks snorted in amusement shaking her head at her partner’s misdirection though appreciating the irony inherent in using a Dumbledore Goat to try and retrieve a Horcrux. She reached down with the provided ladle and with Fleur’s assistance fed the first spoonful to the goat. Nearly immediately, the poor thing dropped to the ground completely paralyzed. Tonks cringed. “I know it’s not technically alive but this still sucks; despite the fact that the paralyzing thing is somewhat hilarious. Goats are weird. At least it’s not screaming.”

Fleur nodded and held the goat’s mouth open as Tonks poured a second mouthful into it. Tonks had gone back for another scoop when the goat stopped playing dead and decided to start screaming instead. Tonks winced and glared slightly at Fleur. “See, told you we’d be cursed if we finished fate-tempting thoughts. I never should have said that…Hold the bloody ass still.”

The goat kept trying to flee from the potion and binding charms didn’t seem to work on it. Finally after another ten minutes, the cauldron had been completely emptied. The transfigured creature was lying on the ground breathing hard and Tonks was holding up a shiny locket with a triumphant grin. “Got it!”

“Excellent. Let’s turn zis zing back and get out of here.” Fleur tried to reverse her transfiguration, but like the earlier attempts at immobilizing the creature, it appeared that the transfiguration faded just before touching it. “Or we can leave it and let ze magic run out. Stupid potion.”

Fleur extended her wings and turned back to Tonks. She froze seeing her partner’s white face. “Trouble,” Tonks murmured. “Fuck! Bella is back! Fleur, Sirius just commed, we need to get back over there now!”

“Hang on!” Fleur jumped, grabbing Tonks under her arms and lifting them into the air. “Disillusion us, Nym.” She flew as close to the ceiling as she felt comfortable doing and soared back over the lake as Tonks’ spell flowed over her. As soon as they had gained some height, the
light of spells could be seen illuminating the area near the door into the room. Fleur cursed and pushed her wings for more speed.

Tonks dropped to the ground on the bank a split second before Fleur set down next to her. “Why haven’t they dropped the ceiling on us?” Tonks questioned.

“Why does your Aunt do anyzing? She is insane and enjoys causing suffering.” Fleur scowled as she saw Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange peering around the pillar with the boat’s anchor chain. She uttered a silent prayer thanking god that they hadn’t landed there. Rookwood and Dolohov were standing with Bellatrix back near the entrance. Remus, Kingsley and Sirius were clustered behind a rock outcrop only a short ways away. “We have to – ” Fleur cut off and her eyes widened as the lake behind them visibly rippled. She squeezed Tonks’ hand and both of them whispered, “The goat…”

Panicked screaming tore through the continuing sounds of battle and everything stopped. Fleur caught a glimpse of the Lestrange brothers peering in confusion around the pillar. A moment later the entire lake seemed to jump into the air from a massive underwater wave and then crash back down. A wave of pale, scrawny bodies suddenly poured out from the water’s edge. The Inferi were completely silent as they started to swarm out seeking all intruders. Fleur stood, pulling Tonks to her feet as well and tried to run towards their friends. She made it half a step before being jerked to a stop.

Turning around and expecting the worst Fleur was surprised to see Tonks’ outline simply standing rooted to the spot. There were no Inferi clinging to her preventing her from moving, she was simply frozen. “Nymphadora! Move zat arse! Now!” A shimmer in the air near where Tonks’ head should be shifted and without any more hesitation both girls started running.

A gurgling scream resounded throughout the chamber. Fleur’s mouth twisted into a predatory smile as she watched the Inferi horde overwhelm Rabastan and Rodolphus. Both brothers disappeared under the bodies. One bleeding arm was flung free from the pile and into the mass. She couldn’t tell which brother had just died but it didn’t particularly matter as the other one was flung by the Inferi over their masses and into the lake, promptly vanishing under the surface of the rippling water. Bellatrix let out a scream of range and started firing spells into the Inferi horde. The remaining Death Eaters quickly followed suit.

Fleur and Tonks jumped behind the rock outcropping with the men and dropped their disillusionment. “Time to leave!” Tonks yelled.

“Any ideas would be appreciated,” Sirius scowled. “They have the exit and knowing Bella she’s going to switch to Fiendfyre any moment.”

Kingsley flung a whip of fire towards a group of Inferi heading their way. “Can your elves get through? Riddle is notorious for marginalizing nonhumans. Their method of travel works differently than ours; perhaps he missed that!”

“Better than my plan of charging forward, wands blazing!” Sirius muttered. “Kreacher!”

“Winky!” Tonks yelled. Both House Elves popped into the cavern right behind their masters. Tonks twisted to grin at her elf. “Winky, get us back to Potter Manor, now!”

“Kreacher, same location!” Sirius ordered.

Fleur watched as Winky nodded and grabbed Kingsley’s arm to pop him away. Kreacher on the other hand simply stared around the cavern with an expression of utter hatred and vitriol on his
“Kreacher, now!” The ancient elf shook his head, nodded and grabbed Remus disappearing with a pop while Winky blinked back in. She grabbed Tonks and vanished again.

Fleur conjured several fireballs in each hand and launched the passionfyre towards the closing Inferi. Beside her, Sirius vanished via a returned Kreacher. She was left alone as a scream of rage came from Bellatrix. The last thing Fleur saw of that horrible cave was the entrance caving in as Kreacher popped back in and whisked her away to safety at Harry’s home.

The receiving hall resolved itself around Fleur and she let out a relieved breath. “Well, zat was exciting. Zank you Kreacher.”

“Kreacher happy to help Harpy Seductress escape. Kreacher hate Evil Cave. Kreacher would destroy Evil Cave if he could. Kreacher would burn them all to ash to avenge Master.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “I appreciate the surprisingly enthusiastic loyalty, Kreacher, but I’m not dead yet. You can head back to the house.” Kreacher nodded and he vanished.

Winky stood off to the side of the room wringing her hands. Tonks moved over and gave the little elf a large hug. “Thanks for that, Winky. I hate zombies. You saved me!”

“Winky did good?” she asked softly.

“You did very good. Head on back to my Mum okay? Make sure she gets you anything you ask for…for the rest of the month!”

Winky gave a shy smile, nodded and vanished. Remus collapsed into a chair nearby and pulled off his damp boots. “Please tell me you two managed to retrieve the Horcrux prior to the ambush?”

“We got it right here!” Tonks said holding it up. “Looks like it should be Slytherin’s Locket. Funny, I kinda figured a Horcrux would…I don’t know, radiate evil or something.”

“’arry doesn’t,” Fleur stated shrugging.

Tonks shrugged. “Still seems…weird…Morgana’s tits…you’ve got to be shitting me!” she snarled. The others quickly stood and clustered around Tonks as she held the open locket in one hand and a note in the other.

Kingsley grimaced. “Another fake?”

“Worse! Someone beat us to it!” Tonks thrust the note at him. “‘I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it’ bloody freaking hell! How do we know if he managed to do it? How do we know if he found any others?”

“R.A.B.” Sirius frowned. “Dammit, he could have at least left a real name. Voldemort would know who this was instantly so stealth isn’t really important. Shite. Now we have to try and track him down too.”

Fleur sighed and sat down rubbing her head with her hands. “Perhaps ze locket could be a clue? Does anyone recognize it?”

Remus, Tonks and Kingsley shook their heads. Sirius shrugged. “It looks vaguely familiar, but I was dragged to a ton of high brow parties as a kid where everyone was all dolled up in their finest.
I could’ve seen the bloody thing on anyone’s neck back then. It’s not like I paid attention to that stuff beyond breasts and arses at that age.”

“Like that’s changed much now,” Tonks muttered. “I can’t believe this bullshite! One bloody break! I’m going to take a shower. We can try to figure out where to go from here later.”

Sirius sighed and nodded. “Yeah, I need to head back to the school anyway. See you guys later.”

Remus exchanged glances with Kingsley who returned his look with a nod. “We’ll both stay and try to find any pictures that have that necklace while collating a list of any potential enemies of the Death Eaters with those initials.”

Fleur smiled at them and moved to follow Tonks out the room. “Zank you both. I will try to calm her down.”

She found Tonks peeling off the last of her clothing and jumping under the steady stream of water cascading down from the shower head. Discarding her own clothes, Fleur climbed in behind her and wrapped Tonks in a hug. “Talk to me?”

Tonks leaned back into the embrace and shifted her height so that she molded better into Fleur’s arms. “I’m sorry, it’s just…between the Inferi and Bella and another dead end…it’s just…what are we supposed to tell Harry now?” Tonks murmured. “He’s losing it with the Horcrux and he needs something to test his rune on…What if we have to watch while he takes Su’s death potion?” Her voice was quiet but filled with emotion. Fleur could hear her partner fighting back tears and the tension in her arms was evident.

“It will not come to zat,” Fleur said softly. “We will find ze real Horcrux. We will get it to our man and we will watch him beat ze odds yet again. It is what ‘arry does. We will all get through zis, mon amour. For now, you need to relax. We will tell ‘arry later tonight. Just relax.”

Fleur squeezed Tonks tighter and moved around to the front to pull the older woman into a kiss. After a moment Tonks reciprocated, deepening Fleur’s kiss. She pulled back shortly after.

“Thanks, Fleur. I know I don’t actually say it often, but I love you too.”

“I know. I am Veela and I am brilliant,” Fleur said mock preening. “What is zere not to love?”

Tonks laughed and Fleur joined in. The mission may not have been a resounding success, but it could have been far worse indeed.

Voldemort glared down at Bellatrix. If it had been anyone else he would have already seen them shaking on the floor under a Crucio. Or simply killed them for their failure. But this was Bella, his most trusted, his most competent…his most fanatical. She hadn’t had all the information and it had directly led to the deaths of the Lestrange brothers.

While the loss of Rabastan and Rodolphus was troublesome it was somewhat mitigated by the fact that neither had ever been subtle or particularly suited for recruitment. If Bellatrix hadn’t already been insane prior to being given to the brothers Voldemort would have been certain they’d have driven her to it. They had been sadists and sadists made excellent shock troops yet poor figureheads. The Death Eaters were losing personnel and he’d already had to take steps in order to ensure that the more…extreme members were not involved with inducting the new followers. Properly cultivating the needed mindset to torture and rape and murder took some time in most people after all. Perhaps it was even for the best that the brothers were dead. It certainly wasn’t like Bella was going to miss her ‘husband’ at all.
No, the far more frustrating item of note was that Bella had destroyed the cave entrance before ensuring that Potter’s forces were dead or that his Horcrux was still safe. He seethed and clenched the arm of the throne hard enough to crack it. The reassuring weight of the Gaunt Ring held his wand hand in check while Bella continued her report. The half-breed and the werewolf had been sighted and added to the list of hunters. Voldemort briefly considered sending Fenrir Greyback and his pack after Remus Lupin. The irony of sending a werewolf after a werewolf nearly saw him ordering it. He had even opened his mouth to shout for the barbarian before scowling and shutting it again. Greyback was busy prepping for an attack on Hogsmeade in several weeks and it would not do to tip anyone off that Lupin was more important than he should be.

The Veela though…perhaps he should arrange to acquire some of the creatures as playthings or slaves for his followers. It would be almost certain to boost their ranks – few men ever turned down a night with a Veela. If he kidnapped some of the females from the French Enclave then it would serve as a reminder to the half-breed to stay out of his business. The only issue was his forces would have to postpone several plans in Britain to ensure enough of a force for a successful raid. Voldemort scowled again. Too many things to do with too little personnel to do it.

His mind circled back around to his Horcruxes. There was no disputing that they knew any longer. Voldemort’s lips curled into a snarl and his wand sparked. Potter and his army knew how he had made himself immortal and they hunted his soul.

The Diadem was safe. None would ever find that Room in the castle and even if by chance some unfortunate did, it was hidden within the mass of detritus. A single tree in the forest was no tree at all.

The Cup was ensconced within Gringotts and should be secure as well. The goblins never assisted anyone – let alone humans. They would prevent any effort to obtain entry to Bella’s vault without the woman present.

Nagini and the Ring would not be leaving his side so if they were lost then he’d likely already be at his end. Well, the Ring at least…Nagini did have her own mind after all so eventually she would falter like all the rest. He doubted that any enemies would still be remaining by that point though so it didn’t truly concern him in the moment.

The Diary was already gone though whether or not the hunters knew what it truly was…that was another matter.

The Locket…Voldemort turned his baleful gaze onto the witch groveling before him. He noted that she’d long since finished her report though he had stopped paying attention quite some time before. The Locket should probably be counted as a loss. Whether or not the hunters had found it, the location was no longer hidden and the identity of the vessel would have been discovered. At least he wouldn’t have to deal with a horde of Inferi swarming the northern coast. Bella had been good enough to seal the exit prior to her departure. Shock and awe and a horde of magical corpses were all well and good, but it wouldn’t due to let the Muggles know he was going to destroy them prior to being ready to follow through. One on one, a Muggle was nothing to a wizard. An entire army facing his Death Eaters though was quite a different concern until he’d properly prepared the fools.

The piece of soul inside Potter was an…odd matter. At times he could almost feel the boy’s mind behind a curtain, but at others he felt a stabbing pain behind his own eyes from that same curtain. The connection was more troublesome than useful. There was no need to lure the boy into a trap. Potter had enough advisors in his army to ensure that he didn’t run in blindly and it would easy enough to simply tell Potter where he was needed and let the fool waltz right in. Potter was
predictably noble so a single important hostage would be more than enough should the necessity arise to maneuver the boy.

Perhaps he should try to make another Horcrux... Voldemort chaffed that his soul was in six pieces now instead of seven. He could take Ollivander for a sacrifice... or perhaps he should try for the metamorph’s mother? Bella would take great delight in seeing her sister sacrificed to him to serve his immortality. Though... the books had been vague on the limits that a soul could be split and he would hate to waste the effort on something pointless. Even going after Andromeda would be fruitless at this stage. As dearly as he wished to send a message he needed to conserve his forces until he regained his prior numbers.

Bella had reported that at least one of the hunters had died due to the Inferi horde after all so... perhaps that would be enough for the moment. In the meantime he’d do more research into seeing if he’d could make a new Horcrux.

Snape left Voldemort’s quarters heading towards his potions lab. He hated this life more and more each day. Lily no longer looked at him like he was scum beneath her boot, but she had exchanged hatred for complete indifference. He wasn’t certain which was worse.

His information had managed to prevent several slaughters when Bones had placed off-duty personnel in the crowds at the attack sites to assist the civilians and apprehend several recruits. Unfortunately, he’d also been forced to tell the Dark Lord about several upcoming raids allowing many Death Eaters to escape capture. The tightrope was draining and Voldemort’s mood while informing him of the newest batch of required potions was... ‘terrifying’ didn’t seem like a strong enough modifier.

Snape sneered. All he needed to do was survive this civil war. If he could do that perhaps in time he’d be able to make some sort of peace with Lily. Or Harry Potter. Or perhaps... perhaps even himself.

As Snape passed in front of Bellatrix’s quarters he could hear her muttering inside. “I failed Voldybear. I failed yet he didn’t punish me…I failed yet... No matter! I will simply ensure that they die by my own knife next time! Yes! Yes, then my Master will reward me like no other! No destruction is too high, no depravity too low, no torture too extreme! I will show him just why I am the first of his people. I will prove I am worthy!”

Voldybear? Snape’s stride was frozen in midair as he struggled to turn that thought into something that made any sort of sense. A shuffle from the open door kicked him back into gear. Snape walked away at a speed just under a run.

Some things one would be happier never hearing or remembering.

Lily sighed as she sat down on the couch next to Shiva and leaned her head on the other woman. “Heard back from Tonks. The hiding place was real, but someone beat them to it. We’re stuck with a fake.”

Shiva swore and punched the cushion beside her. “Well, that’s just bloody perfect. So much for a test run. I really don’t want him taking that Chinese home brew, Lils.”

“Me neither, but we’re running out of options and time.”

“Agreed.” Shiva sighed and squeezed Lily’s leg. “Look, Harry will be fine no matter whether we
use the rune stone or the potion. He always is.”

Lily picked her head up and raised an eyebrow. “Just who are you trying to convince, Shiva? Me or yourself?”

“Both?” Shiva said grinning slightly and shrugging.

Lily rolled her eyes and lightly punched Shiva’s shoulder. “Well, we wouldn’t be his mothers if we didn’t worry. As urgent as the Horcrux matter is I’m starting to wonder just what we should do once it’s taken care of.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we seem to be hitting wall after wall on the Voldemort front. We find the Ring, he’s already reclaimed it. We find the Locket, someone else has stolen it. We have no idea where to look for the others or even what they truly are. We’re assuming at least one is the Cup, but Merlin knows what Ravenclaw’s artifact was,” Lily said holding up one finger for each point. “I died once for my family. I’m not particularly eager to see Harry or anyone else doing the same anytime soon and if we can’t find these Horcruxes that’s what’s going to end up happening.”

Shiva nodded. “Well we could always fall back on my suggestion from last year when the shite about the Tournament came up.” She noticed Lily’s questioning gaze and hurriedly continued. “I asked Harry if he’d be willing to run away to a new country and live without magic. We’d have let the girls and family friends know where we were going, but he decided to stay instead. He figured Riddle would still hunt him down and he wanted to have magic to fight. That option’s honestly a lot more appealing now…we’d all still have magic after all and prophecy only says he has to be there at the very end…”

Lily blinked in astonishment for a few seconds before laughing. “And I thought witches had no common sense! If things get anywhere near as bad as last time, we should definitely move! I could kiss you for that suggestion, Shiva.”

“Well nothing’s stopping you, Lils,” Shiva replied with a wry, teasing grin.

Lily’s laughter tapered off and she stared thoughtfully at her friend. “That is true…” She saw Shiva’s eyes widen; obviously the woman had meant the comment as a joke. She could shrug it off and return with an answering jibe or…or she could…but James…James was dead though. And Shiva was very much alive. “Ah hell.” Lily quieted the part of her still lightly protesting and leaned in. She paused, her lips just a hair’s breadth above Shiva’s. Before she could finish moving down, Shiva raised her head and closed the remaining distance.

Their lips locked and a second later their tongues dueled. Lily heard Shiva let off a low moan of contentment just before both pulled back, slightly breathless. “Well,” Lily murmured, “that just happened.”

Shiva chuckled and shifted so that she could wrap an arm around Lily’s shoulder. “Yeah. Good kiss that.”

“Agreed,” Lily answered, a wide grin blossoming on her face.

“So, you like girls too? I kinda figured that you were strictly into guys. You know, husband and all,” Shiva commented hesitantly.

Lily shrugged. “I had a girlfriend before I had a boyfriend. Travers killed her and her family in the last war. We’d parted amicably long before that, but the point stands.”
“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, it was a long time ago. The point is, yes, I like women just as much as I like men,” Lily said with a small snort of amusement. “When I was kid I used to think I was ahead of my time. Then I got more used to the magical community where that sort of thing seems to be less of an issue. Well at least as long as you’re not concerned with passing on bloodlines.”

Shiva nodded. “Oh. So uh, you like me?”

Lily sat up and raised her eyebrow, staring incredulously at her friend. “Is this really a surprise? I’ve been leaning on you since I woke back up. We’re both raising our son together. I’ve told you the state my marriage was in before Halloween ‘81. We speak and hang out almost every night. You’re very beautiful and extremely intelligent. And I’ve taken to staring at your arse whenever you leave a room before me.”

“Well you put it like that!” Shiva shook her head laughing. “And for the record I’ve been staring at your arse for weeks. Didn’t really think it was appropriate to say anything though.”

“Well the elephant in the room has been spoken of now!”

“That it has,” Shiva said. “So uh, before I try to kiss you again…are you looking for a fling to help you get over James? Because I’m honestly not sure I’d be up for that.”

Lily rolled her eyes. “Wow, jumping the gun a bit there? No wonder Harry is so bad with talking to girls!” she teased lightly. “I don’t know what I’m looking for, Shiva. I just know that I like you and would like to spend time with you as more than just friends. I don’t want a rebound relationship, but I have no intention of making the same mistake I did last time and marrying someone due to a war.”

Shiva smiled and cocked her head to the side a bit. “Well…Harry has been trying to get me to date someone for a few years now…Can you imagine the look on his face when we tell him we’re sort of a couple now?”

Lily started laughing. “It’ll be priceless!”

“Yes. Yes it will,” Shiva commented sagely. She leaned over and cupped Lily’s chin in one hand whispering seductively, “Now, Professor Potter, I believe I need to check whether you remember your studies.”

Harry groaned sitting up and pushing away his papers. He’d finally managed to get it finished. The tracekey schematic no longer had grounding issues and could be used without incurring any magical backlash. He’d have to get the design over to Amelia so that she could run a few field tests to be sure but there wasn’t any reason that it should have issues.

A traitorous part of his mind whispered that the Soul Cage shouldn’t have any issues either yet that hadn’t stop the thing from nearly killing him.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the annoying doubt Harry gathered his work and stood up. Maybe just a quick check with Shiva and Lily to make sure. No reason to jump the gun after all. Besides, he could ask them for advice on what to do for Hermione’s birthday and maybe get some help with setting things up for Daphne’s Defense Association meeting over the weekend. And tell them about Daphne’s Defense Association meeting over the weekend.

Harry sighed to himself. There just weren’t enough hours in the day anymore. Sirius had gotten
back a little while ago too so he needed to swing by his godfather too. Who better for ideas on what to try covering in a Defense class than the Defense teacher? It would also nicely cover Harry’s bases of Attempted Murder By DADA Professor. If Sirius was a guest teacher in Daphne’s new club then there would be bound to be an accident or something at the end of the year almost getting him killed. Now he wouldn’t have to worry about his godfather turning evil and trying to kill him!

He stopped in front of Lily’s office first this time, but there wasn’t an answer to his knock. After waiting a minute or two and still not getting any answer Harry let himself in only to find his mother wasn’t in her rooms. Briefly he considered coming Hermione to check the Aide or Lily herself, but he shrugged and simply turned to continue on to Shiva’s room. They were generally together anyway whenever he went looking for one or the other. It made talking to his mothers easier, but it was reaching the point of hilarity at times.

“Shiva?” Harry called knocking on her door. Again there was no answer. Shaking his head and mumbling in annoyance Harry called out again, “If you’re in there I’m coming in! I need to talk to you and Lily for a few minutes!” With silence his only answer Harry gave the password and the door swung open for him. He shuffled the papers he was holding so that he could check a few things as he stepped inside and shut the door behind him. “Shiva? I fixed the grounding issue in the tracekey. I had to lower the ward tunneling ability and add in a shunting workaround just in case, but I think it’s better than bleeding from the eyes when jumping through a strong ward.”

He heard a grunt coming from the door to the bedroom area and shuffled that way switching to a second sheet. “I also added in a disintegrate matrix. It’ll destroy the rune stone if there’s too much backlash to bleed off unfortunately, but again, better than hemorrhaging.” He turned the doorknob and pushed it open. “Do you want to contact Amelia or – ” Harry cut off abruptly as a feminine squeal had his eyes wrenched up from the papers.

On the couch in front of him were Shiva and Lily. Both very sweaty, very naked and very entangled. Harry’s mouth dropped open and the papers he was holding slipped out his hands. He made a strangled sound that was certainly not a terrified scream. It was a manly utterance of surprise.

“Sorry! I’ll come back later!” He had the door wrenched shut before he had fully processed just who had been in Shiva’s arms. Halfway across the office that information caught up with his feet causing him to trip and fall on the ground desperately trying to get the imagine of his two mothers’ naked bodies out of his mind.

“Harry! Knock next time, kid!” Shiva shouted from behind the newly reclosed bedroom door. “I’m a little busy here!”

Harry groaned and covered his head with his hands. “I did knock! And I was talking too! Lock your bedroom!”

“Harry? Uh, maybe we should talk, honey…” Lily’s voice drifted through the door. Harry could practically hear the blush of embarrassment in her voice. It perfectly matched his own tomato red face.

“Maybe later! Have fun! Leaving now, bye!” Harry didn’t wait around for either of them to say anything further. He picked himself up and practically ran out of the room. He didn’t slow his pace until he hit the ground floor. “Bloody hell. ‘Now you have two mothers.’ Tonks I’m going to kill you. You probably arranged this,” he muttered. “Merlin that was embarrassing…” Harry shuddered again. He didn’t have any issues with Lily and Shiva getting together. It was…rather weird considering one was a mother by blood and one was a mother by adoption. Also weird when
one stopped to consider that one was 35 going on 22 and the other was 23 going on 24.

Whatever. Harry shook his head and groaned. No, Lily and Shiva could date. That was fine. He just had no need to see his parents having sex. That was all sorts of wrong. It would have been all sorts of wrong if they had actually be a good deal older than him like most parents and children. That they were both – by an amusing quirk of Fate – actually pretty close to him in age just made it even more embarrassing.

Resolving to try and wipe the scene from his mind with a bit of manual labor he changed course and headed towards the greenhouses. It was early afternoon so he’d probably have most of the area to himself. He could finish the practical part of the Herbology homework early.

That was a great idea in principal. Unfortunately for Harry it ended up being a bad idea in practice. He had just walked into the greenhouse and grabbed the gloves when he heard something falling towards the back of the enclosure. Frowning, Harry moved through the overhanging plants towards the noise. “Anyone else here?” A distant giggle was the only response. Harry sighed in annoyance. He wasn’t really in the mood to play hide and seek with people from the lower years. “Look, I’m about to start -”

Harry cut off as he pushed aside one large fern and found himself face to face with Neville. A barechested Neville. With Susan, similarly sans clothing and sprawled underneath him on top of the last table - thankfully clear of plant material. “You mind, Harry? We’ve claimed this greenhouse for an hour or so,” Hannah said raising an eyebrow at him from where she was standing with her arms wrapped around Neville from behind.

Harry just gaped and silently tried to reach for words as his face heated up. Before he could regain his composure, Susan twisted to look up at him. “Actually, probably two hours. Hermione is up in the Astronomy tower doing some work I think if you were looking your own entertainment.”

Harry locked eyes with Neville who was struggling not to laugh at the girls’ comments and largely failing. “Lock the door on your way out, mate. I could’ve sworn I did that. My bad.”

“Yeah. Bye.” Harry practically squeaked as he dropped the frond he was still holding and ran out of the greenhouse.

He was on the seventh floor by the time he consciously decided to try and work out his embarrassment in the Room of Requirement. He paused in front the tap dancing trolls trying to decide what would best take his mind off the last few minutes. Eventually Harry decided to try meditating sitting by the fire, curled up on his bed from the Manor. It had worked wonders when he’d done that over the summer hols with his partners.

He set the Room and walked in shaking his head trying to find the humor in this very normal teenage problem which should be an extremely refreshing change from the usual life threatening ones. That attempt was blasted out of his mind as he yet again walking into the middle of an intimate scene.

Fleur and Tonks were squirming against each other in the middle of the Room’s version of his bed with their hands between each other’s legs and both panting heavily. Harry’s mouth again dropped open as he stared. Both girls froze in surprise at the sound of the door clicking before their eyes found Harry and the tension in their shoulders dropped away. They turned to each other and laughed. “Well,” Tonks said completely amused, “we thought we’d be safer coming here to avoid the possibility of Remus or Shack accidentally walking in on us. Didn’t even think about you or Mione being able to open the door. Wotcher, Wonder Boy! Care to join us?”
Fleur grinned lecherously at him. “I know I said to meet later in ze evening ‘arry, but I am glad you decided to come here early.”

Harry groaned and wiped a hand over his face. “Why does this keep happening to me?”

Sirius scowled as he twisted the fake locket in his hands. “Why do you look so familiar? What am I missing?” He dropped the stupid thing on the table and slammed his head down on the desk. “Maybe I should call Kreacher and ask him. He’s been around long enough that he’s surely seen enough old jewelry to point me in the right direction. I know I’ve seen this before! I know I’m missing something big about this whole thing! Merlin’s bollocks! Why did Remus and Lily have to have all the brains in the group?”

“Siri? Are you talking to yourself again?” Amelia asked with an amused raised eyebrow as she let herself into his room. “You’re supposed to have left the crazy in Azkaban, dear.”

Sirius rolled his eyes and glared at her. “Haha, very funny, Amy. Thanks for stopping by, I can really use your deductive skills here.”

Amelia chuckled and pulled up a chair beside him running a hand gently through his hair. “And here I thought you called because you missed me.”

“Well of course I missed you, love,” Sirius said shooting her his trademark Black grin. “I just also happen to admire that beautiful brain of yours and am not above admitting that I’m a fool who misses trees in a forest somewhat consistently.”

“You go running off on a fool’s errand against all common sense twice and you never let yourself let it go huh?”

“Three times. At least. Pettigrew counts as two and three. In hindsight I should really count running around with a transformed werewolf as number one for the fool’s errand occurrences,” he said grimacing.

Amelia blinked in surprise and pulled back staring at him open mouthed. “Who are you and what have you done with Sirius Black?”

He groaned and slapped a hand over his heart. “I can be mature sometimes, Amy. Those kids’ continual brushes with death completely unrelated to any of their own actions are forcing me to reexamine some of my own life choices. It…really doesn’t paint the Marauders in as sterling a light as I’d prefer…”

“Oh please, beyond the animagus thing your actions were harmless. Pranking and exploring isn’t against the law, Siri.”

“We were bullies. I honestly think I finally get why Snape hates me so much. I can’t even blame him. I’d hate me too.”

Amelia frowned. “Sirius, be honest with me, what the hell is going on? You’re never this introspective.”

He waved a hand over the locket on the desk. “This. Ever since we got back from that damn cave hours ago I’ve been going over everything. I’m missing something, Amelia. It’s eating at me and eating at me. I don’t even know what it is that has me turning this over so much, but I know I’m missing something major!”
“I understand. I’ve felt the same way on investigations sometimes. It’s one of the single most frustrating things of being an Auror. Your instincts tell you something is wrong, but you can never find the justification for what set you off until it’s too late. Let’s take a look and see if I can help jog something loose.” She picked up the locket turning it over several times before flipping it open and inspecting the inside. “Was there anything odd about the cave itself or the location?”

“No. It was a cave. I went spelunking with James back in ’74 but that looked nothing like this cave.”

Amelia nodded and gently set the locket down turning her attention back to Sirius. “What about the enchantments?”

He shook his head. “Nothing odd except that one on the entrance in. Black family magic has a distinctive ‘flavor’ and I know that spell. Mum loved it. She used to put the damn thing on the cabinets when she wanted to make sure we didn’t go for the cookies.”

“Is it possible your mother helped Voldemort in the construction of the defenses then?”

“No way,” Sirius said shaking his head. “She supported his ideals 100 percent but she would never stoop to actively helping him. My brother might have told him about the spell, but it could just as easily have been Bella since I know she got a kick out of it too.”

Amelia nodded again and quirked her mouth into a contemplative expression. “Let’s move on then. How about the Inferi?”

Sirius sighed and shook his head again. “Nope. Never had issues with them before, never encountered them beyond Auror training.”

“And nothing leaps out at you about the potion protecting this?”

“Nothing. I was never good with potions though so that’s not surprising.”

“You’re somewhat used to battle as well so that’s out,” Amelia said softly. “Anything about when you were all leaving that seemed strange?”

Sirius frowned. “Well, Kreacher froze for a minute there when he first popped in and he was rather vehement afterward about helping us out of there. He really seemed to hate the Inferi. Is that a House Elf thing?”

“Not that I know of,” Amelia said slowly. Her eyes narrowed and she scribbled a note. “We’ll call him and ask as soon as we finish going over the rest. Let’s get a full list before pursuing the leads.”

Sirius nodded emphatically. “Sounds good.”

“The locket itself next. You say it looks familiar?”

“I know I’ve seen it. It was before Azkaban, that much I’m certain of, Amy. I thought originally it might have been at one of the parties that Mum and Dad dragged me to as a teenager, but now I’m not so sure. Do you recognize it?” he asked holding it out again.

She shook her head and sighed. “Unfortunately no. That is no design I am aware of personally. I have an antiques dealer friend that we could try asking in the morning. If it’s a relic or an heirloom he stands a good chance of recognizing it.”
“Okay, that’s better than nothing. Do you want to read the note inside it?”

“Yes, please.” She took out her monocle and scanned over the paper he handed her several times. Her face lost quite several shades of color as she carefully handed the sheet back and removed her monocle. “Siri, what did you say your brother’s middle name was?”

“He vanished in 1979 didn’t he?”

“Arcturus,” Sirius said shrugging in confusion. “Why? What does Regulus have to do with anything?”

Amelia opened her mouth and closed it remaining silent for a moment. She rubbed her temples. “He vanished in 1979 didn’t he?”

“Yeah. Got cold feet or something after he joined up with the Death Eaters. The reality of raping and murdering apparently didn’t fit with his fantasy. From what Bella said in Azkaban, Voldemort had him killed.” Sirius scowled. “None of my family ever wanted to get their hands dirty. If you’re going to go evil at least be bloody decisive about it so I can properly hate you!”

Amelia’s face whitened further until she resembled a sheet. “Merlin’s beard…Sirius, think about it: Black family magic on the door, Regulus disappearing somewhere around the time this was likely hidden, a horribly familiar locket, Kreacher having a bad reaction to the cave, R.A.B… Regulus Arcturus Black.”

Sirius’ mouth dropped open and he turned to stare at the piece of jewelry. He slowly reached out and picked it up. “Heirlooms you said…Mum had an old locket she kept locked up that was a few generations old. I remember it had a big jewel on the front…just like this…KREACHER!”

“Master calls for Kreacher?” the ancient elf rasped as he popped into the office just to the side of Sirius.

“Kreacher, I need you to tell me about what happened earlier today. When you came for us. Kreacher? Kreacher!” Sirius’ eyes narrowed as the elf remained quiet simply staring at him. He was about to yell at the old thing before he realized that Kreacher wasn’t staring at him. Kreacher was staring at the locket.

“Master Regulus’ locket…” Kreacher murmured reverently. Then he burst into tears and flung his arms around Sirius’ legs hugging them in a death grip. “Master has recovered Master Regulus’ locket! Master is to be praised! Master is no longer unfit! Master is honoring his family!”

Sirius could only stare slack jawed at the ancient elf. He turned to Amelia for help who could only shrug in confusion. Frowning he turned back to Kreacher and gently pried the little guy off of his legs. “Kreacher, can you tell me what happened earlier in the cave? Do you know about this locket? About Regulus? What happened to my brother?”

Kreacher burst into tears again. It took ten minutes before the two wizards could get him calm enough to begin explaining the sad history of Regulus Arcturus Black. Finally Kreacher explained how he’d been used to test the defenses around the Horcrux and how Voldemort had left him to die not realizing the elf could escape due to Regulus’ earlier orders. He spoke of how Regulus had soured to Voldemort after that casual dismissal of the loyal elf. He spoke of Regulus’ research and discovery of the Horcrux. He spoke of Regulus’ attempt to retrieve it ending in the man’s death. He spoke of Regulus’ final orders to destroy the actual Horcrux. Orders that remained incomplete to his eternal shame. He spoke of how he had almost been forced to discard the Horcrux before he could continue trying to complete his mission, but how Mistress Irreverent had convinced Sirius to allow Kreacher to continue holding the cursed item.
Kreacher finished his tale and again collapsed into tears praising ‘Mistress Irreverent and Master Unfavorable’. Sirius finally managed to regain use of his voice. “Kreacher,” he asked softly. “If you bring me that Horcrux my godson and I will destroy it for you. I swear this to you. We will help you finish my brother’s last order. You can keep this locket in return.”

Kreacher’s cries cut off and he stared up at the man. Blinking large eyes, Kreacher disappeared without another word. Amelia reached over and grabbed Sirius’ hand squeezing hard. “We found it.”

“We found it,” he replied with a grin splitting his face in half.
“Hey, Hermione! Hermione, wait up!” Sirius called down the corridor as he spotted the brunette turning a corner just ahead. He and Amelia ran up, coming to a stop behind her. “That was lucky. You seen Harry? We found – ow! Amy, that hurt!”

“Not out here, idiot,” Amelia said groaning and rubbing her forehead. “Hermione, if you would be so kind as to direct us to your boyfriend, we have something of great important to provide him.”

Hermione frowned for a moment trying to puzzle out just what the adults were trying to say. After a moment of thought, her eyebrows shot up, her eyes widened and her mouth opened into a silent ‘oh’. Her face barely taking long enough to spread into a wide grin, she opened her backpack and pulled out her Librarian’s Aide. “I promise to never disrespect a book. Locate subject: Harry Potter.” She didn’t acknowledge Sirius leaning over her shoulder and whistling appreciatively as the improved map zoomed in on the seventh floor, one room to the side flashing. “He’s in the Room of Requirement. Let’s go. I’ll comm Daphne, you get Shiva and Lily.”

Amelia chuckled; Hermione presumed it was at the way she had taken charge and started walking down the passageways without even waiting for them to follow. “I’ll contact Tonks and let her know as well,” the older woman said.

“Don’t bother, Harry was with her and Fleur already,” Hermione said waving the concern off. “Comm on, contact Daphne. Daph, we need you up at the Room immediately. Well, actually scratch that. You’re welcome to come up to the Room if you want to be there.”

“What? Hermione, slow down. What’s going on?” Daphne’s confused voice answered.

Hermione grimaced and took a long breathe. “My apologies. We’ve made some progress on the scavenger hunt and are heading to show off the results to our partner.”

A loud gasp came over the line coupled with a muttered curse. “I’m on my way. Are Tracey and Luna invited as well?”

“If they’re with you then yes, but otherwise no. I don’t want to hold this up any longer than absolutely necessary. If you see Neville, Susan or Hannah feel free to grab them as well.”

“Those three are…busy,” Daphne say causing Hermione to snort in amusement. “I’ll let them know though and see if they can get up there before you start breathing fire about making us wait. Tracey and Luna are with me. What configuration for the door?”

Hermione paused tapping her fingers on her side before sighing. “Probably the manor bedroom. He’s with Fleur and Tonks.”

Daphne laughed. “Whatever, tell him to invite me next time would you?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “They didn’t invite me either, Daph, but I’ll mention it. Disconnect.” She looked over her shoulder at two sets of eyes staring at her. Amelia in mild shock, Sirius quite obviously fighting to hold in laughter. She glared at them. “What? We’re teenagers, in a boarding school, with very little supervision and two of our partners are exceptionally flirty. We’re going to have sex. Get over it and let’s go kill a bloody soul shard before it tries to eat my boyfriend’s mind again.”
Sirius lost his battle and gave an exaggerated bow to her. “Lead the way, Mistress. I see why Harry likes you so much!”

“Did you get in contact with Shiva and Lily?” Hermione asked ignoring the majority of his statement as she resumed walking.

“They’re on their way.”

Hermione nodded in approval as she pulled up outside the tap dancing trolls. “Wait here a moment please. If they are ‘busy’ I doubt any of them would be exceedingly pleased to have either of you walk in on them.”

Amelia sighed and nodded. “Yes, that would be awkward. Just come out to get us when everyone is dressed please.”

Hermione walked past the tapestry three times concentrating on Harry’s bedroom and smiled in satisfaction when the door materialized. She knocked on the new door to give them a slight warning before walking in. Harry was on the bed curled up in Tonks arms while Fleur was sitting up on one arm with her other one lightly stroking the metamorph’s back. Hermione crossed her arms as the door closed behind her and eyed the three. “You know, you three aren’t the only ones who could do with some stress relief.”

Fleur smiled over. “Well zen lose ze clothes and climb in, Mione.”

“Sorry, Mione,” Harry said waving to her. “I walked in on Mum – both of them – then Nev and then these two. Decided there was no way in hell I was going to leave after that, you know?”

Hermione just rubbed her forehead in exasperation. “Yes, well, Daphne also requests an invite next time. Get dressed all of you. Sirius and Amelia have found a Horcrux.”

“WHAT!?!?” three voices rang out in concert nearly knocking Hermione back with the force of their shouts.

“When the bloody hell was this?!” Harry asked leaping out of the bed and grabbing his trousers. Fleur started cursing in French as she slipped on her bra and threw the sheets around looking for her top.

Tonks’ hair flipped through a rainbow of colors before settling on bubblegum pink as she threw her leather jacket on over her shirt. “Which one? I can’t believe they didn’t call us!”

“I don’t have details. I just know they found one. It seemed like they discovered it only a few minutes ago,” Hermione said shrugging.

Tonks shared a glance with Fleur before sighing and slipping on her boots. “Bloody bastards probably figured out R.A.B.”

“R.A.B?” Harry asked. “Nym, shirt’s on backwards.”

“Damn, knew it felt weird,” she muttered. “R.A.B. are the initials of the guy who stole the locket before us and switched it with a replacement.”

“Oh,” he paused and stared at her. “I guess we’ll get that whole story later on now…”

Fleur shrugged and cinched her belt closed around her skirt. “We were going to debrief you all after we finished up here.”
Hermione nodded appreciatively at the three before moving back to open the door into the Room. “Everyone’s decent, you can come in now.” She waved Sirius and Amelia inside and was about to close the door again when Shiva and Lily came dashing around the end of the corridor. Both were sweaty and their hair was tangled. Lily’s trouser legs had ridden up enough to show two different styles of socks. Hermione raised her eyebrows at their disheveled appearances and held the door open muttering, “About time.” Shiva cast her a questioning glance which Hermione ignored.

Before she could close the door, Luna skidded around the corner with a huge grin on her face and Coco riding her shoulder. She practically skipped down the hall as Daphne and Tracey followed at a slightly less frantic, but still hurried, pace. Luna gave Hermione a quick hug and kiss on each cheek before slipping into the Room. “She’s in a good mood,” Hermione remarked to the two Slytherins blinking after Luna.

“When is Luna not in a good mood?” Tracey noted with amusement.

Again Hermione tried to close the door and again she was forced to pause midway through as Neville, Susan and Hannah came into view. “When did I volunteer to become the butler?” she asked herself in mild annoyance waving the three newcomers inside. “Anyone invite anyone else? No? Good. Harry, you get the door next time. If we’re going to be in your room, you should be the one opening the door.”

Harry cast an amused look her way before turning to Sirius. “Mione says you found a Horcrux?”

“Yup!” Sirius nodded emphatically and smiled at Amelia. “Amy was the one who figured out most of it. For those not updated, we raided the cave this morning. Locket was a fake, having been stolen and replaced years back. Neville, the Lestrange brothers are dead. Both got killed by Inferi hiding within the lake. It wasn’t pretty and they sounded like they were hurting quite a lot before dying.”

Susan and Hannah both quietly held Neville’s hands. His mouth set into a grim line and his eyes narrowed. “Two down. Two to go.”

“After we got back to the Manor, we found the deception. The one who stole the locket was…my brother. Regulus Arcturus Black,” Sirius said his voice hitching slightly on the name. He shook his head and swallowed heavily. “I didn’t even think of it before. Regulus was always a mama’s boy and he was a perfect pureblood son. Joined up with the Death Eaters before he even left Hogwarts. I thought he’d pissed off the wrong guy and gotten killed because of it. Turns out Voldemort had used Kreacher to test the defense around the locket and when the elf got away, Regulus turned on the bastard. He stole the locket and Kreacher’s been trying to destroy it ever since.”

Amelia sent him a reassuring smile and squeezed his arm. Sirius wiped a bit of moisture from one eye and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a cloth wrapped bundle and placed it in the middle of the floor. “I present to you, the legacy of Regulus Black, Salazar Slytherin’s Locket, Tom Riddle’s Horcrux.” As he peeled open the cloth, an ornate, silver locket was revealed.

Hermione stared at the small snakes curled around the front facing side of the jewelry piece almost entranced. “It’s quite beautiful for something that’s become so perverted.”

“Agreed,” Daphne murmured.

“Well, let’s not just stand here looking at zis zing,” Fleur said glaring down at the piece of silver so intently that one would almost expect it to burst into flames. “’arry, time to test your rune stone.”
“Yeah.” Harry took out his bandolier and picked out the *Soul Cage* hefting it in one hand and looking at the locket in the other. “Fingers crossed everyone.” Heads bobbed around the room as Harry moved forward and placed the rune stone onto the locket. He took a deep breath and channeled enough magic into it to activate the stone.

Hermione held her breath and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

After thirty seconds Hannah looked up from the locket in confusion. “Is that it? Isn’t it supposed to…*do* something?”

“Yeah it is,” Harry muttered darkly.

Hermione quickly shuffled around the circle to grab his hand reassuringly. “Maybe the locket needs to be open for it to work?”

Harry scowled. “Worth a try I guess. Let’s hope this one isn’t booby trapped.” He took the *Soul Cage* off the locket and whispered in parseltongue to it. Before Harry could replace the rune stone, the locket popped open and black smoke spilled out of the thing causing everyone to jump back.

“*Harry Potter. You seek to destroy me without using me. You are a fool! You could utilize me and become stronger than my original. Stronger than your doppelganger could have ever dreamt of being. With my knowledge and your thirst for power and control you could become what I had only ever imagined. I would rule the country. With my help, you would rule the world.*”

Harry seemed frozen staring up at the curling black smoke. Hermione used her grip on his arm to haul him back and shove him towards Fleur and Tonks. She stepped forward and glared at the smoke with Daphne, Lily and Shiva stepping up beside her. “Leave him alone. Your petty little scrambling for survival won’t earn a reprieve.”

“*Hermione Granger. You worry he’ll toss you aside now that he has others more beautiful and more capable. With my help you could ensure he never wants to leave your side. Daphne Greengrass. You find yourself unclean and unworthy. You are tainted and dangerous. You cause all you touch to wilt. I can help you control the hatred and rage. I can show you how to channel it and use it to make you stronger. Bathsheda Babbling. You think yourself the outsider. The only one who was not born to this conflict. The only one not directly involved. The only one who could reasonably walk away without consequences from either side. You worry that they’ll ask that of you. That somewhere deep inside, they expect it. With me, you’d be too formidable for any to ever think you that weak. Lily Potter. Dead for a decade. Your revival directly contributing to your son’s increased danger and vulnerability. You find your weakness and imperfect sight to be a danger to all who lean on you and trust you. They feel you know things you don’t and can handle that which you cannot. With me as your teacher, you could become more formidable than any you have ever known. Use me. Use me and we can –*”

“Shut up already!” Luna yelled out shooting a spell through the swirling mist and cutting off Voldemort’s monologue. “Stop letting it talk and hit the stupid locket with the rune!”

Hermione jolted herself out of whatever trance she seemed to have fallen into and grabbed the rune stone Harry had dropped. With a snarl she slammed it onto the face of the locket and activated it. A glow ignited and there was a shriek of pain. Some of the black smoke began curled back down towards the locket and into the rune stone. Unfortunately after a few seconds of continued
screaming, the flow stopped and the rune stone stopped glowing. The smoke started to reform with a laughing sound before Luna bounded forward and slammed the small doors shut causing all the remaining smoke to immediately vanish.

Most of the occupants were breathing hard and beside her, Daphne fell to a seat on the floor with her arms wrapped around her legs. “Bloody hell. I hate these things so much,” she murmured.

Harry gingerly got up and picked up the discarded rune stone. His face twitched imperceptibly as he stared at it. Hermione carefully got up and reached out to him. “Harry?” She asked softly.

He roared and threw the stone at the wall chipping off a large chunk. “It doesn’t work! It still doesn’t fucking work! What is wrong?! Why won’t it work?!”

Shiva was pulling him into her arms before anyone else could even register movement. “Hey, it’s okay, kid. It’s okay. Calm down. There are other options. Su’s potion sucks, but it’s an option. Not everything can always be solved with runes. We’ll deal with this just like we always do, kid. This is a setback, but it’s not the end of the world.”

Hermione looked on her boyfriend with something approaching despair. This state of affairs could not continue much longer.

Marcus Greengrass and Viktoria Zabini smiled at each other from across the table at Gringotts Bank. Both grins had equal parts greed, cunning and superiority, both persons intent on thinking they had the better part in this deal.

Normally, magicals would sign binding legal contracts in one of three places, ranked in increasing order of formality. The first would be in one of the parties’ homes which was seen as a deal amongst friends and equals. The second level would be in a solicitor’s office. Many purebloods actually regarded such an event as a veiled insult; if one needed the reassurance of obtaining a solicitor to examine and verify the document then why was a goblin not being paid to do the work? Everyone knew that goblins always scrutinized the most inane language in any contract and were completely unbiased – hating all wizards and witches equally tended to make one fair when dealing with parties in dispute. Therefore, it should be no surprise to learn that signing a contract in Gringotts Bank was considered the most formal, socially acceptable and foolproof method of ensuring that a contract was legal and binding.

“So we are agreed, Daphne will provide at least one male heir to continue my line while Blaise will control the Greengrass business ventures after I step down,” Marcus said.

Viktoria nodded. “Must we go over this again. The terms have been written and the contract has been scrutinized. Just sign the thing already Marcus and stop stalling.”

Marcus raised an eyebrow at her before picking up the quill and laying his signature on the paper with a flourish. “The move is yours, my dear.” He handed her the quill and the document and watched with a satisfied grin as her name joined his own. His legacy was secure and Daphne would have a decent husband who was unlikely to do much beyond ensure she remained in her place at the boy’s side.

As Viktoria lifted the quill, the parchment in front of them remained resolutely dull. “That’s odd… Where’s the flash of acceptance? Marcus you used your full name didn’t you?”

Marcus blinked in confusion. He stood to look at the contract and scowled. “Of course I did. I am not the one with seven different last names to choose from.”
“Eight including my maiden name,” Viktoria commented idly. She frowned down at the parchment in front of them. “Which is completely irrelevant as I always ensure my name is legally changed to match my husband. Snapfist! Get out here, goblin, you idiots missed something!”

The goblin manager walked into the room with a sneer on his features. At least Marcus assumed it was a sneer. He couldn’t be expected to pay too much attention to the creatures now could he? They were just goblins after all. “The contract agreement was examined and deemed complete and all-encompassing. If you wish us to determine why you cannot legally sign it then that will be a new fee for each of you.”

Marcus scowled at the greedy little thing. “Fine. Take your gold from the vaults and tell us what is wrong. I swear you do this on purpose to ensure you get paid twice for one job.”

“Ms. Zabini?” the goblin asked utterly ignoring his jibe.

“Just do it!” she huffed.

Snapfist nodded. He stepped forward and looked over the contract for less than ten seconds before a grin spread across his features. “Ah, I see the problem. Yes, yes this is quite simple.”

“Well what is it?” Marcus asked. The goblin really was just toying with them. He’d really have to examine whether he should go to the gnomes for his banking purposes instead.

“This, Wizard, stipulates that Blaise Zabini is to be Daphne Greengrass’ husband.” Marcus could have hit the fool for that statement of the obvious. Viktoria looked just as annoyed. Thankfully, the goblin continued on quickly. “Such an arrangement would be rather difficult to achieve considering that Daphne Greengrass is already betrothed to a different man.”

Both humans’ jaws dropped. “What?!”

The goblin withdrew a copy of the _Quibbler_ from his jacket and spread it on the table between them. Grinning he pointed to one article at the center of the page.

_Harry Potter Announces First Official Betrothal_

_by Luna Lovegood_

_Earlier this week Harry Potter opened up about his recent engagement. Some will surely be surprised to find that The Runemaster’s first legally binding betrothment is not to one of his current partners, Hermione Granger, Nymphadora Tonks or Fleur Delacour. No, Harry Potter is now betrothed to Daphne Greengrass, Heiress Select of Greengrass Shipping, Greengrass Solutions, Greengrass Maintenance and Greengrass Alchemy._

_Daphne and Harry have been friends since 1992, both having come together to assist in solving – and resolving – the Basilisk Crisis at Hogwarts during that school year. They have remained close friends ever since with Daphne always nearby when conflicts developed around Harry. Students who know both regularly describe their relationship as such:_

“Daphne is like his right hand. Whenever Potter gets serious and goes to beat someone down, Daphne’s right there beside him.” –Blaise Zabini

“Hermione is like Harry’s anchor, whereas Daphne is probably more like his hammer. Does that make sense? I’m not sure I used that metaphor right…” –Parvati Patil

“They’ve been dancing around each other for ages. It’s a good thing that Harry has two Houses to
his name because it would’ve been a shame if Daphne missed out because she waited too long to say anything. They’re cute together!” –Lavender Brown

It has been commented in the past that Daphne was in a romantic relationship with Tracey Davis – a fellow Slytherin and long-time friend to the Greengrass Heiress. When asked for clarification on the state of their current relationship, Daphne, Tracey and Harry all respond with the same reply: “Our relationship is complicated but the specifics of it are our business and ours alone. Feel free to speculate, we won’t be confirming or denying anything except that we are all in agreement.”

Harry Potter has notoriously held personal information close to his chest. The dangers of enemies obtaining these ‘weak points’ have historically been the cause. Why then did this betrothal become common knowledge? In his own words: “It’s unfortunately not really a secret who my partners are anymore. It hasn’t been a secret for a while. Even worse, recent events have seen the people I care about targeted because they associate with me. Daphne was attacked just the other week. I’m hoping that by announcing our new status like this the attacks will be curbed. I don’t think any of my relationships need to be formalized, but Daphne is a special case. Her family had been in talks to cement another arrangement and we felt it was necessary to ensure that she was free to choose for herself. Many people in our world have forgotten that a marriage shouldn’t be decided by a piece of paper, but by who you care about. The contract between Daphne and myself is meant to remind everyone that we should all be allowed to be with who we desire, not who was chosen for us.”

Daphne herself goes on to state the following warning to any who oppose this union: “Harry is too polite to say it, but allow me to be blunt for once. Any who take issue with me or my sister-wives will have to face the full might of the both the Potter family and the Inventor Alliance. This alliance includes the families Potter, Black, Longbottom, Brown, Li, Patil, Greengrass, Davis, Lovegood, Bulstrode, Weasley and Bones. These are just the domestic, big-name families that don’t include people like the Delacours or the Krums. The Dark Lord himself has tried to attack my betrothed and been sent away with his tail between his legs three times – four if you count the incident when he was mere toddler. This was with just the Potter family. Envy us if you wish, but I caution you against doing anything further.”

Marcus finished reading the article and started laughing hysterically. “The girl outmaneuvered me! By Merlin, I have taught her something! Bravo, child, bravo.”

Viktoria glared at him. “You are an idiot Marcus Greengrass. If that child of yours can so brilliantly plot this while hundreds of miles away with only the barest notion that we were moving forward…I am glad she’s not going to be hitched to my son. Blaise would wind up dead within a year tied to that girl. Check your plans next time before you try to involve me in them. Goodbye Marcus.” Viktoria stood up and glared at the smiling goblin as she stalked from the chamber.

Marcus just leaned back and fingered the Quibbler in front of him. He really should be horribly angry with her. The deal with Viktoria had taken up quite a bit of his time in the last few days and he’d had to pay the goblins an exorbitant fee to have the contract checked over – twice for that matter which was annoying beyond belief considered the frustrating creature knew all along apparently that the contract would not be valid. Marcus was first and foremost however, a businessman. He’d been outplayed. And…well really, his legacy was still assured, Potter was a rising star and even if the union between the boy and Daphne was simple cover for her it didn’t matter since it was apparently legal. She’d have a child eventually and his name would continue.

Yes…yes this could have been far worse.

Lunch on Friday saw Lily and Shiva sitting together at the Staff table in the Great Hall. They were
both still somewhat muted from the events of the night prior though Lily was attempting to stay jovial. They couldn’t do much more beyond what had already been done so she didn’t see any true point in remaining morose. She’d had her fill of moping during the year she’d been in hiding with a baby and a trigger-happy husband.

Plus if she kept positive and stayed bubbly, there was a chance that it could spread and her son might perk up a bit as well. Fleur and Tonks had had to leave again though she knew he’d spent the night with Hermione and Daphne while Tracey and Luna convinced the Room of Requirement to leave a second bed for them as well. Lily took a moment of reflection to consider just how much trouble students in this castle could get into if that Room became common knowledge.

Hell, not just the students…she could think of at least a dozen uses for that room…not all of them wholesome at all. Those thoughts had her turning a hungry gaze on the woman sitting beside her who remained blissfully unaware of Lily’s stare. Thank god for small mercies.

“Lily? Lily? Lilllyyy?” Filius’ amused voice finally knocked her out of her reverie and she twisted to face him an embarrassed blush spreading across her cheeks.

“Yes, Filius? You were saying something?”

The small man chuckled. “Well I was going to ask how you were finding your classes, but now I think I’d rather discuss something a bit more gossip worthy.”

“Oh, really?” she asked raising an eyebrow. On the half-goblin’s other side Lily spotted McGonagall casually putting her fork down and surreptitiously leaning in to hear better.

“Yes, indeed. So, my friend,” Filius asked a grin splitting his features, “just how long have you and Bathsheda been an item?”

Shiva started choking on her juice beside Lily and Lily felt her own face burn. She desperately tried to reach for something to say. “Um, err, uh, well you see, we uh…little help here?” she ended, murmuring to a still slightly coughing Shiva.

“Oh no,” Shiva said shaking her head emphatically. “He asked you. You get to field that one. I’m going to get enough questions from Aurora and Septima.”

Lily mock glared at her. “Some girlfriend you are.” She turned back to Filius and shrugged. “As of yesterday afternoon we’re dating. News apparently travels fast.”

“If you keep looking at her like you were then it certainly will,” McGonagall said hiding her own smirk. “I’m happy for you both. It’s nice to see that Bathsheda finally has a date and it’s good to see you moving on, Lily. Do try to remain appropriate in front of the students though.”

Lily raised her eyebrows and cocked a thumb at Sirius who was busy chatting up Sinistra. “Somehow I don’t think we’re the ones who need a potential lecture.”

McGonagall just smiled wider and dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. “Ah, but Sirius is so easy to control. A simple warning that Amelia may get annoyed if he flirts too strongly and…”

“The problem disappears,” Lily finished laughing. “True, true. Don’t worry, Min, we’ll keep our pants on around the kids.”

Filius shrugged far too innocently for his indifference to be believed. “If you can’t I recommend remembering to use a silencing charm for the broom closet walls. Almost everyone remembers to lock the door, but you’d be surprised just how many forget to soundproof the walls.”
Lily groaned and held her head in her hands while Filius lost his battle with the veneer of calm and started laughing uproariously. Shiva could be mistaken for a tomato beside her and even McGonagall was hiding her mouth behind her hand, shoulders shaking. Lily glanced out over the students and spotted Harry cocking an eyebrow at her and shaking his head, chuckling. He may have been too far to hear specifics, but it certainly wasn’t difficult to discern the subject under discussion if one knew the basic situation.

Well at least some people were getting amusement out of her embarrassment.

Sirius looked at his Fifth Year students with mixed frustration and pride. The frustration was largely due to the teens’ rather horrible history of teachers for the Defense course. He had originally thought that Remus and Harry had been exaggerating just how bad the prior instruction had been. Now that he was the one evaluating them all though…yeah it was that bad. He’d even instituted an extra class a week for the Fifth and Seven Year students to make sure that they could at least attempt to be prepared for the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. In barely two weeks they’d already made a lot of progress which was extremely impressive and the source of his current pride.

“So, how did you all feel about the substitute? It was Auror Trainee Savage right?” Sirius asked.

Daphne nodded and her distinctly amused, predatory smile didn’t escape his notice. “Well, Professor Black, he introduced himself as ‘Auror’ rather than ‘Auror Trainee’. His basic tactics lesson was acceptable though he seemed a bit light on details.”

“Well, that’s a bit better then I’d hoped I suppose. Savage might be a bit rough around the edges folks, but he’s the best the Aurors can spare at the moment beyond me. Nobody can beat me after all,” he said striking a dramatic pose.

Harry coughed loudly from the back of the room. His cough sounded suspiciously like, “Lockhart.” Sirius grimaced and quickly dropped his pose. “In all seriousness, I do apologize for being absent. It’s probably going to happen more throughout the year as there are missions I will have to attend. I’ll certainly do my best to ensure that these are limited events and that you’ll have proper tutelage for the days that I’m gone. Now, I realize that most of your course work to this point has been somewhat spotty. I’m going to jump ahead slightly and try to get you all working on silent spell casting in addition to basic duel casting. Savage should have given you the stunning spell for those who didn’t already know it. Let’s practice that first.”

The class proceeded rather smoothly surprisingly enough. Many of the students had issues getting the spell working and only Daphne, Harry and Hermione managed to cast it silently. Not that was all too surprisingly. Harry could probably teach this class at this point, Daphne was nearly as good and grew up knowing most of those spells before she’d even left the house and Hermione was a walking encyclopedia partnered with the previous two – not to mention the addition of having an ex-Auror as a partner as well.

Towards the end of the class Sirius noticed Harry walking around the people near him and assisting each one in getting their stunning spell to work. Sirius’ chest swelled with pride as the young man shook off his melancholy from the previous evening and helped his friends. Harry was all smiles as Neville was the fourth person to get the silent casting off without a hitch. Susan followed soon after. The biggest surprise came when Harry walked over to Lavender and barely three minutes later the girl was also casting her spell perfectly every time. Her silent cast was a touch underpowered, but…well it was darn impressive all the same.

Perhaps he shouldn’t even bother with getting a sub next time and just ask the pup to teach while was gone…Something to think about at least.
Harry Potter tossed and turned in his bed in the Gryffindor Tower that night. His scar ached and his hands clenched. With a wordless cry of pain his eyes opened and he looked out on a very different visage than the curtain clad tower.

Voldemort yelled in rage as he held his wand on the unfortunate new recruit beneath him. The man screamed in agony under Voldemort’s Cruciatus curse. He’d had the misfortune of being nearby when the ritual failed. Voldemort had needed an outlet and the recruit was easier than going out to find a random Muggle or Blood Traitor to torture.

The Horcrux would not work. He couldn’t make a new one. Either the incomplete ritual with Potter had permanently scarred his soul and damaged his ability to further tear it or he was unable to create more than seven Horcruxes. Whatever the root cause was it did not matter. He could not safeguard his immortality any further. Cursing the Death Eater yet again, Voldemort turned his gaze on Theodore Nott. The boy laid at the foot of Voldemort’s throne lifeless, not a mark on him. Such a pitiful waste. Nott had been reasonably intelligent. Voldemort had dearly wanted to use Draco Malfoy for the Horcrux sacrificial murder yet the Greengrass bitch’s agents had absconded with the little fool and he’d been forced to use a more convenient target.

It wasn’t as much of a loss as it could have been. If Nott hadn’t even been able to foresee the stupidity of following Draco without any supporters loyal to himself instead of the Malfoy…well he deserved his fate in that case. Besides, it wasn’t like anyone was going to complain about the loss of the teenager.

Voldemort lifted his spell from the recruit and paced back to the throne. If only he could set alarm wards on the others as he did with the Ring and the Locket his worries would be allayed. Those had been easy to place. Potter’s competence and his allies had proven that the minor precaution after the graveyard incident had been well founded. Mostly well founded. Bella’s team hadn’t been dispatched quickly enough after the alerts to capture any of the hunters after all. But…he knew which Horcruxes they had found out about at least.

He couldn’t protect Bella’s any further than it already was. None of his people could get close to it anymore – but then neither could anyone else. It was safe. Until he finished taking over this country he’d simply have to accept that.

Perhaps he should canvas his followers to see if any had children still in Hogwarts. Most of the primary personnel had already been ejected from the premises thanks to Draco’s ill advised stupidity. There were one or two older students who would accept a mission. However…he didn’t trust them or their parents and murdering an older student would only serve to draw attention to something he needed to remain quiet. No, Hogwarts would have to remain unwarded as well. It was safe as it was. No one would be able to find it. A single tree in a forest was always well and truly lost.

Potter’s hunters were a problem. They were far too competent. Perhaps a larger scale effort might be required to deal with them.

Voldemort rubbed his Ring letting the reassuring feelings wash over him. He was the Dark Lord Voldemort and he’d live forever.

The recruit moaned and his legs shuddered, scraping on the floor. Voldemort frowned and leveled his wand at the man again. He could wait a few minutes more before deciding what to do about the hunters.

Harry wrenched himself back to the Tower and sat up shaking with sweat pouring down his face.
His scar was aching and his mental defenses were in shambles. But not forcing himself out sooner had been worth it. He may never intentionally open that door to Voldemort’s mind but…if Riddle happened to do it himself…well…Harry would use it. This soul shard should be put to use if he couldn’t get it out of his head. “Bellatrix hid one where nobody could get at it and there’s one somewhere in Hogwarts…now we have somewhere to start searching again.”

“Wha? Who’s tha…? ‘Lo?” Tonks mumbled blinking blearily around the darkened room searching for the voice that had awakened her.

“Wow, Nym, you are definitely not a morning person,” Harry commented sounding amused.

Tonks blinked her eyes again and slowly reached up to her ear. “Harry? Why are you tiny and in my ear? I should be able to hold you or see you if you’re that close but…oh…nevermind.”

“Awake now?” he asked.

She shook her head to try and clear it somewhat before looking at the clock on the table. “What are you doing up at 2 in the morning, Wonder Boy? This is an ungodly hour to be up.”

She heard him sigh over the line before he muttered. “Dreaming. Look, Nym, I’m sorry to wake you up and all, but I wanted to tell you guys before I forgot. Not that I would forget but…better safe than sorry yeah?”

“Sure. What’s going on?” she considered waking Fleur, but decided she’d wait to see if it was an emergency or just another late night rune discovery.

“Voldemort gave one Horcrux to your insane aunt for her to protect. Sorta like with Malfoy and the diary I think. Except she was smart about it because he thinks that neither us or them can get to it where it is. There’s another one somewhere in Hogwarts. Hidden among a lot of other things that camouflage it. He’s wearing the Ring, which is both good and bad since we need to cut off his finger before killing him I guess, but at least we don’t have to look for him hiding it somewhere else. I’m still not entirely sure about Nagini, but I’m almost positive the snake is the last one.”

Tonks took a second to force her brain to catch up with her ears and when she did she shot up straight. “Harry,” she asked very slowly and with a supreme calm that she did not feel, “just how do you know all this?”

“Told you, I was dreaming.” Harry was obviously trying for nonchalance, but Tonks had been his friend – and his lover – for long enough that she could hear the strain in his voice. “Arsehole tried to make a new Horcrux, but it didn’t work. He was pissed. Unlucky git didn’t realize that he had opened the door and let me in. I didn’t try to fight my way back to the surface for a few minutes since he was thinking about the Horcruxes. Now we just need to get this bloody thing out of my head before he realizes that I know.”

Tonks gulped and made sure her breathing was calm before she spoke again. “Harry, thank you for the information. I’ll disseminate it. But – and I can’t stress this enough – you really should not be diving into an insane Dark Lord’s head. We’ll use this to find the rest, Wonder Boy, but you can’t do that again. If he pushes back…”

“I know,” Harry said wearily. “I took long enough to build my walls back up before I commed you. I didn’t go looking to enter his brain, Nym. I just used it when he drew me in. One way or another this isn’t going to be an issue much longer. Su’s mum is starting to brew her potion so in a few days I’ll either be Horcrux free or dead. I’m sorry for waking you, Nym. Talk to you soon
yeah?  I gotta get some sleep.”

“Sure, Harry. Try to dream of us this time instead of the monster okay? Goodnight, love;” she said fighting down a lump in her throat. Once he disconnected Tonks rolled over and shook Fleur awake. The Veela opened one bleary eye and stared up at her in confusion. “Harry called. Voldemort tried to make a new Horcrux and it didn’t work. Harry saw the results and found out where the last few are. He’s okay. A bit depressed, but okay.”

Fleur opened and closed her mouth several times before sighing. She reached up and wiped a tear from Tonks’ cheek that she hadn’t even known was there. “Lie down, Nym. We cannot do anyzing to make it easier for him tonight and we cannot go hunting for ze ozer ones as we are at ze moment. Sleep, mon amour. We will deal wiz zis in ze light of ze new day.”

Tonks nodded and lay back down. She shifted her form enough that she was smaller than Fleur and let the blonde curl her arms around her in a strong embrace. Only then did she start shuddering slightly and let herself cry.

Harry stood in front of his group of friends waiting for the practice room to fill up. Daphne’s club was about to start its meeting in a few minutes and he’d been conscripted to help teach the masses. Surprisingly enough, he’d actually managed to get some sleep the night before despite the dream about Voldemort. That wasn’t to say he’d gotten good sleep, but it had been better than usual on one of those nights.

He’d let Shiva and Lily know about his discoveries as soon as he woke up and filled in the others and Sirius before they had moved down to the classroom for this meeting. He wouldn’t go as far as saying he was upbeat…but he was somewhat positive about their chances now.

Colin and Dennis Creevey walked into the classroom first animatedly talking to each other. Colin’s camera snapped as he caught sight of the group at the front and he flashed a wide grin and thumbs up to Harry. Harry managed to stop himself from rolling his own eyes at the younger boy’s antics and gave a thumbs up in return. The Patils, Lavender and Su followed close behind him. Blaise walked in with Millicent. A bouncing ball of energy practically danced into the room behind them; Astoria was on the scene talking a mile a minute to everyone around her. Harry smiled and chuckled at how enthusiastic she was. He really had to try and spend more time with the girl, her happiness was probably infectious. Quite a few Hufflepuffs showed up as did many of the younger years in Ravenclaw. Harry saw Flitwick and McGonagall quietly walk into the room and stand at the back before the door finally swung closed.

Daphne stepped forward and calmly took stock of the room. “Alright everyone, thanks for coming. As many of you know, the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord are active again. The last time they were on the move times became quite dark. Dark enough that many people in the Wizarding World today still refuse to use the name Voldemort,” a shudder went through many of the people in the room. Harry was surprised that it wasn’t quite everyone, but it was still annoying. Daphne scowled. “Voldemort. Voldemort, Voldemort, Voldemort, Voldemort! This is exactly why we are making this club. If one is scared of a mere name how can you expect to stand and protect your brother? Your sister? Your parents? Your children?”

“But he’s so strong!” one voice shouted out from the crowd. “We can’t fight him!”

“He is also just one man. Harry has fought him three times before he was fifteen and walked away,” Daphne said matter-of-factly. There were mutters through the room at that. “Yes, his situation is a little unusual, but that does not mean you simply lie down and die. That means you get stronger. That means you pick easier opponents. If you were walking down Diagon Alley and
a group of ten Death Eaters apparated in in front of you would you rather the adults nearby cowered behind the closest cover or would you rather they fought the terrorists?"

“Why wouldn’t they fight?” another voice rang out.

Daphne just laughed and shook her head. “Ask your parents about that. That’s exactly the question my friends and I cannot understand. The last Blood War was so bad because the only people fighting were the Aurors and a few scattered others. Had more stood up and drew a line in the sand, it never would have progressed like it did. Voldemort is one man. He can be overwhelmed with numbers just like anyone else.” She paused and looked around the room with a critical eye. “Already this war is shaping up to be quite different. We have weapons against the Dementors. We should soon have a competent Minister with Fudge on his way out. We have determined people willing to fight back. Read the *Quibbler* and you will see example after example of ordinary citizens standing up to defend others and tell the Death Eaters that enough is enough.”

Daphne sighed and shrugged her shoulders. “I am not starting this club to try and teach you how to fight murderers and rapists. I am starting this so that you aren’t forced to hide behind someone else. I am starting this to prepare you. To make sure that you have the tools you need to stay alive without having to kiss someone else’s boots. I am starting this to make you strong enough to stand on your own and to stand tall beside a friend in need. Now, please pair off. First we will be going over stunning, disarming and shield charms. At the end of the lesson anyone who wishes to learn a family spell to...dissuade attempted rapists, please stay behind.”

Harry smiled at Daphne as she and the others in his core group started walking around helping their fellow students where needed. He specialized in showing the older students where they were going wrong with the disarming spell. Hermione and Daphne were focusing on those learning the stunning spell. Neville, Susan and Luna were working with people trying to practice the shield spell. Sirius, Shiva and Lily walked around the large room helping anyone who seemed to be particularly struggling. Hannah and Tracey had slotted into groups near the back and were assisting the younger students working on wand movements.

Towards the end of the lesson, Harry raised his eyebrows at Fred and George who had somehow managed to simultaneously stun each other while flying through the air and aiming at the walls behind their opponent. He calmly woke them both up and leaned back in a crouch. “How the hell did you two manage that?” he asked amused.

Fred grinned. “Well, partner, part of being a good Beater is seeing angles. A spell can be a lot easier to get off a trick shot with than a Bludger.”

George laughed and shook his head. “Yes, and the extra training for the Triwizard Tournament had no bearing on it whatsoever!”

“None at all, brother! Look, you hit the same mark,” he responded with a laugh of his own.

Harry shook his head and stood helping both to their feet. “If you two are so good, go help the others. Nice shots by the way. Now get!”

Still laughing the twins moved off and Harry shifted closer to Luna. She was working with Lavender who looked confused. “I still don’t get why these things absorb some spells and reflect others. They’re all just magic!”

Hermione looked over from nearby with wide eyes. “Well you see, Lavender, Jonah Langrich had an interesting theory on that. He was looking into the arithmantic properties of each specific spell
and he discovered how the base component of the original core determined the primary attraction or absorption rate as well as the interactions between most other items and defenses. It was quite revolutionary for the time though it has fallen out of favor as a suitable explanation over Gamp’s theorems and…”

Luna smiled and nodded enthusiastically before talking over Hermione. “What she means, Lavender, is that some spells cannot be absorbed due to incompatible energies. Those spells must be banished or deflected instead. It’s…”

Harry froze and his eyes unfocused. Incompatible energies…absorption vs. banishment…Souls can’t be absorbed…souls can’t be absorbed!

He barely noticed as Daphne stopped and stared at him for a moment. He was already moving to his bag at a pace barely under a run when her voice rang out over the group. “Okay, everyone, I think that’s enough for today. We’ll pick this up next week, same time, same place. I apologize for not getting to my spell right away for those interested. If you can’t wait for next week, then come see me tomorrow or after classes. Chop, chop, out, out. Practice what you’ve learned today and we’ll build on that next time.”

Harry ignored her as he reached his schematics for the Soul Cage and checked over his drawing, tracing his finger to the primary core runes. He let out a cry of Viktory as he found the Absorption rune smack-dab in the middle. “Souls can’t be absorbed,” he muttered grabbing a pencil and erasing that rune hurriedly drawing in a Banishment rune instead. It fit perfectly. “HAHA! GOT IT! TAKE THAT YOU BLOODY THING! WHO’S THE RUNEMASTER NOW, HUH!”

“Harry? What brainwave did you get this time?” Neville asked sounding decidedly amused as he crouched nearby. Had Harry cared enough to look up he would have found his friend in almost the same position he’d just recently been in with the twins.

Daphne came up and shook her head. “Glad I got them all out before he started yelling. What’s going on? Anybody have any clue?”

“Souls can’t be absorbed,” Harry said grabbing for his carving kit. He’d have to make a brand new one. Beyond destroying the original prototype the other day this one needed a different core rather than a simple addition.

“And that means what?” Lily asked frowning.

Harry found a suitable stone and started etching the new design. “I made the same bloody mistake the Egyptians made that’s what it means. Souls can’t be absorbed. It’s why their original cluster never worked. It’s why the Soul Cage keeps failing. Not even Dementors technically absorb souls. They merge with them. It’s a subtle difference and in all practical matters it doesn’t mean a damn thing, but Absorb and Merge are two very different runes with two very different rules on interactions. Souls can’t be absorbed! But they can be banished! Mum I need the Horcrux!”

He looked up long enough to make sure that someone was moving to go get his test subject only to see everyone looking down at him slack jawed. “Don’t just sit there staring! Someone get me the Locket!”

Sirius started chuckling, then laughing, then doubling over in side splitting chortles. “I swear, pup, I am never going to get used to you doing that! Kreacher!” A pop sounded and the ancient house elf stood nearby. He looked quite a bit taller, straighter, and prouder than Harry had ever seen him before. “Kreacher go get the Locket and then you’re free to stay here to watch it be destroyed.”

Harry saw Kreacher’s jaw set in a primal grin before he popped away only to return a moment later
with the Slytherin Locket in hand.

Shiva was looking at Harry with her head cocked to one side and a frown of concentration etched onto her features and her eyes unfocused. “A Banishment rune twined into a Soul rune cluster… that’s…that would function more like an exorcism setup than a true banishing spell…maybe at least, since it should force the soul out of the current container like the spell generally intends…at least if the targeting segment keeps it tied to the Horcrux instead of both souls…well the Dementor Anchor tattoo could be a safety net in case the targeting cluster is flawed…Merlin’s beard, that might just work!”

Harry quickly finished his etching and blew the dust off of it. He checked the design over carefully and nodded in satisfaction. “Okay. Let’s try this thing one last time.” He stood and padded over to the Locket. Kreacher delicately handed it over and the remaining group circled around him again just like the other night. Taking a deep breath and muttering a prayer to several gods, he hissed, ~Open.~

Black smoke started to pool out from the Locket again, but this time instead of letting the horrid apparition speak he slammed the Soul Cage down on its face and channeled magic into the stone.

The effect was instantaneous. A horrible scream filled the room and the smoke circled down through the Locket and into the rune stone as if it was being pulled through a giant vacuum. Harry’s lips spread into a predatory smile that matched Kreacher’s own as Voldemort’s piece of soul inside the Locket was forcibly separated from its anchor and cast adrift. The magic of the Horcrux only worked while the soul was kept tied to this plane through the specified object. Without that tie…without that anchor, the soul shard died.

As the last of the smoke drained away and the scream died out, the Soul Cage’s glow dimmed and went out. Harry reached out a steady hand and plucked it off of the Locket. He could feel a bit of magic in the piece of jewelry still, but it no longer reeked of Dark Magic or Voldemort’s taint.

Slytherin’s Locket was no longer a Horcrux.

“It works.” Harry said triumphantly holding up the cleansed artifact.

Less than an hour after the Soul Cage test worked, Harry had everyone gathered into the Room of Requirement. Well, not everyone he knew, but everyone who knew about him being a Horcrux. It seemed appropriate. They had all been in the hospital wing when Dumbledore had gone on and on about how Harry had to die in order to render Voldemort vulnerable yada yada yada. It felt only right for them all to be present when he proved the old man wrong and cut the Horcrux out of his soul without killing himself.

That was the plan at least.

Harry took a steadying breath and looked over the assembled students, teachers and friends. “Thanks for coming up so quickly everyone. I wanted you all here, but I didn’t want to wait too long so thanks. Um, so I’ve already tested the rune stone a bit earlier and it cleansed one of Voldemort’s Horcruxes without much problem. I’m pretty sure that this is going to work fine on me too so I wanted everyone to be able to watch in order to quell any potential rumors or doubts.”

Harry paused again and grimaced. “So, uh, yeah. Wish me luck.” Catching his mothers’ eyes and the expressions of worry and anticipation crossing his partners, Harry shook his head and steered his nerves. He pulled out the Soul Cage and tried to calm himself. One way or another this internal battle of wills was about to end. He pressed the rune stone to his forehead and activated it.
Pain like he’d never felt before ripped through his head and he felt his knees buckle. Harry’s vision blurred and he heard a piercing scream that matched the one the Locket had let out earlier. Red and black spotted his vision and Harry felt himself falling backward with nothing but sky beneath him. Seconds later he slammed into the ground. Scrambled to his feet Harry sent a sadistic grin towards the visage ahead of him.

He was in his mindscape, the cupboard under the stairs was just ahead. To his left, the door sheltering the Horcrux was finally visible to his eyes. It was standing wide open with the hinges torn off and the wood in splinters. There was an inky blackness beyond the threshold and a stream of tainted air was flowing out of the door and spiraling into a portal hovering just over the stairs. Harry walked forward slowly, finally noticing a figure clinging to the edge of the doorframe fighting against the pull of the Soul Cage’s portal.

The figure was shorter than he’d expected being only slightly taller than Harry himself and clad in a deep black robe similar to Voldemort’s attire in the graveyard. It had a snake-like face but was more human than Harry had seen him before. Almost like an amalgam of Memorymort and Voldemort. The eyes were red, the nose was flattened and the teeth were surprisingly normal.

Scarmort roared at Harry. “You fool! I could have made you unstoppable! I could have made you into a god!”

“All I ever wanted was a family,” Harry stated as he walked to the edge of the storm. “You took that from me once and I will not let you take it from me again. Have fun in Hell. I’ll be sure to send more pieces of you there soon enough.” Harry reached back and materialized a spear from his mindscape. Lunging forward, he threw the spear, impaling Scarmort through the chest. The soul shard screamed in pain and rage and its hands flexed spasmodically releasing their grip on the door frame. Still screaming, the broken piece of soul flew up towards the portal. Harry watched the body of Scarmort start to stretch, expand and unravel just before it hit the portal.

As soon as the flying body passed through the Soul Cage, the storm in Harry’s mind ceased to exist. The door that hid the Horcrux and the inky blackness vanished as if they were never there. The parts of his mind that had been spiraling around the room dropped to the floor and the portal above him vanished. Harry looked around smiling. He jumped out his mindscape and back into the world outside.

And was hit with an incredible amount of pain wracking his entire body. The pain was so extreme that Harry leaned over and threw up the entire contents of his stomach. He noticed with a clinical detachment that the vomit joined a black ichor like substance already on the floor. A shaky hand reached up to touch his forehead and drew back to find the same ichor on his fingers. Only then did realize Lily was holding onto his shoulders supporting him and that he was on the ground with his legs folded underneath him.

“It’s okay,” Harry murmured. “I saw it die. The soul shard is gone. It’s gone.”

Lily just squeezed his shoulders. “We know, son. We saw it too. Rest, Harry. Rest.”
“Hey, you okay, Daph?” Harry asked gently as he looked at his newest partner who had a light sheen over her eyes that he’d almost missed through the sweat on her brow.

“I’m fine, Harry. You worry too much,” she responded smiling at him and sitting up slightly, letting the sheets fall down from her bare shoulders.

Harry frowned and reached up to wipe a finger across the corner of her eye. “Then why are you crying? We didn’t have to have sex, Daph. We could have just gone to sleep. I don’t want to… well you know I didn’t intend to – ”

He cut off as Daphne lightly punched his shoulder with a wry grin. “I know we didn’t have to do anything and I know that you were scared of reminding me of Draco, Mr. Noble. I’m not teary because I’m upset, idiot. I’m teary because this was the first time I’ve slept with a man and not flashed back to that afternoon.” She paused and frowned. “That came out wrong. I’m not sleeping around. I don’t know why I put it that way…” She trailed off and her frown turned to mildly annoyed glare. “I swear, Potter, I always seem to lose the ability to articulate my intent around you these days! It’s annoying! How do you do that?”

Harry chuckled and flashed her a smirk that Neville had taken to dubbing ‘The Potter Charm’. “It’s a talent. Works on guys too if Colin Creevey is any indication.”

Daphne’s glare broke down into an amused lifting of her eyebrows. “Oh really? Should I tell the others we need to watch out for him joining the group?”

“Not by my choice,” Harry said giving a theatrical shudder. “Nothing against Colin and all, but I don’t swing that way. I should probably send him towards Ernie though from what Hannah was saying the other day…Actually,” he said thoughtfully, “I’m surprised a lot of the girls around me seem to…”

Daphne laughed and rolled her eyes. “I imagine we all are. A perfect storm of circumstances. And you have a somewhat small group of close friends. I can assure you that Su at least is not interested in the fairer sex.”

Harry cocked his head surprised. “Oh? And where does that information come from, Mistress Daphne?”

Daphne just shook her head at the teasing. “Tracey apparently approached her to see if she was interested in joining the Slytherin Harem. I was nearby and it was quite amusing to watch.”

“Seriously?” Harry asked laughing. “Wow. So she’s officially decided to build a harem now?”

“Not really. She was mostly worried that she wouldn’t be able to keep up with Luna whenever Luna decides it’s time to get intimate. Since I have no intention of joining in on those trysts she wanted to ensure she had another option for Luna. That little blonde can be quite tiring outside of the bedroom, I shudder to think of what she’ll be like inside it.” Daphne shrugged. “I’m not sure who Tracey is going to set her sights on next. I’m a bit worried that Luna is now in touch with Gabrielle Delacour through Astoria. I already have one Veela trying to tempt me into bed. It’s a bit worrying to consider a second in my other main relationship…”
Harry tried to think of a suitably appropriate response and came up with nothing. Eventually he just shrugged and replied, “Well that would certainly make things interesting.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Daphne muttered.

Harry just nodded agreeably completely missing the sarcasm. “So...how was it? Was I, uh, similar to Tracey?” Daphne’s blue eyes locked onto his green ones and her nostrils flared. Harry immediately sensed danger and tried to backpedal. “Shite, I’ve done it again haven’t I? You’d think by now I’d have gotten used to what was considered appropriate items to ask a girl about.”

Daphne’s annoyance visibly faded and she reached down to playfully smack the back of his head before she laid her own down on his chest. “A, I’d really prefer we don’t start down that road, Harry. It’s never going to end well. B, you can’t easily compare being with a girl to being with a guy. It’s…different. C, you know I love you both so does the difference in sex really matter?”

“No, it doesn’t. Sorry, I was just curious,” he murmured.

“I know,” Daphne sighed and entwined her fingers into his own. “Look, it’s different okay. It’s always going to be different. I can say that while I used to be more relaxed with Tracey thanks to…Draco…that’s apparently not going to be as much of an issue with you anymore as just recently evidenced. I enjoyed this night quite a bit, Harry. You were never a Knight In Shining Armor, until that afternoon. You were always my friend. It’s nice to see that I can go back to thinking of you like my friend again without having to worry about the extra baggage. So to answer your question, it was very good. Satisfied?”

Harry nodded and wrapped his free arm around her tighter. “I’m glad you enjoyed it, Daph. I did too.”

“Good,” Daphne sighed into his chest. She stayed silent for a few moments idly running her hand up and down his muscles. “I am sorry for making your life even more complicated than it used to be.”

Harry laughed at that and shook his head. “Daph, our weird love life is not remotely approaching the level of crazy complications that are my life. Look at my history. In four years of reentering the Wizarding World I’ve discovered I’m a rune savant, blew up a troll’s head, fought a possessed professor for a fake stone that would’ve been safer if I’d never gotten involved, fought a 60 foot snake with a sword and a girl I’d only know for a few months to save another girl possessed by a soul shard of the same man who possessed my teacher, got adopted by another teacher, found a way to kill Dementors while saving my best friends from having their souls eaten and my godfather who was wrongfully imprisoned for a decade, got into a fight with terrorists at the Quidditch World Cup while making friends with French Veela, got entered into a sabotage-ridden Death Tournament, fought my Evil Double –”

“Yada yada yada, yes, yes, I know, Harry Potter’s life is like something out of an adventure book,” Daphne said chuckling.

Harry’s chest vibrated with his answering snickers. “It’s worse than adventure books. I know. I’ve read some of the ‘Harry Potter’s Adventures in...’ novels. Did you know one has me fighting a dragon at age eight? I actually liked that one. I got to ride off into the sunset on its back at the end.”

Daphne lifted her head to stare at him. He just shrugged and smiled. “What? I was curious. Felt I should actually read a few before asking them to stop printing new ones.”
Daphne groaned in frustration as she flopped back down onto him. “People in this world are insane. There’s entertainment and there’s just stupid. Who’s going to believe it’s even remotely possible for an eight year old to tame a dragon?”

“Gabrielle,” Harry stated. He felt Daphne’s jaw drop open and kept talking. “She visited over the summer. Girl looks a lot more her age now. Fleur said something about ‘The Change had finally hit her’ or something. Anyway, after she finally stopped running around the Manor and looking at everything and chattering away in French she handed me that book and asked if I had actually done it because she wanted to meet the dragon, but couldn’t find a place on the grounds with a big enough enclosure. Poor girl was heartbroken when I said most of those stories were made up. She perked up though when I offered to introduce her to Charlie since he could take her to see real dragons.”

“Merlin…thank god you don’t have another House to claim…she’d likely muscle in for one of those spots,” Daphne stated awed.

“Her and Ginny probably,” Harry agreed laughing again. “I agree though. Thank god, that’s not going to happen. I don’t need another House to worry about. I just want to run my store and have a family.”

Daphne stayed silent for nearly a minute. Eventually she asked softly, “Harry, when you say family…do you mean, us, Shiva and Lily or do you mean a family of your own?”

“I want to be a father someday, Daph, if that’s what you’re asking. Can’t say how many kids I want, but yeah, I do want kids.”

“Good answer, Potter. Good answer,” she growled leaning up to capture his lips with her own, before she pulled back smiling. She then pinned his shoulders before she rolled on top of him and winked seductively. “Ready to go again, Wonder Boy?” Harry nodded numbly, and she shifted seating him inside herself with a low moan. Tonight was going to be a good night.

Voldemort eyed his target ensuring that his Death Eaters were in position. Finally – after weeks – the pain had receded. He didn’t know what Potter had done, but he knew it was the boy. He had had a brief glimpse of a small living room consumed by a whirlwind of magic and the boy standing in the middle gazing into the air with a broad smile. Voldemort could only assume that Potter had found a way to rid himself of the Horcrux within him. Voldemort must have been caught in the backlash of the effort involved. His spies had reported that Potter had been incapacitated for several days a month ago though the boy had evidently recovered far more quickly than Voldemort had.

This could not go unanswered. Three Horcruxes were now destroyed and only four remained…his soul was unbalanced, a mere hair’s breadth away from a cursed number of parts. This required recompense – a death for a death. The hunters had been identified and they would fall – one by one.

He would strike in increasing significance to the boy. Let Potter sweat while Voldemort destroyed everything important to him. Kingsley Shacklebolt would be first. With his death, Harry Potter would begin to experience the same clawing fear that was trying to take root in Voldemort. Potter may be a worthy adversary, but Voldemort would not accept the child threatening his immortality.

Voldemort spared a short glance at the half Moon and allowed his mind to briefly drift back. Rookwood had asked why he scheduled the raid for tonight…The question had actually made him laugh. It was simply such an entertaining answer. Potter apparently believed October 31st to be a
A cursed date. A part of Voldemort was tempted to agree with the boy – at least from the Light’s perspective. Some of his most impressive actions and orders always seemed to be carried out on this day year after year…Voldemort chuckled again as he thought how from his own perspective, Halloween might almost be blessed. As long as one discounted his ‘death’ in 1981. And his failure to kill Lily Potter that same night. And his failure with the Stone. And…perhaps this date was cursed for them both? No matter.

“Begin,” he whispered, the force of his prior spell carrying the command to all of his followers. As one forty bodies advanced. Only five were experienced and of those five only two were from his most trusted. He needed at least one lieutenant to cover the flank and the other would lead the charge in case Shacklebolt had any surprises waiting. There was no need for Voldemort to risk his newly healed – and reconstituted – body after all. Not when he had so many willing reserves.

Voldemort ensured that the anti-apparition and anti-portkey spell had been raised as the team breached the front and rear doors. His sycophants in the Ministry had already disabled the Floo network. All avenues of escape should be closed to the Senior Auror.

Voldemort’s expression darkened as spellfire flared inside the building and the screaming cries of pain drifted to his ears before abruptly cutting off. Shacklebolt was alone, but it was no secret that the man was an excellent combatant. He waited until another three new recruits died before he moved forward to enter the building himself. His scowl deepened as he passed a deeply lacerated corpse on the stairs. The loss of Dumbledore seemed to have had the unfortunate side-effect of unchaining the Light from their foolish obsession with stunning his followers. Without Dumbledore, Voldemort was far safer, yet his Death Eaters were in more danger than ever. The irony was not lost on him.

He continued his measured pace towards the battle. It would not due to appear worried or overeager. Not yet at least, not when he was only on the first target. He could not afford to come across as anything less than fully in control until he was targeting Potter’s women. The Metamorph was an impressive combatant after all with extreme stealth skills and the Veela had a great deal of raw destructive potential. It was a shame his followers would never have accepted him converting the women to their cause. Breaking of minds was always so…endearing. That they had already been claimed by Potter made it all the more enticing of an opportunity. Yet…Voldemort had built his foundation on championing Purebloods and with his forces still somewhat below expectations he couldn’t afford to admit half-breeds and Blood Traitors just yet.

Perhaps he’d get lucky and one of the females would survive long enough for him to allow the recruiting requirements to fall.

Voldemort strode into the main living room and took in the scene. He couldn’t help a small sigh. Shacklebolt was successfully holding off two recruits as well as Rookwood and Travers. Such a shame to destroy one so impressive. He disliked having to destroy so much of this country in order to rule the remainder.

As Voldemort raised his wand Shacklebolt pulled out one of Potter’s infernal runes and unleashed a three foot spike of metal. It speared straight through Rookwood’s weakened shield and tore through the man’s throat. Rookwood dropped like a stone, his blood painting the walls as he died.

Voldemort’s appreciation of his target ended and his outrage boiled over. He roared in frustration and hatred and cast curse after curse. He barely noted as Travers twisted and dove out of the room and his curses killed one of the recruits too slow to follow the lieutenant’s lead. Shacklebolt’s defenses held for five seconds then shattered. Voldemort sent a bone-breaker followed by an eviscerating curse followed by a severing curse. The large man’s body crumpled at his feet.
Scowling Voldemort took several seconds to re-center himself and push his aggression down. He was having more and more trouble with that lately. It was becoming annoying. “Report,” he said softly.

“No further resistance, My Lord,” Travers said stepping forward and nodding his head. “There was no one else present. Shacklebolt was trying to reach for one of Potter’s runes when we first breached his study however Rookwood managed to destroy it before it activated. I’m not certain what that one would have done. The boy has quite the assortment he has distributed to his friends…”

Voldemort shook his head. “No matter. Enough time has passed that we must leave. Have one of the newer personnel retrieve what they can from Rookwood. He might have kept something useful on his person. You may leave the body. Let them see that our might is impressive enough that even Unspeakables are not safe.” A frown of confusion crossed Travers’ face yet he proved his worth by swallowing any objection and immediately moving to comply.

Voldemort strode from the room and smiled. One target down. Now to begin planning for the werewolf.

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Halloween. October 31st. Lily had been subdued for most of the day. For most others this was supposed to be a happy occasion. It was a day of celebration and fun. Even for the followers of the old ways, it was a time to rejoice for they could connect with their lost loved ones during All Hallows Eve.

For Lily Potter all it served as was a memory of the past. Halloween was a reminder of the years lost, the son who was no longer a child, the husband buried, the sadistic murderer still on the loose. She had known waking up that this day would be difficult. What she hadn’t quite realized was just how much it also affected her son. Her friends – and Shiva in particular – had warned her that Harry was especially antsy and jumpy on this day but…well the true scale of that warning had eluded her.

When he’d shifted to Midnight and nearly clawed her as she simply hugged him from behind in the morning that warning became far more real. It would have been amusing if he hadn’t been utterly serious about the whole thing. Even still…he had to be overreacting. Harry Potter’s life was complicated true, but they weren’t talking about Friday the 13th here. Halloween sucked, but it was just a sad day, not a day to expect the Apocalypse.

“Lily,” Sirius said sitting down at the staff table next to her, his face pale and strained. “Grab some food then get Harry and the others. I…I have some bad news that everyone needs to hear.”

Lily felt her stomach clench and she cast an involuntary glance towards Hermione and Daphne. “The girls?”

“Fleur and Tonks are fine. Remus is too. It’s Kingsley.” Lily’s insides began to loosen though she hated herself for it. Something bad had just happened to a family friend and she was happy it hadn’t happened to someone she was personally interested in? “Finish eating. I imagine the shite is going into the blender soon so might as well eat while you can.”

“Shite hits the fan, it doesn’t go in the blender,” Lily responded automatically. His recent attempts to use more Muggle phrases were endearing at times though the timing of this one left something to be desired. “Points for trying though.”

Sirius sighed and shook his head. “I don’t care about the right phrasing, Lils. I wouldn’t even be
down here if Minerva hadn’t made the feast mandatory.”

“Neither would I,” Lily murmured.

The rest of Halloween feast was extremely subdued and passed in a bit of a blur for her. She managed to grab Shiva as her girlfriend finished her meal and with barely a glance at Lily’s face the Runes professor went rigid. “Who died?”

Lily shook her head and whispered back, “I don’t have details. I think Kingsley.”

“Goddess,” Shiva cursed. “I’ll grab the teens. Core group?”

“Yes. Sirius is already heading up to the Room. Conference configuration.”

Shiva nodded then pulled Lily into a hug. “It’ll be okay, Lils. We’re getting close and we’ll take the bastard out before he does anything else,” she whispered into Lily’s ear. Pulling back and giving her a quick kiss on the cheek, Shiva moved away and let Lily trail off after Sirius.

She had just finished materializing the door to the Room of Requirement when a gang of teenagers practically ran around the corner and into the hallway. “Mum!” Harry called from the forefront as he skidded to a stop in front of her. “How bad? What happened? Are there more attacks coming?”

Lily just gave him a sad smile and squeezed his shoulder. “You probably know more than I do at the moment, Harry. Especially considering I imagine you spoke to Tonks and Fleur on your way up here.”

“Fleur,” he said nodded curtly. “She’s okay. Tonks is busy in the training room cutting down dozens of target dummies so she’s not okay, but she’s not hurt. Mione talked with Remus and Daphne tried to talk with Amelia, but – ”

“She was too busy to explain and all she said was there had been an attack by the Death Eaters led by Voldemort,” Daphne finished.

“Let’s take this inside everyone,” Hermione said pushing to the front and opening the door. “We shouldn’t discuss this in the middle of the corridor.”

Lily nodded and followed the students inside squeezing Shiva’s hand briefly as the woman passed by. Once everyone was inside, they took seats around the table with Sirius in the middle drinking a cup of hot chocolate – presumably provided by Kreacher or one of the castle elves.

She had barely sat down when Harry started firing off questions to Sirius. “Amelia said there was an attack and Shiva said it was bad. You’re never this upset unless Pettigrew is involved so either the rat learned to fight or someone died. Who died? How many were hurt? Is there more coming? What are we doing in response?

Lily could only blink in astonishment. When had Harry become a general? She’d seen him defend against the Aurors over the summer and she’d seen the aftermath of his sprint to reach Daphne – half the castle had seen the aftermath of that, claw marks on walls and floors were not a normal occurrence after all and the destroyed classroom on the Third Floor had been home to veritable fan club until Minerva had come back to fix the damages. This though was completely different. Her fifteen year old son had taken charge of the situation and was speaking of events as if he was getting ready to lead the charge on Voldemort himself!

Maybe that was exactly what Harry was doing…
“Amelia called to tell me as much as she could while the investigation was getting started,” Sirius said sighing and setting down his mug. “The Death Eaters conducted a raid on Kingsley Shacklebolt’s house. It appears that there were at least two of the Inner Circle and, from what the neighbors said, almost three dozen rank and file members. Plus Voldemort himself.”

Murmured curses followed that statement and Lily felt the last bit of hope she’d had die. Kingsley hadn’t survived.

“Shack did good. He did really good,” Sirius said raising his glass in a silent salute. “He took out ten of the regulars and he managed to kill Rookwood too.”

Lily’s mouth twitched into a small grin at that. The ex-Unspeakable had been one of the worst of Voldemort’s minions. He had been sadistic in a detached manor, interested only in furthering new research projects without a care to the pain or horror his efforts and work induced. Rookwood’s ‘test subjects’ had been permanent residents of St. Mungo’s since before Lily had ‘died’. From what she’d heard several of them had been trying to get the Healers to let them die ever since arriving under their care…

Sirius grimaced and shook his head. “We know that Voldemort fought personally. There were too many bodies in too bad of a shape for him not to be involved. Amelia thinks that he lost it after Rookwood died. Kingsley didn’t make it out of that engagement.” Faces fell and heads hung around the table. “I think it’s safe to say that this was in retaliation for the Horcrux Hunt.”

Hermione’s gaze snapped up with a deep frown etched across her features. “Why wait until now if that’s the case?”

Shiva held her hand up at that question. “Snape reported that Voldemort had been staying secluded for the past few weeks. The dates coincided with when Harry used the Soul Cage so we assumed that he had been hit by some sort of backlash or something. Why he was knocked down for so long compared to the kid is anyone guess though.”

“We were tied through it,” Harry said. “The Soul Cage may have traced the link back and attacked his connection to his own body while it was expelling the soul shard in me. The link would’ve broken as soon as the piece in me was gone, but I imagine he’d already been hurt pretty bad. Too bad I didn’t think of that before…I could’ve tried to weaponize it…”

Luna shook her head, no hint of a dreamy expression anywhere in her appearance. “It’s good that you didn’t, Harry. Killing a ghost would be much harder than killing a living being. We don’t know for certain that Voldemort would be destroyed if he was a wraith when the final Horcrux is vanquished. I don’t think we can afford to take that risk.”

Harry sighed and nodded. “Yeah, you’re right Luna. It’s better to be safe than sorry. I’d hate to have to kill him a third time.”

Lily frowned. “As interesting as that is, Sirius did you have anything else to report?”

“Sort of, but nothing directly related to Kingsley so if you have any other questions ask now,” he said.

Neville raised his hand. “I have a question. Why didn’t he call for help?”

“Or portkey away?” Susan asked immediately after. “He should’ve had a finished version of the Tracekey now shouldn’t he? I thought Harry had distributed those to almost everyone by now with Aunt Amy’s help.”
Sirius nodded. “He has and we do. The problem is that not everyone likes to sleep with earrings in. I know Shack takes his off and leaves it by the bed at night. The call for help isn’t the important thing though as he had other means at hand of contacting help. He used them too, it’s why the Aurors were able to respond quickly…just not quickly enough. The Tracekey is really a mixed bag. The way it’s designed, he could have ended up back at their headquarters if the Death Eaters had portkeyed into location within range. Though…I don’t think they did. Amy agrees with me. She said that it looked like Shack might have tried to get to his rune stone before the attackers got between it and him.”

Hannah shook her head and grabbed Neville’s hand. “I knew I wasn’t being paranoid keeping that in my pocket.”

“I recommend necklaces,” Tracey said. “A bit of a glamour and it looks just like a regular necklace. Plus it’s always touching skin so you can activate it whenever.” Lily stared in wonder at Tracey. Was everyone Harry associated with at Mad-Eye levels of paranoia? At least she wasn’t the only one looking askance at the Slytherin. “What? After what happened to my girlfriend do you really think I’d walk around without a bit of a security blanket people? Besides I’m a half-blood so I’m going to be a target anyway.”

Luna cocked her head and patted Tracey’s arm. “We understand, love. Though I think the glamour is a bit much. I find the rune stone quite stylish myself!”

Harry rubbed his forehead. “Sirius what was the other thing?”

“Remus, Tonks, Fleur and I are going to be raiding Bella’s manor tomorrow.” Shouting broke out at that announcement. Sirius responded by shouting over the rest of the voices. “We’re not going unprepared, people! We’re not going to get a better opportunity than this. If we raid now, they’ll think this is in retaliation to the death of Kingsley and they won’t suspect we’re looking for the Horcrux while we’re there!”

Harry scowled as the room quieted. “I thought we agreed that it was unlikely to be hidden in the Lestrange manor. Just because there are Aurors watching place doesn’t mean the Death Eaters can’t get into it. Voldemort was pretty clear when he thought about not being able to reach it.”

Sirius shrugged. “We’re running out of ideas, pup. Unless my bitch of a cousin dropped the damnable thing into the English Channel we’re going to have to search her house sooner or later. Might as well do it now.”

“It’s always possible it is actually there, kid,” Shiva asked trying to mediate between the two. “He could have noticed you in his head at the time and tried to trick you. It’s not like we’ve had a ton of luck finding the one here…”

Harry’s scowl deepened. “I know. Which is ridiculous! We’ve been going room by freaking room through this whole bloody castle and nothing so much as twitches! We’ve found five new secret passages, two secret rooms and one new staircases thanks to the elves helping out and yet nothing that remotely feels, looks or acts like a bloody Horcrux!”

Hermione laid a hand on his back and rubbed small circles. “It’s okay, Harry. We missed something obvious and once we figure it out we can bang our heads on the table. Until then, we have to stay positive.”

“Kinda hard to do that at the moment, Mione,” Harry muttered. Hermione sighed and wrapped her arm fully around him pulling him into a crushing embrace for a moment. Lily found herself in complete agreement.
“Look, Sirius, are you willing to take anyone else on this raid?” Lily asked turning the conversation back around.

“Amy is sending Scrimgeour and Proudfoot with us and I think a Hit Wizard is going to hitch a ride as well. We need to sell that this is revenge not a hunt,” Sirius said nodding.

Lily sighed and leaned back into her chair. “That’ll do I guess.”

Daphne was still frowning as she asked, “Just how sure are you that your Horcrux detection spell works Sirius? We have no proof of concept since we destroyed the others prior to you finding it in your library. We don’t even really know the range. What if there really is one of the items there and you miss it?”

Sirius shrugged again. “I’m…pretty sure it works. I consulted with Phineas Nigellus and he said the spell had worked in his day so…pretty sure. I still say we should only count on it for about 21 meters. Anyway we’re not really using the spell. We’re looking for priceless artifacts. That’s what he’ll have used.”

Shiva sighed and shook her head. “I don’t like this, but it’s your call, Sirius. Please let us know when you all finish so that our minds will be a bit eased.”

Sirius nodded. “We will.”

Harry leaned back and closed his eyes. “Thanks, Sirius. Everyone else, if you haven’t been following Tracey and Hannah’s example, please start wearing your Tracekeys on you. It’s not a perfect escape, but at least you’ll have something in an emergency. Everyone staying at Hogwarts let’s recenter. I think I’m going to talk to the elves again. Maybe if I ask the question a bit differently they’ll have better advice. Luna you’re friendly with the Grey Lady right? I know she and the Bloody Baron are two of the oldest ghosts in the castle; can you ask her if she has any idea where things might be hidden?”

“Oh course, Harry,” Luna said nodding.

“I’ll see if the Baron has any idea as well,” Daphne said. “I don’t like that we are outsourcing these questions so much. The ghosts talk…”

Harry grimaced. “I know, but we’re running out of options. We have to find these bloody things, Daph. Please, I just…please?”

A round of heads bobbed across the table and the meeting wound down. Lily let the students troop out of the Room before she moved over to sit on Shiva’s lap. “Our boy is fighting a war.”

“He’s been fighting a war for awhile now, Lils. I missed it for a long time too,” she sighed and wrapped her arms around the red-head. “This thing with Voldemort needs to end soon. I would really prefer to have a rune savant for a son rather than a soldier.”

Lily chuckled. “Well at least you got to see his growth spurt! Maybe I’ll get to see the next one’s.”

Shiva blinked and pulled back. “Come again?”

Lily rewound to go over the last few moments and paled. “Not what I meant! Not right now! Not…oh bloody hell.”
Tonks’ hair was still deep red and she was having a hard time preventing herself from shuffling in place while waiting for the go signal. The team was finally assembled outside of Bellatrix’s manor and Tonks was still riled up.

Shack was dead. Even before working with him on the Horcrux hunt she’d worked with him several times on cases. He was a good guy; he had been one of the few Aurors who’d actually taken her seriously. He was funny and kind and intelligent. And now he was dead because he’d been helping them.

Every Auror – and ex-Auror – knew that someday their number might come up. It was the nature of the job after all: hunt Dark Wizards, find the evil bad-guys, take them down, possibly die in service. The job wasn’t pretty and it was far more dangerous than it was for Muggle coppers. Cops had to deal with guns and bombs. Aurors had to deal with mind control/wipe spells, explosion curses, evisceration spells, invisible attackers…a large part of initial Auror training dealt with confirming that the trainee actually fully understood the risks of what they were volunteering for.

None of that made losing a friend and old partner any easier.

“You must keep your head, mon amour,” Fleur murmured from beside her lightly stroking her arm.

Tonks took a deep breath and nodded. “Not that easy, Flower. It doesn’t help that I think this is useless. Bella’s insane, but she’s not stupid. It’s not going to be in the house. We’ll be lucky to find any Death Eaters inside to take out.”

Fleur sighed. “I worry when you get bloodzirsty. Finding ze Deaz Eaters in zis house would not be a good zing, Nym.”

“Would be good therapy though,” Tonks muttered refusing to acknowledge – at least verbally – that Fleur was probably right.

“All personnel standby,” the Auror Comm Stone clipped their belt chirped softly. Sirius was the secondary leader for this raid while the Hit Wizard was primary. She didn’t know the guy’s name. It wasn’t like he was going to be around long anyway. Why Hit Wizards weren’t being dispatched regularly to fight Voldemort’s forces escaped Tonks. Amelia had said something about the few qualified ones keeping other wannabe-Overlords from taking advantage of the chaotic situation, but it had all sounded like justification to her. Maybe she’d was just too disillusioned now.

This guy had supposedly owed Amelia a favor which was the only reason he was tagging along. Tonks was torn between being grateful that her old boss had called it in for a raid on Bellatrix Lestrange’s manor and frustration that Amelia had wasted it on a raid that was unlikely to mean much in the long run.

No sense worrying about it now. Maybe they would get lucky…

“Commence Retribution in five, four, three, two, one…breach breach breach!”

The small group surged forward. Tonks caught a glimpse of Remus and Sirius blasting out a window on the side and jumping in before she leapt through her own following right behind Fleur’s fireball. The Veela landed just behind her and they went back-to-back covering both ends of the hallway. “West wing clear,” Tonks reported tapping her rune stone.

“Copy, east wing clear.”
“North wing clear.”

Shouts rang out through the halls and the Auror comm stone chirped, “Hostiles south wing! Four targets! Priority target 3 spotted!”

“Dolohov,” Tonks muttered her eyes narrowing. “We need to –”

“Nymphadora,” Fleur said insistently, “we must search ze premises as per our mission. Voldemort comes first.”

Tonks growled but nodded her assent. Fleur and Tonks moved apart to begin quickly investigating their wing. Fleur used Sirius’ – suspect – spell while Tonks focused on carefully eyeing the artifacts on display throughout the house. It would be just like Bellatrix to hide something exceptionally valuable in plain sight. She’d think it was being exceptionally clever, and what’s worse was she’d be mostly right. Many casual observers would overlook things on display as being simple ornamentation or ostentation and nothing worthy of more than idle appreciation.

This was something Bella had been given by Voldemort though so…Tonks’ scowl deepened. Bellatrix would never have left it in her home. She’d have thrown it into the safest, most secure location she could think of. A Pureblood’s home may be secure, but it would never be safe. Not while the Death Eaters were still considered terrorists.

After twenty minutes of searching Tonks and Fleur had completed their assigned wing. Tonks’ mood had darkened more and more as they finally cleared the last room. “Changeling to Beta,” she said into her rune stone. “West wing swept. Twelve prescribed Dark artifacts, seven Cursed artifacts, three ‘trophies’, negative prime target.”

“Beta copies,” Sirius replied sounding just as frustrated as she felt. “All other wings are close to completion as well. Regroup in Entrance Hall.”

“En route.” Tonks nodded to Fleur and they moved back towards the front entrance in the north, the confiscated items floating behind them. Tonks was levitating the three corpses they had found in a hidden room. One of them was far too small.

One day soon, Tonks was going to find her aunt and… ‘remove’ her from the family.

“Changeling, Harpy, well done,” the Hit Wizard said nodded towards them as they stepped into the hall. “The others just reported in as well. Good call with this raid. Target 3 escaped, but we got one of the others with him. Unfortunately the man wasn’t in the Inner Circle though he seems to have information on the vampire covens joining up. Teams 2 and 4 are bringing him back to base for interrogation. Thirty Class D artifacts recovered and twelve Class C. Pass off the victims to Hermit.”

“Any casualties?” Fleur asked.

The Hit Wizard shook his head. “Minor injuries only. We got lucky. This was a win, girls. Take it for what it is.”

Tonks scowled and moved over to confer quietly with Sirius and Remus while Fleur moved Bellatrix’s prior victims. As she pulled up next to them, Tonks whispered, “Nothing from you two either?”

“Unfortunately no,” Remus replied his eyes narrowed and nostrils flared as he eyed the cloth draped bodies. “We knew it was a long shot anyway. I still say we should try to detect something in the surrounding waters. If she’s insane enough to keep posed corpses, she’s certainly insane
enough to drop it into a trench.”

“Not when he might have asked for it back,” Sirius responded with a heavy sigh. “We’ll have to go back to the drawing board. Hell, maybe we should talk with Charlie Weasley. No better place to safeguard things than in a dragon’s hoard…”

Tonks chuckled darkly and her hair color deepened until the red turned almost black. “Well maybe we’ll get lucky and capture her. Cut out the middleman.”

“We can hope to be so lucky, mon amour;” Fleur commented walking over with weary look. “The oizers will finish cleanup. It is time for us to leave.” Sirius and Remus nodded. Tonks moved to follow after them with one final look around the horrible manor around her.

“One day, Aunty. One day.”

“Lily you can’t avoid answering this forever,” Shiva complained glaring at Lily.

“Sure I can. Sirius does it all the time. I learned from the best,” her girlfriend replied with an infuriating grin.

“Lils, I’m serious.”

Harry groaned from his seat on the couch next to her and rubbed his forehead. “I came here to relax. If you two are going to argue the whole time I’ll go hang out with Tracey.”

Shiva cocked her head at the boy momentarily caught off guard. “Tracey? Why her?”

“Because,” Harry said rolling his eyes, “Luna is always distracting even when she doesn’t play it up. Hermione and Daphne would both pester me over what I’m working on. Susan and Hannah would try to keep working out the general concept. Neville would try to convince me to work on his Evil Walking Plant rune again…Tracey’s the only one who’d just let me work.”

Shiva could only stare at him for a few moments. “Evil Walking Plant rune?” she finally managed to choke out.

“Yeah. He wanted me to adjust one of the Fertile Ground stones I made for him last summer. ‘Evil Dead’ apparently gave him some ideas and now he’s obsessed with making a walking tree that uses its roots and branches like arms to attack the Death Eaters.” Harry grimaced and shook his head. “The original name he wanted for it was ‘Evil Death Eater Molesting Tree Soldier’. Evil Walking Plant was the compromise. I keep telling him that’s outside my skill set, but he keeps trying. He’d have far better luck figuring it out than me. I just work with runes, not plants.”

“Why in heaven’s name…” Lily asked gaping.

“He wants to get at Bellatrix and Crouch even more than Tonks does,” Harry said shrugging. “I’m not really one to comment on his choice of revenge considering what I’ve thought about doing to Voldemort.”

Shiva groaned and rubbed her head. “Kid…you know what, nevermind. Just please don’t unleash the Triffids on the world yeah? And Lily, you heard the kid, stop arguing.”

Lily glared at Shiva before dissolving into chuckles and rolling her eyes at the woman. “Honestly, love, I’m sorry for earlier. All I meant was I want more children someday. Someday far into the future, not right now. It’s not something that needs to be discussed at the moment. We’ve barely
been dating for a month and a half and I warned you I fully intend to move slower than I did with James. I’m not looking to speak about children right now.”

“Ah. Well that’s good,” Shiva said looking somewhat relieved.

“Can we not talk about sex at all please?” Harry asked his voice strained. “Just because I’m okay with you both dating doesn’t mean I’m okay hearing this kind of thing.”

“Hey, kid, some of the fun of being a mum is getting to tease your child. Deal with it,” Shiva commented winking at him. Harry just groaned again and leaned back over his papers. “So what is you’re working on anyway? I haven’t seen this design yet.”

He pointed to a cluster on a schematic off to the side. “It’s either going to be called the Live Wire or the Ley Beam. It’s the Chain Reactor Beam and the Yamato Cannon on steroids. Sorta like a siege cannon. I’d tap into the local ley line, draw it to the surface a bit and channel the energy through the rune cluster directing it out at the target.”

Shiva looked over the drawings and bit her lip in thought. “Good idea but I don’t see any way to miniaturize this…It would make a good static defense but as a portable battle option? I don’t see it.”

Harry nodded. “No you’re right. I was thinking of putting this around the manor in case they try to attack us there like they did with Kingsley. I think I need a cluster about a meter in width of strong stone in order to safely charge this. Even then it probably won’t last for long and the caster’s hand will be a little burnt.”

“Um, wouldn’t you need to be near a ley line for this to work?” Lily asked laying her hand on Shiva’s back as she glancing over the two.

“Yeah, so it’s not exactly super useful everywhere, but it’s a nice powerful option for the places it can be used.”

“Cool,” Lily said. “Well let me know if you two need any help. I’m going to work on this potion recipe.”

“Will do hon,” Shiva said erasing one segment from Harry’s design and adding in a different cluster.

Ten minutes later her comm stone earring chirped. Tonks’ voice came over the line shortly after. “Hey, Shiva, wanted to call you before Harry, Mione or Daphne. We just finished up.”

Shiva leaned back and grunted. “I’m with Harry and Lily right now so I can brief them after we’re done. You don’t sound happy, Tonks. That bad?”

“No casualties,” Tonks sighed. Shiva quickly repeated that to the others. They visibly relaxed with Harry falling bonelessly back into the couch. “Bella’s manor is even more disgusting than I had expected which is saying something. We found a few bodies she kept posed and dozens of cursed items. Dolohov was there, but he got away. We captured another guy who knows something about vampire clans joining up; he’s with Amelia. No luck on the scavenger hunt.”

“Damn. Well we figured it was unlikely…still though, that sucks.”

“Agreed,” Tonks said sounding tired. “Look, I feel like I have her filth infecting me. I’m going to make a quick call to Mione and Daph then hop in the shower. Give Harry my love, yeah?”
“Will do. Let us know if you need anything.”

Tonks chuckled morosely. “An end to this would be nice. Bye, Shiva. Sirius should be back in a few minutes if you want more details.”

She ended the call and Shiva looked to the other two occupants. “Harry, Tonks sends her love. Sirius is on his way back. No luck on the scavenger hunt. Bellatrix is apparently even more sick than we had realized. No one on our side was hurt and we managed to capture someone with information on vampires that are being recruited.”

Harry nodded and leaned back down over his schematics. “They’re okay. Good. That’s good.”

Shiva raised her eyebrows at him then turned to Lily. They both wore identical worried gazes. Shiva reached and took Lily’s hand. Hopefully this would be over soon and Harry could go back to worrying about the usual teenager things instead of war.

“You know, I think I’m going to go and find Mione now. Thanks for keeping me company while we waited for word back,” Harry said sweeping his papers into a pile and dropping them in his bag.

“Anytime, honey. Our doors are always open,” Lily said smiling gently at him. Harry nodded and heading out.

Shiva closed and locked the door as soon as he was gone. Turning to regard Lily she cocked her head to the side. “So...you want another kid in the future?”

Lily groaned and Shiva added a point onto her invisible tally. She was back ahead. “I did just say we don’t have to talk about this, hon.”

“Who’s talking about it? I’m just genuinely curious. You gave birth to one, I’m just raising one. Doesn’t that hurt? How can you want another after going through that once!” she grinned and waggled her eyebrows waiting to see how long it would take for Lily to realize she was teasing.

“Well to be honest I don’t quite remember how much it hurt. You can’t use spells that near to a birth and potions aren’t recommended for the same reason. I remember screaming at James that I was going to kill him for doing this to me and then...” Lily stopped and finally looked up to see the expression on Shiva’s face. Lily stopped and threw a pillow towards her face.

Laughing Shiva caught it and plopped down into the seat next to Lily. “Sorry, really couldn’t resist.”

Lily glared for a moment before her lips twisted up into a scary smile. “Oh that’s fine. You know I may just have to punish you for that though...”

Shiva’s eyebrows rose and she had to fight to push down her own hungry grin. “Really? Well I should probably punish you then for starting the whole thing off you know.”

“Hmm...true.” Lily licked her lips seductively and eyed Shiva. “Perhaps we should move this ‘argument’ into the bedroom then.”

Shiva stood and pulled Lily to her feet. “I’m thinking that’s a requirement.” She playfully pushed Lily towards the inner door and as soon as they were through she paused and grimaced before grabbing a sock and hanging it onto the doorknob. At Lily’s raised eyebrows Shiva just shrugged. “He knows the password for the inner door too. Do you really want to risk him walking in again?”
Lily shuddered and hurriedly shook her head. “Good call. Wait Harry knows the password to your actual bedroom?”

“I was 19! I had no idea what I was doing and now it would be weird to change them without telling him. Now can we please stop talking about Harry? I believe we were in the middle of something.” The days around Halloween might be cursed for the Potter family, but if Shiva could succeed in taking at least one of their minds off the sadness of the recent day her mission would be complete.

Lily laughed and moved to take off her shirt. “Well if you insist.”

Shiva grabbed Lily’s arms and held them behind her back with one hand while leaning in to capture her lips in a deep kiss. “Not so fast, love,” she whispered pulling back a few moments later. “I believe this was intended to be punishment.”

Lily groaned into Shiva’s neck. “You are so mean.”

“You’ll get your turn in a few minutes.” Grinning like a cat, Shiva flicked her wand and had Lily’s arms frozen in their current position before ever so slowly moving to pull the woman’s trousers off. “Oh, orange and black huh? Festive.”

Lily blushed. “Well, it fulfills both the Halloween spirit and the mourning requirement right.” She shifted uncomfortably, wincing. “And would you mind switching my arms around? This position might get a tad uncomfortable shortly,” she admitted a touch ruefully.

Shiva laughed and finished pulling Lily’s bottoms down her long silky white legs, standing back up and lightly pecking her lover on the lips. “Sure, hon. Bed?”

“Bed,” she agreed fervently.

Shiva cast a quick spell to unlink Lily’s arms and gently pushed her back onto the bed pulling off her shirt in the process. Shiva smiled, her Lily’s nipples had already started to harden. This was going to be fun! Lily raised her arms spreading them out to either side and soon enough fuzzy orange satin flew out of Shiva’s wand to tie around both posts and her lover’s wrists. Lily smirked approvingly, raising a quizzical eyebrow. “When did you learn to color them?”

Shiva shrugged lithely. “Tonks showed me the spell a few days ago,” Shiva said. “I couldn’t decide whether it was awkward getting sex advice from my son’s girlfriend so I just decided to treat her like a friend with a few kinks and ignore the rest of the implications.”

“Good idea. Now get busy. I want my turn!” Lily replied spreading her legs suggestively.

Shiva shook her head laughing and stepped off the bed. “You’re in such a hurry! One would think you didn’t deserve to be teased a bit first,” she said, the last few words almost a purr. She set her wand down on the bed and started to sway her hips hypnotically side to side in a slow dance shedding her clothes as she moved. “Fleur happened to know a bit of dance. I highly recommend talking to her about it.”

Lily’s answer was a low growl of approval, followed by an almost whimper as she bit her lips and pressed her thighs together, shifting slightly. Finally Shiva rid herself of the last stitch of her clothing and, climbing slowly onto the bed between Lily’s legs, smiled saucily. “Finally,” Lily murmured hopefully.

Shiva just shook her head and raised her eyebrows. “Still so impatient.” She slowly held up a hand and lowered it to her own breasts, plucking lightly at the nubs there. “One must learn to be patient
grasshopper,” she remonstrated silkily.

Lily bit her lip as she watched Shiva hovering over her massaging herself. Periodically pinching and rubbing at turns. “Not fair,” she said, sounding a touch weak even to herself.

“You brought up kids, darling. This is totally fair,” Shiva argued, then smirked drifting her hand down lower across her belly finally settling just barely low enough she was brushing her more private reaches. Lily groaned in response, rubbing her thighs back and forth a bit, hoping the mild friction would ease some of her tension. Shiva just smiled wider and leaned down to lightly nip at Lily’s breast before pulling back almost immediately.

Shiva’s breathing increased and she started panting lightly as she pressed her hand lower finally finding the cleft between her legs. “I believe you were the one who wanted to take this slow after all Lily,” she teased happily, as her fingers slowly parted her lower lips and pressed inward, causing her to sigh.

Lily growled again watching that and unconsciously bucked her hips upwards, revealing the small damp patch she’d left on the sheets to her lover’s pleased eyes. Shiva, paused reaching out and used one hand to press down, cupping Lily’s cleft just enough to hold her in place without providing any true stimulation. Lily bit her lip again and moaned softly. “Please, Shiva, stop teasing me,” she begged.

Shiva considered for a second, her fingers working away even as she thought about it, before heaving a theatrical sigh and withdrawing her hand from her Lily’s crotch. Slightly damper for being there. “Well I guess we can end this punishment session a little early this time. You’re being so good after all.” Shiva whispered as she shifted back and lowered herself so that she could lightly kiss Lily’s legs moving up from the inner thighs ever so slowly. Lily gasped slightly as Shiva nearly reached her core before pressing upwards.

She almost moaned in disappointment as Shiva straightened and stared into her eyes. That was before she leaned in, kissing Lily briefly before settling back and grabbing her wand to release the bindings.

Again Shiva pressed her advantage, capturing Lily’s lips with her own and caressing her breasts. Lily just returned it for a time, before tentatively moving her own hands to Shiva own breasts. This time it was her turn to moan.

Shiva’s hands abandoned their work on her lover’s chest and slid to Lily’s flanks. Before slowly drifting lower, as they dropped so too did she, her lips parting from Lily’s as she lowered herself to rest between the woman’s knees. There she felt her lover’s hands rest on top of her head, the request clear, she just turned her eyes upwards to wink at the other woman before her hands settled on Lily’s knees and pushed them a little farther apart.

Shiva shimmied slightly so her own bottom was slightly elevated into the air as she rested on her knees, unaware of what the sight of her wiggling backside did to Lily. She worked one hand down between her own knees to her favorite spot and started working as she lowered her lips to her lover’s crotch.

Sucking, teasing and gentle nipping that was the game, nothing that would hurt. Her lips and teeth gently worrying Lily’s lips, the thumb from her free hand rubbing gently at her button. Her tongue occasionally darting out to probe deeper.

It didn’t take long, Lily’s breaths came faster, her body started to twitch, and she started to groan. Finally, she let go, her body sinking into trembling gasps as she achieved release, and a small gush
of warm liquid gushing across Shiva’s tongue.

Lily continued to tremble and jerk for a few seconds before sagging back bonelessly onto her pillow, then barking out a short laugh. “Knew there was a reason I started dating you,” Lily teased.

Chuckling lightly, Shiva lay there on her stomach peering up at Lily. She poked her lover gently on the thigh not far from her still quivering core. “Better now, love?”

“Oh, yes. I think we can safely say that!” Lily laughed, then a small spark lit in her eye, an almost hungry look as she noted that Shiva’s hand was still working lower down on her own release. “Now I believe it was my turn to do a bit of punishing, yes?”

Shiva shivered in anticipation, and rolled over swinging around so her lower end was closest to her lover. Lily chuckled, clapping her hands on Shiva’s hips and drug them closer to her. “Now then. What will it be tonight I wonder? Fingers...tongue and lips?” she teased, before reaching forward to cup her lover’s cleft. “Or maybe you’d like to try that position we found in the book,” she suggested, wagging her eyebrows.

Shiva thought about that, all the options were tempting but she was sooo close, she could practically scream. “Ugh,” she groaned, “I so want to try that out. But later okay? I need to finish, or things are going to get ugly!” she teased. “Fingers.”

Lily nodded gamely. She backed up before settling down on her chest, resting on her elbows, feet kicked up and ankles crossed. She trailed her fingernail down the pale skin of Shiva’s inner thigh. “Oh really?” she asked huskily.

“Really,” Shiva breathed as Lily’s finger skipped across her button and shivered.

Lily wasn’t a delicate kind of girl, and that suited Shiva just fine in times like these. Lily just laughed before drawing two fingers together and pushing them gently but firmly inside her, quickly finding her ‘spot’ and massaging it for a moment before withdrawing to begin slowly rocking in and out, pressing her at that delightful little bundle of nerves each time her fingers bottomed out.

Soon, it was Shiva who was quaking and trembling, and she was pleased when Lily’s hand snaked out to grab her wand before directing silencing charms at the walls, ceiling and door. Lily worked at her only a few moments more after that, before she came apart with a cry.

Shiva lay there for a time, quivering deliciously, before shifting up onto her elbows. Lily smiling at her expectantly, whilst playing with herself. “So, my turn again?” Lily asked playfully.

Shiva smiled – mission accomplished. This was going to be a long night. And she was going to love every minute of it!

Luna sat behind Tracey in the Slytherin dorms idly braiding the older girl’s hair while Coco sat on Tracey’s lap and nipped playfully at Tracey’s fingers. Luna smiled at the two and finished one braid moving onto the next. “Tracey, have you considered that we’re focusing a bit too hard on the box?”

Tracey blinked looking up from the snorkack and trying to eye the little bit of Luna that she could see. “You’re going to have to explain that one a bit, hon.”

Luna shrugged. “I mean with the scavenger hunt. We’ve hit a wall with only two left to actively locate. We even know where one is and the general specifics of the other. I think everyone has
been so focused on the box we’ve constructed for the locations that no one has stopped to consider how they were hidden.”

Tracey made noncommittal noise and turned back to Coco. “I’m not sure I follow. Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

“No really. We’re looking for where it’s hiding. We’re not looking for why they chose that specific spot. If we reverse it we might be able to guess the spot.”

“Still sounds like what we’re doing, Luna,” Tracey said grimacing. Coco headbutted her palm and stared up at the Slytherin causing Luna to giggle.

“It’s certainly similar, but it’s not quite the same. I just think we need to expand our box slightly. I’ll think on it and see what I come up with. The Grey Lady has agreed to speak with me soon as well so hopefully I can work out something from that meeting.”

Tracey nodded. “Well let me know how that works out, hon. And if you need me for anything just let me know.”

Luna smiled brightly. She may have had friends for two years now, but it was still nice to be reminded of that fact at times. “Of course. You and Harry will be the first ones to know! Now, I was thinking that we could dye your hair green. It would go very nicely with your robes!”

“Oh hell no!” Tracey said trying to squirm away. Luna wrapped her arms around her girlfriend refusing to let go.

“Awww, maybe just half?”

“Not happening!”

“Awww…”

Dumbledore opened the Quibbler copy he’d received earlier. The Flamels had seen fit to send it via Muggle post this time rather than stopping in for a visit. He was grateful for that bit of relief. Whenever Perenelle came by he wound up with less hair than he started off with. He had thought the woman infuriating when he’d first started working with Nicolas. He had been naïve.

**Harry Potter Announces First Official Betrothal**

Dumbledore felt his blood freeze. This was dated from September. The boy had been building his power base and cementing his alliances for over a month. This was worse than he feared.

Hurriedly Dumbledore read the entire article. By the time he finished it and read Daphne Greengrass’ threat, he’d started crying. The fools were welcoming a new Dark Lord with open arms. He wasn’t even trying to be subtle anymore! Harry James Potter had cemented his female chattel, he had cemented his primary supporters, he had cemented his political allies…he was perfectly placed to assume complete control as soon as Voldemort was negated.

Dumbledore could wait no longer. Fawkes was still ignoring his pleas for assistance. Why the phoenix still refused to find and assist him he couldn’t fathom. He knew their bond was broken months ago, but this was starting to reach beyond simple petulance and into malevolence.

Had Harry somehow managed to corrupt Fawkes as well? If he could make a phoenix fall…
“I must escape these confines!” Dumbledore stood and walked to the nurses’ station. He’d learned a little bit about how to fool these Healers since his last attempt. Johnson was nearby already being distracting by waving his cane around, but Dumbledore ignored him as best he could. “Hello, I believe that Marcus was discussing a train to something called Elysium with his doll in the rec room. Perhaps someone should investigate?”

“Thank you for letting us know, Al,” the woman said smiling up at him. She stood up and shuffled around the desk heading down to corridor, gently moving Johnson away from the aquarium as she went. Dumbledore waited until she had disappeared into the rec room then he quickly strode through the large double doors and out into freedom. He was out. He could finally return to Hogwarts and save them all from Harry Potter’s evil!

That was when he noticed the large wrought iron fence towering around the garden entrance. And the pointed tips on each shaft. And the giant gates locked closed at the end of the driveway. And the two bored looking guards at the bottom of the stairs raising their eyebrows at him.

“Hello, Mr. Brian. You wander out again? Let’s get you back to your bed,” one of them said reaching out to take his elbow and gently turn him around.

“No! No, I was so close!” Dumbledore shouted. “I need to return to Hogwarts! He’s built a harem and he controls the nobility! He must be stopped before it is too late! Help me and you will be hailed as saviors of Britain! I will make certain you get to participate in the award ceremony and receive the Order of Merlin prior to the memory adjustment! Please, help me! Together we can stop him!”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Brian. We’ll inform the appropriate authorities that ‘he’ is making his move.”

Draco Malfoy huddled up against the little garbage can fire and clutched the threadbare jacket tighter around him. This was so demeaning. It had been weeks since that bitch had dropped him off in the middle of nowhere casually pointing in a seemingly random direction and saying, “City’s about twenty miles that way. Get walking.”

He’d made it to the city – somehow. But no one had been willing to take him back to England. No one had even cared when he said his father was rich and would gladly pay for his safe return. No one had given him the food he’d demanded or the information he’d required. He didn’t even know the name of this stupid city! How was he supposed to survive with these peons refusing to help him?!

It had taken awhile, but he’d finally found a decent spot to sleep in and managed to steal some food from one of the weaker idiots nearby. He had managed to save up nearly thirty pounds – whatever that was – and was going to be able to buy his ticket tomorrow to reach London. This nightmare hell would end soon enough.

The little man that he’d taken food and money from earlier in the evening walked up to Draco’s can with a large grin on his face. Draco just sneered. “What do you want, Muggle? If you think you’re getting your stuff back think again.”

“Told you he was a feckin’ idiot, Marty,” the man said smiling even wider and gesturing behind Draco. The blond barely had enough time to turn around and gape before a mountain of a man grabbed him by the throat and lifted him into the air. “You get half, Marty.” A grunt from the large man was the only response.

Draco whimpered as his captor slammed a fist into his stomach and let go of his hold on Draco’s...
neck. A whoosh of air and a pained cry were all he could muster. A flurry of kicks followed and when the pain finally let up, Draco found himself alone by the still burning can with just the jacket on his back and the trousers around his waist. They’d even taken his shoes.

Draco curled up and muttered another curse at Harry Potter and Daphne Greengrass.

“Well, aren’t you a pretty little thing. It’s good that they left your face alone,” a soft voice said from above. Draco twisted to look at the man standing and peering down at him. “Heard you wanted to go somewhere. I can’t get you to London, but I might be able to get you to Thailand for bit. Give me a few months of work in the bar and I can guarantee you passage to anywhere you want after that.”

Draco blinked up and pushed down the pain in his side enough to think. He could be a bouncer in a bar for a few months. He’d watched Crabbe and Goyle guard him well enough to know the general principles. Anything was better than staying in this hellhole! Plus he’d be able to get back to London in time for the summer in order to take his revenge on Potter and Greengrass. They would rue the day they left Draco Malfoy alive!

Draco didn’t even bother to pay attention to the man as he stood. If he had, he’d have heard something that might have given him pause. “You won’t even need a wig. Wonder if you can dance already…”
Chapter 43:  Another One Bites The Dust

Luna skipped along the corridor towards the inner courtyard; the Grey Lady loved to float around in that part of the castle.  Hermione walked along beside Luna, murmuring softly about potential avenues to pursue.  Luna had to struggle to stop from chuckling.  The Grey Lady had been around for centuries, she’d certainly experienced almost everything that Hermione could come up with to encourage her to talk about her past.

Luna was planning on taking a far different approach.  The Ravenclaw ghost most assuredly loved the castle.  Getting the woman to speak about her home would undoubtedly be simple enough.  They didn’t need a whole history lesson after all, simply a direction of available secrets to pursue.  Sometimes Hermione and the others aimed for the Sun when the Moon would do just as nicely.

“Hello, Luna, it’s a pleasure to see you as always,” the Grey Lady said with a smile as the two students walked up.  “It was a shame to lose you from my House, but you certainly seem to be flourishing.  And Ms. Granger, I don’t believe we’ve spoken often.  What can I do for you today?”

Hermione stepped forward smiling.  “Hello.  Luna and I were wondering if you’d be willing to answer a bit of a debate we’ve been having.  It’s about the castle actually.  Luna had mentioned that you’ve resided on the grounds for quite some time so we thought it would be best to seek out one with the knowledge to settle our discussion.”

Luna could only smile and nod.  She loved being friends with Hermione.  The brunette never ceased to amaze her.  Without any prompting at all, her friend had immediately chosen the one path that might just convince the Grey Lady to break her habitual silence on anything approaching the past.  Hermione really was brilliant!

“Oh?  What would the debate happen to concern?” the ghost asked intrigued.

“Layout mostly.” Luna commented spreading her arms wide to encompass the entirety of the castle.  “Hermione thought that most of the best hidden areas would have been found already, but I’ve been trying to convince her that there are still superb spaces that have survived through the centuries without being disturbed!”

Hermione sighed theatrically and shook her head.  “She’s oversimplifying things.  The core of our debate focuses specifically on additional rooms that even the House Elves wouldn’t be aware of.”

“Like the Chamber of Secrets!” Luna chirped happily.

The Grey Lady frowned and crossed her arms.  “Salazar really should have told the others about that cave system.  My mother could have warded it appropriately had he bothered to tell her there was a basilisk sleeping in it.”

Luna saw Hermione’s mouth start to open and she pounced before her friend complete wrecked everything.  The Grey Lady’s identity as Rowena’s daughter was not widely known – and Luna was not about to let Hermione to potentially damage their rapport with a question Luna could easily answer afterward.  “I thought there might be a secret corner that each of the other Founders formed somewhere that were similarly hidden away.  Hermione says that it’s highly unlikely.”

Hermione sighed though she took the hint to drop her attempted query.  “Yes.  You see, I’ve been
trying to improve a map of the castle and we thought you might have some insights into whether there were any locations that we missed. The House Elves have been quite helpful, but Luna has made her case well enough that I’m worried and would like to be certain.”

“May I see the map?” the Grey Lady asked. Hermione nodded and handed over her Aide. “Hmm, well it seems you’ve catalogued nearly all of the passages and locations I am aware of…I assume you’ve asked the Baron as well?”

Hermione sighed. “Two of our friends in Slytherin tried, but he wasn’t able to assist. He apparently hasn’t paid much attention to his wanderings.”

“Well I can tell you for certain that Ravenclaw did not have any hidden locations. She assisted in the creation of this area with the others,” the ghost said pointing towards the Room of Requirement. “While I can’t speak for certain, I was told that all four considered it their prime achievement, Ravenclaw in particular. The spells and runic components that went into that room were some of the most complicated ever designed that did not end in complete devastation. Were you aware that it can become whatever you wish?”

Luna nodded. “Yes! We’ve been using it quite extensively actually! It is amazingly accommodating.”

The Grey Lady smiled and nodded. “It is indeed. That room can even form new passages to areas adjacent to the grounds if needed in addition to expanding its own dimensions to an impressive degree. I imagine the storage configuration alone has likely grown quite extensive since initial construction.”

“Storage configuration…” Hermione muttered. Luna cocked her head as her friend’s eyes widened and Hermione gasped. “Ma’am, would the House Elves use the storage configuration?”

The Grey Lady shrugged. “I don’t know. Many students and staff have utilized it in the past, but I’ve never seen one of the elves using that version. Generally they ask for cleaning supplies or something smaller than the original catchall. As far as I know, only two people have regularly used it in the last few decades. Sybill generally hides bottles from her private winery there when Minerva decides it’s time for an inspection. The other…” her face took on a look of pure hatred and scorn. “The other perverted my mother’s legacy. I was murdered for that hated thing and he tainted it!”

Luna’s froze and blinked repeatedly trying to determine if they could really have gotten that lucky. Hermione had apparently reached that conclusion earlier as she grinned triumphantly. “Thank you, Ma’am. I do believe you’ve settled our debate. We might just be able to give you a bit of closure in a few hours. Come on, Luna, we have a scavenger hunt to progress!”

Waving goodbye to the Ravenclaw ghost, Luna skipped after Hermione. Her friend was just as impressive as always! It was only too bad that Coco wasn’t with her to watch the fun about to be had.

Hermione nodded in approval as her troops spread out throughout the aisles. How they had managed to overlook a room that could hide anything you wanted nearly had her beating her head against the nearby armoire. This was Sirius ‘Snuffles’ Black all over again. They had been too close to the problem. Far too close apparently.

No matter. The Room of Hidden Things was not quite so ‘hidden’ anymore. It was now filled with over a dozen people all looking through the masses of junk for an elusive Horcrux. Luna was
convinced that it was Rowena Ravenclaw’s Diadem and Hermione was tempted to agree. After seeing Helena Ravenclaw’s reaction — *Helena Ravenclaw*, the treasure trove of knowledge the Grey Lady must have had all along — she was certain that, at minimum, this was where Riddle had hidden his Horcrux.

Hermione had wasted no time, in assembling their allies and organizing a search party as soon as she and Luna had inspected the room. The sheer staggering size of the amount of detritus that had been deposited in here was frightening. She was willing to put good money on the House Elves crying when they saw this place. Whether they’d be crying out of joy or sadness she couldn’t guess. Even after speaking with Dobby and Winky for so long she still didn’t fully understand the thought process those beings went through.

“Hey, Lav, does this match my pink shoes?” Parvati’s voice floated from the next row over. Hermione rolled her eyes at her roommates. She couldn’t really fault them — she’d grabbed four intriguing novels and one priceless First Edition herself. This room was a goldmine!

“It does, Parv, but try to focus. We find the evil soul thing first then we go shopping.”

Hermione couldn’t help but chuckle at that. Walking beside her Harry raised his eyebrows.

“Lavender really is far more impressive than I initially gave her credit for that’s all,” Hermione said in reply to his unasked question.

Harry nodded knowingly. “Agreed; it can be rather funny sometimes. Hey what’s this…a flute? We’ve been sitting on this place for years and had no clue…I can’t believe some of this stuff that people have thrown away. Mione, look at this broom — it’s brand new! It’s ancient, but this is in perfect condition!”

“So take it,” Hermione said shrugging. “I worry that we’re going to be searching in here for hours or days…The search party seemed like a great idea when I rounded us all up, but there’s just so much here…”

“Hey you found the room, Mione,” Harry said smiling and kissing her cheek. “We’re finally making progress. We’ll find it. If we have to go item by item we will find it. So calm down! We’re doing good!”

Hermione shook her head and smiled. “You’re in a good mood today.”

“I just love it when a plan comes together,” Harry said laughing. He looked at her and squeezed her hand. “Also, you are exceptionally attractive when you’re being all smart and stuff.”

Hermione blushed and stammered for something endearing to say. Thankfully she was saved by a shout from Millicent further into the depths. “I got a hit! Guys, I got a hit! It’s over here! Well…a Horcrux is over here!” Hermione gasped and started to run towards the Slytherin’s assigned lane pulling Harry along behind.

“So apparently this spell works, Professor Black. Nice find,” Millicent said to Sirius as everyone started rounding the nearest corners and the two came into view.

“I told you people it would work!” Sirius crowed puffing up his chest. “My family may be mostly insane bigots, but they keep darn good notes!”

Lily rolled her eyes. “Yes they do, Sirius. We are sorry for doubting you. Now let’s all concentrate and actually tracking down the location shall we? Miss Bulstrode where was the positive response from?”
Millicent turned and pointed down one of the major throughways of the junk towards a large chest with a bust of a rather unattractive warlock. “Somewhere over there.”

“Nice job, Millie!” Angelina said and clapped the younger girl on the back as the Weasley twins grabbed both her hands and started vigorously shaking them up and down.

Tonks chuckled and stepped to the front of the group saying over her shoulder, “Gotta find it before celebrating guys. Let’s see, let’s see…worn panties…”

“Hey, I wondered where those got too! These were my favorite pair, how’d they wind up here?” Lavender mumbled snatching the underwear from Tonks’ hand and drawing entertaining glances from everyone else.

“Moving on,” Tonks muttered snorting in amusement, “ugly statue thing, faded tiara, old dresser… I don’t see anything that might be a Horcrux.”

Hermione frowned and took a piece of paper out of her bag. “Can you say that list again please, Tonks?”

“Sure. Lavender’s panties, ugly statue head, faded tiara, an old dresser. Why?” Tonks said frowning.

“A diadem looks like a tiara,” Hermione murmured. “That’s odd.”

Sirius smirked and chuckled. “Yeah like that old thing is a Horcrux. Good one, Hermione. Pull the other one, it has bells.”

Harry frowned and narrowed his eyes towards the chest with the tiara on it. With an annoyed growl he ramped his Occlumency up to maximum and suddenly the ratty old tiara was far more interesting. “Arse. Guys, we found it. It’s just under some sort of misdirection spell or something. If you push your Occlumency you can see through it.”

Shiva cursed. “Bloody brilliant. You can’t trap something in this school. If someone got lucky and found it then an investigation would be launched.”

“Not under Dumbledore,” Hermione muttered.

“By having everyone dismiss it though,” Shiva said choosing not to comment on Hermione’s remark. “Nobody would think twice about a dusty old tiara. Hidden in plain sight indeed.”

Harry nodded. “Alright, everyone stand back. Horcrux Number Four coming up.” Hermione watched him pull out his *Soul Cage* and walk towards the tia-priceless Founder artifact. The diadem started to shake as he stopped next to it and a dark stain started to spread across the metal. Harry didn’t pause at all, he just pressed the rune against the diadem.

A loud screaming filled the room and Harry smiled as black ichor sprayed across the floor. The screaming stopped and he cast a cleaning charm on the diadem removing the rest of the ichor. “One more down, three to go.” A series of whoops and shouts of encouragement resounded throughout the room as Harry turned to hold up the diadem. His grin turned a bit sneaky and he walked back to them. Holding out his hand and getting on one knee Harry said, “My lady, I present to you the Diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw.”

Hermione could only gape at the treasure held in his hand inches from her. “What?” she asked dumbfounded.
“Well you and Luna found it. We can’t give it back to the school yet so you might as well try it on for a few minutes,” Harry said.

“Go ahead, mon amour, try it,” Fleur said chuckling and gently pushing her forward to close the remaining distance.

Hermione blushed again and nodded. “Well…okay, maybe just for a moment.” With trembling hands she reached out and plucked the diadem from her partner’s hands. Gently she moved it to her head and sat it down amidst her hair. Blinking in surprise she turned to the others.

“Well how does it work? Solved any riddles of the universe yet, Mistress of the Tower?” Fred asked smirking.

“Well…” Hermione said slowly trying to think about something, anything complicated. Bernok’s Arithmantic Formula for Entwined Empathic Response came to mind. She could remember reading the very page it had been on. Actually…she could practically reread that page right now…“Well, I seem to have a photographic memory now!”

Luna smiled and nodded. “Yes, that was one aspect of the diadem’s powers. A shame its primary function of increasing cognition and cognitive speed doesn’t appear to work for you, Hermione.”

Hermione gaped at the younger girl and tried to come up with a suitable rebuttal, but after nearly a minute of trying to find something she had to give it up as useless. “I feel cheated…Ravenclaw’s Lost Diadem and all it does is let me reread my books without going to go and physically get one…”

Tonks laughed and leaned down to kiss Hermione’s nose and gently take the diadem off her head. “Only you Hermione could be completely unaffected by improved thinking and be disappointed that you get a photographic memory instead. You, love, are apparently too smart for Rowena Ravenclaw to have any effect.” The group started laughing good naturedly as Hermione simply blushed further, completely at a loss for words.

Several days after the destruction of Voldemort’s Horcrux, Remus was sitting in his armchair at home looking through an old photo album. Flipping the page he raised his glass and silently toasted. “You’d be so proud of your son, James. We all certainly are. He’s gathered a group of friends that seem set to tumble the entire society we live in and build it back up stronger than it ever was before. We thought we were impressive with our adolescent explorations…none of our exploits hold a candle to theirs!”

Smiling fondly at an old photo Remus shook his head at the direction his life had turned in. Things were progressing and changing. Fudge’s vote of No Confidence had finally passed earlier today and the portly man was no longer a thorn in their side. The truly amazing thing was that Amelia seemed to be the favorite for the newly vacated Minister for Magic position! If she received the job…Harry might just succeed in his threats about dragging the Wizarding World into the 20th Century kicking and screaming.

And it would make Sirius Black the boyfriend of the Minister for Magic. Wasn’t that a scary thought!

A crash sounded from the front of his property followed immediately by the wards around his home screaming alarms. Remus jumped to his feet all traces of inebriation flung from his system by the adrenaline. His front door flew off its hinges under a rain of bombardment spells and a shout rang through the opening. “Anyone who kills the werewolf gets to play with the Mudblood...
and the bitch for the whole night! We want to finish this before the Dark Lord is forced to come in personally. No repeats of last time boys!"

Remus growled and his instincts surged. At least some of these Death Eaters were the ones who had killed Kingsley. He’d be outnumbered for certain. But unlike his friend, Remus had an emergency escape route immediately on hand. He was momentarily torn between wanting to stay and fight until the position was untenable or jumping away now. Judging by how quickly his wards had fallen prior to the alarms tripping it was likely that the enemy had arrived inside the range of his Tracekey. His house was small and his wards very close in. The destination would likely lock onto one of the Death Eater’s portkeys – had they used any – vice his own priming one from last week. Should Remus utilize it now he might well arrive inside the latest Death Eater stronghold. Unexpectedly arrive inside their stronghold, Remus amended.

With a rueful grin he palmed the rune stone. Tucking the photo album under his coat he allowed himself to remain behind just long enough to sent a piercing hex through the first Death Eater’s skull then activated the cluster.

A hook grabbed his arm and yanked upwards. Remus almost laughed. Harry had mentioned adjusting the basic portkey so that it would be slightly more comfortable though he had sounded quite annoyed at not being able to make the ride smooth like he’d hoped.

Abruptly the Tracekey dropped him at his destination and crumbled to dust in his hands with a bright flash of light and smell of ozone. He had just enough time to see a very surprised Macnair staring at him before Remus was leaping forward. Macnair barely even started to raise his wand before Remus reached him. A downward slice of his hand broke the man’s arm forcing the wand to fall and a scream of pain to issue forth.

“There are some advantages to being a werewolf you know,” Remus said conversationally. “Very strong bones. Quite a bit of extra muscle.” He kneed the executioner in the bollocks then stepped back as the giant man fell to the floor whimpering. “One chance to make this easy. Where’s the girl?”

“Dungeons…” Macnair wheezed out between gasps for air. “Left door. Second staircase. You’ll never get out. We’ll kill you all.”

“Well, you won’t. I did promise easy though…Goodbye and thank you for the assistance.” Remus nodded ever so slightly and cast a quick bludgeoning hex into the man’s head. Leaving the mess behind, Remus strode towards the indicated door and carefully peered around both sides before stepping through and hurrying out. He vaguely recognized this from when Sirius had dragged the Marauders on the political party rounds that the young Black had been forced into. This setup appeared to be Avery’s summer mansion. If he remembered correctly…there was a section of wall in the dungeons that opened onto a tunnel into the cliffs beyond the apparition wards. Sirius had used it to let them escape the party early – and left Walburga spitting mad afterwards.

It would do perfectly.

Hurrying across the empty corridor Remus cast a quick homenum revelio and found two personnel walking down the corridor towards him. He waited until their outlines were almost at the corner before he flipped around it and sent two silenced cutting hexes into their necks. As the two Death Eaters died Remus jumped over them and ran through down the staircase towards the dungeons. He leapt off the stairs and landed right in front of Yaxley. Remus had to hand it to him, this man reacted far quicker than the prior three Death Eaters. Unfortunately, it wasn’t fast enough.

Remus shot off a bludgeoner, a reducto and a severing curse in quick succession batting aside the
man’s half formed shield and leaving yet another cooling corpse. “Well, the home security seems to be somewhat lacking. I wonder if you were similarly lax in other matters. Accio cell key!” A small iron keyring flew from Yaxley’s pocket into his hand and Remus smiled turning to the prisoners. “Hello, I’m here to rescue-Cissa?!” Remus’ polite greeting degenerated halfway through into a shout of surprise and rage. Narcissa Black, the woman he had been somewhat dating for several weeks stared back at him in open mouthed shock from the other side of the bars. Behind her was a young woman, slightly younger than Remus curled up on the floor.

“Remy? How did you know I was here?” Narcissa asked blinking away tears.

Remus just shook his head and hurried forward to unlock the doors. “I had no idea. They attacked my home and I hitched a ride back when I heard they had a girl imprisoned. I didn’t realize they meant two or that…how did they get you? I thought you were safe in Grimmauld?”

“I left to visit Andi,” Narcissa said pulling him into a hug and short kiss. “They were waiting for me as soon as I apparated into the alley. We have to warn her in case they try for her next!”

“First we need to leave. Ma’am,” Remus said gently pulled the other woman’s arm and rousing her to her feet, “we’re getting out. Can you walk?”

She blinked at him dazed before nodding slowly. Suddenly gasping a light seemed to switch on in her eyes. She jumped past Remus and grabbed up Yaxley’s wand pointing it up the stairs. “Which way? I’ll go first. I want to get these bastards.”

“Actually this way,” Remus said pushing on the stone that opened the hidden passage. Narcissa looked at him with arched eyebrows and he shrugged. “Sirius liked to leave the mandatory parties as quickly as possible. I know several passages through several different highborn manors. Quickly, I imagine it won’t be long before – ” he cut off as a deep hissing voice cut through the entire mansion.

“The werewolf is here. Find him and you shall be rewarded. Don’t fail me again,” Voldemort’s proclamation died and the dark haired woman shook.

“He’s here,” she murmured. “We can’t beat that monster, but we can go down fighting.”

Narcissa grabbed her arm and started pulling her towards the open wall. “Or we can run and live to fight another day. Lead on Remy, I have Davis.”

Remus nodded and took off down the secret passage, two sets of running footsteps close behind him. They had been running for about two minutes when shouts rang out down the corridor. He thanked whatever god was watching that there had been enough turns in the passageway to prevent direct spellfire from reaching them. He felt the telltale tingle of passing through the wardline when he heard Bellatrix’s mad voice scream out, “Fiendfyre!”

Not stopping to ask permission, Remus turned, grabbed the two women as they stepped past him and twisted. He apparated all three away just as the edges of flame licked around the corner.

Landing in a heap on the floor of Potter Manor, Remus groaned. Both Narcissa and Davis had landed on top of him and he seemed to have left a good deal of his shoe and cloak back at the secret passage in his haste. Well at least none of his body parts had been splinched. And he still could feel the photo album digging into his ribs so it wasn’t a total loss.

“My hero,” Narcissa murmured shifting enough that she could kiss him. “I’d say this makes things official then?”
Remus chuckled. “If you’ll both let me up, I’ll agree to that.” The women blushed and quickly shifted to stand. The Davis woman froze as she caught sight of the basilisk skeleton which had turned to stare at the three newcomers. Remus’ chuckle turned into a full on laugh. “Don’t mind, Skelly, she’s only there to intimidate people Harry doesn’t like. She won’t – and can’t – hurt you.”

“Right away!”

Davies’ mouth dropped open and she twisted immediately to stare at Remus with wide eyes. “Harry? As in, that’s Harry Potter’s basilisk skeleton? As in, this is Harry Potter’s house?”

“Yes.”

Remus had expected several things could happen, but the woman bursting out in side splitting laughter was not one of them. He looked to Narcissa who just shrugged equally nonplussed. “I’m sorry, this is just too ironic,” Davis said between her giggles. “Let me guess, you’re one of the honorary uncles?” At his nod she giggled harder. “My daughter is saved by Harry Potter from a giant snake monster and Voldemort possession. Now I’m saved by Harry Potter’s pseudo-uncle from Voldemort and his gang of monsters only to stare in the face of the snake that almost ate my daughter! You can’t make this stuff up if you tried!”

Remus looked at her for another moment before sighing and turning to Narcissa. “Cissa, please get Ms. Davis situated; her home is unlikely to be safe. I’ll retrieve Andi and…hello Tonks, Fleur.”

“Uh, hi, Remus. Why is Aunt Cissa and…some weird laughing woman in our house?” Tonks asked her hair switching to a bright yellow as Fleur cocked her head to the side.

Remus groaned and rubbed a hand along his forehead. “It’s a long story. Short version is I was attacked. The long one will have to wait. I don’t think our homes are safe anymore and this is the most secure location I know besides Hogwarts thanks to the goblins and Harry’s paranoia. I’m off to collect your mother Tonks before the Death Eaters try to retaliate by attacking her. Would one of you be willing to invite Hermione’s parents here? I feel it unwise to leave them in a Muggle neighborhood at this stage.”

Tonks paled and nodded. “I got them. Fleur go with Remus. He looks like he’s been hit by a lorry and I’d prefer my parents hold their questions until they’re here.” She summoned her leather jacket from the hall closet and slipped her gloves on in the time it took Remus to extricate himself from Narcissa’s arms.

“Well, let’s go get our family together. Just in time for Christmas too!” he said smiling.

“You know, mon amour,” Fleur said giggling softly, “you are acting rather like ‘arry at ze beginning of ze summer. You can’t just hide in here and hope ze parents leave before you are forced to come out.”

Tonks stuck out her tongue at Fleur and crossed her arms. “What I am supposed to say to them, hon? ‘Hi, Richard, Emma, I’m Tonks. I’m shagging your daughter and now we’re going to be living together for at least a few months while I keep almost dying trying to kill a psychopath evil wizard.’ I’ve never gotten to the ‘meeting parents’ stage in my past relationships!”

Fleur laughed harder. “Well I would suggest switching ‘shagging’ for ‘dating’, but zat is just me. Perhaps ask zem about zeir work?”

Tonks gasped, her hair switching to pink and she jumped to her feet pulling Fleur into a hug.

“Work! Perfect! Great idea, Fleur! Knew I kept you around for a reason.”

“So my sexual proficiency has nozing to do wiz it?” Fleur asked her wink and wide grin betraying
the attempted innocence.

“Nah, Hermione has some kinky ideas from those books she reads. You’re definitely just here for your ideas and that hair.”

Fleur laughed and gently took Tonks’ arm in her own. “Come on, mon amour. Time to greet ze parents.”

Tonks grimaced, but let herself be led down the corridor. They stepped into the already crowded library and Tonks’ winced seeing everyone. Tracey Davis’ mother was sitting in the corner glaring at her stolen wand while Narcissa stayed in the far corner wrapped around Remus. Her own parents were working on some of her father’s latest cases on one of the couches. Richard and Emma Granger were busy perusing the shelves with huge smiles on their faces. “Well at least I can always just direct them to a new book if I screw this up too bad…” Tonks muttered. Fleur chuckled a final time before squeezing her arm and shifting away.

“Hello, again, Mr. and Mrs. Granger,” Tonks said forcing a smile onto her face.

Richard turned to her and shook his head with an exaggerated sigh. “Tonks, we told you to call us Richard and Emma when you picked us up earlier.”

“I know. And I’m working on that, Mr-er-Richard. It’s just a little…I don’t know, weird?” she said shrugging and using her powers to avoid blushing.

Emma laughed and patted Tonks on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, dear, we won’t bring up you corrupting our daughter’s virtue.” Tonks’ mouth dropped open and her abilities were nowhere near enough to stop the blush from spreading. She very nearly tossed a stinging hex at Fleur who was leaning against the bookcase nearby and laughing silently.

Richard sighed heavily and said, “Sweetheart, by not bringing it up you brought it up. And besides, it was surely Harry who took her virtue first.”

“Well Tonks is ze oldest among us,” Fleur commented helpfully. Tonks turned a murderous gaze on her partner.

“True, true,” Emma agreed. “And while you seem the most adventurous, Fleur, we know it had to be one of the others. If only because our girl would likely take the lead the first time.”

“Hey!” Tonks said after finally regaining the power of speech. “I’m right here! Can we please stop talking about this?!?”

Richard laughed and sat down in one of the armchairs grinning like a loon. “Well we were just told we can’t go home for a few months thanks to a war we’re technically not supposed to see. We have to have a bit of fun somewhere along the way and Hermione isn’t around to tease!”

Emma nodded sagely and sat on her husband’s lap. “Consider it a sign that you’re an accepted part of the family, Tonks.”

“An accepted punching bag of the family is more like,” Tonks grumbled. She snorted in amusement before attempting to smile at the others. “Well this family member is going to go check on the other guests. Feel free to abuse Fleur while I’m gone. She could do with being taken down a peg or two.”

Tonks left the laughter behind as she walked over to speak with Mrs. Davis. “You alright?”
“I’ve been better,” Davis said curtly. She finally tore her gaze from the wand and looked to Tonks. “You’re the ex-Auror friend right? Tonks something?”

“Just Tonks.”

The woman nodded. “Just Tonks, aye. I’m Marian Davis. My daughter is dating your newest girlfriend.”

Tonks grimaced. “Yeah, I know. Small world huh?”

Marian just laughed though there wasn’t much humor in the sound. “You can say that again, Tonks. Thanks for opening up your house to us by the way. I’ll have to get a new wand at some point I suppose and I can’t just hide out here forever. Do you mind if I borrow an owl? I should let my husband know to stay away for a while. He’s on a business trip. They waited until he was gone to kidnap me. Hazards of being a Muggleborn married to a pureblood in these days I suppose.” She paused and eyed Tonks. “Your man is working to kill all of these bastards right?”

“And to hopefully fix the system so that their kind doesn’t start cropping up again another few decades down the road like last time,” Tonks said. They were finally starting to make a real difference and she’d be damned if she watched it all backslide by the time her own kids were growing up.

“Good. Tear the weeds out at the root. Now,” Marian grinned up at Tonks, “I wonder if you could tell me a bit about my daughter’s girlfriend? Tracey is always so guarded about these things and I don’t have nearly enough material to tease her with when I see her again!”

Tonks could only groan and slap her hand to her forehead. “What is it with parents? Do you all take lessons in how to embarrass your offspring?”

Fenrir Greyback looked down on the town of Hogsmeade and his lips split into a feral grin. The utter failure at the Avery manor had been rather supremely unpleasant for the Death Eaters. Greyback couldn’t be happier about it! He’d been away at the time and had received sufficient warning to avoid returning until Voldemort’s anger had cooled; so he’d managed to escape the debacle without any punishment. He’d even come off looking good from the incident when he’d ‘casually’ mentioned that he’d warned several of the personal present of the potential advantages of working with werewolves – which would have naturally translated to extra protective measures when fighting against one.

Now Greyback was almost assured the honor of going after the wayward wolf himself after this operation was completed. Normally he preferred his prey to be young enough to avoid puberty, but he could make exceptions for hunting down fellow werewolves. They always made entertaining prey and it helped to further cement his position as alpha in the pack.

Greyback licked his lips as he saw the Hogwarts students milling about in the town. Voldemort hadn’t specified a preferred date for the attack so he’d taken some liberties with it and made certain that the kiddies would be around. If he was going to be causing mayhem he might as well get some tasty morsels while he was at it. Maybe with some luck the lycanthropy would carry over despite the lack of a Full Moon; it was always a tossup without the Moon. If the curse did take though…well then he’d be able to play with his new converts in the pack afterwards…

“Get ready,” Greyback said wiping a bit of drool off his lips and refocusing on the task at hand. “All forces attack on my mark. Five, four, three, two, one…Now!” He leapt up and apparated into the first street with his pack close behind. Two additional wolves stayed with him as an honor
guard while others spread out through the town cutting off the exits and going for the high priority targets like the Three Broomsticks, Zonko’s and Honeydukes.

Leering in glee, Greyback snapped off a body-bind spell at a nearby long-haired Chinese girl while his pack took shots at the residents. The girl fell to the street while the single spell she had managed to get off took out a chunk of the cobblestones as her arm snapping to her side. He laughed as he stepped towards her. “Nice reflexes. I hope you change, you’d make a great addition to the pack! Slightly too old for me really, but you’re a bit flat so I can close my eyes and pretend.” He felt himself harden as her eyes spat fire. It was always so much more fun to break the ones with fight in them! “Oh and you have daggers too! I wonder if you know how to use those?”

Greyback heard shouts coming from down the street causing him to sigh in disappointment. He really hated losing the opportunity to play with his food. “Well better to get this over with.” Leaning down, Greyback bared his teeth and bit deeply into the meat of her arm. Feeling the warm blood flow down his throat he pulled back grinning at her. “See you on the Full Moon flat one!”

He stood and ran down the street after his pack mates. As he turned the corner, he pulled up short and gaped in surprise. A third of his pack lay dead or dying on the streets with the remaining ones taking cover behind a makeshift barrier in the middle of the road. They were besieged by several townsfolk and – amazingly enough – about twenty students from various years. Only a few third years were utilizing stunners and body-binds while the rest of the town’s defenders were busy firing dangerous and potentially lethal spells at the pack.

He snarled as he saw Potter, Granger, Greengrass and Longbottom leading the defenders in their counterattack. Further down the street near Gladrags he spotted Davis and Mini-Busty Bones hunting down several scattered members of the pack while Scrivenshaft’s was being covered by the Lovegood bitch and the youngest Weasley. As Greyback watched, he saw two more of the pack drop as spikes of silver shot through their chests from Potter’s Merlin-be-damned runes.

Greyback briefly contemplated ordering a retreat but a blur of movement dashing from the shop next to him pushed that concept from his mind. Leaping to the side, he grabbed the cloak of the small girl running towards the dubious safety of her friends. His lips splitting into the wolf’s smile again, Greyback held up his prize and shouted, “Stop or the Greengrass bitch dies!”

His pronouncement froze several of the defenders and he watched in satisfaction as Potter, Granger and his prize’s sister turned their attention on him. Leering at the students, he pulled the small blonde closer to his lips. “That’s better! Now drop your wands and throw some of those rune stones over here.”

Instead of following his orders the elder Greengrass leveled her wand at him. “Let go of Astoria and I let you live.” Her voice was calm and quiet though it carried across the entire square. The few remaining spells stopped and all eyes turned towards the stalemate.

“Daphne, don’t!” his prize shouted. He opened his fingers just enough that she could get the rest out without gasping. It wasn’t as good if they couldn’t scream a little. “Just get the rest of them! Tell Gabi I would’ve loved to check out the French guys together!”

Greyback had to suppress chuckles at that. He liked this girl. “I think I may just turn her if you don’t drop those wands in five seconds!” he shouted laughing slightly. She had such a good scent. Leaning down to sniff her neck he ran his tongue over his lips and bared his teeth. Shifting his eyes up he spared a final quick glance to see if any of them had complied and spoilt his fun. He’d probably bite her anyway even if they had. His eyes widened as a thin blue light sprang from Granger’s wand.
Greyback didn’t have any time to move before pain blossomed in his head and the world went dark.

Daphne saw the piercing spell shoot through the space between Fenrir Greyback’s eyes and the blood spurt from the back of his skull. The alpha werewolf’s grip opened and Astoria pulled free. She sprinted away from him and ran to Daphne. The remaining few werewolves apparated out with pops that Daphne barely heard. She grabbed her sister in a hug muttering, “It’s okay, sis, you’re okay. He didn’t bite you right?”

“No,” Astoria murmured. She pulled back and flashed a shaky smile. “I’m fine. I’m going to head inside to check on my friends okay, Daph?”

“Go. It’s safer in there.” Daphne let her run, watching until the door closed. Once it swung shut, Daphne turned to Hermione and grabbed her head on each side pulling her down into a deep kiss. Hermione made a noise of surprise, stiffening slightly. Daphne pulled back smiling and hugged her friend hard enough to bruise. “You saved my sister. Thank you, Mione.”

As Daphne let a blushing and stammering Hermione go, she saw Harry smiling at them both. “Hey, I’m not the only one to play hero for once! Nice shot by the way, Mione. Let’s go make sure that everyone else is okay and the rest of the attackers are gone.”

Daphne hurriedly nodded and shifted to shadow him as he started to walk down the street, Hermione and Neville following on either side. They had barely even gotten started before the professors joined in the efforts. Sirius, Shiva and Lily made a beeline towards the quartet. “Jeez, you kids can’t even go for a simple walk around Hogsmeade without getting into a fight,” Sirius said shaking his head. His grin did almost nothing to hide the way his muscles tensed and the white knuckles clenched around his wand.

Lily and Shiva both paled even further as they looked over the bodies in the streets. “How many children were hurt?” Lily asked.

Neville gestured to a small group in the Three Broomsticks. “Not many surprisingly. Daphne’s Defense Association rallied a pretty good defense really fast. They weren’t prepared for us to actually fight back. The town helped funnel them all here to keep casualties on side streets to a minimum.”

Shiva nodded. “I’ll help fix up those who need it. Lily, watch this lot. Sirius, sweep the north side. Filius had the east and Minerva was taking the West.” She squeezed Harry’s shoulder and hurried to the pub waving Madame Pomfrey over to assist.

“Daph!” Tracey shouted running up and embracing her. Daphne melted into her girlfriend’s arms letting some of her stress bleed away. “I saw him grab Astoria. Thank Merlin she’s okay! First Shacklebolt’s killed, then my mother gets kidnapped, now they attack Hogsmeade?!?”

“Look on the bright side, Trace,” Daphne murmured smiling. “Voldemort has got to be running low on lieutenants by now.” That comment brought a low chuckle to her girlfriend’s lips.

The group turned back to triage and cleanup. They had been at it for about fifteen minutes when Sirius returned with a furious Su Li in tow, a large bandage wrapped around her arm. “Poppy, we need a test here,” Sirius called grimly. Daphne felt her blood chill and she hurried the group forward.

“Su, did they…?” Daphne asked softly trailing off.
“Greyback,” the Chinese girl snarled. “And he had the nerve to call me flat! When I find that pedophile bastard I am going to cut his jewels off and feed them to him before I flay him into tiny strips of meat! Bite me. We’ll see who gets the last laugh, arsehole! If I turn I’ll steal the whole fucking pack from him!”

Hermione grimaced and held up a hand. “Um, Su, he’s over there. I already killed him…he had Astoria and…well I saw an opening and…sorry…”

Su followed Hermione’s finger and turned back eyeing them all carefully. “You made a pinpoint shot around a hostage?”

Harry nodded. “She did. I’m sorry you were hurt, Su.”

“Nice aim, Granger. I knew you could be a bit of a badass when push came to shove, but I admit I didn’t think you had it in you to do that,” Su said appreciatively. “Just wish I could resurrect him and kill him slowly. And this isn’t your fault, Harry, so don’t bother feeling guilty about it. Hell I wouldn’t have even gotten bitten if I hadn’t waited long enough to figure out who popped into the street in front of me. It’s my own fault for having sloppy reflexes. I’ll have to train harder. You still want those dagger lessons stay behind after the next DA meeting.”

Pomfrey finally made her way over and frowned seeing Su. “Damn, not another one. I’m sorry, dear. There’s no way to know for sure whether the curse takes hold until the first Full Moon. We have two others who will be waiting for the results. Report to the hospital wing the morning of and we’ll be sure to take precautions…just in case.”

Su sighed and nodded. “I will, Madame.”

Daphne looked around the damaged street. She felt arms wrap around her from behind while a hand found one of her own. She didn’t even particularly care just who was comforting her. Everyone around her was a friend and sometimes even the Ice Queen got tired of hiding behind her façade.

“Any word about Su?” Harry asked his friends as he sat down to breakfast with them the Saturday after the attack on Hogsmeade.

Neville nodded. “Yeah, she’s okay. Mostly at least. The curse didn’t fully take hold thankfully, but apparently there were a few minor side-effects. She was saying that she prefers her meat pretty rare now and I’ve noticed she’s more aggressive than she used to be.”

Tracey smirked and brandished her spoon at the Gryffindor. “You sure that’s not just because she’s still pissed that Hermione stole her kill? That girl was wound tight before this happened.”

Neville chuckled. “She was, but yeah I’m sure. She mentioned it too. It was actually pretty funny since she joked about the wolf being too scared of her to manifest properly.”

“She should teach Professor Lupin that trick,” Hannah said smiling.

“Nah, he’s earned his ‘badass’ cred after rescuing my mother from the lair of the enemy itself,” Tracey replied shaking her head. “Thanks again for letting her stay for a while, Harry.”

Harry just shrugged blushing a little. “It’s a big house might as well use it. I’m sure that Fleur and Tonks were getting a bit lonely anyway.”

Hermione snorted. “Yes well I for one feel a bit sorry for them. Sharing a house with my
“Hey did anyone hear about Rosmerta?” Susan asked. “I already talked to Ernie and he was in
about the same boat as Su. Rosmerta was the last one bitten right?”

Neville sighed and shook his head. “She’s not so lucky unfortunately. Full amplification.”

“Damn,” Harry cursed softly. “At least she owns the shop herself so she can’t be fired…If we have
to, make sure we all spread the word to keep patronizing the Three Broomsticks, guys.”

“Katie was bitten too. Also full amplification.” Fred murmured just loud enough for the rest of the
group to hear. Suddenly his reserved status this morning made a lot more sense. “She wants to
keep it quiet though and only let the DA members know. So please make sure you support her, but
don’t tell anyone else not in our study group.” A series of understanding nods followed that
request.

Conversations after that shifted to mundane items, homework questions and the next set of lesson
plans for the DA. Daphne was just starting on how she was planning for Harry to introduce spell
chains when the morning post arrived. Hedwig swooped down through the rain of owls to land a
small rectangular package in front of Harry. Frowning curiously, he reaching out and started to
unwrap it before being interrupted by the owl nipping at his fingers. “Ah, sorry, girl, my bad.
Here,” he said handing her a string of bacon and getting a bark of approval going along with an evil
eye. “Hey! You just got me a package I wasn’t expecting! I’m curious! You can’t blame a guy
for being curious.”

Hedwig barked again and lashed out a wing to slap his head. “Ow! No need to get mean. I know
it’s safe otherwise you wouldn’t have delivered it, girl.” Hedwig puffed up her chest, but still
refused to meet his eyes for longer than a second. “I promise, the next time you deliver a surprise
package I will remember to praise you and give you your reward before trying to examine it.
Deal?” Hedwig cocked her head to the side, considered him for a long moment before bobbing her
head once and hopping up on his shoulder.

Hermione stared at the two of them with raised eyebrows. “I know Crookshanks is smart and all,
but I don’t know if even he is quite that impressive.” Hedwig puffed her chest up further and
hopped from Harry’s shoulder to Hermione’s nipping affectionately at the girl’s ear.

Harry held his heart in pain. “Betrayed by my own familiar! The shame!” A round of laughter
and a satisfied bark were his only replies. “Alright, let’s see what’s in this thing…” Leaning
forward Harry pulled off the brown paper. As his fingers touched the second layer, a light, filmy
coating on the surface luminesced briefly before the paper fully unwrapped itself.

Daphne blinked in surprise. “That wasn’t a spell. That was some sort of…”

“Alchemy,” Harry finished most of the prior levity drained away from his voice. The package
contained a single VHS tape with a note on top. The note was simple: *Latest antics of an old goat.
Thought you might like to watch. Heard about your shopkeeper and Quidditch teammate.
Included a recipe for a wolfsbane variant. We just finished the first round of tests. Let us know if
it works better than the usual variety. (Yes there are three sample doses, didn’t really think we’d
leave out your Hunter buddy did you?)*

Finishing up the note Harry smiled as he turned to his friends. “Have I mentioned recently how
much I love being pen pals with those two? Let’s head up to the Room and take a look at this
tape. I’ll grab the telly from my mum’s room.”
Barely ten minutes later, the entire group had assembled in the Room of Requirement and Harry was setting up his telly while Lily pored over the formula that the Flamels had sent. “This is absolutely brilliant,” she muttered. “I never would have thought of adding in wiggentree bark…It should make the entire mixture unstable, but with the additional tubers here…”

Harry called out in triumph and his device flared to life. “Got it up. Mum, you need another minute?”

“I’m good honey, you can play it. Just trying to figure out whether the Flamels are completely insane or utter geniuses,” Lily said waving him off.

Neville smirked and claimed a seat between Hannah and Susan. “Probably both considering what little we actually know about them.”

Harry pushed the tape they’d sent him into the machine and sat back with Daphne and Hermione to watch while Luna curled up on Tracey’s lap and Shiva leaned over Lily’s chair. Sirius had actually made popcorn and was happily snacking away as the screen shifted to a display of the mental ward where Dumbledore was held.

“He’s assembled an army!” Dumbledore screamed at the nurse in front of him while an older gentleman swatted at the ceiling fans with a cane behind him. “They’re elite units! They repelled a full on werewolf invasion! You have to let me out so I can stop him!”

“Mr. Brian, wouldn’t fighting off werewolves be considered a good thing?” the nurse asked innocently.

Dumbledore slammed his hands onto the table and his beard quivered. “Of course pushing back Dark creatures would be a good thing. But a war between two Dark Lords only hurts everyone! Harry Potter has his political support and his army! He has toppled the Ministry and installed a puppet Minister! Now he has shown the might of his forces. We must move now if we are to save anyone!”

Sirius laughed uproariously and spilled half his popcorn. “Oh Amy is going to scream when I tell her Dumbledore called her a puppet!”

“Shh!” several voices hissed. Sirius just kept laughing though he managed to lower the volume slightly.

On the screen they watched two orderlies come down the corridor aiming for Dumbledore. “No, not this time!” the old wizard yelled. “You won’t stop me. I will save England!” He quickly turned to leap for the back room and ran smack into the man with the cane causing both to come crashing to the floor as the orderlies finally came up shaking their heads. The screen went black leaving the group chuckling amongst themselves.

Shiva smiled and shook her head as she shifted to sit with Lily. “You know, when they originally told us their plan I never thought I’d be satisfied with it, but I have to admit this is rather poetic justice for the man.”

“Agreed. We need to send the Flamels a Christmas card this year,” Harry said nodding.

Neville had opened his mouth to reply until he suddenly leaned back into the seat and lapsed into silence, his face relaxing into a slight frown of concentration. “Harry, Hermione…you two remember when we first learned about them?”

“Sure,” Harry said. “We looked them up in the book about savants.”
Neville shook his head. “Yeah, but that’s not what I meant. I was talking about the Philosopher’s Stone.”

“What about it?” Hermione asked. She blinked in confusion before gasping and sitting up straight.

Neville smiled. “Where did they hide that fake Stone originally before Hogwarts?”

“Gringotts,” Harry said looking between his two friends. He frowned trying to make whatever connection the others had.

“And why is it that Gringotts is famous beyond regular banking?” Neville asked looking like the cat that caught the canary. Hermione started laughing followed shortly after by Daphne and Tracey.

Finally, Harry felt his mouth drop open. “Hagrid…’Ain’t no safer place’, indeed…”

The original plan for the Christmas hols had been for most of the group to stay in Hogwarts. It had been thought that having Harry and the majority of his family home for the New Year would make too tempting a target for Voldemort to ignore. That the Potter Manor’s wards were second only to Hogwarts made little difference. As the school’s motto said, it wasn’t a good idea to tickle a sleeping dragon.

Now though…now that plan had changed. Now they had a potential lead to the final hidden Horcrux. Now they had to get to Gringotts without seeming suspicious.

What better time to take a trip to the bank then prior to some Christmas shopping?

In the end a compromise was reached. Sirius would join them at Gringotts in his official capacity as Lord Black and kip by for Christmas Eve/morning though officially he would be staying at Hogwarts and have to leave for a few hours on an Auror mission. Neville, Susan and Hannah would go to the Longbottom estate – with improved wards courtesy of Bill, Fleur, Shiva, Harry and Gringotts of course. Tracey would spend the holiday with Luna at her home – also with improved wards – before joining her mother and Daphne at Harry’s. The Weasleys were of course going home to the Burrow. Daphne was officially going to the Greengrass estate, but in reality would be taken to Potter Manor as soon as she was in her bedroom with Dobby popping her back whenever Marcus went looking for her – if he did at all that was. Hermione, Shiva and Lily would return straight to Potter Manor with Harry.

Katie would also be stopping by the Manor though she’d only be there for the night of the Full Moon. Remus had offered to help her with the first transformation and the Chaser and had gratefully accepted.

Despite his friends accusing him – somewhat rightfully he was willing to admit – of being paranoid, Harry did think they were somewhat overthinking this. In a moment of temporary insanity he found himself almost hoping that Voldemort tried to attack his home. As long as the Dark Wanker brought his snake and his ring then Harry could kill four birds with one stone this holiday and have nothing to worry about for the rest of the year!

Rolling over slightly he readjusted his head on Daphne’s lap on the Hogwarts Express and groaned loudly.

“Something wrong there, oh Great And Mighty Chosen One?” Tracey asked chuckling.

“I was just having a thought that probably signals early insanity. I wonder if whatever made
Dumbledore nutters was infectious?” Harry muttered.

Hermione snorted. “Care to share, Harry? I’m sure it can’t have been that bad. You aren’t raving about magical wars to Muggles after all.”

Harry groaned again and shook his head. “Don’t want to. You’ll hit me.”

That comment sent a round of laughter through the cabin. “Oh, poor Harry Potter is scared of a girl,” Daphne said laughing at her teasing. Her hand however, never stopped running through his hair so he was willing to let it slide.

“You’ve seen Mione angry. She’s scary.” Harry could tease them too if they wanted to play it like that.

An exaggerated sigh rang out above him setting on more giggles. “Well, if I must, I must. Harry, as your right hand I promise to protect you from the danger represented by Hermione Granger.”

Harry could practically hear Hermione’s eyebrows rise in amusement. “You might be able to take me standing up Greengrass, but do you really think you can get away while the boy wonder is lying sprawled across you?”

“Well his legs are sprawled across you too so I figure we both have even odds,” Daphne said nonchalantly.

Hermione chuckled. “Nope. You forgot, dearest Daphne, that I can toss his legs aside without worrying about hurting him while you can’t do the same to his head.”

“She has you there, Daph!” Tracey tossed in.

Daphne’s hands kept up their attentions despite her deep sigh. “Shite, you do have a point…”

“This is all a moot point anyway,” Harry said. “My right hand can’t defend against my left hand. That’d just be weird.”

“Oh so I’m your left hand now?” Hermione asked doing her best to sound affronted and failing miserably. “Do I get a say in this?”

Harry paused to consider. After several long moments he stated, very imperiously, “Nope.”

Luna laughed along with the others though as the noise died back down she cocked her head to the side and looked at Harry with a smile. If he didn’t know better he’d have called it devious. “That was a quite decent distraction, Harry. What was the thought you had had earlier to prompt all this?”

Harry groaned again. Devious. The girl should’ve been in Slytherin. Coco giving her little rolling laugh certainly helped make his case for him. “I was just thinking that after we make our withdrawal it might have been nice for the Dark Wanker to show up at my heavily fortified house so I could finish our scavenger hunt and kill him all in one night.”

Daphne sighed while the others groaned. “You’re right, you do deserve to be hit for that. If he shows up and we kill him that’s one thing. But, Harry, don’t you know better by now not to tempt Fate with these things?”

“Agreed, mate,” Neville chimed in. “You’re already cursed, no need to help it along.”
“Thanks for the support, Nev,” he muttered.

The fellow Gryffindor saluted him. “No problem!”

Harry groaned again. “No love. I get no love. Besides, it’s not Halloween or the end of the school year. Those are –” He was forced to cut off as Hermione leaned down and put her hand over his mouth.

“Shush now, love,” Hermione said pulling her hand back. “While the sentiment may be correct and the hypothesis upheld through prior observations, there is no need to challenge whichever god or goddess you annoyed and break the pattern. Try not to even finish the thought. Now, I was wondering if anyone had any requests for movies.”

A chorus of voices answered the girl and Harry tuned them out, going back to his nap. By the time he woke back up the train had already arrived in London and he and his friends exchanged thoroughly rushed goodbyes before being hurriedly apparated along to their respective abodes.

Rather than returning home though, Harry, Shiva and Lily went straight to Gringotts to get their actual holiday business done first. All play and no work would a Voldemort Britain make. As they walked into the bank together Harry saw Tonks standing next to Sirius rolling comically huge eyes at the man while Sirius smiled innocently. It was unexpected to find his partner here, but he certainly wasn’t about to complain about getting to see her early. Less than five minutes after disembarking the train, Harry was striding forward towards the metamorph and wrapping his arms around her. “Hey, Nym,” Harry greeted his partner as she let out a surprised huff of air at his embrace. “I didn’t think you’d be here too!”

She twisted in his arms until she was facing him and raised her eyebrows before sticking out her far too long tongue at him. “Well you can’t really expect me to let my Head of House go to the bank alone can you? Lord only knows what the overgrown child will take from the vault without some supervision!”

“Hey! Amy has firmly proclaimed me a teenager now! I am no longer a man-child,” Sirius proudly proclaimed. Even the goblin teller groaned at that comment and waved them along to follow after Griphook. The group was led into Snapfist’s office and promptly greeted by the Account Manager.

“What can Gringotts do for you today Warrior Potter? I assume there is a reason for the presence of Lord Black, the future Lady Black and your legal guardians?” Snapfist asked looking thoroughly amused at the extra people invading his space.

Harry nodded. “There is. They are here because we need to look inside Bellatrix Lestrange’s vault.” Snapfist’s expression hardened and Harry hurried on before the goblin truly got angry. “With her husband’s death and no children, I’m told that Sirius is recognized as her Head of House again. That should entitle him to inspect her holdings shouldn’t it?”

Snapfist narrowed his eyes at Harry looking between all five humans present. “This is an unusual situation. The body of Lestrange would need to be recovered for that to be the case or the Ministry would need to declare him legally deceased. Neither has happened yet. As such, her holdings remain her own.”

Shiva scowled and flopped into her chair. “Dammit, Snapfist this is important. Isn’t there a loophole or something?”

Snapfist glared at her and lifted a clawed finger in warning. “Gringotts takes the protections of its
customers’ assets very seriously. The Nation may like you humans, but that only extends so far. If we compromise once, when do we stop compromising? Our enforced neutrality and complete trustworthiness is our greatest defense against any who seek to further undermine our constantly dwindling political capital and rights as a species. Until a formal declaration of war is made by the Nation, we will continue to safeguard all clients equally.”

Harry sighed and held out his hand to summon the Sword of Gryffindor. As it materialized he reached over to lay it on his Account Manager’s desk. “What if we wished to add an item to her vault?”

Snapfist stopped to consider that for a long moment before shaking his head. “Had you led with that…perhaps. Unfortunately, I cannot in good conscience allow it knowing you seek to inspect the current contents.”

Lily placed a hand on her son’s shoulder, her lips narrowed into a line. “Perhaps a partial explanation of just what we are looking for then. It affects Gringotts and you would be just as angry as us if it is discovered inside.” The goblin turned his gaze on her and waved for her to go on. “Have you heard of a Horcrux?”

Snarling, Snapfist reared back, his lips pulling over his teeth and baring their points to the group. “The insane bigot has made one of those abominations?”

Lily shuddered. “Let us hope not. We believe she may be holding one though for a certain individual.”

Snapfist looked between all of them finally settling between Harry and his birth mother. “Warrior Potter, I ask you truthfully on your word of honor: is this all you seek from the Lestrange Vault?”

“It is,” Harry said nodding.

“Lady Potter,” Snapfist said turning his full gaze on her. “I ask you truthfully on your word of honor: is this all you seek from the Lestrange Vault?”

“It is,” Lily replied.

Snapfist stood and nodded at them all. “Wait here.” With that he walked out the door leaving the humans to stare at each other.

“Well this isn’t going as easy as we’d hoped,” Tonks muttered. “Was telling them that much wise?”

Shiva shrugged. “We know he can’t make more. We know he knows we know about them in general. Half the kid’s class knows about them…what harm is there in the goblins knowing too if it saves us the trouble of trying to stage a break in? They supposedly have dragons down there. Do you want Harry to face a dragon?”

“A chimera was more than enough thank you,” Tonks said as her hair flashed to red.

Sirius sighed and clapped his cousin on the shoulder. “I agree with Lily. The Goblin Nation could be a powerful ally. Look what they’ve done for us when they consider us friends. To a goblin, an ally is even higher up the totem pole.”

“Very true, Lord Black,” an imperious and amused voice rang out as the doors opened again letting in Ragnok and Snapfist. “The Nation would have to receive quite the request from people we have shown great respect and admiration to in the past to even consider an official alliance. It would be
the first time in centuries after all. Though I suppose…it has been the first time that we have
called two Warriors not of our blood in centuries as well,” he finished chuckling. Harry didn’t fail
to catch that hint and resolved to come back later with Daphne to see about following through on
that thread.

The old goblin Director clasped his hands and inclined his head for them to follow as he headed for
another door. “Gringotts will let you inspect the Lestrange Vault for a Horcrux. If found you will
have to remove it. Only it. Anything else will be considered theft and punished appropriately. In
addition, Lord Black, it is my duty to inform you that if there is a Horcrux inside that vault, fees
will be collected from the Lestranges.”

Snapfist looked back at them with a cunning smile. “How long do you expect the item was hidden
there for?” he asked as they stepped into a minecart that just barely fit them all.

“Probably about fourteen or fifteen years,” Sirius yelled over the wind of their journey.

Ragnok laughed though the sound came awfully close to evil cackling. “Back-fees for illegally
residing without rent in a Gringotts vault for fifteen years will be quite substantial I am sure. I
doubt the Lestrange Vault will have much of any gold left after this!”

“Rent?” Harry exclaimed goggling. The cart started to slow and coasted to a halt. “We could’ve
led with there being a Horcrux and claimed Voldemort and Bellatrix weren’t paying rent?!!”

Snapfist gave an exaggerated shrug and raised an eyebrow. “Vaults for living souls are separate
from vaults for items and documents. To reside in the latter and not the former is unacceptable!
Not least of which because there are no facilities in them.” He started cackling just like his boss
and Harry just groaned.

“Oh. My. God,” Tonks muttered. Her hair turned to black and she moved to subtly cover Harry
and the rest. “There is an actual dragon here.”

Shiva blinked in surprise as the creature turned toward them and huffed out a small flame from its
nostrils. “Well would you look at that. It’s not just a story…”

“I love Gringotts,” Sirius said practically tearing up.

Lily and Harry just nodded. Harry couldn’t help but notice the shackles on the poor thing and how
it appeared to be blind. None of that would stop it from trying to bite his head off though so his
sympathy was somewhat mitigated.

Snapfist pulled out a pair of metal tools, banging them together a few times. The dragon
immediately cringed away towards the other side of the large central space allowing the group to
move towards a newly revealed vault door. “We’ve trained it well. It is old and will have to be
replaced in a few years, but it used to be much stronger and livelier. No point in having a dragon
guard if your guard looks like it’s on the verge of death.”

Lily opened her mouth to reply twice before finally getting words out. “Even so, I recommend not
taking additional family members down here. I can’t see Hermione reacting well to this.”

“Yeah well Hermione didn’t almost get eaten by a basilisk and a chimera,” Harry muttered. “She
can have her magical creature rights ideals while I maintain a healthy distance from all five X
beasties.”

“Good plan. I vote for this plan,” Tonks said nodding enthusiastically.
Ragnok ignored their banter and reached up running a finger down the door in front of him. A moment later the door melted away. Grinning Sirius stepped forward to cast his spell. Unfortunately he bumped into a plate near the door and as it fell, he clutched his leg, yelling out in pain and the plate bounced onto the floor splitting into two identical copies.

Both goblins growled. “Illegal charms and defensive spells,” Snapfist snarled. “More fees. Stand back!” He lifted a hand into the air and swiped it down. Harry felt a wave of magic wash over him and the double of the plate vanished. “The illegal spells have been removed. You may try again, Lord Black.”

Sirius glared at the plate that had dared to burn him and stepped – carefully – into the room again. A short muttered spell later and a small goblet near the back of the chamber glowed. “Ah, Bella, good, but not good enough!”

Sirius walked forward and plucked it off the shelf with two fingers wincing in disgust as he dropped it in front of Harry. Harry for his part immediately whipped out his Soul Cage though he hesitated a moment before handing it to Tonks. Tonks just stared at the rune in her hand blinking up at Harry in confusion. “I got the others,” he said shrugging. “I killed the locket and that probably should’ve been Sirius’ to destroy since his family got it. You’re going to be Lady Black one day and this thing was hidden by your aunt who is hell bent on killing you. You deserve to get to destroy one of these things, Nym.”

Flashing a feral grin to him, Tonks turned back to the locket. For one of the few times he could remember, Harry saw Tonks drop all her morphs at once as she leaned over the Horcrux. “Stay the hell away from my family, wanker,” she snarled. The cup started to fill with a black sludge, but her hand lashed out with a fully charged Soul Cage. A loud scream and shooting black ichor signaled the death of yet another of Tom Marvolo Riddle’s Horcruxes. All the personnel watching wore identical satisfied grins.

“Well,” Ragnok commented appearing quite happy. “I do believe that the fees levied on the Lestrange family will be quite exorbitant.”
Chapter 44: Avengers Assemble! Masters of Evil Unite! Part 1

Harry heard the chime signaling a visitor and watched his mother get up to collect their guests. Lily met his eyes as she walked out and they shared a small grin and wink. Sirius wasn’t the only one in the family who could mess with people. Despite having known about – and actively advocating for – this arrival, Harry couldn’t help the way his stomach flipped or his shoulders tensed.

Of course Hermione, sitting next to him, didn’t fail to notice his nervousness. While Tonks and Fleur continued to eat their popcorn and watch “It’s a Wonderful Life”, Hermione twisted in her spot to peer closer at her partner with a curious tilt to her head. Harry gave her a small smile and nodded that he was okay before watching the entrance to the library carefully. His vigilance was rewarded when thirty seconds later Lily walked back in with a couple right behind her. The woman was tall with long wavy black hair and an amused expression dancing in her eyes while the man was toned with a rough cut to his chin and short-cropped hair.

“Who was at the door, Lils?” Shiva asked. “I thought Remus and Katie weren’t coming for another hour or so.”

“Is that any way greet your parents, Bathsheda?” Mrs. Babbling asked with a huge grin splitting her features. Harry saw Hermione’s jaw drop as she switched her gaze between the two newcomers, Lily and Harry. Tonks and Fleur froze with their hands halfway to the popcorn bowl. Shiva’s reaction was by far the most pronounced as she literally fell out of her armchair. The crash of his adoptive mother hitting the floor was followed by silence for a long moment before Shiva carefully poked her head over the side of the chair and stared wide-eyed at the couple.

“Mum? Dad? What are-what are you two doing here? You’re supposed to be in Brazil!” she squeaked.

“Peru actually,” Mr. Babbling commented chuckling and shaking his head. “Did you think we’d miss your first Christmas with a new family?”

“We did miss the first Christmas dear. And the second.” His wife was obviously fighting to hold in her own laughter as she teased them.

Shiva stood and glared. “Hey, that’s unfair! I didn’t have Christmas at home for the past two years! Last year we were stuck at the castle for the Yule Ball and the year before that we still thought Sirius was a dangerous madman! Made it difficult to leave for the winter hols that did!”

“Excuses, excuses,” her father said smiling and waving it off. “Now are you going to introduce us to your new son and girlfriend you going to keep standing there arguing?”

Shiva rolled her eyes and waved towards Lily and Harry. “Mum, Dad, that’s Lily Potter and Harry Potter. Harry, Lils, my mum and dad, Rebecca and David.”

“Bathy, really is that the best you can do?” David sighed. “We didn’t even know you had a son until we got their letter the other day.”

Harry froze halfway out of his seat. A pin could’ve dropped on the carpet and sounded like a cannon blast. All the color drained from Shiva’s face. She started working her mouth for a few
moments before finally managing to squeak out a few words. “What? But…I…I sent you a letter over two years ago…I know I sent it! I gave it to the owl right after I…picked up…the guardian forms…oh bugger…”

Harry groaned and rubbed his forehead. “Shiva, you forgot to tell your parents you basically adopted me?”

“I didn’t forget! I didn’t! There was that thing with Marge and the dog, you had all those medical issues, all that stuff about the Magical Guardian and Dumbledore, I still thought Sirius was going to try and kill you —” Everyone ignored an indignant “Hey!” from an implicated godfather while Shiva kept babbling. “I didn’t forget! They travel like all the time with their work! They’re gone for months or years at a time! I wrote a letter and I got distracted…I could’ve sworn I sent it out…”

Lily finally took pity on her girlfriend and stepped forward, all smiles. “Well, the lack of social skills aside, your daughter has been nothing short of wonderful to Harry and I. She’s been extremely supportive every step of the way and is a great reflection on the both of you! Right, Harry?”

“Right!” Harry said noting his cue and walking up to briefly hug Shiva before stepping next to Lily. “Shiva helped me trust people above my age group and probably saved my life a few times. It’s an honor to meet you in person, Mr. and Mrs. Babbling.”

“Such a polite young man!” Rebecca exclaimed leaning in to wrap Harry into an embrace. “Please dear, call us Rebecca and David.”

David held out his hand to Lily and eagerly shook. “We really can’t thank you enough for the invite, Lily. We’ve been cataloging ruins and critters for so long out West that we had no idea just how much we’ve been missing back home!”

Shiva glared at both Harry and Lily for a long moment. “You two sneaks…” Harry just smiled back at her. From her stance and the way her arms were crossed it was pretty obvious that Shiva wasn’t actually angry at them.

Any further potential conversation was interrupted as Daphne walked in with both arms covered in balancing plates and an annoyed expression. “What happened to helping me, people? I volunteered to grab two dishes not seven! Oh – hello.” Daphne’s eyes widened in horror at her outburst as she caught sight of the new additions to the room. Her cheeks blushed red and she hurriedly tried to set the plates down on the nearby table. “Umm…excuse me.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and moved to help while Tonks and Fleur devolved into laughter. Harry just shook his head in amusement and the elder Babblings took their seats on one of the couches. Christmas with family…Harry smiled as he sat down. It had taken over a decade but…he was finally getting to experience the holiday the way he’d always dreamed.

Rebecca and David had eagerly settled in and were in the process of being updated on all the ‘interesting’ stories of Harry and Company’s adventures in Hogwarts. Thoroughly embarrassing versions of the stories that was. Harry had decided against listening in almost an hour ago and had taken to playing chess with Tonks. It was far more likely to prevent his cheeks from turning red – which was really saying something considering this was Tonks.

“Nym, no matter how much you change your face I’m not going to get distracted,” Harry said grinning at Tonks’ sun-yellow hair and pointed, Tolkien-esque, elven ears.
“But I’m Arwen. Arwen is too beautiful to be ignored!” Tonks protested with a smirk.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Arwen had black hair in the movies.”

Tonks frowned. A moment later her smirk returned and her face morphed into a more masculine appearance while she sat up straighter and struck a regal pose. “Then I’m Legolas. He was so hot they had to bring him back for the next trilogy! Beat that!”

Harry raised his eyebrows at Tonks and chuckled. “Unfortunately for you, Nym, unlike the rest of the group, I am not bisexual.”

“You’re going to break poor little Colin Creevy’s heart, Wonder Boy.”

“Pretty sure I already did when I started dating Daphne and killed his last hope.” Still laughing, Harry stretched out his hand and prodded his rook to march forward. “Checkmate.”

Tonks watched her pieces throw down their arms in surrender while Harry’s started cheering. She shook her head in defeat and changed back to her normal face and pink hair. “Darn. Well, it’s two to two. Want to go best of five?”

“And zat is when he popped up from ze lake wiz my sister and Mione under each arm, flying across ze surface like a human jet ski!” Fleur’s voice floated over with appropriate gasps from Shiva’s parents. Harry just groaned and looked to Tonks for help.

“Next game coming right up! Come on you lot, back to the starting positions!” Tonks said hurriedly to the pieces. “Harry, you use these same examples yourself. Why do you get so embarrassed about it now?”

Harry shrugged. “I talk about those things when I need to intimidate someone, Nym. These are Shiva’s parents. It’s completely different.”

“Pawn to E4,” Tonks said. “They’re going to like you Harry. Honestly, they could stay in contact better themselves, two years is a bit long to go off the grid.”

Harry just winced. “Knight to F6. True, but Shiva’s mentioned they do it a lot. Part of the job apparently.”

“Still a bit weird.” Anything else that Tonks was going to say was cut off as the door chime rang again. “Ah, Remus and Katie finally made it. Daph, Mione, you had Katie added into the wards so that they can just walk in right?”

“Yes, Tonks, we really should be polite though anyway,” Daphne said standing. Remus walked in before she could actually leave the room though so Daphne just sighed and sat back down. “I am surrounded by savages. One day I will teach at least one of you some etiquette…”

Harry rolled his eyes at her melodramatics and turned to flash a welcoming smile to Katie as she entered the room. “Hey, Katie. You…okay…?” He trailed off at the look of wonder and satisfaction on her face.

Katie shook her head and focused on him before nodding emphatically. “I am wonderful! That was awesome!”

“Yes, well, you wouldn’t have felt that way prior the contribution of the Fulcanellis,” Remus huffed. He claimed a chair and crossed his arms though the small smile fighting to keep from fully manifesting was evidence to his real feelings. “Harry, be a good nephew and tell those two they’ve
succeeded in putting their names back into the history books once that potion hits the open market.”

“That good, Moony?” Sirius asked as he leaned forward to peer at his friend. “Wow, you’re not pale or shaky and you’re practically beaming. What the heck was in that stuff?”

“The closest thing to a cure we’re likely to ever find,” Remus said finally letting his mouth take the shape it wanted. “The change was fully voluntary for me; the only reason I even shifted at all was to keep Ms. Bell company and run around the cellar with her.”

Katie snorted. “Yeah next time Professor, I’m totally going into a field or something and howling at the Moon.”

Everyone in the room had stopped what they were doing to stare slack-jawed at the two werewolves. Lily was the first to somewhat recover. She sat back against her seat and whistled low. “Voluntary change? Completely? No compulsion whatsoever?” Her voice was faint, but still had an edge of scientific wonder about it.

“It was like an itch for me. Something that could be scratched by the change or simply ignored for several hours,” Remus said nodding. “Ms. Bell’s transformation was involuntary though she retained full human intelligence while in her wolf form. The First Moon is part of the magic that seals the lycanthropy curse meaning that it is intrinsic to the disease. It’s highly likely that any werewolf ingesting this new potion after their first transformation would have similar voluntary control of the shift that I did!”

Katie smirked and laughed. “If you have any sense whatsoever while a wolf even on regular Wolfsbane, I have no idea why you hate it so much, Professor. Between the senses, the power, the energy…that was just…awesome!”

Sirius laughed and lightly punched Remus’ shoulder. “She has a point, Moony. You always did focus on the negative.”

“To be fair,” Daphne commented her eyebrow arched, “there are quite a few negatives.”

“I’m just saying, if you go into it as a defeatist, of course it’s going to be the worst thing in the world,” Sirius said shrugging. “Think about it like this though, Remus got to explore the grounds with his friends at least once each month and we all got to become cool animagi!”

Shiva nodded. “In a way, if Remus wasn’t a werewolf you never would’ve survived or escaped Azkaban.”

“See! Point made.” He sat back smiling and nodding. As far as Sirius appeared concerned, the discussion was over and he’d won.

Harry just rolled his eyes at his family. “That was barely even about the good points of lycanthropy.”

“Well it’s easier to get off for one apparently; wolves are randy. It’s too bad Lee wasn’t around when the sun came up…” Katie commented. A few of the adults had to change their snickers into coughs while Harry and Hermione groaned and dropped their heads into their hands. Katie’s face lit up like a traffic signal as she realized she’d said that aloud.

“And on that note, new topic,” Hermione said. “Harry, you said you had things to give out?”

Harry perked up and a grin split his face. “Right! Dobby, can you grab the presents for me?”
“Master Harry wants the war attire?” the House Elf asked as he popped into place in front of the couch. At Harry’s nod Dobby disappeared.

“War attire?” Shiva asked looking askance at Harry. “Something you forgot to tell us, kid?”

“Nope,” Harry said looking extremely smug. “It’s not my fault you forgot the initial plan, Shiva.”

Dobby appeared again with several large, lumpy packages in hand laying them at Harry’s feet. Harry’s smile widened and he started passing the packages out to his family. Hermione, Daphne, Fleur and Tonks all accepted them with minimal fanfare beyond a light kiss while Lily and Shiva settled for amused glances and hugs. Remus took Harry’s gift with his typical reserved manner and Sirius was no surprise as he jumped up and wrapped Harry into a bear hug.

“Sirius, let me go!” Harry said laughing. “You don’t even know what it is!”

“Unlike these rapscallions, I have a pretty good idea, pup,” Sirius said his eyes gleaming.

“Oh good, somebody remembers,” Harry said. “Katie, Rebecca, David, I’m sorry, but I had these commissioned ages ago so I don’t really have any extra to hand out…”

Katie waved it off. “No worries, Harry. We don’t exactly hang out regularly enough for me to expect a super expensive Christmas gift.”

“And we weren’t exactly around prior to today,” Rebecca said smiling. “Now stop holding back everyone! What is it?!?”

Paper rattled and crinkled as Harry’s family tore off the wrapping followed quickly by gasps and shouts of surprise. Daphne started chuckling and shaking her head as she looked at Harry. “I can’t believe I forgot about this. I was the who made sure you rendered the thing!”

Fleur held up her new ‘war attire’ blatantly admiring the dull green scales. She held up one of the arms on the suit and squeaked in delight when she saw it perfectly matched her arm length and even had small slits on the back for her wings to poke through. “‘Arry! Zis is magnifique! Zis is ze basilisk catsuit yes? Zis is why you ensured Dobby took all of our measurements during ze summer?”

“Sorry they took so long,” Harry said running a hand through his hair. “The scales make it highly resistant to spellfire so if we combine it with the Armor Robes we get double protection in a fight. Each one is sized to the individual with spells on the inside that allow it to expand or contract to a small degree. As long as no one gains or loses a ton of weight they should stay fitted. Fleur, yours is basically skintight since you mentioned you like that. Nym, yours is a bit loose so you can shift easier.”

“Wow…” Lily murmured. “These are beautiful…did you have any additional ones made, Harry?”

“Yeah, a few more. Amelia, Tracey, Luna and Neville all have one as well. Dobby delivered them a little while ago.” Harry smiled and shrugged. “There’s enough left over for Astoria and Gabrielle as well once they finish puberty.”

Tonks leaned over the chessboard and pulled Harry’s head down proceeding to capture his lips until a light cough from the direction of the parents forced her to release him. Pulling back enough to kiss his cheek, Tonks whispered, “Smart boy. You know Fleur and Daphne are soooo going to repay that foresight later tonight. I will too.”

Harry felt his face burn as Tonks shifted back into her seat and the others started to profess their
love for the protective outfits as well. Leaning back Harry couldn’t stop smiling. With the basilisk skin suits finished, they’d be much safer. Voldemort could try to attack his family, but...the murdering madman would be very surprised at just how hard he’d find such a battle.

Voldemort reclined on his throne as the meeting commenced. He allowed Lucius to conduct the majority of the discussions. It wouldn’t do for him to stoop to dealing with his own business. Not with these pathetic creatures at least. He would likely have to speak with the next two groups personally, but for the moment the need to intimidate and display his power was far more important.

The werewolf alpha scowled at Lucius and slammed a hand onto the table. “We will not be bullied Malfoy! With Greyback’s death my pack represents nearly every remaining werewolf in the United Kingdom and I speak for them. I recommend you address me as such.”

“Of course,” Lucius said smiling and cocking his head. Voldemort suppressed a sigh. The man had a silver tongue with those who lived for gold and commiserations. He had never been nearly as accomplished with those who lived for battle. Not for the first time, Voldemort cursed the loss of the Nott. “I merely wished to express the likelihood of disaster. Especially now in the aftermath of a werewolf assault on Hogsmeade...”

“You are not the only power in this country anymore, Death Eater.” The alpha growled low before leaning back, smiling and crossing his arms. The urge to separate the beast’s head from his shoulders was strong, but Voldemort resisted. Killing this man would certainly remove the remainder of his werewolves from the army.

“I’m sure you don’t mean the Ministry.” Lucius laughed and clutched his cane tighter. “Those fools just ousted their own Minister for Magic!”

“And installed a competent leader,” the werewolf said. Voldemort’s rage grew further. Amelia Bones. He should have killed her first while she was still undefended. Now she was constantly surrounded by Potter’s personnel or Potter’s wards and was she was basically untouchable until the rest of the country had been dealt with. “But no, I don’t speak of the Ministry. The packs historically align with the Dark or remains neutral. Our affliction makes it difficult for the majority to accept us. Your administration would let us have free rein but...there are rumors of a potentially more appealing option. I don’t like you or your cohorts, Malfoy. That said, if it was best for my pack I would still throw our forces behind you.” He paused, narrowed his eyes and stood to glare down at Lucius. “Unfortunately for you, Lucius Malfoy, I don’t believe you will win this war. Goodbye.”

As the werewolf stalked out of the room Voldemort’s wand arm literally began to vibrate as he suppressed the murderous urge welling forth. He could not afford to have bodies of envoys falling at his doorstep until after the army was established. There would be time for revenge and retribution later. “Lucius, what rumors did the beast speak of?”

The blond man flinched and bowed low enough for his hair to brush the floor. “My lord, there is talk that Potter has a new form of Wolfsbane Potion that can curb the destruction of the werewolf form.”

“And?” The threat in Voldemort’s sibilant voice quickly drew out Lucius’ remaining information. “My sources tell me that Lupin has claimed the potion allows for voluntary transformation...”

Voldemort scowled. “More of his cursed runes no doubt...No matter. We will deal with this
situation as we obtain more information. Perhaps we’ll be able to corrupt whatever rune scheme he is using to create them.”

“My lord, actually he is – ” Lucius tried to expound on the failure, but Voldemort quickly cut him off.

“Send in the soldiers.”

Lucius winced and nodded. “Yes, my lord.”

Voldemort waited patiently as four men in pressed military uniforms strode into the chamber. The leader moved to seat himself at the table facing Voldemort’s throne while the others remained standing behind the chair. “Lord Voldemort. I am General Schulz, first of Grindelwald’s remaining Wizarding Schutzstaffel. We were surprised to hear your invitation. You were never interested in allying previously.”

“Times change my friends. I find myself more open to assisting you in your future endeavors if you would assist me in mine,” Voldemort said waving his hand dismissively.

The SS wizard smiled though the expression did not reach his eyes. “You mean that your recruitment efforts are now as ineffective as ours.”

Voldemort glared down and fingered his wand. “Careful, General. For half a century your efforts have been barely enough to maintain your own philosophy. My setbacks are merely temporary. Yours are endemic to a new worldview.”

“If Harry Potter and his allies have their way, your problems will be the same as ours, Lord Voldemort.” The general leaned back and folded his hands on the table. “We did not come to fight however so let us stop this foolish posturing. You seek the assistance of my men so what do you plan to do in return?”

Voldemort stayed silent for several long moments taking stock of the man and the situation as a whole. “I am prepared to seed you the majority of the mainland. I reserve the right to claim France and Belgium. Once Britain is secure under my banner I will allocate my Death Eaters and Aurors to assist you in taking over a single country of your own choosing. From there additional negotiations would be required for anything further.”

“That…would be acceptable,” General Schulz said. “For that, I could agree to send 40 elite personnel to assist. If you swear an oath to free Grindelwald I will send an additional 60.”

Voldemort nearly laughed at the fool. Such a poorly worded request for a huge gain in forces! “Done.”

The general smiled and raised his eyebrow. “Free him and ensure he is alive and unharmed upon delivery to my team.”

Voldemort seethed inside. Perhaps the man wasn’t as shortsighted as he seemed. You never could tell with the WSS. Grindelwald’s shock troops had always been too aligned with the Nazis they had supported to be truly predictable. He’d avoided seeking their support originally as they personally disgusted him. Growing up during the war had left lingering hatred for these types of men that his knowledge of magic had done little to dispel. The WSS cared nothing for blood status, they focused on the skin or religion. Voldemort’s Death Eaters on the other hand cared nothing for religion or skin color and merely sought to ‘purify’ the nation.

In truth, Voldemort cared little for either philosophy. He was only interested in power and he
could stand to work with his hated rivals for long enough to obtain it. Once his base was secure, he’d be able to stamp them out like the insects they were. “Agreed. Do we have a deal?”

“We do. Assembling my forces and closing down our current operations will take some time. Say we move to attack in May?” General Schulz said standing.

“That was my intention as well. A decisive battle will break them more than small fights. My own forces will be trained for true combat by then and my alliances will be secure.”

“Excellent. I’ll ask for the oath prior to sending my people. We’ll keep you informed, please do the same. Good evening, Lord Voldemort.” Nodding his farewell, the general stood and all four walked out of the room in lockstep.

Voldemort scowled at their backs fingering his wand. Nagini slithered her way up his leg and laid her head on his lap. “Ah my pet, if only I had time to take out my frustrations…” He smiled as he saw Lucius flinch. The man deserved to be fearful. After the betrayal and subsequent escape of Narcissa and Draco’s utterly pathetic showing in life…Lucius was lucky he was still useful. “Send in the giants, Lucius.”

“My lord, they have already proclaimed themselves to your banner,” Lucius said bowing. Voldemort looked up in surprise. “A messenger arrived during your conversation with Grindelwald’s remnants. The giants ask only for further territory to the North which you had already agreed to. The stupid beasts didn’t even think to ask for more. The mountain and river trolls are marching under your banner as well.”

“Excellent,” Voldemort said smiling. He rubbed his ring wondering at just how much destruction his forces would cause to this country when they moved. Hopefully he wouldn’t have to rebuild everything. “Then let us move on to the vampire covens.”

“Of course, my lord.” Lucius hurried out of the door returning shortly after with two vampire lords following in his wake. “Dark Lord Voldemort, I present Lords Elmont and Shuzen.”

Both vampires were tall and stately. The male seemed like he was born to the regal bearing while the brown skinned female appeared to have only learned how to play the part instead of having it ingrained into her since birth. Voldemort frowned at the foreign sounding name of the female. What had a Japanese vampire done to get exiled to this section of the world? “Please, sit. I can provide ‘refreshments’ if you’d like.”

“No thank you. I try not to sate my appetite until the battlefield,” Elmont said.

In direct contrast to her counterpart, Shuzen smiled showing off her fangs and nodded. “Someone younger – late teens – tall, with silvery or pink hair and female if possible.”

“Detailed. One would think you were substituting her for your actual target,” Voldemort mused. Nevertheless he snapped his fingers and Lucius scurried off. As far as he knew, there were no personnel on the grounds that fit that description however Lucius would ensure one of the slaves was properly glamoured before bringing her in.

“My stepdaughter,” Shuzen said waving a hand dismissively. “Now, I believe we were about to discuss how your Death Eaters want my coven to assist in killing off the humans?”

Voldemort smiled. He liked this woman. Ruthless and direct, it was a shame she was a vampire; she would have made a good lieutenant. “That is correct. After I gain control of this country the territory allotted to your kind will be greatly expanded.”
“We will be allowed to war in the open?” Elmont asked leaning forward with an eager grin on his features.

“Within reason. Until we have secured more of the world population under our control we cannot risk revealing our full existence to the Muggles at large. However should you ensure that any witnesses were permanently silenced, I see no reason to take away all of your fun.”

Both vampires smiled. Lucius chose that moment to return with a girl walking ahead of him. Her dull eyes provided the proof of the Imperius curse and she stopped to the side of Shuzen. “Ah, excellent. Dinner.” Without further ado, the female lunged and latched onto the girl’s neck. In the thirty seconds it took to fully drain the child, the other three occupants watched on with utter indifference. Voldemort stroked Nagini and thought to what he would offer the acromantulas. With their help in addition to these others, Hogwarts was sure to fall…along with Harry Potter and his primary backers.

“Ah, that hit the spot,” Shuzen said pulling back and wiping the drops of blood off her mouth. She dropped the corpse to the floor beside her and nodded to Voldemort. “My coven will support you. We return to Japan come summer so I recommend you attack prior to that.”

“Mine will come to your aide as well,” Elmont said. “I warn you, the other covens will not be open to negotiations. They received visits from your Minister several months ago thanks to leaked intelligence from one of your agents. They are very…unhappy that their nests are known to the British Ministry.”

Voldemort scowled. That fool who had allowed himself to be captured at Bella’s manor was still causing problems…No matter, when he took the Ministry, the man would suffer greatly for allowing himself to be interrogated. “Then it seems you will be the primary beneficiaries of the new order I bring to this country.”

“It seems so. Perhaps I will move my operations here in the future if we are successful. Good luck, Voldemort. I look forward to playing with your targets,” Shuzen and Elmont both nodded and left the room.

Voldemort idly waved for Lucius to collect the corpse and clear the table. He returned to stroking Nagini as the Death Eater cleaned. “Soon, my pet. Soon, we will be able to claim our right. Soon.”

Harry, Lily and Daphne walked into Gringotts the day after Christmas in their finest cloaks and basilisk skin armor. Shiva had opted out of this conversation in an attempt to present the strongest front they could to the goblins with the people the beings seemed to respect the most. After speaking with the teller they were quickly brought before Snapfist who grinned at them and immediately left to retrieve Ragnok without even having to be asked.

“This seems to be going well so far,” Lily commented shifting her suit slightly. “And I can’t believe how well this breathes!”

“Women,” Harry muttered rolling his eyes. “Here we are about to negotiate an alliance with the Goblin Nation and you’re fawning over the new uniform, mum.”

“Hush, son. Fashion is important no matter the occasion.”

Daphne smirked and patted Harry’s knee consolingly. “Get used to it, Harry. You have four women who are all going to be extremely interested in shopping, clothes and playing dress-up at
“Should just let Voldemort kill me. It would be less painful,” he said shaking his head despondently.

“Ah, but Warrior Potter with the proper mindset even a shopping excursion could be treated as an epic battle for the ages,” Ragnok said snickering as he entered the room and sat down behind the desk.

Harry lifted an eyebrow at the goblin. “I like that way of looking at things, Director. Perhaps I should approach those future trips as diving behind enemy lines.”

“Men,” Daphne and Lily said chuckling. Shaking her head and settling down to business Daphne leaned forward slightly. “Director Ragnok, thank you for agreeing to see us. We have important matters that need to be addressed. Matters that stand to gravely impact both the Nation and the British wizarding population.”

Ragnok clasped his hands and tilted his hand. “The Nation agrees with you on the latter Warrior Greengrass, but disputes the former. Tom Riddle has yet to show any overt actions against Gringotts or the goblins.”

Lily shook her head and handed over several papers. “Actually, Director Ragnok, that is not true. Tom Riddle has had his trusted lieutenants push for the legislation that has continued to curb the Nation’s rights and holdings. Here is the proof that Lucius Malfoy was at the forefront of these laws.”

Ragnok took several minutes to read through the offered files before carefully laying them out and turning back to the humans. “Warriors, Lady, this evidence is damning, yet it also lies heavily at former Minister Cornelius Fudge’s feet. What assurances would the Nation have that the current Minister Amelia Bones or the next Minister after her would not simply continue this trend?”

“Minister Bones is a close personal friend of the Potters and is a leader in the Inventor Alliance,” Daphne said. “This alliance consists of a eleven major British pureblood families. Twelve when I take command of the Greengrass estate. In addition the Alliance includes the Delacours and the Krums, both highly placed and respected in their own countries. The Lis and the Patils both have extensive holdings and status in China and India respectively.” She leaned back and spread her arms wide. “Should Minister Bones attempt to invoke any legislature against Warrior Potter’s allies she would quickly find the motion blocked by the rest of the Alliance and multiple foreign countries. We have a history of taking care of our own.”

Harry nodded. “Warrior Greengrass speaks the truth. You’ve heard of many of our accomplishments, Director. You know what a gaggle of school kids can do. Imagine how much ground we’ll cover in a few years. Even if our families don’t respond to our requests at this specific time, we will be leading those families one day. And we can vow that if nothing has been done to increase the rights and privileges of the Goblin Nation, it will be done as soon as we have control.” A dark look crossed Harry’s face as he scowled thinking about the corruption, stupidity and racism rampant in the wizarding culture. “I will be dragging this world into the 20th Century kicking and screaming if I have to. It’s high time, wizards grow up and get off our high horse.”

Ragnok started laughing and shaking his head causing the humans to look at each other in confusion. Eventually he settled down and wiped his eyes with a claw. “Warrior Potter, I knew there was a reason I liked you. You would have made an excellent goblin. Warrior Greengrass, I assume you have an alliance agreement already drawn up?”
The only surprise that Daphne allowed to show at the quickness of Ragnok’s agreement was a few rapid eye blinks. Harry had been around her long enough to recognize the tell and he had to fight the urge to reach over and squeeze her knee. “I do. It’s right here.”

When she handed it over Ragnok started to read. Continuing his scan, the old goblin calmly spoke to Lily, “Lady Potter, your opinion of the agreement and the other personnel in the Inventor Alliance?”

“I believe Warrior Greengrass is a far more adept politician than many of the persons currently sitting in the Wizengamot. She and Hermione Granger have drafted a comprehensive and flexible agreement,” Lily said. “All families in the Alliance are trustworthy and honorable. Even the Bulstrodes have completely fallen into stride with our group – largely due to the influence of my son and his friends on their daughter. With their backing you can gain ground in the Chinese and Indian markets as well through the contacts that the Lis’ and Patils’ maintain.”

Ragnok nodded and finished the paper laying it down with the others. He slowly regarded each of the three humans before nodding his head. “The Goblin Nation has received your request for a formal alliance. Prior to agreement we require an additional stipulation.”

Daphne sighed, but nodded. Harry grimaced. This wasn’t unexpected, but it could be painful depending on what Ragnok wanted. “What would the addition be, Director?”

Ragnok’s grin was all teeth and very little humor. “We require assurance that Marcus Greengrass will be abdicating his Lordship in favor of Warrior Greengrass. Gringotts is willing to…help this state along.” Three pairs of mouths dropped open at that. Ragnok’s grin only widened. “I have heard about his attempts to force the hand of respected Warriors. I have also heard of how you easily outmaneuvered him. This is on top of insulting us during his prior meetings. Gringotts collects its debts and Marcus Greengrass has incurred a large one. We do not trust him to act in the Nation’s interest. We do however trust Warrior Greengrass to do so. Our only question is whether you wish him to remain alive or not after we are through.”

Harry couldn’t stop the laugh from bubbling out. He turned to Daphne, grinning widely. “So apparently we can cross your father off our list of people to go after now!”

“Apparently so.” Daphne’s grin matched Ragnok’s. “I would prefer he live. The man may be a bastard, but he is still my father; and it would be ever so sweet to have him watch as I wrest control from him without even lifting a finger.”

Ragnok laughed and nodded. “Then on behalf of my people, I accept this alliance request. When the time of battle arrives, the People will march with you.”

After leaving the bank Harry dropped Daphne off at Luna’s, his mother off at home and picked up Remus. Together man and werewolf left the manor again for the next meeting of the day. This one was being conducted in a neutral location, a pub in downtown Muggle London. Both sides wanted to be sure that the Death Eaters wouldn’t be following along and it had been decided that this was the best option available.

Walking into the pub, Remus’ nostrils flared and he quickly nodded to a side booth. “Over there, Harry. Remember, just because he will speak as an alpha werewolf he is still human and will have personal motivations that will factor heavily.”

“Pot meet kettle. I got this, Remus,” Harry said smirking at the older man. “Come on.” Harry led the way over to the indicated booth and nodded politely to the sole occupant receiving a similar
response in turn.

“Harry Potter, Mr. Lupin, a pleasure. I am Martin Levinson, alpha of the London Pack and representative of the six largest packs in the United Kingdom. Before we begin, perhaps some drinks?” the werewolf said.

Harry nodded. “Sure, though I don’t think these places sell pumpkin juice…”

Martin laughed shaking his head. “They don’t, but they do have a great black tea here. Soothes the throat after a Full Moon.”

“Hopefully that won’t be needed for much longer,” Remus murmured.

“We had heard rumors about that possibility,” Martin acknowledged. “To be perfectly honest, that is why I am here instead of attending You-Know-Who’s meetings. I want to tear the man and his personnel limb from limb, yet I can’t deny he talks a good game with his promises regarding my people. I hope there is some truth to these rumors as I would hate to crawl back to him.”

Harry’s lips twitched and it took a great deal of effort to avoid snarling. From the way Martin’s eyes shifted to his mouth, Harry knew that the werewolf had noticed and chosen to ignore it. “Mr. Levinson, allow me to make something clear early on. Don’t go back to Voldemort.” He took not a small amount of pleasure in the flinch that Martin displayed at the name. Levinson may be alpha of several packs, but Harry was the one in charge of this meeting. “Tom Riddle is going to die soon. One way or another, I can assure you he won’t survive the coming months. When he falls, the Wizarding World is going to change. No one who supported him is going to get away without consequences. It isn’t going to be like the last time. If you or your people support Voldemort, you will all come away far worse off.”

Martin smiled a toothy smile. “You have quite a deal of confidence in your abilities, Mr. Potter.”

“They are well warranted I assure you,” Remus said. “I’m sure you’ve thoroughly researched his history and accomplishments. When Harry says something will happen, it will.”

“It also helps that I am not just talking about my own role in the coming fight, Mr. Levinson. I am talking about the combined skills of all my friends and allies,” Harry nodded towards Remus and waved his hand in the general direction of the city. “The Inventor Alliance comprises fourteen Houses, including four foreign Houses. We also have additional non-titled families involved as well as many Muggleborns. On top of this, I am personal friends with the Minister for Magic and have recently secured an alliance with the Goblin Nation.”

Martin made a strangled sound at that and reached for his tea gulping down half the mug. “You are allies with the goblins?! Truly?”

“Truly,” Harry said smirking. He had the man now. “But I believe we were going to discuss the veracity of the new Moonsbane Potion?”

Remus snorted a bit and muttered, “Moonsbane?”

“They said I could name it,” Harry said shrugging.

Martin looked between the two of them and started rubbing his forehead with two fingers. “Would you care to explain just how effective the ‘Moonsbane’ is when you are done?”

Remus smiled and his eyes widened with glee. “Startlingly effective! I had a First Moon wolf with me who was forced to change as usual, but with none of the normal pain evident even with people
welcoming the transformation. In addition she retained her entire human faculty for the duration. Another First Moon wolf had the exact same experience.”

Martin narrowed his eyes and sized Remus up. “Her *entire* reason remained? No degradation at all?”

“None.”

“Promising…That wasn’t quite what I had heard though…”

Remus’ smile widened. “Of course not, because that was not the most amazing thing. The true benefit to the potion is for the wolves who have already transitioned. *My* change was completely *voluntary*. And I actually *enjoyed* it!”

“Well call me a monkey’s uncle,” Martin said chuckling and leaning back. “Remus Lupin enjoying a Full Moon, now I’ve seen everything. Alright, how sure are we that this isn’t a one-off deal?”

Harry took over at this point. “About 90%. My mother is gifted with potions and she’s been going over the formula to ascertain why it works like it does. She’s convinced that this should make the transformation voluntary for every werewolf not allergic to the ingredients. We’ve also spoken with the creators of the new potion at length and they agree with our conclusion. Their only addition was that there is a chance that one in a thousand won’t be able to prevent the change however every other aspect should still work the same for them.”

Martin whistled and crossed his arms in thought. “I’ve seen your record, Potter,” he said slowly. “I think it’s safe to say that you will be distributing this potion whether I agree to ally with you or not.”

Harry sighed and leaned back into his chair. Sometimes he really hated being so noble…“As much as I’d like to deny it, that would be a good assumption.”

“Understood,” Martin breathed out heavily and stared into his tea. “I can’t promise more than my own participation. I’ll speak with the others and ensure they all understand the stakes, but it will be up to each individual. However, I will say this…if you can deliver on this potion, Harry Potter, you should expect at least 50 werewolves to join in your battle against Voldemort. Possibly as many as 70.”

Harry smiled and pulled out six vials. “Excellent. Thank you very much for your assistance, Mr. Levinson. As a symbol of good faith, these six vials are samples of the Moonsbane Potion. You should expect to see the recipe for it appear in the next issue of the *Quibbler*.”

Remus and Harry both stood and bowed their heads towards the alpha werewolf who was staring in wonder at the vials in front of him. “Thank you for your time, Martin Levinson,” Remus said. “We hope to hear from you and your people soon.”
Fresh off his success with the werewolves Harry left Remus at the manor and groaned internally as he saw the time. “Damn. This is getting to be a long day.”

“Long, but rewarding from what Remus was saying, ‘arry,” Fleur said sliding in behind him and snaking her arms around to hug his back into her chest. “You secured ze werewolves?”

“As much as we can I think,” Harry said nodding and leaning back into her. “You coming to this next one, ma rose blanche?”

“Ma rose blanche?” Fleur asked, the smile visible in her tone.

Harry shrugged and nodded. “I, uh, asked Gabi how to translate it best. You’re the only one in the group without a nickname and your hair is silvery and…it seemed nice.”

“It is beautiful, ‘arry,” Fleur said kissing his cheek. She sighed and pulled back. “Oui, I am going wiz you. We should really be on our way, mon amour. Amelia will meet us at ze office and I have ze portkey.”

Harry nodded and turned around smiling. “Right. Last meeting for today.” Fleur held out her hand with a silver gauntlet clutched in it. Harry raised his eyebrows at her choice of portkey.

“It seemed appropriate,” she said shrugging.

Harry laughed and touched the piece of armor. Fleur tapped it and Harry felt the familiar tug around his waist. As they roared through the space between origin and destination Harry scowled at his continued inability to figure out why magical travel hated him and how he was going to fix portkeys to make sure he had at least one method where he didn’t land on his arse.

All too soon, the portkey ride ended and Harry fell forward onto his knees. Grumbling out his frustrations he let Fleur help him to his feet as she chuckled. “Yeah, yeah, we’ll see who’s laughing when I come up with a runic stargate.”

“I look forward to zat day, ‘arry,” Fleur said grinning.

“As do I, Mr. Potter,” an amused baritone rang out from behind them. “Having to schedule an international portkey just to see my daughter will get old quickly I am sure.”

“Papa!” Fleur shouted quickly moving to embrace Sébastien with a glowing smile. “Has Minister Bones arrived yet?”

“I have,” Amelia said nodding hello to the others as she stepped into the receiving room. “And, M. Delacour, depending on how well these talks go I imagine it wouldn’t be much of an issue to have a permanent two-way portkey set up between Potter Manor and yours.”

Sébastien laughed and shook his head. “Somehow I don’t see that being an issue no matter what the results of this conversation. Considering my future son-in-law is ‘arry Potter. When this young man can’t get away with ignoring the rules he simply forces new ones that suit him!”

Harry winced. “You’re making me sound like a Malfoy…”
“No, that fool bribes his way to what he wants. You have a silver tongue and allies, young man. The difference is subtle, but extremely important. Now, shall we move into the Minister’s office and start zis talk?”

Amelia nodded and bowed her head. “Lead the way, Monsieur.” Harry and Fleur followed along behind the two through the reception area of the French Minister for Magic. Harry took a deep breath seeing the foreign Minister smiling at them all and everyone took their seats.

“Minister Bones, it is a pleasure to meet you in person; the same to you, Mr. Potter and Mlle. Delacour. I am M. Louis Durant, Minister for Magic in France,” the man said. “Now, shall we begin?”

“Certainly,” Amelia said. “The British Ministry formally requests the assistance of France in quelling our…problem with Tom Riddle, aka Lord Voldemort.”

Durant nodded and leaned forward clasping his hands on the desk. “I admit to being surprised when I received notice of this meeting. Your predecessor was rather hostile to my country. As are many of your own citizens.”

Amelia sighed and nodded. “Fudge was an idiot through and through. Worse, he was a corrupt idiot in the pocket of a terrorist. I have many issues that I’m trying to sort through from his era. The British people may be annoyed that I am bringing in outside help, but I will do what I have to in order to protect them. If they don’t like it they can feel free to kick me out when the elections roll around again.”

Durant started laughing and shaking his head. “Oh I like you. Would you be willing to send Aurors to assist us in rooting out remaining bands of WSS soldiers after Voldemort has been eliminated?”

“Certainly. I can’t guarantee a specific number as we are currently undermanned as it is and I will need to rebuild our forces somewhat, but I see no issue with repaying your assistance with our own,” Amelia replied.

“Excellent.” Durant turned to regard Harry and Fleur for a moment before he continued. “And, Mr. Potter, I understand that you are beginning to manufacture items termed, Armor Robes through Potter Runes in conjunction with a…” he paused while searching for a paper. “Ah! Here it is, in conjunction with Weasley Wizarding Wheezes. Are you willing to supply the French Ministry with a contract for these items in addition to the British contract already in existence?”

“Of course, Monsieur. I have no issues at all with that. I’m not attempting to ensure my friends have the best items, I’m mostly just trying to ensure that my more dangerous inventions don’t fall into the wrong hands,” Harry said. “I actually have a set of order forms with me. These include all of the rune stones that I feel comfortable distributing.” Harry handed a set of forms to the Minister who took a moment to look them over nodding agreeably.

“This Tracekey is the modified portkey capable of tracking others, correct?” An answering nod set the Minister’s grin firmly back in place. “I would agree to this alliance solely for access to that honestly. The patents are in place, Minister Bones?”

“They are,” Amelia said.

“Excellent. One final piece of business then before we sign anything.” Everyone leaned in to see what else Durant was looking for. His grin spread from ear to ear as he wiggled his eyebrows at the two youngest members of the meeting. “Will the wedding be in France and if not can I expect
an invitation anyway?”

Harry’s face blazed red while Fleur and her father started laughing hysterically. Amelia just shook her head rolling her eyes. “You’ll get an invite, Sir,” Harry finally managed to mumble. “Details on location won’t be available for a while. At least two years.”

While Amelia immediately left for her return to Britain Harry was persuaded to take a walk around the Delacour manor before returning home. Once they apparated in Harry was nearly bowled over by a silvery-blond missile leaping into his chest. “‘Arry! You visited!”

Harry gaped down at the girl in his arms momentarily at a loss for words. Fleur laughing behind him and Sébastien’s chuckle jolted him out of his shock slightly. “Uh, hi Gabi. You, uh, wow, you got a lot um…taller.”

“Oui! I finally hit ze…ze…Fleur what is ze word in English?”

“Change,” Fleur said.

Gabi nodded and pulled back from Harry doing a small twirl. Gone was the cute 9 year old child; in front of Harry was a teenager nearly as tall as he was with hair cascading down her back and breasts almost rivaling Fleur’s. “Ze Change! Veela puberty iz um…it iz um…darn it I should know zis word!”

“Weird, odd, unusual, strange, annoying?” Fleur said shrugged. “All are appropriate. You can visit wiz him later, Gabi. For now I want to show my partner ze Manor.”

“You mean you want to show him your room,” Gabrielle retorted with a quirk to her lips. Harry blushed as Fleur nodded emphatically.

“Oui. My man was quite attractive a few minutes ago and I wish to show him I approve.” Fleur moved forward and grabbed him arm pulling him gently into step with her. “Besides, I still need to show him my gratitude for ze foresight he showed with obtaining a gift for you.”

Gabrielle bounced from foot to foot. “Gift for me? What? When? Where is it? Can I see?! Iz it a secret?”

“Uh,” Harry mumbled trying to placate his likely future sister-in-law’s curiosity despite Fleur picking up her pace and dragging him away faster. “It’s just a suit of armor. I’ll have Dobby send someone to collect your measurements since you seem to have finished puberty already! Bye, Gabi!”

“Zat girl has far too much energy for a fourteen year old,” Fleur said, shaking her head in amusement. Harry fought to hold back his laughter at that. “I need to find her a man before she sets her sights on you. Zere are already more zan enough and I don’t want to have to fight my sister off wiz a stick.”

Harry lost his inner battle and shook his head at Fleur. “Somehow I feel like that would devolve into fireballs incinerating clothing and singing hair rather quickly.”

“Our fights were worthy of ze legends,” she agreed nodding sagely. “Zis is ze West Wing by ze way. My room is on ze zird floor.”

“Er, Fleur, are we going to slow down a bit so that I can actually see the house?” Harry asked raising an eyebrow.
Fleur looked at him with a dubious tilt of her head before continuing her forward movement. “Do you want to see ze house or do you want to snog me?”

Harry tried to come up with an answer that would be considered appropriate and, failing utterly, resolved to simply shake his head. “Lead on then, fair lady.”

“Good answer,” Fleur said.

“Oh good, I was worried it wasn’t enthusiastic enough,” Harry said chuckling softly.

Fleur laughed as she crested the landing and opened the door to her room. “You are nervous, no?”

Harry grimaced and nodded slightly as he stepped past her. “A bit. I know it’s stupid. It’s not like we haven’t slept together before.”

Fleur pushed her door closed, cast several locking and silencing charms at it as well as a quick contraceptive one on herself – the potion was supposed to be foolproof, but they all agreed it was better to be safe than sorry. With her spells cast, Fleur left her wand on the table and walked forward to stand in front of Harry. She draped her arms over his shoulders and pushed forward gently until he was back against the wall. She leaned down to lightly peck his lips before pulling back and smiling. “Relax, ‘arry. Just because zis is ze first time I am alone wiz you does not mean zat I will act differently or zat you need to be worried.”

Harry shrugged and stretched his neck up enough so he could deepen the kiss she had teased. After they were both panting slightly he smiled at her. “I’m more worried about not being enough for you on my own, ma rose blanche.”

Fleur’s answer was simply an enchanting laugh as she moved her head to the side of his neck. “Somehow, I doubt zat will be an issue, mon amour.” She took his ear in between her teeth and nibbled on the lobe gently eliciting a low murmur of approval from her partner. “‘arry, if you want me to stop at any time, tell me, oui? You know I can be…a tad aggressive at times.”

Harry could barely form the words of acknowledgement as Fleur kissed his neck and popped the buttons on his shirt. “Will do.”

Fleur purred in satisfaction, her arms reaching up over her head to force the shirt completely down his arms. Harry shifted enough to let it drop to the floor. He tried to grab Fleur’s chin, to bring her back up to kiss her again but she had already dropped further down his body. The Veela was trailing light kisses across his stomach as her hands wandered lower and started to tug on his belt. It didn’t take long, soon she had gotten the offending item off of him and was quickly pulling open his trousers.

Harry blushed slightly as Fleur, wasting no time, took his rapidly hardening member into her mouth, though the light groan that soon escaped his lips was more than enough encouragement for her to continue. Threaded his fingers through her hair Fleur started to hum some tune she liked to use when they were together like this. It was enough to bring his lower body to attention in moments and Fleur bobbed her head rapidly for a few more strokes, even taking him into her throat just once, before she pulled back. Harry fell out of her mouth with a light pop, and Fleur paused looking up at him with a smile on her lips and a coy look flitting across her features, before giving him a wink.

“‘arry, now zat you are suitably…focused, would you like to try somezing a bit new?” she asked in a sultry tone her hand still working him despite her mouth’s absence.
“New?” Harry asked a bit dazedly, trying his best to swallow the urge to simply grab her, throw her onto the bed, and have his way with her like some sort of caveman.

“Would you please take me against ze wall zis time?” Fleur asked innocently trailing a finger along his length and tracing a circle around his lower head, a pouting expression gracing her lips. “I have not mentioned it before as it tends to leave ze ozers out, but I hear it can be quite...pleasurable.”

Harry shuddered in anticipation as Fleur stood slowly, luxuriously, and stepped in, pressing her body flush against him and trapping his penis between them. She rubbed up and down slowly while he struggled to concentrate on her question from a moment ago. “Wall it is,” he rasped between suddenly dry lips.

“Excellent,” Fleur purred briefly toying with his sack before letting go. She grabbed his arms and with one smooth motion switched their positions. Fleur was now the one being pushed back into her bedroom wall, while Harry was draped against her.

She smiled slyly at him before she leaned in and captured his lips again while proceeding to rub against him harder, obviously enjoying the sensation produced in her nipples as they roughly rubbed against his chest through the fabric. Harry groaned into her throat and quickly shimmied his hips back enough that he could carefully reach down under Fleur’s skirt to grasp her panties. He smirked in satisfaction finding them already dripping, Harry shoved the fabric partway down. Fleur, tried in vain to kick it entirely loose but failed to free one of her legs before succumbing to lust and pushing back against the wall pulling him back flush against her. “No more teasing, ‘arry,” she mumbled thickly into his mouth.

“You really need to play with Daph more. She teases a little first,” Harry said smiling.

Fleur laughed and shook her head at him. “So naïve. Daphne does not tease, ‘arry. Daphne controls. Zere is a difference. Now stop talking and get busy!”

Harry needed no further encouragement. Grabbing Fleur’s hips he lifted her up and leaned forward gently sandwiching her between him and the wall. Fleur pushed against his shoulders, and rolled her hips just enough that when he thrust his own hips forward he slipped right into her without issue. “Never understood how you know just the right angle,” he moaned into her neck fighting to stay standing at the sensations rippling through his body. It was like being gripped in a warm, wet, velvet vice.

“I am just zat good,” she breathed into his ear, as he stretched her pleasantly. A shudder of pleasure ran through her and Harry felt her legs wrap around his waist and a clatter sounded as her shoes fell to the floor behind him. A moment later, her bare heels dug into his backside pulling him into her even further, his tip brushing her cervix. “Hard, ‘arry. Make me feel it,” she moaned piteously.

Harry bit down on her collarbone as Fleur loosened the hold her legs had on him enough for him to pull back and thrust forward. A groan of pleasure sounded from both of them as Fleur was pushed up the wall with a small amount of force. Harry pulled back again letting her slip back down and rammed forward before she had a chance to drop too much, a dull wet slap heralding their joining. She gasped and tightened her arms around his neck, fingers digging into his shoulders painfully. He was sure there’d be a mark there come morning. “Yes!” she hissed between her teeth. “I…told you zis was…an excellent position!”

Harry lifted his head enough to grind his lips against hers in answer. She responded eagerly, her tongue threading into his mouth. Harry quickly found a rhythm to his thrusts that worked perfectly
for them both, and he felt a bit of her dampness running in small rivulets down his length. Fleur soon started to pant into his mouth, occasionally nipping at his lower lip, and Harry felt her limbs start tightening their hold around him. He pulled back from her mouth and tried to focus on the bouncing of her breasts against his chest to keep his own excitement from boiling over. In retrospect that didn’t help much, and it was rapidly becoming a losing battle.

Harry could feel the tingling building inside his groin and he squeezed Fleur’s arse harder in his hands. “Fleur, I can’t hold out much longer,” he growled.

“Zen don’t, ‘arry,” she panted. “You can finish inside moi; just don’t stop!” she encouraged as they continued to meet with damp slapping sounds which were slowly driving her wild.

He grunted his acknowledgement and kept up the energetic pace. Fleur’s fingers now clutched his hair and he felt her legs start to shiver against his back. With a muffled cry Harry thrust forward one final time burying himself inside her as deep as possible feeling her button press against his groin and his tip bump against her cervix once again. His release hit at nearly the same time as Fleur’s. The feeling of him flooding her body with warmth seemed to be enough to send her over the edge. A shudder ran through her body as her legs pulled back hard pushing him against her even tighter than before. Fleur’s moan joined Harry’s own and one hand left his hair to gently caress his cheek in desperation, her walls spasming around his shaft repeatedly.

It took a full minute for her to finish her first orgasm of the night. They remained that way with him still sheathed inside her, silently pressing her against the wall as she came down from her peak. Finally parting, he let her down onto her feet and they shared a rueful glance at each other as she paused to catch her breath. She smiled at him as he once again turned his eyes on her. Fleur smiled wickedly, kicking aside the undergarments which had until then still clung on stubbornly to her leg. The panties hadn’t even hit the floor before she was reaching down and pulling her dress over her head to stand gloriously bare before him. Shifting close, Fleur draped herself over her momentarily stunned partner so that her mouth was against his ear and Harry could feel the soft breath escaping her lips. “Round one.”

Harry looked up at the bones of the basilisk in his entrance hall and sighed. “As much as I love having you up and moving it’s probably best to stay asleep for this next thing. I’ll animate you again when they leave.” He tapped the stone on the crown of the skull that stilled the charms and runes on the skeleton and the gentle undulations ceased. Harry turned to see Shiva smiling at him.

“Probably for the best kid. We don’t really need to intimidate the Australians.”

He shrugged and answered with a small grin of his own. “Probably wouldn’t work anyway. Their continent is supposed to be so deadly even the grass can kill you.”

Shiva laughed. “Likely a bit of an overestimation there, Harry.” A knock sounded at their door and she moved to open it. “Welcome, come on it.”

Harry shook the hands of the two men who entered and led the way to the sitting room. Both were dressed in nice business suits with one of the wizards having a faint runic design embedded in his tie. Harry chuckled as he noticed a scheme on a bit of stone that would allow him to keep the tie straight and ever-knotted. “Interesting way to put the tie on, Sir.”

The man with the tie shook his head and shrugged with an easy grin. “My wife complained that I could never tie it correctly so I got creative and switched one of the designs from decorative to functional. Most people don’t notice.”
“Most people don’t send their corrective notes to you either, Kevin,” the other man said winking at Harry. “Now, I believe introductions are in order. I am Douglas Greer and this is Kevin Lyght. I’m the official Australian wizarding ambassador to Magical Britain. Mr. Potter, I believe you already know the CEO of Outback Training Alternative.”

Harry had to suppress his eye roll. “We haven’t met personally, but yes, I believe I’ve sent you a few letters, Mr. Lyght.”

“Yes, indeed,” Kevin agreed. “They caused quite a stir among my staff. Are we waiting for anyone else or can I ask the most important question right now?”

Shiva shook her head. “Minister Bones was supposed to attend, but she was called away at the last moment over a developing issue with the giants. I’ve been authorized to act as her official representative for the duration of this meeting.”

“Well then, in that case, Kevin, go ahead!” Douglas said slapping the other man on the back.

Grimacing Kevin nodded. “Mr. Potter, Ms. Babbling, do I need to worry about being forced to dissolve my company under whatever terms we are about to discuss? I know we have had some product issues in the past that you’ve helped to point out and correct, but I want you to know we’ve taken quite a round turn on the safety aspects of everything produced through Outback Training Alternative.”

Harry stared at the man in surprise. “Wow, I must really be doing good if you think that Potter Runes can buy you out already…”

“Actually my marketing section says you hold nearly 30 percent of the contracts for the European nations, the United States and Canada along with 80 percent of the United Kingdom. Australia is lagging only slightly behind Europe with nearly 25 percent of our prior customer base flocking to your equipment instead,” Kevin said shifting uncomfortably with his face blushing red a bit. “I’m not sure whether to congratulate you or curse you.”

Shiva whistled. “Goddess, kid. You didn’t tell me you were doing so well.”

Harry blushed crimson and leaned back into his seat blinking rapidly. “Honestly I didn’t know. I’ve let Fred and George deal with the majority of the order forms since they’re also the ones doing the actual manufacturing of the rune stones…They sent me a few receipts and statements, but we’ve been so busy with Voldemort and the Soul Cage that I just…never really got around to checking the details beyond the bottom line…”

Douglas laughed and slapped his knee. “Well I for one shudder to think how your sales will improve when you can devote your full attention to it!”

Harry just nodded. “Yeah…Anyway, no, Mr. Lyght, you don’t have to worry about a hostile takeover. I’m not really interested in muscling in on your primary market yet. Instead I intended to offer a formal partnership actually. We’d share some profits in several areas with R&D on new designs being floated between both personnel. I’m also offering to double check your rune schemes to ensure that no potential safety concerns were overlooked as I would like some of your personnel to do with a few of mine. Between Ms. Babbling and myself we tend to catch most things, but I know there are some mistakes I’ve made in the past that an outside eye would’ve seen.”

Kevin smiled and shook his head up and down rather emphatically. “Excellent! We are certainly open to such an arrangement. I’ll have my law department draft a…oh you already have one.”
“My betrothed is rather good at these things. Two of them actually,” Harry said smirking as he handed over another copy of a form that Daphne and Hermione had drafted. “Feel free to have your personnel check it over. I just ask that you get back to us as soon as possible. We’re trying to be ready for an offensive against Voldemort’s fanatics in May and your additional manufacturing capabilities would certainly help us achieve that goal.”

Douglas frowned at that. “May I ask why so late? That is five months from now after all…”

“Part of it is the preparation issue,” Shiva said sighing. “We’re trying to create enough of the protection runic equipment for a good deal of Ministry personnel in addition to some for Hogwarts faculty and the students.” Harry repressed an amused snort that Snape had actually managed to pass along concrete information about Voldemort’s intended target for once.

She grimaced before continuing at a much slower pace. “We’re…also still attempting to vet all of the Ministry personnel. There were some breaches in internal security and we need to ascertain that anyone who will be participating in a defensive action or assault on Voldemort will be on our side.”

Douglas nodded. “That makes sense. Thankfully, we haven’t had terrorist issues for quite some time so we haven’t really had to deal with such a problem. Is your government seeking simple verbal support from the Australian Ministry or are you hoping for personnel to assist in the operation as well?”

“We’d really prefer personnel if you can spare them,” Shiva said. “Fudge gutted the entire law enforcement branch and attempting to build it back up in short order has created almost as many issues as it’s solved. In addition to the partnership with Potter Runes, Britain as a whole is prepared to offer tax incentives and support personnel of our own for a future issue should you require it.”

“Not a bad deal for us all as long as our people come home,” Douglas said slowly. “I would request that we also relax immigration restrictions – both for Australians attempting to emigrate to Britain and British citizens seeking to make Australia their home.”

Shiva nodded. “Minister Bones mentioned that that might come up. We’re prepared to accept those stipulations.”

“Excellent,” Douglas said smiling. “Then I believe we have the makings of a deal. I’ll speak with my Minister tonight and ensure that he signs the agreement with yours first thing tomorrow.”

“Thank you. We look forward to increasing the bonds between our two countries,” Shiva said shaking his hand.

Harry stood with the others and nodded to each. “I’m also looking forward to increasing the economic business between our countries,” Harry said winking to Kevin. All four chuckled at the lame attempt at humor. Walking the visitors to the door Harry pushed it closed and leaned his back against it sighing heavily. “Yup, this is Daphne’s job as soon the Voldemort thing ends.”

“Amen, to that, kid,” Shiva breathed out. She ruffled his hair and joined him against the door. “Only one major group left before school starts back up.”

“Thank god for that.”

Cornelius Fudge scowled as he finished throwing his clothes into the open bag. “Running away like a common thug. I can’t believe this is happening to me! It was just a few pieces of gold here
and there! Why do these idiots care so much about it?

Fudge hefted the bag and dragged it into the drawing room grabbing a few of his priceless paintings and shoving them inside. “Bunch of foolhardy fearmongers the lot of them. It’s not like He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is actually back! At worst it’s some trumped up Dark Wizard stealing his name to play against our fears.” A gleam entered Fudge’s eyes and he started laughing – the manic edge to the laugh would have been readily apparent to anyone nearby. “It’s probably that Pettigrew fellow! Yes, yes that makes perfect sense! He stole You-Know-Who’s name and is gathering allies to find Dumbledore and throw me out! That must be it. It’s the only thing that makes sense. This was all designed to kick me to the curb and steal my power. Well I won’t let them win! I’ll be back and I’ll show them why I should be the Minister for Magic!”

Fudge nodded at his brilliance hard enough that his bowler hat flopped to the floor. Quickly scooping it up, he grabbed the bag and trumped across the hall to the office. “Now to get my nest egg and –” The bag clattered to his feet as Fudge pushed open the door and caught sight of the figure sitting at his desk. A jet black robe ensured the pale white skin and red eyes stood out even more than they normally would. The noseless visage staring back at him caused Fudge to relieve himself right where he was standing and his mouth fell open in a silent shriek of terror.

“Ah, former Minister Cornelius Fudge,” He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named said calmly. The demon tapped the desk idly and frowned. “Such a shame you were removed from office. You were doing such an excellent job of assisting me and my personnel.”

Lucius Malfoy pushed Fudge to the side as he strode into the room, nose crinkling at the smell. “My lord, there is nothing in the bedroom. I know he kept at least six thousand galleons here…it must be in this room.”

“Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!” Fudge finally managed to regain his voice as he saw his longtime friend bowing to the Dark Lord.

“Six thousand should be enough for some of the more impressive mercenary bands; especially when we add in the priceless artifacts on display here,” You-Know-Who said nodding. His eyes narrowed and his voice took on a slight hissing quality. “I am glad you were not the only one lining his pockets, Lucius. Such frivolous waste of resources would have greatly displeased me.”

Lucius gulped and hurriedly replied, “Yes, my lord. Should I search the room?”

“Let’s just ask him first shall we?” The red eyes turned and bored into him. “Cornelius…where is your gold?”

Fudge could only squeak as a wand raised to point between his eyes.

Harry shifted his weight and pulled at his collar with a frown. “Why do I have to wear this again, Viktor?”

The Bulgarian Seeker chortled and slapped Harry on the back. “Ah, my young friend, you meet our Minister! You must look good for this!”

“But why my Seeker uniform?” Harry asked. Behind him Sirius chuckled and snapped a picture. “And will you stop that! I can pose for photos with Viktor after we win this war!”

“Yeah, but those will look staged,” Sirius said grinning from ear to ear. “These on the other hand…these are totally going into the scrapbook.”
Harry ground his teeth and mumbled unintelligibly about singed dog while Viktor just laughed harder. “To answer question, we wear Seeker uniform to present united front. It shows you are strong and determined and successful. Sleeves rolled up to show off your tattoos further reinforcing image.” He paused and shrugged. “Also, Minister is huge fan of Quidditch.”

Harry groaned as his two friends smirked at him. A few moments later the doors to the office opened and the trio was beckoned inside. After shaking hands and sitting down the man behind the desk started the meeting off. “Mr. Krum, Lord Potter, Lord Black, welcome to Bulgaria. I am Minister Anton Oblansk. I do hope the portkey wasn’t too bad. The international ones can be so very nauseating at times.”

Harry nodded. “Thank god I’m not alone. One day I hope to fix that issue.”

“I had heard you were working on that. You will certainly have me lined up at the store should something come of it!” Anton said smiling. “Though that is neither here nor there. Lord Black, you are Minister Bones’ representative, yes?”

“That’s correct,” Sirius said leaning forward. Harry was pleased to note that most of the joking nature present in his face and posture just a few moments ago had fled leaving Sirius’ expression hard and piercing. “Minister Oblansk, I am sure you’re already aware, but we’ve been gathering allies for the battle against Voldemort. We were hoping we might be able to reach some agreement with your government.”

Anton leaned back with his hands clasped. “I am certainly open to speaking with you. Now that Fudge is gone at least. What has happened to the little schemer by the way?”

The grin that crossed Sirius’ face was all teeth and helped to remind the people in the room that he had been incarcerated in Azkaban for quite some time previously. “From what I hear Fudge had… run into some unhappy constituents.”

Anton raised his eyebrows and smirked. “That is what you get for pitting teenagers against manticores, chimeras and hydras. Good riddance. Bulgaria is prepared to offer three Auror squadrons in assistance.”

“Wow, just like that?” Sirius asked leaning back and blinking quickly. “What’s the catch?”

“We’d like access to Lord Potter’s exclusive rune stone stock, with similar arrangements that the French received. We would also request that Britain assist us should a similar issue arise in our country.”

Harry and Sirius both nodded quickly. “Certainly,” Harry said. “Both conditions are easy to meet. I brought some order forms along if you wanted to take them to your Magical Law Enforcement department after the meeting. We might be a bit behind in filling any orders not going to the war effort though so please don’t expect everything immediately.”

“Of course,” Anton said nodding. He leaned forward and smiled flicking his eyes between Harry and Viktor. “Now, one more stipulation before anything is written down.” A bead of sweat dripped down Harry’s back. This was going to end up embarrassing him yet again. “I want a personal assurance that, should you ever play a professional or exhibition Quidditch match, I will receive an invite to watch. And I want both your autographs.”

Harry leaned back into his seat with a hand over his eyes groaning. Sirius and Viktor just started laughing.
The day prior to returning to Hogwarts, Daphne strode through the main doors to Greengrass Manor. The reverberating gong signaling the master – well mistress now – of the grounds had arrived saw a large smile spreading over her face. Barely 16 and already Head of her family… going after Harry, Neville and Hermione that day so long ago had been the best decision of her life!

“Daph! You’re home!” Astoria shouted as she ran up to hug her sister. “Did you sic the goblins of Father? Or was it Harry? Or did Mum do it? Tell me please!”

“Calm down, Tori. Breathe,” Daphne said smirked and patting her sister on the head. “It was actually the goblins’ idea. Harry and I certainly had no objections to it though, I’ll admit.”

Astoria nodded. “I see, I see. So you’re the Lady Greengrass now?” At Daphne’s confirmation Astoria quickly continued. “And you’re still keeping the betrothal to Harry?”

“I am.”

“Darn,” Astoria mumbled. She heaved a great sigh and shrugged. “Well, at least he’ll make a cool big brother. Can I date whoever I want now?”

Daphne laughed and started to walk around her sister to head deeper into the house. “Tori, I don’t care who you date. I just draw the line at sadistic murderers. Stay away from those types and you’re free to do whatever you want.”

Astoria snorted as she moved to keep pace with Daphne. “Please, I’m a Greengrass! They should be afraid of me!” The brunette looked up at Daphne and smirked. “Especially considering who my extended family is.”

“So true, Tori, so true.” Daphne stopped outside the doors to the family study and squared her shoulders. “Are you coming in as well or do you want me to give you the highlights later?”

Astoria frowned and narrowed her eyes at the door. “Father may have liked me better than you, but that really doesn’t mean much…you’re not going to kill him are you, Daph?”

“Not unless he tries to kill me,” Daphne said shaking her head. “If I had thought he would attempt it, I would’ve brought backup.”

Astoria sighed again. “Then I’ll head up to my room. I’ll see you in a bit, sis.” She padded softly down the corridor and Daphne turned back to the doors. Taking a deep breath, Daphne stepped forward and pushed inside.

Marcus looked up as she entered and he chuckled raising his tumbler of firewhiskey to her. “All hail the conquering Lady!” Scowling, her father tossed the drink back and poured another glaring at the bottle as it ran dry with the glass only half filled. “Out of ruddy liquor. Perfect. Daphne, be a good Lady of the House of get me another bottle would you?”

Daphne raised her eyebrows at him. “I can honestly say I never expected to find you drunk, Father. Raging, certainly; murderous, possibly; utterly depressed, likely; but not drunk.”

Marcus raised his head and glared at her for a moment before draining his glass and falling back into his chair. “Of course I’m drunk. I can’t kill you…hell I bloody made you! More successful than I had ever dreamed I was there…stole my own house out from under me…bravo girl, bravo. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

Daphne raised her arms and narrowing her eyes. “As much as I hate to admit it, you taught me well, Father. You should have seen this coming.”
He nodded and closed his eyes. “Yes I should have. Especially after you outmaneuvered me with that bloody betrothal. Made me look like a fool and I didn’t even think that you had deeper plans…I deserve this. What do you plan to do with me and your mother now, Daphne? Are we to ‘disappear’?”

Daphne laughed though there was little humor in the sound. “Why would I go against Mother? She has only ever helped and supported me. Unlike you.”

Marcus scowled and leaned forward to glare at her again. The heavy swaying in his movement sapped a lot of the effect. “I was making you strong and worthy to lead!”

“You were making me into a glorified baby factory! At least have the decency to admit it!” she snarled.

“You would have had status.” Marcus fell back into the seat and sighed. “Though I suppose if Potter wins this, you’ll have that anyway. Are you going to kill me, Daphne?”

Daphne almost moved to say no however she held her tongue. Her father may have been defanged, but he could still be dangerous if his bitterness was allowed to fester. “That depends on you, Father. As much as I dislike you…you are correct that you made me into who I am. So if you wish to live I will require an Oath from you. You are to never harm me or mine; you are to always pass on information that could lead to harm against us; you are to remain out of the political arena henceforth. Do you think you can do all this, Father?”

Marcus nodded slowly. “Am I in exile as well, daughter?”

“To a degree,” Daphne said. “You will live in one of the smaller houses in the countryside. I will ensure you have a reasonable stipend to live on though it will not be to the same standard you are used to. It won’t even be close. Mother may accompany you or not as she wishes.” Daphne sighed and stood up shaking her head. “You are not evil, Father. You are simply a bastard and a horrible parent. I don’t want to hurt you, I just want you out of my life. Stay at the cottage and keep quiet and we can both move on with our lives as we each see fit. I’ll have the necessary papers for the Oath sent over by tonight.”

As she walked to the door, a shifting sound behind her saw Daphne pausing with a hand on the handle. “You are far stronger than I ever gave you credit for, Daphne. You are more worthy of the Greengrass Lordship than I ever was,” Marcus murmured from his position near the fire. “Don’t let anyone stamp that out like I tried to do.”

Daphne nodded and closed her eyes. “I won’t, Father. Goodbye.”

After a thoroughly uneventful train ride on, Harry and his friends filed out of their chosen carriage and headed into the castle. Harry and Hermione immediately split off from the others and walked hand-in-hand to the kitchen entrance. Hermione’s grip on him tightened and Harry paused and leaned over to feather his lips against her cheek. “I promise, Mione, we’ll work on getting them more rights after this is all over. Think of how much easier it’ll be if they actively participate.”

Hermione sighed and leaned her head against his shoulder. “I know and I know they’ll be a huge help if they agree but…well I just hate that we have conditioned them to slavery…”

“Mione, we’ve been over this, House Elves have very different values and outlooks. They’re not human, you really can’t treat them like they are. You’ve talked with Dobby and Winky enough to know that, Mione.”
“Getting rid of a lifetime of beliefs doesn’t exactly happen overnight you know,” Hermione commented with a slight huff. “Just because I learned to deal with being in a multiple relationship does not mean I have learned to deal with an entire race that actually desires slavery. I’m working on it. Just let me be surly for a bit.”

Harry nodded and patted her back. “Yes, Ma’am.” Reaching out he tickled the pear and with a small squeak, the door to the kitchens opened allowing the two teens into the House Elf headquarters at Hogwarts. Short shouts rang out around them and a flood of elves rushed to offer food and assistance. Harry smiled politely at them and tried to ignore Hermione’s brief grimace. “Hello, and thank you for the food, but we’re actually waiting for dinner before eating. However, Miss Granger and I do need to speak with your primary representative for a few minutes.”

Soft murmurs flowed out from the elves before most shifted back and one ancient looking elf stepped to the front of the group bowing low. “Master Harry Potter, Mistress Hermione Granger, I is Kilik. I is Head Elf for Hogwarts. How can Kilik be assisting you?”

Hermione took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. “Hello, Kilik, it’s a pleasure to meet you. If at all possible, we’d prefer to be addressed as Harry and Hermione though it is of course up to you how you address us. As to what we want, we’d prefer to ask in private.”

Kilik’s face took on a thoughtful bent as he cocked his head to the side and scrunched up his mouth. After a few moments, the old elf shook his head and waved them towards a table just behind the group. “Master Potter and Mistress Granger may speak here. Elves have no secrets in the castle.”

“Okay, we understand,” Harry said taking the offered seat. “Kilik, I’m sure you’re aware that Voldemort is gathering his forces and that things will likely come to a battle sometime before the end of the year.”

“Kilik knows this, yes.” The elf bobbed his head while many of the other nearby beings twisted their hands and frowned. “Does Master Harry expect the Dark One to attack Hogwarts?”

“I do.” Harry grimaced and shook his head. “I hate to ask you this, Kilik, but we need to be sure that the school and the students will be safe. When the attack comes would any of the House Elves here be willing to assist in the defense efforts?”

Kilik stayed silent for a long time as did the rest of the elves. Harry couldn’t help but notice that all of the background noise had ceased – all of the House Elves in the kitchen had drifted closer to listen in. Finally Kilik nodded his ancient head. “House Elves not supposed to harm wizards or witches. However…to House Elves, protection of their family and home is most sacred vow.”

“Kilik,” Hermione said softly. “You don’t have to do anything that would make you uncomfortable. This is not an order or it would be the Headmistress coming down here asking you. We are asking for your help as people fighting against the darkness, not as superiors and not as Harry Potter Savior of Elves.” Hermione steadfastly ignored Harry’s brief glare. They had heard Dobby quietly referring to him as that to Winky the other day and he’d been adamant about no one ever repeating that title near other House Elves. “If you agree to help, please don’t agree because of who we are. If you want to fight with us, fight for yourselves, fight because it is right, fight because you want to.”

The old elf smiled at her and patted her hand. “Kilik and Hogwarts’ elves consider students our family. We consider castle our home. Elves will protect family. Elves will protect Hogwarts. When the Dark One comes, Kilik will lead elves to war.”
After dinner, Harry collected Luna and moved off to his final – theoretically at least – ally recruitment mission. He nodded to the others and took a second to collect himself as they reached the main doors. Luna just smiled at him as he paused and looped her arm through his, pulling him along behind her. “No need to worry, Harry. I’m sure they already know you’re coming.”

“Luna,” Harry said rolling his eyes and picking up his pace to keep up with her. “You can’t play the psychic card. We all already know that you aren’t actually a Seer.”

Luna looked at him with wide eyes and tilted her head just enough that she appeared so innocent even Santa would cry. “I didn’t say anything about seeing them being ready, Harry.” She tapped her chin with one finger before shrugging. “I did however neglect to mention that I saw Bane and Firenze near the Forest border waving to us as the carriages emptied.”

Harry groaned and rubbed his forehead. “Luna, please warn me if you ever go into politics. I think any session you attend in the Wizengamot would leave me with nightmares.”

“Not you, Harry, just our enemies,” Luna said with a spreading smile that promised pain to anyone standing in her way.

Harry raised his eyebrows at the younger blonde. “Yup, nightmares.” Luna’s smile shifted to something radiating sweetness and contentment and she hugged Harry’s arm. He reached over and patted her head suppressing a chuckle. They stopped at the edge of the Forbidden Forest behind Hagrid’s hut and waited patiently for the centaurs to arrive.

They didn’t have to wait long. Less than a minute after arriving, two of the magical beings melted out of the gloom and stepped forward to stand in front of the humans. All four bowed slightly to each other. Not enough to show any deference or fealty, but enough to prove mutual respect. The smaller of the centaurs pawed the ground and pointed hesitantly at Harry. “Harry Potter. The stars have said you would come bearing ill tidings. We have foreseen Change sweeping behind your path like a hurricane. Luna Lovegood speaks highly of you. I am Firenze. My companion is Bane.”

Harry smiled politely at them. “It’s an honor to meet you Firenze, Bane. Has Luna mentioned why we’re here?”

Bane scowled and turned narrowed eyes on him. “She did not have to. Tom Riddle has recently invaded our territory and sought out the acromantulas. We do not know what exactly was discussed, but it is not hard to reach the correct conclusion even without consulting the heavens. The death of Aragog before the end of the meeting certainly left out all possible doubt.”

Harry frowned at that. “Aragog?”

Firenze waved a hand to indicate the forest. “Aragog was the one rescued and raised by Hagrid. Aragog was the sole acromantula capable of keeping his spawn tame. Aragog was the reason the school has remained untouched. Aragog was the reason we have allowed the monsters to remain in our forest. Now Aragog is gone. Now the spawn will swarm at Tom Riddle’s command.”

Harry growled and ran a hand through his hair while Luna just sighed heavily. “One bloody thing after another,” he muttered. Looking up at the centaurs Harry spoke louder, “Firenze, Bane, we have reason to believe that Voldemort, Tom Riddle, will attack Hogwarts in May. If I can assure you that the acromantulas will be exterminated afterwards – one way or another – will you agree to fight by our side during the battle?”

Firenze moved to speak, but Bane cut him off. “I wish to hear from Luna Lovegood first.”
Luna nodded happily and smiled up at the two. “Certainly. Voldemort is going to try and destroy Hogwarts. He won’t stop there though, he’ll raze the forest just to make certain he kills you all. Voldemort won’t do this because he cares about killing you. He’ll do it because he needs to in order to maintain his power. Voldemort is every bit as much of a monster as the acromantulas you hate so much. Help us with our monster and we will ensure that our friends help you with your monster.”

Bane nodded and Firenze looked up at the stars just starting to twinkle in the darkening sky. “Thank you for the candor, Luna Lovegood. Harry Potter, the stars say that you keep the promises you make. You promise to ensure our forest is cleansed of its infestation?”

“I do,” Harry said.

Firenze and Bane both bowed their heads. “Harry Potter, Luna Lovegood,” Firenze proclaimed, “you both are trustworthy and the stars have foretold that our fate would lie in your hands. Our bows will sing at your command.”

About an hour before curfew Harry walked into his mother’s room – after having thoroughly knocked and received the all-clear…several times just to be sure. He collapsed onto the couch with a muffled groan and ran his hands through his hair. “Done. They’re in. I think we have everyone we’re liable to get now.”

Lily smiled and sat down next him patting his son on the leg. “Excellent. You do realize you’ve not only made alliances with three separate foreign nations, but you’ve also managed to gain the assistance of House Elves, centaurs and goblins? I may be Muggleborn, but I read more than Binns’ lessons…those three races haven’t fought together on a single side for four centuries. They haven’t fought as our allies for nearly six.”

Harry pulled one hand away from his face and cocked an eyebrow at his mother. “Way to make me feel more normal, mum.”

Lily just laughed and went to get some tea. “Harry, I am the wrong mother to go to for normal. Physically I’m barely older than your future Lady Black. In no way are you and I normal!”

Harry grimaced. “Please don’t remind me of how weird that is. On a scale of one to shadow panther I think we hit Giant Squid on that one.”

Lily’s hand hovered over the tea kettle as she turned her head to stare at Harry with wide eyes. A moment later she just shook her head and finished with the tea. “You are one strange child.”

“Thanks,” Harry said rolling his eyes. “So you’re only physically older than Nym huh? How about mentally?” he teased.

Lily set the cup in front of him with raised eyebrows and a smirk. “Really? Half the time I’m amazed she’s mature enough to tie her own shoes.”

“Thanks,” Harry said rolling his eyes. “So you’re only physically older than Nym huh? How about mentally?” he teased.

Lily set the cup in front of him with raised eyebrows and a smirk. “Really? Half the time I’m amazed she’s mature enough to tie her own shoes.”

“She’s not that bad,” Harry laughed. “She’s like, seventeen tops. Well…minimum? Anyway yes, mum, I realize that I have a veritable army ready to fight under my banner. I just hope it’s enough.”

Lily shrugged and snorted into her tea. “You obviously have developed a very poor sense of overkill.”

Harry turned to her and gestured with arms wide. “My life is overkill. I blew up a troll’s head as
an eleven year old! My mind is guarded by the bloody *Death Star* and the *Xenomorph Queen*! I have *Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel* on my comm stone!"

Lily laughed and held up her hands in surrender. “I give, I give! I wasn’t criticizing, Harry, I was making a comment. Besides…I like overkill. I married your father to keep him out of trouble after all,” she said smiling.

Harry shook his head at her. “You did not marry Dad just to keep him away from pranking.”

“Well it was *part* of the reason. He also had the most beautiful hair…” Lily commented reaching up to playfully ruffle Harry’s own hair.

“Mum!”

“Spoilsport,” Lily said pulled her hand back and leaning back into the couch. “I was serious about the overkill though, Harry. I am a huge fan of it. If you’re going to do something, might as well make sure you don’t have to do it a second time. If you want to secure a home, make it a fortress. If you want to kill someone blow up their house and Fiendfyre the ashes. If your enemy is bringing an army, bring your own five times as large. I’d almost say we should try to ask the ICW for help, but they are rather useless for the most part unfortunately.”

Harry chuckled at that. “Agreed. Plus I think we recruited pretty much everyone we could possibly get already.”

“That you have, son. I’m proud of you, Harry,” Lily said giving him a hug and a kiss on the head.

Harry leaned against her shoulder and nodded. “Thanks, mum. That…that means a lot.”

Lily could only smile at that. Until a few moments later when a stray thought crossed her mind that she seemingly just had to voice. “What about dragons? Could we use them? It’s not true overkill until there is fire raining down from the sky.”

Harry was torn between laughing and facepalming. “*Mum!*”
Chapter 46: The Calm Before…

The weeks after returning to Hogwarts passed in a sort of daze for Harry. Always dominating his thoughts were Voldemort and the uncertainty of when the attack would come. Snape could have been fed false information. The quiet infiltrations of the country that Amelia kept finding could be a diversion. The pattern from the past years could be broken. Voldemort could get spooked. His allies could get spooked. So many things could force the conflict before Harry’s side was ready.

He quickly forced himself into a routine in order to avoid dwelling on the issues. They still weighed on him, but as long as he kept busy he could keep the stress to a minimum. No matter the horror show coming he did still have to pass his O.W.L.s after all. The one time he’d tried to get out of it Hermione and Daphne had both ganged up on him. Hermione was adamant about him not neglecting his studies – completely irregardless of the fact that he could likely pass his N.E.W.T.s for Ancient Runes in Third Year and that was really the only important class he needed for the life he planned after Hogwarts.

“Harry James Potter! No future husband of mine is going to drop out of school with one passing grade to his name! You march back into that library and start studying, right now!” she had yelled, her face crimson and hands clenched into fists.

“You may be content just running Potter Runes, Harry, but I plan to change our society,” Daphne had piggybacked into the argument. “How is it going to look if I end up the Consort of a man who couldn’t even finish his O.W.L.s?”

Harry had rolled his eyes, mumbled about domineering women ruling his life and trudged back to his revisions. He couldn’t even say he disagreed with them. It had just been a nice fantasy avoiding the tests and all...at least for the few minutes that the idea had existed…

On the weekends Harry could almost always be found in the Defense Association’s training sessions assisting Daphne and the rest with teaching the students advanced combat spells. Sirius, McGonagall and Flitwick were proving to be extremely welcome additions to those extra periods as their presence allowed for greater freedom with Harry’s own activities during the sessions.

In contrast, his weekdays turned rather predictable. Harry’d go to class, finish the homework, revise for an hour, train for an hour, help Fred and George’s assembly team to craft the more complex rune schemes for an hour, then spend any remaining time in developing potential new combat/defense runes. Unfortunately the R&D periods weren’t proving very productive beyond streamlining the creation of already existing items.

Crumpling up yet another failed design, Harry scowled and shoved his papers away. “This is ridiculous! I’m having better luck advancing the Gold Digger than I am finishing up this thing!”

“The Gold Digger was the one that converts lead into gold right?” Hermione asked.

Harry nodded. “Yeah. Figure I’ve got like ten to fifteen years left of work to iron out the kinks; assuming I keep leaving it as a side project.”

“Well let’s hope you move it up the priority line at some point. We need to be ready for whenever the next generation starts looking at school. You have four women who all want children, Harry. That’s going to get expensive and it’d be nice to have a backup to the store,” Hermione said. She
turn a page in her book and smiled before jotting down another note on her pad.

“Are you even listening or just appeasing my fragile male ego?”

Hermione shrugged. “Both. Probably more the latter. Did you know that Nifflers were where wizards got the idea for an expansion charm from? Magicals were interesting in replicating the holding ability of their pouch.”

“That is very interesting, Hermione,” Harry said snorting in amusement at her ability to multitask. “Mind if I borrow that book for a few minutes? I really need to look at something besides runes for a bit.”

Hermione marked her page and passed it over with heavy sigh. “Just when I was at the good bits too. I’ve been trying to figure out how Newt Scamander managed to capture a Nundu by himself…he’s horribly vague about the whole incident. Want me to take a look at this scheme for you?”

Harry shifted the book onto his lap and blinked at his partner. “How do you avoid getting whiplash changing topics that fast?” At Hermione’s arched eyebrows, Harry rolled his eyes and passed her his own work. “I was trying to make a stone that would let me rapidly shoot out multiple Yamato Cannons. Failing that, at least maybe just smaller balls of energy rapid fire. I’m starting to think it’s just not possible without getting more exotic materials.”

“Have you considered metal options?”

Harry nodded as he flipped through the pages to try and find an interesting article. “Yeah. The magic doesn’t work well with the metal. Ends up completely shorting out the entire scheme. Shiva hasn’t mentioned that in class?”

Hermione sighed and nudged his side. “Of course she’s mentioned that. I just thought maybe you could use that shorting effect to channel the energy without breaking the stone.”

Harry looked up at her and frowned tapping his finger as he considered that option. After several moments he shook his head. “No, I don’t think it would work. The energy wouldn’t be able to properly form into a coherent matrix before shorting out. Good idea though, Mione.”

Both students nodded and turned back their respective work. Harry finally found an article that seemed promising and started reading. His frown returned in full force before he was halfway through the article and he was openly scowling as he starting into the last part. Coco started to bump into his foot repeatedly, squeaking out worried huffs as Harry finished the article and slammed the book closed. Standing up he left it on the seat behind him and sidestepped the little snorkack. Hermione’s head rose to stare at him as he started walking quickly to the portrait hole.

“Harry? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, thank god!” Harry yelled over his shoulder. “I’m going to see Shiva for a few minutes. I’ll be back before curfew. Probably.”

As the entrance started to swing closed again, Harry heard Hermione say to Luna, “He was on this page I think. What’s an Obscurus?”

Harry hurried along the corridors and coming to a stop in front of the door to Shiva’s office he started knocking insistently. A muffled, “Give me a minute!” sounded from the other side. Harry just kept knocking trying to calm his roiling stomach and stop his tattoos from itching. “Jeez, I’m here, I’m here! Who wants what?” Shiva asked yanking the door open. As soon as the there was
enough clearance Harry leapt forward and wrapped his arms around the woman. “Harry? What’s
wrong, kid?” Shiva patted his back and awkwardly stepped back into the room flicking the door
closed as she dragged him fully into her quarters. “Lils, it’s Harry. You should put some clothes
on.”

“Roger.” Lily’s muffled voice said through the closed bedroom door. Harry dimly noticed that
Shiva was in a bathrobe and shorts though he couldn’t really be bothered to care all that much.

“Hey, kid, what’s wrong?” Shiva asked gently lifting Harry’s face from her chest and wiping a
finger down his cheek. He hadn’t even realized he’d been crying until then…

“Thank you,” he whispered and buried his head into his adoptive mother again. “Thank you!”

The bedroom door opened and Lily came out with a small frown. “Harry?”

“I got this, Lils,” Shiva said waving the other woman to the couch. “What am I being thanked for,
kid?”

Harry strangled the manic laugh that tried to bubble out though he didn’t quite manage to catch it
all. He took a few deep breathes and when he was sure he wouldn’t devolve into a blubbering
mess he said, “You got me away from the Dursleys. I…I never realized how bad it could’ve
been. I’ve always said I was fine. I’ve always avoided talking about them. About how much I
hated being different and getting punished for something I couldn’t control and didn’t understand.
I never knew that…I didn’t…I could’ve…thank you, Shiva!” He felt the tears start streaking down
his face this time. “Thank you!”

Harry felt a third hand settle onto his back and knew his other mother had left the couch. “What
prompted this, Harry? Did someone say something?”

“I read about Obscurials,” Harry said softly. A gasp from above him and a tightening of Shiva’s
arms told him he didn’t need to explain further.

“Goddess, I never even thought of that…” Shiva muttered. “Lily, when a magical child actively
suppresses their magic due to mental or physical trauma it bottles up like a volcano. Given enough
time, enough pain and enough power the child becomes an Obscurial releasing a destructive rage
force called an Obscurus. There’s…never been a documented case of someone surviving that for
long and only one who even managed lived past ten that I know of…”

That annoying, manic laugh escaped Harry’s control as he shook his head. He felt his mothers’
hands tightening on him more. “We all know the rules don’t tend to apply to me. I would’ve been
the second case of that probably…Good thing Vernon usually stayed away from actual beating
huh? There probably wouldn’t have even been a Privet Drive…”

“Ariana,” Lily whispered. Harry felt her shake for a moment before she moved to envelop the
other two. “Yet another thing my family owes you apparently, Shiva.”

Shiva stayed silent for a long time. Eventually all three seemed to calm down enough for her to say
quietly, “Once Voldemort is gone, those relatives are following right along in his wake, kid. I
promise you that.”

The next day, was the regular DA meeting though Tonks had stopped by to help out for a bit this
time. Harry’d given Hermione and Luna a brief, heavily edited, explanation of why he’d run off
the night prior and proceeded to use the perfectly timed meeting to take out some of his remaining
stress. His spells were more powerful, his casting faster, his runes more prone to breaking, his
tattoos more itchy...he’d even swapped into Midnight for a few minutes to practice jumping between the shadows of different people in the room.

Breathing hard Harry finally sat down on a bench to take a break when Su came up to him. “Someone’s worked up,” she said arms crossed and eyebrows raised.

Harry shrugged. “It’s not really a secret. Just needed to work through some stuff.”

Su shrugged. “You make the mistake of thinking I’m criticizing. I’m not. I think this is a good time to step up your dagger lessons if you’re game. You channel that energy into your stances and movements and we’ll make you into a martial master in addition to a rune master and a duel master.”

“I don’t need to be a master at hand-to-hand, Su,” Harry chuckled. “I just need to hold my own. Master is a bit out of my reach for the time we have.”

Su rolled her eyes and yanked him to his feet pushing him towards the little section where she taught her – admittedly small – group. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just grab the black and silver ones. Colin’s up to this point too so you two are facing off against each other. Harry, use your longer reach. Colin, use your agility and size.”

The older Creevy brother nodded to Su. He cast a nervous smile at Harry which Harry quickly returned. “Ready, Harry?” Harry nodded and they set off.

The fight was hard. Harry was used to firing off spells while he jumped around the battlefield yet for this they were going without wands or magic of any sort. Colin actually had a bit of an advantage because of his slightly higher speed and his smaller build presented a reduced target. Harry finally managed to get in a jab to the stomach at the same time that Colin skidded and slashed across Harry’s inner thigh.

“And goal!” Su called. Both students helped each other up and Su came over shaking her head. “Not bad overall, but the aim is to survive. A pyrrhic victory isn’t a true win. Gryffindors… getting killed while you strike the lethal blow is not a good strategy. Work on shifting the opponent’s lunging blade with one dagger and striking with the other for next time guys.”

As Su walked away, Colin visibly gulped and turned to Harry shuffling his feet. “Harry, um, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, Colin. What’s up?”

“Well, you see I was wondering if…It’s just that…Would you go to Hogsmeade with me?!” Colin finished in a rush, his cheeks flaring crimson.

Harry sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry, Colin, you’re a really nice guy, but I’m already dating four people that I love very much. I’m not planning to break anything off with any of them at this point in our lives.”

Colin grimaced. “I figured. I just wanted to be sure, you know…did I ever have a chance? Maybe if I’d asked earlier? You know…before the whole thing with Daphne?”

“Err,” Harry fumbled for an easy way to put it and came up blank. Running his hand through his hair Harry decided it was probably better to just rip the band-aid off. “I don’t really think so, Colin. I just don’t really swing that way…I’m sorry…”

“It’s not your fault,” Colin said his lips widening into a semblance of a smile. “We’re born how
we’re born. Thanks for being straight with me, Harry.” He walked a few feet away and stopped to turn back with a frown etched across his features. “I can still keep taking pictures though right? I promise they’re all innocent and um well um – ”

“Sure, Colin, you can keep taking pictures when mood strikes you as long as they are wholesome,” Harry said rolling his eyes. Keeping the younger boy away from his camera for even a day would probably win Fred and George some money, but Harry wasn’t going to be the one to dash that hobby. Colin smiled widely and nodded hurrying off.

Harry had just put the knives back into their sheathes when Daphne called the group’s attention. “Okay, everyone is doing very well. I want you all to keep practicing what we learned today. Next week’s class is cancelled for Fifth and Seventh Years in order to allow them a final study weekend.” Harry snorted at that. He still wasn’t sure whether that had been Daphne’s or Hermione’s idea though he could see both reaching that conclusion independently considering their class ranking. “Professors Black, Flitwick, Potter and McGonagall have all offered extended office hours throughout the week in order to make up for the lost time. Have a pleasant evening and don’t hesitate to ask one of your peers for assistance if required!”

The group started to file out of the Room while Harry continued to clean up the area near him. Tonks threaded out of the throng and paced over to him. “You know, the Room resets all that stuff the next time we open it up, Wonder Boy.”

“Still seems like we should clean-up though,” Harry said shrugging. “It only takes an extra few minutes.”

“Well let me help then,” Tonks said picking up some of the mats and lugging them into the corner. They worked in comfortable silence for a few minutes as the last of the DA members left. When it was just the two of them left Tonks asked, “So...what got you so worked up last night? Hermione mentioned it to me this morning.”

Harry grimaced and shrugged. “Guess that’s why you showed up to help with the training today?”

“That and the war council meeting in the afternoon,” Tonks agreed with a smirk. “It’s not always about you, Wonder Boy.”

“Oh really?” Harry’s raised eyebrows and askance glance had them both laughing in short order. Coming down from the amusement Harry shrugged again. “Honestly, Nym, it’s not that big of a deal. I was reading *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and found the article about Obscurials is all.”

Tonks frowned at that. “I remember hearing something about that in training...some sort of super powerful, invisible raw magic force or something?”

“Something like that. That’s the Obscurus itself. The Obscurial is the wizard releasing it. Basically repressing your magic while still young leads to bad things. And death,” Harry said. He leaned against the wall folding his arms across his chest. “I just got spooked that that could’ve been me if Vernon had gone one step further or if Shiva hadn’t gotten me out when she did is all.”

Tonks nodded and stepped forward to lightly kiss him. “See, not so bad talking about your feelings is it?”

“You should take your own advice sometimes, Nym,” Harry replied with a low chuckle snaking his arms around her waist and pulling her against him. He sighed at the feeling of her pressing close. “This is nice.”
“It better be nice, Wonder Boy,” Tonks murmured, smirking in amusement. She pulled back and tilted her head to look at him with a playful grin. “You need to loosen up and relax a bit, Harry. You’re way too worked up. Close your eyes for a minute, I’ve got a surprise for you.”

Harry raised his eyebrows in question, but did as he was told. He found it was best not to try and predict what his partner was up to. He felt Tonks pull away and heard a rustling of fabric, followed by a muffled curse as a dull thump sounded. “You okay, Nym?” he asked cocking his head curiously.

A grumble was the answer, before she spoke up. “Don’t mind me, the crash dummy and I got into a disagreement,” Tonks said. “Ah, much better. You can open your eyes now, Harry.”

As Harry cracked his lids, it was all he could do to not drop his mouth open at her. Tonks had tossed most of her clothing onto the mats in the corner leaving her clad in just her combat boots, fingerless gloves and black thong. Her toned voluptuous legs, firm bum and athletic form weren’t the product of any sort of metamorphic talent, he knew. He’d seen her enough to know that Tonks’ sensuous form was the result of real hard work. Harry licked his lips as she paced closer swaying her hips seductively.

The image of beauty broke somewhat as Tonks’ boot caught on something and she squawked indignantly, flying forwards through the air. Harry reached out and caught her slamming them both into the wall behind him. Looking at Tonks glaring at the mat behind her Harry couldn’t help laughing which soon set her off as well. “You and your clumsiness,” Harry murmured brushing a lock of pink hair out of her eyes.

Tonks’ lips lifted into a rueful smile as she shrugged. “What can I say, the Room apparently has it out for me. At least my hero was here to catch me.” She shook her head and the hair in his hand switched into cascading gold flowing down her back. Tonks lifted a hand and held it over her forehead in mock theatrics. “Oh my prince! You have rescued me from the horrific fate of the evil Room!”

Harry’s laugh shook them both and he shook his head lightly kissing Tonks’ hand. “Sorry, luv, the innocent princess thing just does not work with combat boots and gloves on.”

Tonks eyed him and rolled her eyes in amusement, shifting back into short blue hair and pulling back to stand up. “Well I could always switch to Tracey I suppose. She’s a strong type, I could see her in boots.” Tonks posed with one arm behind her back and settled into a low stance. “What do you think?”

Harry hurriedly shook his head. “Please don’t give me ideas. I’m fine, I really don’t need to see Tracey naked.”

Tonks tapped his chin with a smirk and raised eyebrows. “Hmm, well anyone else you got the hots to see under their clothes? One of your Chaser friends perhaps?”

He sighed, exasperated. “Nym, I’m dating four girls including one who can constantly shift little things here and there to always be someone ever so slightly different. I don’t need to fantasize about anyone else.”

“Spoilsport,” Tonks said shaking her head. “Well, one day I’ll wheedle your fantasy out of you. Or I’ll switch to Fleur and you can have two of the girl at once. There’s an idea…”

Harry stepped forward and placed a hand behind Tonks’ head gently pulling her into a deep kiss. When their tongues started to twine against each other Harry pulled back and kissed her nose
ignoring the mewl of protest. “Just because I don’t ask for changes doesn’t mean you have to search for ones, Nym.”

“I know. But it’s fun being able to choose to shift for you, Harry. You don’t ask, which makes it my choice. I’ll stay me for this time.”

“Fully you or this you?” he asked.

“This me. I still don’t really like my default you know.”

Harry shrugged. “Nice breasts though,” he said with a smirk.

Tonks rolled her eyes and stepped into him letting her chest drop down into the B range. “Just for that mister you get to play with them smaller today.”

Harry laughed as Tonks started to pull his shirt over his head. “Someone’s eager.”

“Someone is talking far too much and ignoring his randy partner,” she returned sticking her tongue out at him and proceeding to remove his shoes and trousers in record time. Her boots were kicked off and joined the growing pile as she let Harry drop them both to the few mats still on the floor.

“Did you already cast the contraceptive charm, Nym?” Harry asked lightly kissing her neck.

“On the potion, Wonder Boy,” she breathed out suppressing a shudder at the tingling from his lips. “But yeah. Door’s locked and silenced too.”

“Good,” Harry murmured. He lifted his head and without warning shifted one arm underneath her arse and leaned forward laying Tonks out flat on the mat. Her brief protest died as he shifted his mouth onto her nipple gently rolling it between his tongue and grazing it with his teeth. He couldn’t help but wonder if the piercings there shifted as she did to avoid discomfort; the tiny bar certainly looked like it had to adjust slightly if she altered her breasts too much. Unaware of his musing, Tonks gasped and wrapped her arms around his head. Harry didn’t let her keep him trapped there for long though and quickly started to trail kisses down her delightfully muscular stomach.

Reaching her damp center soon enough, Harry lifted his head to meet her eyes. Tonks’ bright green irises stared back at him and his smile widened. Her irises always seemed to shift to match him when he’d gotten her ramped up. Diving down between her legs, Harry, ran his tongue briefly along her lower lips until he found the small button at the top. Tonks’ moan of pleasure, and slight tremble, was enough to let him know he was in the right spot. Smirking to himself, Harry shifted his thoughts so that the next words he spoken were in Parseltongue.

He didn’t say anything that made sense – he’d long ago learned that simply humming in the language or murmuring sweet nothings was more than enough to satisfy the girls. His tongue rapidly vibrated back and forth with the hisses and flicks. Tonks gasped and clutched his hair with her hands pulling him against her harder and her legs wrapped around his shoulders. “Merlin! I swear, men were behind vilifying Parseltongue! No woman would ever speak out against this!” She shuddered and bucked underneath him reaching release ridiculously quickly and dampening his lips somewhat.

Slowly easing off his humming, Harry unwrapped Tonks’ legs from his shoulders and crawled up her body placing soft kisses as he went. He spent a moment on each breast before returning to her mouth and plunging his tongue inside to do battle with hers. Tonks responded eagerly flinging her arms around his neck and wrapping her legs back around his arse. She pulled him into her and
shifted her body subtly to make them fit better together. Pulling back Harry murmured, “Not interested in me teasing you today then?”

“Screw teasing, just fuck me, Harry, please!” Tonks whispered taking his ear into her mouth and nibbling.

Harry suppressed his own grunt of approval as he pushed his hips back far enough so when he bucked forward again he entered her with a muffled clap. Tonks moaned loud in appreciation and Harry couldn’t help the answering one from his own mouth. He’d only gotten in a few thrusts before Tonks was shuddering underneath him again and her arms clamped around him hard enough to bruise, mewling piteously. Harry lifted his head and kissed her nose as she came down from her high, continuing his slow thrusts. “You cheat.”

“Hey if you’ve got the power, use it,” Tonks said, between gasping breaths. “Just because I can extend my – uh! – G-spot a tad to make sure you hit doesn’t – mmph! – mean I’m cheating per se…” She protested grunting slightly as they continued.

He chuckled. “You’re cheating. Wait til I tell Mione.”

Tonks moaned again clutching him tighter. “I look forward to it, Wonder Boy.”

Chuckling Harry pulled back bringing her with him as he sat up. Tonks ended up in his lap still seated firmly around his length and mewling in satisfaction. “Ride me,” Harry whispered into her ear.

No further encouragement was needed as Tonks started bouncing up and down enthusiastically, her breasts moving with her pleasantly as she went. Harry managed to get one nipple back into his mouth long enough to flick at it with some more with Parseltongue. He hummed gently sending a shiver of pleasure resounding through Tonks’ body. Harry felt her shudder again and then cry out. He let her breast pop back out of his mouth. He could feel his own release building up, but it wasn’t quite enough yet.

An idea striking across his mind, Harry grinned. He leaned back and gently prodded Tonks. “Stand up and turn around, Nym.” She quickly complied on legs that were shaking ever so slightly. As his partner knelt down to plant herself on him again, Harry lifted up to meet her halfway. As soon as he was buried back inside her wet folds, Harry immediately rose to his knees and, leaning a hand on her back, pushed her forward onto all fours. Tonks groaned in appreciation of the new angle as Harry started thrusting again.

He watched the beautiful arc of her back and leaned over to kiss the space between her shoulder blades while reaching around to grab a hold of her swaying breasts. He enjoyed the sensation of some of her slick lubrication dripping along his shaft and off his bollocks, reveling in knowing how much he was pleasing her. This time, when Tonks started shuddering underneath him – even more strongly than before – her legs gave out completely and she collapsed to the ground moaning long and loud as she clenched around him. Her climax, massaging his length with her fluttering spasms, sent Harry over the edge and he bit down gently on her neck. Groaning into his lover’s tender flesh, Harry let loose inside her repeatedly, before he let his weight settle onto her back. Panting heavily, his manhood still inside her, Harry gently leaned up enough to kiss Tonks’ flushed cheek and the edge of her mouth as she turned her head. “Bloody hell, Nym, you need to visit more often!” he gasped.

She chuckled, rolling over with some effort and poking him gently in the chest. Blowing a strand of sweaty hair out of her face. “You’re just saying that because, you…” she teased her finger down his chest tantalizingly, “just got laid.”
He snorted in amusement, and she reached down with one hand to tease her button a little while the other massaged one of her breasts. “Want to go again?” she asked hopefully.

Harry chuckled. “You are incorrigible.” He sighed as he sank into her properly once again, “But yes, I would enjoy that quite a bit I think,” he laughed.

She groaned, panting slightly as he bumped over her G-spot and rubbed against her cervix. “Best boyfriend ever,” Tonks moaned happily in reply, quivering in anticipation.

After another few hours with Tonks, both she and Harry cleaned up and briefly left the Room in order to reset it to the Conference configuration. They opened the door just as Hermione, Luna, Daphne and Tracey turned the corner. Tracey smirked at the couple and wiggled her eyebrows. “Wow, that’s a pretty good time-span you two. No wonder Harry can satisfy you all.”

Harry’s face turned crimson while Tonks just grinned wide. “You better believe he can. We all know you’re jealous Trace.”

Luna shrugged. “No she isn’t. I can keep up.” That effectively killed the conversation as Tracey just smirked and the others tried to think of something besides what Luna was like in bed.

Harry managed to get his blush under control as the rest of the core group filed into the room and took their seats around the table. As Sirius sat down he nodded to the others. “Amy can’t make it so I’ll fill her in later. Anyone feel like starting?”

“I’ll go,” Harry said standing up. “Before we start with the main meeting, I want to go over two things. First, Bane passed on word that we’ve found the main Acromantula nest. Are we still sure we don’t want to take out that threat immediately?”

Lily grimaced and nodded along with McGonagall and Flitwick. “Unfortunately, yes. I’ve dealt with this in the last war; if we attack one of the elements he’ll retaliate with the full force immediately. We’ve made that mistake before and it cost us dearly. We simply can’t risk it.”

Harry sighed and nodded. “Well, at least we have a target for once they start the attack.” The others nodded around him. “Alright then, second issue. How sure are we of the timetable? I know that Snape is giving us all he can, but are we certain that Voldemort is feeding him correct intel? It probably isn’t too hard to figure out that Snape is a spy…”

Flitwick shrugged. “Honestly, that is somewhat immaterial. Voldemort can know Snape is a spy all day long, but it’s simply impossible to craft a large scale assault for a particular window and have a single individual expecting a different time frame. Magic can do quite a bit, but not that. Also…we know he will either attack prior to, or after the end of, the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. Riddle is smart enough to know that there would be far too many additional skilled adult defenders should he choose that specific week.”

Harry nodded again. “Okay. Fred, George, how’s our production looking?”

The twins saluted with matching grins. “On track partner. The last set of items just started being put together this morning. We should be delivering the final crate to the troops in a few days. All that’s left are the main castle defenses.”

“I got those covered already,” Shiva said. “The rune clusters are primed and the standalone comm relays are already set up. Each station is linked to Auror Headquarters as well as to Potter Manor in case we need to evacuate to the second front. Gringotts has a tie-in too as do the French, Australian and Bulgarian Ministries. All central stones are large enough to maintain active links
with the entire network for about two hours before we have to shut some down to avoid burnout.”

“The defenses themselves are Mortar Circles on the ramparts?” Harry asked.

“Yup. Bill and I,” Shiva said waving a hand towards the other seated Weasley, “managed to get them tied into the main castle wards so they’ll leech the power from the ambient magic instead of having to latch onto the ley lines.”

McGonagall grunted her agreement. “I’ve personally ensured that all castle Prefects are fluent in their use.”

Harry nodded. “Good. We have evacuation routes set up through the Chamber and this room. Students can portkey out directly from the Chamber since it’s outside the main protections though if they come here they’ll have to be partway into the created tunnel in order to get outside the boundaries. All our allies have reported in ready as well.” He looked around at the group before plowing ahead. “Now for the topic that we really need to hit on…Nagini.”

Remus, Tonks and Sirius all scowled while a light pattering of feathers briefly showed on Fleur’s arm before absorbing back into her skin. The rest in the room just narrowed their eyes and waited.

“Voldemort isn’t stupid. Insane, yes, but not stupid. There is a chance that he won’t bring her along…” Harry said hesitantly. “We know he wears the ring so that isn’t a problem, but if we do end up killing the bastard without getting the snake…”

Sirius shook his head. “I say we still off him. Took the arsehole over a decade to cobble together a body again. We’ll be able to find and destroy the stupid slithering wonder by then.”

Flitwick snorted. “Why push our luck? We should aim to capture him instead in order to be certain. There is precious little information that says what may happen should the Horcruxes be destroyed while Voldemort’s spirit is ephemeral. There is every chance he will remain and we will be forced to tangle with the monster yet again.”

“And just how are we supposed to capture him?” Remus asked waving for Flitwick to fill them in on the grand plan.

Harry took charge of the conversation before anyone else could start bickering. “I think I’ll be able to if we have to.” All pairs of eyes snapped to him and any murmurs ceased immediately. Harry closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. He stood straighter and faced his friends and allies. “Look, let’s be realistic here. He has decades of experience on me. I’ve held my own until now and I have a lot of tricks up my sleeve and on my bandolier however Voldemort still has a reputation for being one of the strongest wizards of the age for a reason. I’m confident that I can pull out ahead and take him out. However…I’m fairly certain that even my strongest attacks won’t kill him in a single shot. I plan on being able to wind him or knock him senseless, but I doubt I’ll be unintentionally killing him. Get me next to him and I’ll get him on the ground for capture.”

A few grimaces greeted that response though most of the people present sighed and nodded. Millicent was the first to speak up about the potential flaws. “So if we manage that, then how do we keep him down?”

Daphne stood, her expression frozen into her Ice Queen persona. Harry had to hold himself back from reaching out to grasp her hand seeing that. His eyes briefly met Tracey’s to find the other girl in a similarly conflicted position with her own fists balled and her lips set into a thin line. “We prevent him from using magic to the best extent we can.” Daphne held up a hand to stop anyone from interrupting her as she forged on. “Voldemort is skilled in wandless magic so simply
destroying his wand is not enough. We need to amputate his limbs after we capture him. Arms and legs both. Wandless magic is still possible at that point, but only after weeks or years of practice. It will be enough time for us to delve into his mind and ascertain the location of the snake.”

Lavender held up a questioning hand and waited for Harry to wave her on before she started to speak. “Um, so if we have him in our custody at that point, rather than cutting off all his limbs…” she turned slightly green and had to pause for a second as she gagged. “Rather than amputating, why don’t we just obliviate him? Make him into the next Lockhart. The man can finally speak again from what I hear, but he’s barely at the toddler level.”

Padma shook her head. “It’s a good idea, Lav, but it’s too risky. We’d be leaving a Horcrux out there and if that thing managed to leech enough strength from Nagini it could come back and re-embody like the diary one tried to do. Voldemort probably locked the snake under a Fidelius with himself as Secret Keeper.”

“Anyone know what happens when the Secret Keeper forgets the secret?” Su asked frowning.

Lily sighed. “The secret remains protected unfortunately. The charm doesn’t break until the Secret Keeper dies and even then it only splinters into the remaining personnel who previously knew the secret. Once that second set dies, the Fidelius permanently falls.”

Parvati paled. “Bugger. So since Voldemort can’t die without Nagini dying first…that’s a brilliant defense…”

Harry quickly shook his head and started speaking again before anyone could lose hope. “It’s good, but it’s not foolproof. If he’s still able to keep out all the interrogators I’ll figure out a way to get the information out of him with a rune. It’ll all be a moot point though if he’s confident enough to take the snake with him.”

“Or paranoid enough,” Hermione said. Many questioning glances found her leading the brunette to shrug. “Tom Riddle’s primary trait beyond a need to gain control of everything around him has always been paranoia. With so many of his safeguards confirmed destroyed…there is not insufficient reason to suspect that he will be afraid to ever let the snake out of his sight. Instead of searching for a hidden house we will merely have to contend with felling whatever cage he has erected around Nagini when he arrives with her in tow.”

Fleur’s grin had a distinct edge to it that could probably chill the heart of any demon it was directed at. “Leave zat to me. Between curse breaking and ze passionfyre I will have ze Horcrux destroyed in short order. Simply keep his attention off of me for a few minutes.”

“I got that,” Harry said directing a large smile and thankful gesture to his partner. “You’ll have all the time you need, Fleur. Now, was there anything else anyone felt immediately pressing for the group?”

As specifics were discussed Harry looked around the room at his friends. If someone had told him five years ago that he’d wind up surrounded by some of the most loyal and competent people in the country, calling them all friends and trusting his life and the lives of others to them…he’d have called that person insane and laughed in their face.

What a difference having a family had made.

Harry looked over the people arrayed throughout the Great Hall and gulped. He had never been so
thankful for the experiences of previous years – and the tutoring of his more politically aligned partners. Standing in front of dozens, no, hundreds of people from varying nationalities and races was always going to be intimidating. Without the prior boons he’d likely have been quailing under such attention. That certainly wouldn’t have looked good considering he was supposed to be their general…

“I appreciate everyone being willing to stay in the castle’s guest quarters for the next three weeks,” Harry said, his voice carrying to all corners of the room. A series of nods and smirks answered him. “The O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s start next week so we expect the attack to come shortly. Please ensure you remain within the assigned areas to maintain the secrecy of your presence.”

One of the Australian volunteers waved two fingers in the air and called out, “Question, mate, how sure are you about the loyalty of the rest of the students not in the room?”

Harry grimaced and leaned back against the desk to prevent himself from shrugging. His mother shifted slightly from her position nearby and stood up beside him. Lily nodded towards the Australian Auror before replying, “We’re pretty sure that most of the people who would betray us have already been kicked out or are otherwise too wary to do/say anything. Just to be safe though we are asking you to remain within your assigned sections until the operation commences. Only people who have been properly vetted will be trafficking those areas.”

A goblin frowned in response. “Will we be required to berth above ground, Lady Potter, Warrior Potter?”

“No,” Harry said shaking his head as Lily resumed her earlier position and left the floor to him. “The goblins have an area near the Chamber of Secrets actually. We found a side tunnel that is still within the main Hogwarts wards. Now to go over some of the major items you should’ve recently received.” Harry paused to ensure that everyone was paying attention.

“The robes that are being handed out now are called Armor Robes,” he said gesturing to parcels that Fred, George and Lee were distributing. “They are a bit heavier than regular robes so I recommend practicing with them in order to get used to the extra weight. They’ll shield you from a few spells; though if too many hit it in short order or if a spell is too powerful, the robes will disintegrate.” A few snickers greeted that pronouncement and Harry barely managed to prevent his face from blushing red.

One goblin held up his hand and at Harry’s nod asked, “Warrior Potter, is the damage from spells cumulative or will the armor regenerate after a time?”

Harry frowned. “It’s not so much a regeneration as a recharge. The robes work because of runic inscriptions on the stone inlays. As long as you allow enough time for the runes to bleed off the energy they’ve absorbed you’ll be fine.”

Su’s hand was the next to rise only barely beating out Viktor. “Harry, you said a single strong spell would cause it to be overload. What type of strength range are we speaking of?”

“Fred?” Harry said nodding for the Weasley twin to take that question.

“From our bench test, any spells up to the Sixth Year curriculum can be taken up to three times in five seconds before catastrophic failure. Seventh Year spells drop that to two spells in five seconds. Anything Fourth Year and up that is relatively overpowered will also lead to immediate failure. Same with most of the dark spells. You’ll be able to block a single bone-breaker or blood-boiling curse for example, but expect to be running around in whatever you have on underneath afterwards,” Fred said no trace of his usual joking.
George jumped in on his twin’s heels. “And for the love Merlin people do not think that this can tank a Cruciatius or Killing Curse. Both will shred through it like parchment.”

Lee held up one finger and grinned. “Ironically, it actually can block a single Imperio. Make of that what you will.”

Harry blinked and stood up straighter at that. “I created a robe that can block an Imperio?” he muttered. Shaking his head of the distraction Harry held up another two rune stones. “Moving on, these two are your Dementor defenses. This is the Silver Spirit. I’m relatively certain most people already know about this one, but for those who don’t, it functions similar to a patronus spell. The major exception is that this can actually kill a Dementor instead of just ward it off. Be careful with its use; if the apparition is forcibly dispelled there will be some feedback on the caster.” He grimaced remembering the time his evil doppelganger had proven that rather painfully. “The second one is a Dementor Anchor. This was originally designed to function as a tattoo so if the Dementors get close you need to be certain that it’s physically touching your skin in its entirety. The idea is it can prevent the creature’s Kiss from working. I’m…honestly not entirely certain if it’ll work as a rune stone instead of a tattoo so please don’t rely on it except for emergencies.”

He paced back to the head table and picked up another rune stone showing it to the crowd. “This is the Sanctuarykey. It’s basically a fancier version of a portkey. This one however can tunnel through the wards around Hogwarts. Each has been keyed to work with the specific individual in order to prevent Death Eaters from stealing one and using it to escape. They’re all already targeted to our rendezvous location as well. Try not to use this unless you’re completely surrounded. We don’t want to telegraph that we have this option to our enemies. Also, there’s no easy way back from the rendezvous so assume that once you use the key you’re basically out of the fight. This is a one-time use thing as well. That Sanctuarykey is going to be massively overloaded by jumping through these wards so if you use it…as soon as you land throw the thing into the air. It’s going to explode. There’s no point in sugar-coating this and there’s no way to avoid it — unless you’re leaving via one of our two designated evacuation routes in which case you shouldn’t be using the Sanctuarykey anyway. If you do use it I really can’t stress this enough: upon landing, throw it and cover your head to avoid shrapnel. Healers will be standing by to help with minor injuries.”

One of the French Aurors frowned. “Zis sounds dangerous to use…”

“Well compared to my prototype from last year this is downright comfy. I’ll take some stone shrapnel over bleeding from every orifice thank you,” Harry said deadpan. The Frenchman paled and some others in the room nodded emphatically. “Look it’s just a last resort for active combatants. I don’t want anyone else from our side to die if we can avoid it at all.”

Millicent grinned and smacked a fist into her open hand. “Yeah, we just gotta kill all the other guys instead! Make them die for their stupid beliefs instead of us for our cool ones!”

Harry rubbed his forehead and silently counted to five as many of the occupants voiced their agreement and those nearby slapped the Slytherin on her back. “Sure. Let’s go with that. Okay, moving on…”

There were children lying about all around the castle taking advantage of the weather. Some were reclining against trees, some were throwing items at the giant squid, some were practicing and some seemed to be simply sleeping. Voldemort looked on the ancient castle grounds with a thin smile. The grounds looked just like he remembered…a brief flare of regret ignited within him before Voldemort ruthlessly suppressed the emotion. Attacking this place was not his choice. It was Harry Potter’s choice. If the boy had simply submitted then Voldemort would not have been forced into this course.
He wouldn’t destroy the castle. Probably not at least. Surely he’d be able to crush the pitiful resistance before too much damage to the grounds accumulated. Then he’d rebuilt and turn it into the seat of his power. He’d install puppets in the Ministry and he’d rule from Hogwarts. It had always been more home to him than the orphanage after all and he had no attachment to the actual Ministry building. And didn’t a King deserve to rule from the most opulent, most defended, most impressive location available?

“Wormtail,” Voldemort hissed. The simpering little fool quickly stepped out of the ranks and bowed. “Was the path clear?”

“I checked the tunnels I remember, my lord,” Wormtail said shaking his head up and down vigorously. “Many are collapsed. Two were open, but with obvious traps installed. The one leading through the Shrieking Shack is not practical without first felling the Whomping Willow.”

“At which point we will already be deep within the grounds voiding its usefulness,” Voldemort said narrowing his eyes. “So a frontal assault is the most efficient option. Once again you fail to impress me, Wormtail.”

The little rat of a man shuddered and fell forward trying to kiss the hem of Voldemort’s robes. “Forgive me, master! I will do better!”

For a brief moment Voldemort toyed with torturing the man just for fun. It would stoke the fear of his person in his new ‘allies’. Surely if he was willing to torture his own man for something outside the fool’s control then he’d have no issue with torturing any of the others only tentatively helping him. After several moments of contemplation Voldemort suppressed a sigh. He couldn’t risk Wormtail’s screams alerting the castle with their attack about to commence. A few moments wouldn’t do much, but there was no need to test that. “Stand and return to your position.”

Ignoring the simpering, Voldemort scanned the castle one final time before turning his gaze to his minions. “Their exams begin tomorrow. They are tired. They are frustrated. They have exhausted their reserves. They are weak. We are strong. We are righteous. We have magic itself on our side. Today we begin the new era of magical supremacy! Today…today we show these fools just what power means!” The troops remained quiet though large grins spread across the faces not fully covered by masks and hands pumped the air. Voldemort smiled and turned around to face his objective as Nagini slithered around the confines of her magical shield bubble next to him. Harry Potter would fall today and Voldemort’s power – and immortality – would be assured. “Commence the assault!”
Chapter 47: The Storm

The weekend morning started off rather nice at first. Despite the exams starting on Monday, Neville was in good spirits all things considered. The first indication that he had of trouble was a shout of surprise from Hannah as she backpedaled and tripped over him. Twisting, Neville managed to catch his girlfriend before she hit the ground. The maneuver also happened to give him a clear view of the charging mass streaming through the gates of Hogwarts’ grounds. Black cloaks were the majority though there were several camouflage fatigues, military uniforms and mangy rags mixed into the grouping.

A large, toothy grin spread across his face as Neville keyed his Comm Stone. “Emergency Broadcast. All units stand up; attack commencing, frontal assault. Longbottom coordinating decoy retreat. Disconnect.” Levering Hannah back to her feet he turned to his other girlfriend and waved towards the two students near the giant squid. “Susan, get them inside. Hannah you grab the group by the tree. Remember none of the others are real so ignore the rest!”

“We’re on it, Nev,” Susan said pulling her wand and setting her features in stone. “Don’t be stupid and attack Bellatrix or Crouch before the rest of our side shows up.” Her warning delivered, she ran to grab the two volunteers and usher them back into the safety of the castle.

“You get yourself killed by being a hero and I’m going to slap you hard enough to wake you right back up,” Hannah said as she moved to her assigned group as well.

Neville shook his head at his partners as a loud gong rang throughout the grounds. A silvery border briefly flashed to life around the perimeter wards before fading back to the normal invisible nature of the defenses. Neville knew that was the signal that a newly added aspect of the wards had just been dialed up to maximum. This layer handled physical ‘deterrents’ preventing any non-authorized personnel from exiting. Knowing that the Death Eaters were now trapped on one of the most fortified grounds in the country almost set Neville to chortling. Suppressing the urge, he turned to face the oncoming terrorists…never once losing his smile.

Neville’s comm call cut off and a loud gong reverberated through the castle corridor. Hermione gave herself two seconds to panic before suppressing as much of her fear and worry as she could. “The Death Eaters are here, everyone!” she yelled. A gasp came from the direction of Madame Pince near the front of the room. Hermione didn’t know whether it was from shock at her shouting in the library or from the content of said yell. Either way, it wasn’t worth worrying about. “Everyone not staying to assist in the defense begin evacuation procedures!” Books dropped to tabletops and Hermione ran towards the entrance. She skidded to a stop in front of Pince and pulled out the utility belt Harry had given her. Draping the belt over her shoulders Hermione turned to the librarian. “Madame Pince, can you handle directing the students to the seventh floor exit? I have to get down and help on the front lines!”

“I-I have this covered.” Pince said swallowing hard and clutching her wand like a drowning man clinging to a boat. “Stay safe, Miss Granger.”

“You as well, Madame.” Hermione finished cinching the belt and tore out of the library streaking
towards the stairs. She took the steps two at a time praying that Neville was able to get the people inside before anyone was hurt. Hermione kept running as she started checking off the list of priorities and actions that needed to be taken. She was on the second floor landing as the entrance hall doors clanged shut.

“Students inside!” Susan yelled as the doors shimmered with the protective wards springing to life. “Where’s – BUGGER!” Hermione hit the ground floor just in time to see Susan swing back to the door with a scowl and wand raised. “Drop the wards! I need to get my boyfriend away from his revenge before the army of arseholes kills him!”

Hermione grabbed the red-head’s arm and started dragging her to the side. “Secret passage is one corridor over. Our own people will be streaming out from the others now so Neville will be fine.”

“I’m going to kill him. I’m going to fucking kill him,” Susan mumbled as she followed behind.

“Hannah okay?”

“She got her group and headed up to the hospital wing. Neville is so dead!” The two teens skidded to a stop and Hermione pushed in the second brick above the sculpture shifting the section of wall to the side. “Let’s go! He better have killed Bellatrix and made this idiocy worthwhile,” Hermione heard Susan mutter.

As her friend surged forward, Hermione couldn’t help the slight shiver that ran through her. “Harry, you better not be taking similar stupid risks,” she said scowling and rushing out to join the battle.

A muted gong sounded down inside the cavernous not-so-secret room beneath the castle. Lily Potter reacted immediately, jumping to her feet along with the group of allies around her. “Everyone up! For those who didn’t hear, Longbottom is the current defense and the attackers are advancing! Move your arses and let’s make those bastards bleed!” Shouts of agreement and determination met her proclamation. A small grin spreading at finally getting the chance to pay back the people who’d taken her husband from her, Lily led the group of goblins and French Aurors out from the Chamber of Secrets into the Forbidden Forest. They had dug up through the ceiling of the original tunnel in order to make a second exit closer to the school. That effort’s worth was immediately evident as the group of defenders streamed out of the trees and took the Death Eater army on the right flank.

The spell volley launched by the French and the thrown axes lobbed by the goblins cut down twenty of the black robes and five of the uniformed men before anyone was even aware that they were under attack. Shouts of surprise rang through the Death Eaters and the next volley of spells slammed into shields. Several of the goblins had closed the distance enough by that point though to leap into the fray directly and Lily saw Snapfist riding a camouflaged man to the ground. The mercenary had an axe embedded in his chest and his mouth was stuck open in shock.

A flash of purple light from near the castle doors caught her attention and Lily caught a brief glimpse of Neville tossing spells out at the attackers. She didn’t have a chance to angle to help him though as the army of Death Eaters finally started to return fire on her troops. Shields sprang to life, blocking most of the barrage. The few curses that made it through splashed somewhat harmlessly on the Armor Robes.

One French Auror started to laugh as he dropped his shield and lobbed a Feedback Stone at the group. “Zis is almost too easy!”
Scowling, Lily barely had enough time to think he shouldn’t have said that before their fortunes turned. A scream of rage wrenched her attention and she could only watch helplessly as Griphook, cackling madly while swinging a sword through the legs of a Death Eater, was struck from behind with a curse that cut his back open to the bone. The goblin dropped to the grass twitching while Lily’s eyes narrowed. She found the one who launched the spell just in time to see a green light streaking towards her from the same man.

Lunging to the side, Lily barely managed to avoid getting felled by the Killing Curse again. Scowling, she locked eyes with the Death Eater and the world seemed to slow. Travers. The man who’d killed Marlene. Screaming in rage, Lily jumped forward and sent spell after spell at the murderer. She ignored the rest of the battle raging around her and focused solely on Travers.

“Woman possessed! I like it!” Travers taunted as she sent a blood-boiling curse at him. “The fiery ones are always fun to play with! Reminds me of my last bitch before they tossed me in the hole. McKey or something.”

Lily roared. “I may not be powerful enough to kill Voldemort and avenge James, but I am sure as bloody hell strong enough to fucking kill you!” Lily pulled one of the Spikers from her side and sent a four-foot long stone hurtling towards him. Travers dodged the spike with little difficulty… unfortunately for him, his move put his head directly in line with the bone-breaker launched from her wand. The shattering sound his skull made sent a grim sense of pleasure through her as blood burst from his crumpled head. Travers fell and Lily turned, hunting for a new target.

The dull gong of the activating wards sounded and Shiva launched to her feet. “They’re attacking! Let’s go everyone, we need to get out there and support the others!” Shouts of what she could only assume were agreement rang out in Bulgarian behind her. Shiva ran launched a spell at the ward anchor nearby shattering the illusion surrounding her small group camped on the side of the lake in their small hollowed out section of the grounds. Jumping up the shallow embankment they’d dug, her troops surged forward into the left flank of the army in front of them.

The Bulgarian Aurors sent multicolored spells streaming towards the Death Eater army felling a large number of the mercenaries with the first volley. As the nearby enemies raised their shields Shiva held up her Yamato Cannon and unleashed hellfire towards them. The rune stone dissolved in her hands, but the roiling ball of destruction cut a swath through the attackers incinerating some and flinging others to the side before it petered out. Shouts of encouragement rang through her troops.

“Shame we can’t use more of those…” Shiva muttered as she moved closer to a group of allies focusing on sharpshooting support rather than entering the fray. It was too dangerous to use too many wide area spells once the battle was joined – the risk of collateral damage was too high. So she and others more suited to support roles would be picking and choosing the best possible time for their hits. Shiva set about casting defensive wards around the snipers as one fell to a piercing spell from the Death Eaters. Flashes of light from the far side signaled the arrival of Lily’s prong of the pincer assault bringing a determined nod from Shiva.

“Stay safe, Lils,” Shiva murmured finishing her first armor layer and shifting to the second.

McGonagall ran to the top of the Astronomy Tower as Neville’s call cut off and the gong echoed through the staircase. Panting she burst through the door at the top to find her trio of Gryffindor Chasers manning the Mortar Circle. “Girls, can you see the Death Eaters?” she asked pushing forward to the side of the Tower facing the entrance gates. A sea of black and tan robes were evident on the lawn rushing forward towards a lone defender standing in front of the castle gates.
Her question grimly answered, McGonagall turned back ready to scold the Chasers for not having already started to support the Housemate only to find Alicia already inside the circle with her hand clutching the guidance stone. “Angie, angle?”

“Five degrees left, ten up.”

“Roger,” Alicia set her stance and her muscles clenched as the runic circle under her feet whined. The air crackled briefly and the circle flashed orange as a small ball of energy shot from the guidance stone and arced over the railing. McGonagall watched it splash into the grouping of enemies advancing on Neville scattering the leading front.

“Left Flank is out of cover and moving to engage. Right Flank close behind,” Katie growled. “Swift to half power.”

“Half power,” Alicia nodded and shifted her right foot back enough to cover a small rune segment behind her.

“Two degrees right, three up,” Angelina said gazing down at the army. Alicia twisted slightly and the runic circle flared again as another ball of magic leapt from the stone.

McGonagall smiled at her lions and raised her wand. “Well you three seem to have this tower in hand. Let’s get a few more allies into the mix shall we?” She twisted her wand into a complex swirl of movement ending it with a raised flourish and a shout that covered most of the grounds, “Piertotum Locomotor!” Grinding sounds rang out from throughout the castle and McGonagall felt her connection to the varied suits of armor and statues establish itself. She nearly laughed as they took a step off of their pedestals and one near the gates got lucky. Rowle happened to be passing it at just the right moment for a swing of the newly animated guardian to remove his head from his body. Shivering with righteous glee at the success of her spellwork, McGonagall yelled, “Hogwarts is under attack! Defend the school! Defend your home!” She turned to see Angelina raising an eyebrow at her and shrugged. “I’ve always wanted to use that spell.”

The comm call in his ear and the gong ringing through the castle walls had Sirius surging to his feet with Amelia and Remus close behind. “Neville’s out there, let’s go!”

“Susan too,” Amelia stated a grim mask of stone settling over her features as Sirius tore the door open and flew out. “She’s not going to leave him behind and I’ll be damned if I lose any more family to this insanity.”

Sirius barely noticed the Floo in his office flaring to life as he turned the corner and ran down the corridor. “We’ll keep her safe, Amy,” Sirius said before falling silent and conserving his air for the run to the grounds. They reached the window on the second floor and swiftly jumped out of it, landing on the cushioned section of ground below. Running around to the front of the castle, Sirius was just in time to see death rain down on the front row of attackers and a second, larger ball of magical energy tear through a section further down the line.

He lined up with Remus and Amelia and sent a quick severing curse into the feet of the Death Eaters jumping over their fallen foes sending them falling to the ground bleeding and screaming. A series of spells flew wild, streaking far over the heads of the army, causing Sirius to twist about trying to find the source. He barely had to turn before finding Neville locked in battle with his cousin and laughing. “Not so little anymore am I Bella!?” Sirius was about to move and cover Neville was he felt a pull an arm wrap around his waist and roughly haul him backwards.

Sirius tumbled to his arse as a sickly green Killing Curse flew above him. “Watch the group not
the bitch!” Marian Davis shouted from behind him. She rolled back and sprang to her feet leaving Sirius blinking in confusion.

“Remy, down!” Narcissa’s shout sent Sirius’ head twisting in confusion again though he managed to catch sight of Remus dropping underneath a second Killing Curse.

“Stop gawking at the reinforcements and get attacking!” Amelia yelled hauling him to his feet. Sirius scowled at himself and nodded. Turning back to the battle he felt his blood freeze. The Death Eater who had been throwing Killing Curses their direction was none other than Peter Pettigrew.

A deep growl shuddered through his chest and throat and he jumped forward leaving everyone but Remus behind. The two men leveled their wands at their former friend and ran. “Peeetttterrrr!” he shouted. Flicking his wand, Sirius sent an entrail-expelling curse towards the silver-armed rat only to see the man shift into his rodent form to avoid it and quickly shift back to human to jump out of the way of Remus’ blood-boiling curse.

“You’re getting rather blood-thirsty old friend!” Peter yelled as he tried to push back enough to be enveloped by the line of Death Eaters behind him.

Sirius roared and pulled out one of the Fishing Line stones Harry had included in the gear set thrusting his hand forward. A shrill shriek of terror was music to his ears and confirmation that he’d latched onto the correct Death Eater. Yanking his arm back, Sirius watched Wormtail fly towards him head first. The man’s wand lifted, but a spell from Remus separated the piece of wood from the traitor’s body – along with a large chunk of his silver hand.

Stretching out his own hand, Sirius dropped the rune stone and caught Peter by the throat holding him close. “This is for the Marauders, you fucker!” Without allowing time for the traitor to shift forms, Sirius thrust his wand into the man’s stomach and sent out the most powerful reducto he could manage. Blood sprayed and coated his robes while Peter’s weight was suddenly vastly reduced. The light left the man’s eyes and Sirius smiled grimly as the ex-Marauder gurgled his last and fell dead at Sirius’ feet.

“For James,” Remus murmured next to him. A firm hand closed on his arm and Sirius looked up. “We have work to do, Padfoot.” Sirius nodded and turned to run to Amelia’s side.

Fred and George ran down the passage to Honeydukes with Luna close on their heels and Coco huffing in exertion next to her. All three had heard the gong signaling the beginning of the Death Eater’s attack and had immediately hurried to the secret tunnel. They were working with the Australians who had asked to be housed in Hogsmeade. They were going to be the ones cornering Voldemort’s forces and preventing them from escaping. Reaching the end and tossing open the door, the three students and one snorkack flew out and ran up the stairs.

“Hey, mates, nice of you to join us. The others are already heading out!” a grinning face called out in greeting and running along beside them. “Some crazy woman showed up a minute ago and said you’d catch up if you knew what was good for you.”

“Tonks’, mother arrived quickly,” Luna said chuckling as they sprinted up the road to the gates.

George nodded. “Agreed. This is a long run…wish I had volunteered for something else…”

Fred snorted and rolled his eyes. “Think if we hadn’t had all that cardio last year during the practices for the Triwizard!”
“Or this year with the DA,” Luna commented.

“Whatever fitness program you got going for you, sheila, keep it up,” the Australian Auror said raising his eyebrows at her. The twins were sweating and huffing around their words, Luna looked like she was out for an afternoon stroll; she was smiling, breathing easily and not even remotely flushed.

Luna just smiled and kept running. They reached the gates just in time to see the defenders slam into the rear of the Death Eaters. About twenty black cloaks fell before they turned and responded. Spells bounced off of the Aurors’ shields and robes with only a few falling to green Killing Curses. Fred grabbed one of the vials off his belt and lobbed it into the main mass ahead. It had disappeared into the Death Eaters for barely a moment before an explosion rocked the grouping and shouts of pain and surprise rang out. The ground under the Death Eaters had just turned into a large swamp catching at least fifteen people in its muddy water. “George!”

“Got it!” his brother yelled tossing his own shimmering blue vial into the air and launching a spell at it. The two collided just over the new swamp with the resulting burst sending a bolt of lightning to the ground. The bolt hit the swamp water and the screams of the Death Eaters sounded for the barest of moments before abruptly cutting off as they fell to the ground twitching.

“Lightning-in-a-Bottle,” George said laughing. “Never was able to make that one safe!”

Andromeda Tonks sidled up beside the new arrivals scowling. “Stop congratulating yourselves and get to fighting. This ends tonight. None escape!” She turned back to the fight and seeing a prime target jumped forward, her mouth curling up into a large grin. “Antonin, long time no see! Perhaps you’d like to answer for the insanity of my sister?”

Dolohov stepped from the line of Death Eaters and cocked his head with a chuckle. “Don’t look at me Blood Traitor, that bitch was always crazier than a Lovegood.”

“True, but you and the brothers gave her direction! We could’ve pointed her towards safer obsessions! I will not let you walk away!”

“Bring it, Tonks.”

Andromeda’s lips parted and her teeth bared in a toothy grin. “You forget…I’m still a Black at heart.” Her wand whipped forward and a bone-breaker curse flew towards Dolohov who only barely managed to skip back a step and levitate a rock in the spell’s path. Fred tried to assist Andromeda but his spell was batted to the side and the Tornado Can he threw after it was batted further down the line in an instant.

Andromeda scowled and shouted, “Get back, boy! He’s mine!”

“Too confident by half, little Black!” Dolohov shouted back. Andromeda leaped over a Cruciatius and sent another bone-breaker at him. As Dolohov levitated another rock laughing, Andromeda smirked and leveled a Spiker rune stone with her other hand. As the debris from Dolohov’s defense fell, his eyes widened at the giant spear leaping towards him. Hurriedly erecting a shield, the spike slammed against it shattering into hundreds of pieces…along with the shield itself. Andromeda’s final spell had already left her wand and the organ-rot curse soared through the gap in defense splashing purple fire across his chest. Dolohov’s eyes widened and his mouth fell open in shock before he keeled over, twitching for several seconds and then ceasing all movement.

“Who wants to tangle with the Black Family next?!?” Andromeda screamed twisting her head in search of a new opponent.
Fred could only gape momentarily before running to catch up with his twin. “Bloody scary that one is. We don’t mess with Tonks from now on, brother.”

“Right you are, Fred,” George replied. His head snapped up and he grinned. “What say you to taking out the Dark Incest Twins?”

Fred glanced in the direction that George indicated and snorted in amusement. It appeared that Amycus and Alecto had escaped Azkaban with Voldemort’s raid and decided to join in on the fun. “I say we should remove them from the board. They give twins a bad name.”

“Aye, that they do.” George hefted one of his few remaining potion vials and tossed it towards the Death Eater siblings. As soon as the bottle smashed on the ground between them letting loose a green gas, both Carrows turned to glare at the Weasleys with wands raised. They tried to cast a curse, but the instead of the incantation only a donkey’s braying issued from their mouths accompanied by a sparking from their wands.

“Careful of what you breath, folks!” Fred shouted as he sent a severing curse into their chests. His spell combined with George’s simultaneously launched one nearly cut the evil siblings in two. Grinning both moved aside to clash with a new Death Eater.

A shout of rage immediately drew their attention to the left before they had gone more than a single step. “Get him, Coco! Tear his throat out! Show them the power of the crumple-horned snorkack!” It seemed all nearby battles stopped at that voice. For his part, Fred could only stare slack-jawed as the diminutive Coco, The Crumple-Horned Snorkack, tore at Mulciber’s throat with her claws and teeth. A spray of blood flew from the man and his body started to fall. The snorkack immediately leaped off the dying man and onto the back of a WSS soldier tearing into the space between his shoulder blades and leading to a scream of pain issuing forth.

Cackling, Luna raised her wand and pointed it at a frozen form of a man staring in shock at the scene. Fred’s eyes narrowed as he saw it was none other than Marcus Flint. That finally broke him from his paralysis and he started to run towards his blonde friend.

“Not so, Loony now am I, Flint! Let’s see how you like being the one getting beaten down!” Luna was suddenly a blur of motion twisting and leaping and sidestepping across the grounds. She dodged every spell sent her way and flung conjured rocks towards those in her chosen path. In a matter of moments, Luna was next to Flint with her wand driving into his chest. The ex-student had enough time to sneer at her before Luna’s reducto tore a large chunk from the middle of his body.

Luna turned to Fred and George with a smile that had dropped all pretense of her default persona. “Come on boys! We have a Kraken to unleash and wrackspurts to exterminate!”

Victor Krum jumped and knocked his girlfriend out of the way of a Killing Curse twisting as they fell to ensure she landed on the side away from the WSS crowd. Growling he rolled and transfiguring a wall of stone to cover their return to their feet. “These Vizarding Nazis are far more efficient than the others.”

“Yeah,” Millicent said glaring at the uniformed men. “But that just means we can feel even more accomplished when we kill them, Vik.”

Viktor shook his head at her. “Millie, I would much prefer a living woman attending my games then a satisfied corpse. You need to watch your left side.”
“Oh I’ll be at your games, big boy. You just focus on clearing us a path through the monsters and back towards Shiva’s group. I’m not the only one bleeding.”

Viktor shrugged. “It is nothing. Scratch. I’ve had worse during practice sessions! Now grab your vand, Millie! Ve charge!” Turning to the crumbling wall, Viktor sent a large radius blasting curse at it sending the debris flying towards their foes. Shouts of surprise and grunts of pain greeted his maneuver and many of the WSS men dropped with their chests oozing streaks of blood. Millicent followed up his assault with a thrown Freezer and a flame whip. The spewing water flashed to steam and scalded Death Eaters and mercenaries dropped to the ground clutching their burned bodies.

Rushing through the gap, Viktor angled towards the island of safety. A flurry of spells at his back had him diving over Shiva’s wards with Millicent half a step behind him. She cried out in pain and fell to floor next to him, most of her left foot mangled beyond repair. Millicent clung to him with one hand even as she leveled her wand and shot off a piercing spell dropping Scabior to the ground with a perfect hole through the center of his skull. “Gotcha fucker…”

“Medic!” was all that Viktor could scream as he hurriedly tried to cast the few healing spells he knew to staunch the blood flow.

“Looks like I’m not dancing anymore,” Millicent muttered.

Viktor scowled and shook his head as a Healer dropped to his side. “You will dance better than Mad-Eye Moody, I assure you of that.”

Millicent gave a weak laugh and the Healer looked up at him shaking her head. “Carry her to the back of the group and have her use her portkey. I can’t heal this here and she needs immediate attention.”

“Da. You did well, Millicent. Now let us help you and I will pay them back tenfold.” She smiled back at him and Viktor felt his heart warm. She would live and she would be fine.

As he levitated her out of sight of the attackers, Viktor couldn’t help an errant thought…oh how the media would die when they learned their Quidditch hero was involved with someone missing part of a limb!

Tracey Davis had long since surpassed rage and settled into a wonderful neutral ground she liked to think of her Angry Place. Others probably called it something elegant like Tranquil Fury, but unlike some of her friends, she wasn’t fancy like that. She also wasn’t prone to Berserker moments like she’d recently learned Neville was. As she had ran out of the secret passage at the heels of Flitwick, Narcissa and her mother she was treated to the rare sight of Neville Longbottom, Former Shrinking Violet Extraordinaire, not only going toe-to-toe with Bellatrix Lestrange…but winning.

Her headlong rush nearly saw her tripping over her own two feet seeing Voldemort’s Number Two placed on the defensive. Bellatrix was forced to block nearly every spell Neville sent her direction and those she ducked were wide enough – and powerful enough – to keep the line of Death Eaters behind her at bay.

“Well, fuck me sideways…” Tracey mumbled as Neville sent a Cruciat.us Curse towards Bellatrix managing to strike her on the leg for an instant before her previously conjured rock smashed into the ground in front of her breaking the beam.

“Miss Snake cannot stand still in this place,” a small tinny voice said beside her and a tiny hand
clutched her free hand pulling her forward. "Miss Snake must keep moving to avoid being a target!"

Her trance snapped, Tracey looked down and raised an eyebrow at the House Elf running along with her. "Dobby, I thought you were attacking with your friends?"

"Dobby is attacking with his friends!" the elf said shaking his head. "House Elves popping the Aurors in around the sides. Dobby and Kreacher takes ours in and come to help our friends now!"

Tracey jerked her head up fast enough to see the ancient Black Family House Elf running full tilt towards Neville and Bellatrix holding a kitchen knife high and with the locket from Regulus Black on bouncing on his chest. Her eyes widened as the elf raised a hand and screamed, "Mistress Bella brings shame on the family! Kreacher will see Bad Mistress’ head in the rubbish bin!"

"You tell her, Kreacher!" Neville shouted. "How’s it feel to be insulted by your Aunt’s own elf eh?!"

"Neville stop insulting her and kill her!" Susan snarled knocking him out of the way of an entrail-expelling curse. "I swear to Merlin, if you don’t kill this bitch I am going to do it for you in a moment!"

"Aww, Widdle Baby Nev-Nev is getting yelled at by a girrrl!" Bellatrix mocked tossing a Killing Curse in their direction only to have it blocked by a thrown plate courtesy of Kreacher.

"That I am! Where’s your husband, Bella? Oh right, he’s sleeping with the Inferi now! What about your other boyfriend, Voldemort? He too much of a little coward to join you at the front?"

"How dare you mock the Dark Lord!" Bellatrix yelled and sent another Killing Curse towards the trio. Neville dodged to the side and a large grin split his face.

"I’ve been practicing something I think you’ll appreciate, Bella," he shouted. Leveling his wand Neville shouted to Kreacher and Susan, "Kreacher, Sue, water after she dies! Fiendfyre!"

Tracey’s mouth dropped open as a flaming bear issued forth from the tip of Neville’s wand. She wasn’t the only one shocked to stillness – it seemed like everyone turned to momentarily stare at Neville’s use of the destructive flame curse. Bellatrix grabbed her chest obviously trying to portkey away only for her eyes to widen in shock as a spasm of pain wracked through her body and her legs fell out from under her. The flame animal bore down on her splitting into a griffin and a badger in addition to the bear. The three animals converged on the Death Eater whose screams rang through the area and abruptly cut off.

Water issued from Susan’s wand and Kreacher’s hands dousing the flames streaming from Neville’s wand. The reduced flame creatures leapt into the line of Death Eaters felling two more before dying out completely.

Snorting in astonishment Tracey turned to the remaining enemies and froze. Her face warped into a scowl and she took a brief moment to force herself deeper into her Angry Place. Lucius Malfoy was directly ahead of her.

Tracey lunged forward, barely noticing the pitched duel to her side as Flitwick took apart Selwyn with a complicated spell chain or her mother screaming in rage at Avery before launching a blasting curse into his skull.

Her headlong rush towards the object her utter hatred was joined by Dobby and Narcissa. “My ex-husband is mine. Miss Davis you can – ”
“That man almost got my soul drained in a teenage Voldemort wannabe and might as well have sizzled a basilisk on my girlfriend and her partner! He is **MINE**!”

“Dobby will assist in killing Bad Old Master!”

Narcissa cast a glance at the other two and gave a short nod. “Very well, we do it together.” Casting her gaze towards Malfoy, Narcissa shouted, “Lucius, dear, have you learned yet the difference between tradition and bigotry?” He whipped his head around, the blonde hair flying across his face not quite masking the shocked expression. “I suppose it doesn’t matter because Hell doesn’t particularly care about semantics!”

Tracey watched as Narcissa sent a flame whip streaming towards her ex-husband. Lucius parried with a shield and sneered at them. “A woman, a girl and an elf? You seriously think you can defeat *me*?!”

“Yes,” Tracey responded narrowing her eyes. She punched her wand forward sending a Killing Curse towards the man who had nearly destroyed her life before she’d even had a chance to truly start it. Lucius’ eyes widened as her spell streaked towards him. He tried to leap to the side yet a quick conjuration by Dobby had him smacking into a wall of stone and falling back directly into the path of Tracey’s spell. The green beam struck Malfoy over the chest and he dropped bonelessly to the ground.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” Tracey muttered lowering her wand slightly.

“Didn’t think you had it in you, Davis. Well done,” Narcissa nodded to her. “Our work isn’t over yet.”

“No, it isn’t.” Tracey turned and hurried forward looking for a new target to introduce to her Angry Place.

Gabrielle was not supposed to be here. She had been told to stay home. She had been told to ‘stay safe’. She had been told she was ‘too young’.

Like *that* was going to happen!

Her sister had been fighting this sadistic bigots for months. Her ex-crush-almost-big-brother had been fighting them for *years*. Her mother and father were fighting in the battle today. Her recent best friend, Tori, was fighting. Gabi would be *damned* if she was going to stay snuggled up at *home*!

So she’d snuck away from the elves, grabbed a broom and flew to the United Kingdom. Once she got over the border it had been easy to summon the Knight Bus and catch a ride to Hogwarts. She’d gotten lucky with the timing. She’d barely had a chance to grab a bite to eat from the kitchens and push down her remaining nausea from the Bus before the castle started going crazy. A dull gong reverberated through the walls and the sounds of running footsteps pounded outside the hidden door. Many of the elves dropped what they were doing and rallied around one particularly ancient fellow who started issuing soft orders.

Gabrielle wolfed down the last bite of her meal and hurried over to the elves arriving as several started to pop away. “Wait! Take me wiz you! I am ‘ere to ‘elp!”

The old elf turned to her and sized her up for a long moment. “You are not properly outfitted to assist in the castle’s defense. Kilik can take you tos the ramparts to help those in the bombing locations.”
“No,” Gabrielle said vehemently shaking her head. “My entire family is running outside zis moment. I will not let zem fight alone. I am powerful and I am quick and I am Veela. I am better use outside zen in ‘ere!” She paused long enough to reach into her little bag and whipped out one of Harry’s cloaks and belts brandishing them to the elf triumphantly before hurriedly clipping both on. “And I come prepared.”

Kilik chuckled quietly and nodded. “That you do Miss Fire. Allow Kilik to finish with sending off the others and I will take you to the French Aurors.”

“Zank you,” Gabrielle said bowing slightly and moving back to let the old elf work. She took the time to slip into the basilisk armor that Harry had gotten made for her a few weeks back. Once the suit was in place, she shifted forms just enough for her wings to poke out of the back of. With a slight frown, Gabrielle pulled at the edges of the armor in a slight realignment letting her wings slip out without any rubbing or chaffing. It was perfect. She sighed and allowed herself a brief moment of fantasy about what could have been had Fleur not been interested in Harry. Gabrielle would’ve had him all to herself and – shaking her head, Gabrielle scowled. Harry was not hers and she would let that distract her. Not when it could mean the difference between life and death.

“Is Miss Fire ready?” Kilik asked hobbling up to her.

“I am. Will you be safe popping into battle?” Gabrielle asked.

The elf smiled at her and nodded. “Kilik is old, but Kilik is not weak. I will be fine Mistress.” He took her hand and with a brief apparition, both appeared on the edge of the group of Frenchmen and goblins. Gabrielle took a moment to orient herself and narrowed her eyes as she saw one of the nearby Auror’s robes disintegrate as a Cruciatatus Curse flashed through it and sent the woman sprawling to the ground. Gabrielle scowled and let go of Kilik’s hand leaping forward. Her wand slashed down and a flame whip sprung to life cutting down several of the camouflaged men as well as one of the black cloaks.

Two severing curses sprang towards her and Gabrielle twisted avoiding both though she couldn’t quite pull out of the way of a third. That one splashed across her armor leaving a small scorch mark but not even tickling her skin. Sneering at the man, Gabrielle sent a blasting curse towards him the spell punching through the weak shield and throwing the man back into the crowd of people behind him.

“Vampires! Zere are vampires!” a panicked shout rang out from her right. Gabrielle turned in time to see twenty of the demi-humans swarming her compatriots. Shrieking the young Veela Changed and as soon as her wings sprouted, she took to the air. She angled up enough to avoid an errant spell from a Death Eater and flicked her wand into its holster using both hands to form balls of passionfyre and lob them at the vampires. The fire incinerated three of them before the group scattered enough that she’d have to aim individually.

Peering down with narrowed, telescopic vision Gabrielle quickly picked out the two leaders of the vampire’s charge. A dark skinned woman with shoulder length hair and a male a few paces away from her. The man had a huge, toothy grin on his face as he twisted from one target to another sometimes using his claws and sometimes swinging a large broadsword. Goblins and Aurors fell back from his berserker fighting yet a few still fell before him, their cloaks blunting, but not preventing, injuries. The woman was more clinical, she took the time to pick her targets – always young women – and ensured that each fell in a spray of blood.

“Papa!” Gabrielle yelled wheeling around in fear as she caught sight of her father in the path of the male vampire’s blade. She hurried to form a fireball, but knew she’d be too late to save him.
“Not my ‘usband you bastard!” a shout rang out carrying over the field. A ball of liquid fire smashing into the large vampire an instant before the sword hit her father bringing a brief dying scream from the unfortunate creature of the night. Gabrielle cheered for her mother as Apolline moved forward from the ranks raining deadly fireballs at all nearby vampires with each step.

Seeing the dark skinned vampire female turn to her mother with a predatory grin, Gabrielle’s eyes narrowed again. “You will not ‘ave zem,” she muttered with a scowl. Forming two fireballs, she launched one into the path of the vampire expecting the woman to dodge backwards as she had done a few moments before with one of Apolline’s.

The vampire noticed the passionfyre at the last moment and dodged. She laughed and yelled, “You’ll have to do better than that to hit Gyokuro Shuzen!” Gabrielle merely smiled and raised her eyebrows as the vampire queen finally looked up only to see the second ball of fire a bare inch away from her face. She shrieked in disbelief and terror as Gabrielle’s passionfyre coated her face quickly burning the woman to a crisp.

It was short work from there to finish off the remaining vampires and the defenders’ forward momentum quickly resumed. As spells started to streak towards her again, Gabrielle dropped to the ground and curled her wings back in leaving her claws extended and her face partially morphed. The red-head she landed next to glanced towards her for a moment and started to laugh before turning back to the Death Eaters. “Welcome to the fight, Gabrielle. We never met, I’m Harry’s mother. If you’re parents haven’t seen you by the end of this I’m totally going to hold this over you as leverage one day.”

“Zat is fair,” Gabrielle said grinning. “Shall we push forward?”

Su was at the forefront of the second wave of reinforcements streaming from the castle. These ones mostly included werewolves and Hogwarts students along with some British Aurors. As soon as the younger years had been evacuated and the Death Eaters had been halted far enough back, the professors threw open the doors to the Entrance Hall and Su ran out the door, leading the others. Her blood was raging and her vision was red. She should’ve gone with the first group of defenders, but she’d let Lupin and Katie convince her to stay behind. They’d said she stood a high chance of losing her wits once the fighting started and that the wolf would come to the fore leading her into situations she wouldn’t be able to get out of. They’d said that she would be better off waiting with the second set of people as she’d have more allies around to back her up.

They didn’t understand.

Even Katie, despite embracing the wolf unlike Lupin, didn’t quite get it. Su loved the anger and rage that came from her partial curse. It fed into her natural inclination towards violence and the increased stamina let her both cast more spells faster and get up close and personal with her daggers. Su didn’t need to fear the anger…she needed to feed it.

And feed it she had. She’d taken the time to stoke the fire inside and bring up as much of the werewolf as she had within her. Pepper-Ups were for pansies. This was where it was at.

As she charged outside, she noted with mild surprise that Lavender, Parvati and Colin were keeping pace with her. Nodding towards them, she sighted onto a primary target and yelled out pointing towards her chosen victim. The foursome subtly changed direction heading towards the hulking giant of a man in a pristine military uniform. With all the death and destruction he was doling out, the man had to be using a spell to keep his clothes clean. A spell that wouldn’t play nicely with her blades. Cleaning spells never did like her daggers.
The man grabbed two of the people near him and smashed them together, both falling limp at his feet before he turned to the charging students. Chuckling he raised his eyebrows and readied his wand. “Come to play at war children? You have chosen poorly. I am General Schulz, last of Grindelwald’s devouts and captain of the WSS. You have one chance to turn away before I destroy you.”

Su sneered, but it was Lavender who shouted back first. “I am not just a pretty face you git! You attacked the wrong school! Parv!” She slashed her wand low and a bone-shattering spell flew out towards the Schulz while Parvati sent a bludgeoning spell high. Parvati’s impacted on his shield while he batted aside Lavender’s spell with his wand.

“Not bad little one! Shame you’re on the wrong side!” Schulz retaliated with a volley of spells and the students scattered. Su continued on the straight path dodging everything sent her way as she closed the distance. Lavender and Parvati jumped to either side and continued running forward. Colin stuck just to Su’s right, he jumped over a bright purple flame and lunged left sending a quick blasting spell towards the General followed by three piercing spells and a thrown Freezer. Su used the distraction to activate a Ninja rune and increase her speed even further.

Schulz managed to deflect and block all three of Colin’s spells though his left foot was caught in the ice released by the rune stone. With a scowl of outrage, the WSS man slashed down to free his foot. His first spell didn’t cut deep enough and he was forced to shift his attention back to the fight as the two Gryffindors sent another series of spells at him.

Su grinned with triumph as she finally closed the distance enough to make her move. She leapt, pulling her daggers and slammed both into Schulz’s chest. The Ninja flickered and dispelled leaving the last remnant of Grindelwald’s forces to stare in shocked amazement at the lithe teenager who had finally managed to best him. “The inferior subhumans send their regards. Burn in hell, arse!” Su growled and twisted her blades.

A gurgle was his only reply as his body crumpled beneath her. Su leaped off and turned to the others. “Next victim?” she asked. Colin just raised his hand to the left and pointed. She grinned and took off running falling in behind Lavender and Parvati.

Harry hovered over the battlefield on his Firebolt with Tonks on her own broom next to him to the right and Fleur beating her wings on the left. All three were using linked Ninjas in order to maintain sight of each other while remaining invisible to the main combatants below. He had his father’s cloak wrapped around his waist just in case he needed to drop the runic invisibility in order to cast spells. He’d also grabbed the wand he’d taken from Dumbledore in the hospital wing just to be safe. While Harry may prefer runes, one could never be too careful and two wands was better than one.

“My insane aunt is going straight for Neville…dammit I need to get down there to help,” Tonks murmured beside him.

Harry shook his head and reached over to lay a hand on her arm. “Nym, we need you up here. Neville can take care of himself and he has backup already en route. He’ll be fine and Bellatrix won’t make it through. You can’t take this from him. It’s as personally to Nev as Riddle is to me.”

Tonks frowned and hovered in place for a long moment before nodded slowly. “Okay. Okay, I’ll stay. Someone has to watch your arses.”

“I can’t believe he hasn’t shown himself yet,” Fleur said. Her eyes constantly roved over the Death
Eater forces searching in vain for their target. “I sought he would be at ze front…”

“Too dangerous up there,” Harry sighed. “He knows I know he’s coming and that we probably got something set up in advance.” He watched as a large swathe of Death Eaters were mown down by more fire from the Mortar Circles around the castle embankments. “Thank Merlin he severely underestimated us.”

The trio fell in silence as the battle continued below them. All their hands flexed towards their wands while Harry had to constantly fight the itch of his tattoos as his magic surged with each scream of pain from their side. The minutes ticked by and he started to sweat beneath his armor.

“What if he didn’t come? What if this was all for nothing? What is if this was just a feint?”

Tonks snorted and shook her head. “No way. You don’t commit this size of a force to a feint. He’s here. He’s just letting them soften us up for him. He still thinks he’s invincible remember.”

“Ze acromantulas have arrived,” Fleur murmured gesturing to the forest as a horde of spiders as large as cars came skittering out of the woods. Harry couldn’t help the shudder that ran down his spine at seeing those creatures. He silently thanked whatever god was watching for not having personally run into any of those outside of the Triwizard Tournament. He’d almost rather face Voldemort than be surrounding by the chattering horde of nightmares.

Suddenly a sheet of black and brown launched at high speed from the tree line two hundred yards down. The rain of arrows could very well have blacked out the sky below them, there were so many. “And there go the centaurs,” Tonks said with a smirk. “Remind me never to piss those guys off.”

The majority of the acromantulas died screeching under the first volley. The second killed off the slower spiders while the fireballs launched from the Auror contingent hiding in the woods nearby finished off the rest. A few lucky survivors turned spinneret and skittered back into the forest.

“That was almost anticlimactic,” Tonks murmured.

Harry shrugged and turned his eyes back to the Death Eaters. “That was preparation. They may have numbers, but so do we. Know where they’re coming from and with a bit of warning, a trap can be just as easily turned into an ambush.”

Tonks turned to Fleur and raised her eyebrows. “Look at our little general. He does know we’ve been watching this whole thing right next to him yeah?”

“He is busy. It may have slipped his notice,” Fleur said. She sighed and shook her head. “All joking aside, I am beginning to question the wisdom of zis. Perhaps ze little man truly did turn tail...”

“Giants, on the right,” Harry said glaring off to the side of the lake. “Damn…Shiva’s wards aren’t going to hold against those…we need to – what the bloody freaking hell!”

A loud roar echoed across the battlefield and nearly everything stopped moving. Harry’s trio was rocked with the slipstream of a massive form streaking past them at high speed forcing Fleur to briefly grab onto his broom before she got the wind under her wings again. Harry caught a brief glimpse of short-cropped, flaming red hair and a cackle of glee as the shape flew by. “Go get them, Norberta! Dinner is served! Roasted giants coming right up!”

Harry could only stare slack-jawed at the gigantic form of Norberta the Norwegian Ridgeback, formerly known as Norbert Hagrid’s Pet Dragon. The black scaled monster was being ridden by
an ecstatic man waving one arm in the air like he was on some American western riding his horse into a gunfight. “I don’t believe it…Mum actually got a bloody dragon…”

“Looks like Charlie is having a grand time,” Tonks said tracking the dragon’s path and shaking her head with wide eyes. “Aligning with your family has been the smartest thing I have ever done bar nothing…Wonder Boy even has bloody dragons following in his wake…”

Norberta roared again and let loose with a large ribbon of flame that streaked out engulfing the lumbering giants whole. Harry could smell the burnt flesh from his perch and he had to blink his eyes in astonishment as Norberta cut off her attack and swooped around to pick off the two remaining giants she’d missed on the first pass.

As her flame issued forth a cry of utter rage and hatred cut through the silent battlefield. Immediately, a large, green spell lanced out streaking up towards the dragon. The Killing Curse abruptly cut off the gout of flame though Norberta seemed otherwise unaffected despite shaking her head swiftly from side to side. A red beam lanced towards the dragon next and while this one still didn’t kill the beast she was obviously affected as a roar of pain was unleashed. Charlie shouted something and Norberta swung wide arcing back out over Hogsmeade.

Harry scowled and turned his gaze to where the spells had come from. His eyes finally locked on his prey as Voldemort lowered his wand and shouted something to the men around him. “He’s here!”

“So is Nagini!” Fleur shouted, her talons extending and her voice growing garbled. “I ‘ave ze snake!”

“Barty’s riding Number Two in place of Aunt Bella. I got him,” Tonks yelled. “Harry, don’t be a hero or you will have at least six very angry witches attempting to resurrect you before the night is over!”

Harry nodded and set his mouth into a thin line. He turned his Firebolt towards the ground and streaked towards Voldemort while Fleur screeched and wrapped her wings in, diving to the rainbow aura surrounding the airborne serpent next to the murderer. To his other side Tonks was arcing down as well, matching the other two in speed and intent. All three picked their targets and launched a volley of spells, fire and explosions immediately prior to hitting the ground.

In the haze of the debris, Harry leapt off his broom, hurriedly tucking it into his robe pocket and sending a full power knockback blast from his tattoo towards Voldemort’s position followed immediately by a large spike and a Feedback Stone. An angry scream sounded from the cloud of dust and dirt and a shockwave swept all of the airborne particles shooting outwards. Harry ducked and raised a shield feeling the impact of several larger pieces of stone. As the field cleared, he saw Voldemort standing tall in the center of the carnage with a trickle of blood dripping from the side of his head. Harry had just enough time to see Fleur raining fireball after fireball on the rapidly flashing flying prison ball that Voldemort’s familiar was ensconced in to the left and Tonks sending a hail of multicolored spells towards Barty Crouch Jr. to his right.

In front of him Voldemort’s eyes narrowed and he raised his wand bowing his head ever so slightly to Harry. “Congratulations, boy. You have accomplished what no one else has in decades. You have wounded me.”

“Yeah, well, I think I’ve done that more times than I can count now. Or have you forgotten recent history, Tom?” Harry quipped rising back to his feet and fingerling his wand.

“You should have killed me while you had the chance, Harry Potter. You won’t get a second
opportunity now…” Voldemort hissed.

Harry smirked forcing down the shiver of fear and refusing to let it show to his nemesis. “And make you a wraith again? Not going to happen, Tom. In case you missed it, my friends and I have been busy. And our work is almost done.”

Voldemort’s eyes widened as he glanced to Nagini in time to see the cage flare again. Fleur was stripping away his protections at a ridiculous pace. Harry had to remember to recommend she join Bill as a curse-breaker full time if they all survived this. Voldemort’s finger briefly flew to his left hand and caressed a large ring centered on it. Harry grinned and drew the monster’s attention back to him. “Nice ring you have there, Tom. Care to let me take a look or do I have to cut it off of you?”

The move succeeded and Voldemort’s lips curled in rage baring his teeth at Harry. He raised his wand and let loose a volley of spells that Harry had never even heard of let alone seen before.

Thankfully one does not intentionally goad a villain without having a valid plan. Harry jumped backward twisting into Midnight midair and leaping into a shadow of a particularly large chunk of rock. The ice pressed in on him for only a brief moment before he was through and clawing up Voldemort’s back. He jumped again as the man turned with a whip of flame streaming from the tip of his wand. Another short hop through the shadows had him emerging from another boulder next on Voldemort’s flank. This time, Harry changed back as soon as he was clear and summoned the Sword of Gryffindor.

As his momentum swept him towards Voldemort, the man’s eyes widened and he tried to dodge back throwing a hand up in front of his face. Harry’s mouth set in a thin line and he swung the sword hoping his play would work. In a rare turn of fortunes, a plan made by Harry Potter did not fall apart upon execution for once – the Sword swept an arc through the arc and managed to nick half the ring as well as Voldemort’s finger.

Twin screams of pain immediately issued forth dampening sound in the immediate area. One lingered and a black wisp dissipated in the air above the ring with the remaining pieces falling into Harry’s hand as his jump completed and landed him on the other side of Voldemort. The second scream however almost immediately cut off and Voldemort turned to Harry with eyes blazing red.

“Shite. I was really hoping the sword did eat souls…” Harry muttered as he changed his stance and slipped the remainder of the ring into his pocket.

Voldemort uttered a short laugh and shook his head. “Harry, Harry, Harry…it does.” He roughly pulled back his sleeve and exposed a copy of the Dementor Anchor tattooed onto his flesh right beneath the Dark Mark. “I did not come unprepared for you. I chose you as a baby for a reason, Harry Potter. You have proven yourself formidable. You may have destroyed my anchors, but I will be the one standing when this day is through. And with this lovely little mark coupled with intricate study of your doppelganger’s antics I have no doubt I will achieve an even stronger, more complete version of immortality. This setback is nothing to the magical god I will become!”

“You’re insane!” Harry whispered, his jaw falling open slightly at Voldemort’s rant.

Voldemort merely laughed and lifted his wand issuing forth a bright light that split into several glowing balls and hung over head blanked out the surrounding shadows enough to ensure Harry’s options as Midnight had effectively been neutered. “Let us see you leap around now, Potter. Shall we duel again?”

Harry spared a brief glance to each side. Fleur had removed all but one of the shimmering
protections around Nagini. Tonks had backed Barty into a corner next to a ditch, the actor having managed to hold his own so far, but Harry watched as her severing spell left him far more easily able to complete his Mad-Eye Moody impersonation. The surrounding Death Eaters on all sides had been forced to turn and confront the lines of Hogwarts defenders that closed ranks and pressed in on the center.

Unfortunately, none of his allies were close enough to assist Harry in this fight. He swept his eyes back to Voldemort who had raised his wand again with a sadistic smile plastered on his face. Harry’s gaze widened in horror as he realized that the murderer wasn’t pointing at him but at Fleur.

“NO!” Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Harry’s hand slammed into his utility belt and wrenched off a rune stone flooding it with magic as Voldemort uttered the words he feared most.

“Avada…” The magic in the stone snapped into the proper channels and flowed out. Harry tossed the carved piece into the space between him and Voldemort as it lit a pure white. “Kedavra!” The tip of Voldemort’s wand glowed green and the beam speared out. The white light from the rune stone burst into a cage of energy spreading out wide enough to encompass an area approximately ten yards under its bubble. The Killing Curse slammed into the dome of white a split second after it stabilized and an unholy screech of power burst forth. The curse arced up and as it collided with the top of the dome another screech of roiling magic sounded. The curse deviated down this time and crashed into the ground a few feet from a staring Voldemort. Both times the curse had touched the dome of light it had visibly faded and the wall flashed bright, growing more solid.

An instant later, Harry heard the protections around Nagini shattering and the dying scream of the snake as it went up in a pillar of fire. A muffled curse sounded from Barty as Tonks finished off her work and twin shouts of denial echoed from his partners as they turned to see him encased within a Fortress of Solitude.

Voldemort cast a critical gaze between the wall of semi-solid light and the smaller dome of light encasing the rune stone before turning back to Harry. “The source is similarly protected.”

“It is.”

“Password locked I assume.”

Harry nodded. “Of course. Even if I die in here, Tom, you will too. It may take you days – or weeks depending on what modifications you made to your body – to succumb, but even you need to drink. One way or another, you end here.”

Voldemort’s eyes narrowed to slits and his lips curled. “I can simply pry the key from your mind before I slaughter you, Potter.”

“The last time you tried to mind rape me you were sent pinwheeling out of my head. And that was when I was handicapped by a backdoor. This time I don’t have that problem,” Harry said standing tall. “I’ve already won, Tom. Your army is destroyed, your allies dead, your followers decimated, your Horcruxes gone and you are trapped. Accept the loss with dignity, Lord Voldemort. It’s over.”

“It will NEVER BE OVER! I AM IMMORTAL!” Voldemort shouted. His wand flashed out and Harry had to leap to the side to avoid the purple flame sent his way. It splashed against the shield wall and strengthened the magical protections feeding the vampire circuit built into the stone. Harry mused briefly on how something he’d idly discussed with Shiva during their very first meeting was now something that factored into his final battle with murderer obsessed with
destroying everything he’d ever cared about.

Voldemort sent another flurry of spells flying towards Harry and he flung out a hand directing a knockback blast towards him from his tattoo as he dodged again raising a wall of stone behind him to shield against some of the spells. Voldemort barely even reacted to Harry’s attack and simply launched more curses at him.

Harry raised another wall and jumped to the side again this time raising a Chain Reactor Beam from his belt and channeling the blast of devastation towards his enemy. Voldemort’s oncoming spells were engulfed by the beam, but the man himself sneered and twisted out of the path of magic letting it splash into the dome and intensify the magic holding them captive. Harry felt a slight twitch of his lips before he clamped down on that and jumped again raising more blocking walls as he ran. He skidded to a halt, blocking several of Voldemort’s oncoming spells and dodging backwards, raising more of the ground in front of him.

“McGonagall better give me an O for all this Transfiguration if I live to see tomorrow,” Harry panted as he ran to the side and slammed his arms together. A burst of lava seared his arms as the Lava Bomb forced Voldemort to dodge to the side. Harry tracked his foe for a moment before the pain grew too intense and he had to wrench his arms back apart. Quickly running again he raised more walls as he twisted into a new location and activated his Silver Spirit sending the spectral entity streaking towards Voldemort. The man let loose a controlled blast of Fiendfyre as he dodged to the side and Harry immediately cut the Spirit before it could be engulfed. He didn’t need a repeat of the last time it had died.

Voldemort wasn’t quite as fast with ceasing his spell and as the hellfire made contact with the white dome the entirety of it began to be sucked in. Voldemort fell to his knees before managing to cut off the spell. Scowling, the Dark Lord issued forth a Cruciatu at Harry. He tried to dodge backwards but tripped and fell on a loose stone. Knowing if he was hit with the curse there was a chance it would punch through his armor and leave him vulnerable, Harry brought his hand up and caught the spell on his War Gauntlet.

Pain more intense than anything previous arced through him as the power of the spell was channeled along his arm, around his back and out through his other palm. The torture curse lanced out from his right hand and back towards Voldemort who was forced to dive out of the way. Harry raised more walls around him and took a brief moment to force down the pain that threatened to send him into unconsciousness. He wouldn’t be able to use those gauntlets again. They’d likely have disintegrated anyway judging from the way the magical radiation backlash had seared into his skin under the armor.

Stumbling to his feet Harry tried to run out and sight on Voldemort. Unfortunately the damage from his use of the incomplete Gauntlets proved to be more than he had anticipated. Stumbling, Harry fell to the ground in the open as Voldemort stood smiling down at him. Harry activated the Boomstone and felt the vibrations of the amplified sound rattling his teeth and bones. Voldemort flinched back and raised his wand to his ears as Harry hurriedly raised his final set of walls behind him and finished off his transfiguration on the ground below him etching a small circular divot into the ground.

Harry released the Boomstone and crawled back slightly while Voldemort walked over to stand above him. “Would you like to ‘accept your loss with dignity’, Harry Potter? You have fought well. Far better than I would have ever expected from one so young. But you could never have surpassed me. I have decades of experience on you, hundreds more spells in my repertoire, a complete lack of conscious to hold me back...what do you have?”
Harry let out a weak laugh his injuries and fatigue showing. “I know I could never beat you one on one Voldemort. Not with spells. You’re right. How is a teenager who hasn’t even finished school supposed to win that fight?” Harry grinned as his hand slipped into the hole he’d transfigured next to the Fortress stone. “The answer, Tom Marvolo Riddle, is with misdirection. Family first!” he shouted slamming his hand into the point at the center of the hole hard enough to draw blood.

Several things happened simultaneously at that point. The first was that the dome of light contracted back into the rune stone as the password was given. The second was that Voldemort’s eyes widened in sudden fear that he had missed some critical element. The third was that all of the surrounding transfigured walls that Harry had constructed lit up with a golden glow circling inwards from the edges. The light immediately spilled into the central hole Harry’s hand was wedged in, a hole exactly in the center of his newly formed transfigured runic pattern etched from the very ground around him.

The buildup took less than a second. The magical energy from the ley line underneath Hogwarts channeled through the Livewire runic circle and arced through Harry. His right hand came up and the roiling power spewed forth. Voldemort had just enough time to raise his wand and cast the most powerful set of shields he knew as Harry glowed from within and the line of raw magic blazed towards the Dark Lord. The energy beam quickly sheared through all of the protection that Voldemort had managed to erect and hit him full on. The power sent him soaring backwards and smashing to the ground before continuing on scorching the side of the mountain several dozen miles in the distance.

With a primal roar, Harry pulled his hand free of the channeling segment and the Livewire fell silent. Panting Harry flopped back to the ground amazed that the energy inherent in the system had actually managed to channel correctly and not burn him to crisp from the inside out. With a groan he rolled over and lifted his head enough to see Voldemort meekly clawing for his charred wand three feet from his hands. It was pointless since the man’s lower body had been twisted beyond recognition and only his right hand and eyes seemed to be working at all.

“How…are you…still…alive?” Harry panted.

“Because cockroaches always manage to survive until you have them directly under your heel,” a cold voice came from the surrounding crowd of onlookers followed immediately by a second voice saying. “And yet when it comes down to a cockroach versus a man…the man wins every time.” Harry blinked up and let his head fall back to the ground tracking the two voices with his eyes alone. Those icy tones probably sent shivers of fear through many in the crowd, but to him it resulted in a far different type of shiver. Daphne Greengrass stepped forward from the crowd with Hermione in lock-step with her.

Both girls looked disheveled, Daphne’s normally bound hair was loose and plastered to her face and back by an assortment of blood and dirt. Her armor was scorched in multiple places and one of her ears was bleeding. Hermione had a large amount of her hair singed off all-together along with a missing pinky on her left hand and she had managed to lose a boot somewhere. Together they strode forward to stand beside the prone Harry, Daphne on his right and Hermione on his left.

“My Right and Left Hands,” Harry murmured trying and failing to stifle the urge to laugh at the absurdity of his joking titles for the two girls playing into the conclusion of this drama and the final note of the prophecy.

“Mione?” Daphne asked never removing her gaze from Voldemort’s increasingly frantic scrabbling.

“Ready when you are, Daph,” Hermione responded leveling her wand at the creature that had
haunted their nightmares for so long.

“Goodbye, Tom Marvolo Riddle, do try not to come back this time,” Daphne said. “REDUCTO!” she and Hermione both shouted. The twin spells lashed forth and Voldemort’s body was reduced to nothing more than ashes.

Chapter End Notes

DEATH EATERS AND THEIR ALLIES TALLY:
- Acromantulas: centaurs and Aurors
- Alecto and Amycus Carrow: Fred and George
- Avery: Marian Davis
- Barty Crouch Jr.: Tonks
- Bella: Neville, Kreacher and Susan
- Crabbe: Previously killed in Azkaban Breakout
- DEs Rank and File: House Elves, Goblins and Aurors
- Dolohov: Andromeda
- Elmont: Sébastien and Apolline
- Flint: Luna
- General Schulz: Su, Lavender, Parvati and Colin
- Giants: Norberta ridden by Charlie
- Goyle: Previously killed by Fleur at the World Cup
- Gyokuro ShuZen: Gabrielle
- Lestrange Brothers: Previously killed by Inferi in The Cave
- Macnair: Previously killed by Remus in the Avery Manor Infiltration
- Malfoy: Tracey and Dobby
- Mercenaries: Australians and Bulgarians
- Mulciber: Coco
- Nagini: Fleur
- Nott: Previously killed by Harry in the Graveyard
- Peter Pettigrew: Sirius and Remus
- Rookwood: Previously killed by Shacklebolt in his Final Stand
- Rowle: McGonagall
- Scabior: Krum and Millicent
- Selwyn: Filius
- Travers: Lily
- Umbridge: Previously killed by Shiva during the Final Task
- Yaxley: Previously killed by Remus in the Avery Manor Infiltration
Chapter 48: Closure

“So now that the Dark Lord is simply another name in the history books can I assume we will be seeing far less of each other, Mr. Potter?” Madame Pomfrey asked raising her eyebrows with her hands on her hips.

Harry rolled his eyes as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. “You realize I don’t ever intend to get hurt so often right?”

“All the same, I believe you’ve been my patient far too often young man. Hopefully this latest brush with death has been enough to sate you through the last two years.”

“Barring Quidditch mishaps, sure,” Harry said chuckling letting his eyes roam briefly over the plaque above the bed with his name on it. “I think I’ve hit my limit on almost dying for this lifetime. Besides, if it happens again my partners will probably end up making me wish I died.” He paused and hefted the cream from the table as he stood. “Will this actually help with the scars or is it just to make me feel better?”

Pomfrey sighed and shook her head. “It should lessen them…slightly. I am sorry, Mr. Potter, unfortunately that is the best I can do. At least…at least you didn’t take a Killing Curse on those gauntlets of yours. If I may be so bold, don’t try to make those again.”

Harry grimaced and nodded. “Yeah. I don’t think I can get them to work any better than that and it’s not really worth the damage they can do. Thanks for the help, Madame Pomfrey. And for keeping the reporters away.”

“Me? Ha, I didn’t do that, you can thank Miss Granger and Miss Greengrass for that.” Pomfrey winked at him. “Apparently they drew quite a lot of attention for dealing the final blow.”

“Good for them. With any luck people will forget I was even involved and I can just stay quietly anonymous,” Harry muttered.

Pomfrey laughed so hard at that comment she had to clutch her sides before wiping away the tears leaking from her eyes. “Anonymous he says! Anonymous! Potter, I should keep you here for another few hours simply because you’re delusional!”

“No thanks! I’m good! Bye, Madame Pomfrey!” Harry yelled quickly hurrying away from the still laughing witch before she could make good on her threat. His pace slowed as he made his way down towards Shiva’s room and he took a moment to recenter himself before reaching out and quietly knocking.

“Door’s open!” his mentor’s voice shouted from within.

“Everyone decent?” Harry yelled back with a grin.

He could practically hear the eye roll in Shiva’s reply. “No, kid, Lily is lying on the couch starkers and I’m dancing around in just my knickers. Open the bloody door!”

Chuckling Harry complied and walked in waving hello to his very much clothed red-headed mother sitting on the couch. Shiva was sitting on the armchair sipping her tea and looking with amusement at the pile of papers surrounding Lily. “Hey, mum, mum. Grading papers? I thought
exams were cancelled?"

“Only for you, Harry,” Lily said marking an ‘O’ onto the parchment in front of her before shifting to a bound notebook underneath. “Well, you and the ones actively involved in the defense of the castle. The rest of the school had to turn in their finals after all. Oh and it’s less ‘cancelled’ and more ‘postponed’. O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. periods will be rescheduled for the second week of June, give people time to ‘rest and recover’.”

Shiva snorted into her tea. “Bunch of bollocks if you ask me, but at least they’re not really cutting into the meat of summer. Are you ever going to let that incident go by the way?”

“Not likely,” Harry replied with a grin and plopping down into his chair. “I’m really glad you’re both okay…”

“Us too, honey,” Lily said looking up and smiling at him with a grin that seemed to light up the room. “Though I did lose some hair with some of the fire that your French friend was tossing around.”

“Who, Apolline? I thought she had better aim than that.”

“Sure. Let’s go with that,” Lily replied, her chuckling eliciting a raising set of eyebrows from both other occupants in the room. Lily just shrugged and zipped a finger across her lips turning back to her papers.

Shiva shook her head and shared a look with Harry. “I swear, you got your mischievousness as much from her as your father. In all seriousness though, kid, without that basilisk armor and those robes there probably would’ve been a ton more casualties.”

Harry grimaced. “I wish we could’ve afforded to lay traps or just hit them with Yamatos all at once then there wouldn’t have been any casualties.”

“True,” Shiva shrugged. “But then we wouldn’t have been able to get Nagini or the ring before wiping out Voldemort. Better that a few die now than thousands if he got away to try again…with a better idea of what we were capable of too.”

Harry sighed and nodded. “What was the final count? Pomfrey wouldn’t tell me.”

“The French lost about 15 total with over half falling to that Vampire Queen. The goblins lost six. We only knew Griphook, though Snapfist is going to have to get used to one hand now – from what I hear, he’s pretty happy with the battle scar and is displaying it to everyone who’ll listen to his story.” Shiva frowned at that before draining her cup. “Never understood goblins…Anyway, the Bulgarians lost four. A lot of them fell back into the field I set up once they got injured so they’re the group hurt the most but with some of the least deaths. Millie sends her regards by the way and says she’s probably still better than you at dancing.”

Harry laughed and shook his head. “She probably is which is pretty sad.”

“Australians didn’t lose anyone,” Lily put in waving her hand and not looking up. “I advise you to never piss off Luna if half of what I was told in the pub was real. Between her, that snorkack and Andi, the Death Eaters were basically slaughtered. I don’t know what Xeno has taught that girl, but she has no right to be that adorable while carving a path that even Voldemort would’ve appreciated.”

Harry could only stare between the two women for a few moments with his mouth hanging slightly open. Finally deciding that they weren’t actually having him on, Harry shut his mouth and tried to
move on to a safer topic. “So uh…anyone from the school not make it through?”

Shiva grimaced. “We lost two. Zacharias Smith tried to fight for about a minute before deciding he wasn’t cut out for it. He was hit in the back while trying to run back into the castle. Almost got Lavender killed too when he pushed her right in front of Su’s spell as he ran – from what the girls said at least. Cormac McLaggen didn’t do too much better sadly. He tried to take on Avery and lost. Marian saw the whole thing, but didn’t get there fast enough to help.”

Harry’s eyes fell and he shook his head. “Cormac was a git, but he deserved better than to die at their hands.”

“Things would’ve been a lot worse, Harry,” Lily said softly. “We had a lot of injuries, but considering the force against us it was extremely few deaths. Proper planning and equipping cut this war off at the knees before it ever even really started. That’s thanks to you and your friends.”

“We shouldn’t have been that good…Schoolkids have no right beating adult wizards with years of experience like that…It’s almost enough to make me actually believe in Merlin or your Goddess, Shiva,” Harry murmured.

“Don’t piss off the Goddess,” Shiva said playfully slapping the back of his head. “You never know when Morrigan is listening.” Leaning back into her seat Shiva refilled her glass and shrugged. “It’s really not that much of a mystery that you guys all did so well, Harry. Those arseholes were used to fighting a hit-and-run battle. They hit hard and fast and ran just as fast. They never really had people fighting back against them until a few months ago. You saw how quickly Voldemort pulled in his people once the citizens started defending themselves. You kids were fighting to live. They were only interested in causing pain. It’s not really a fight if your opponent doesn’t actually know how to hit back after the first spell is thrown.”

Harry frowned. “I think you’re downplaying them…but I really don’t want to argue about this.” He stood and stretched before walking over and hugging each woman hard. “I love you,” Harry whispered with a soft smile.

Lily ruffled his hair and returned the grin. “Love you too, honey.”

“I love you too, Harry,” Shiva said setting her cup down and moving to his side. She gently pushed him towards the door. “Now stop bumming with us and go find your girls. Fleur and Tonks are back at the manor for the moment though Hermione and Daphne both stopped in to say they were heading to the Room to get some peace and quiet. I think they were using the Lounge Configuration.”

Harry nodded and blinked away the sheen in his eyes. “Thanks, Shiva. I’ll see you later, mum, mum.” As he walked out they could hear him mutter softly, “Gotta figure out which of them is ‘mum’ and which is ‘mother’. This is getting bloody confusing…”

Harry paced his third time in front of the dancing trolls and nodded to himself as the door appeared. “Lounge Configuration it is,” he murmured as he stepped inside the Room of Requirement and glanced around for his partners. He found them both sitting on the couch staring intently at each other. Feeling a slight shiver of fear that they were about to fight Harry hurriedly walked over. “Hey, Mione, Daph, Pomfrey said I’m free! Girls? Hello?”

Narrowing his eyes and frowning Harry looked closer and chuckled to himself as he dropped into an armchair across from them. How he’d mistaken their Legilimency for hostile intent was beyond him. As he settled into the chair both girls blinked with Hermione shaking her head and
grimacing. “I had forgotten how…brutal I was during that…”

“Brutal? Mione, that was…that was amazing!” Daphne said brushing away a tear. “You rode that bastard to the ground! And the way Harry jumped in afterwards with a magical grenade? Merlin that was – it was – oh screw it!” She reached across the gap between them and grabbed Hermione’s face with both hands. Harry watched as Hermione’s eyes widened slightly and Daphne pulled the brunette in mashing their lips together. Hermione froze for the barest of moments before melting into the kiss and wrapping an arm around Daphne’s waist.

Feeling a blush rise on his face Harry coughed loudly trying to make sure that the girls realized he was in the room with them. His effort was apparently successful as they pulled apart and turned towards him. Hermione blushed while Daphne just snorted in amusement before smirking at him. “Like the show, Harry?”

That seemed to break the trance over Hermione who leapt off the couch and wrapped him into her arms. “Pomfrey let you out! You’re alright!”

“About an hour ago, yeah. Hand alright, Mione?” Harry asked pulling back from her embrace enough to gently run his own hand along her left one, grimacing as he traced over her missing pinky.

Hermione smiled at him and shook her head. “It’s fine. I barely use that hand anyway. If I wrote left handed I’m sure it would be more awkward, but as it is this is far easier to deal with than what some others have to face. I’m honestly having more issues getting used to short hair…strange I know…”

“Good. That’s good…How about you, Daph? Hearing coming back in the right ear yet?” Harry asked.

Daphne shrugged. “Mostly. There’s a bit of a ringing sound every so often. Now that we’ve all assured each other that we’re alright are you going to ask?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Okay sure, skip all the pleasantries then. What were you guys going over?”

Hermione shifted to the side to sit down next to him and shrugged. “I finally showed her when we met Fleur at the Quidditch World Cup.”

“When you rescued her you mean,” Daphne said raising an eyebrow. “That was…extremely impressive to say the least. And it bears some striking similarities to my own rescue…” Daphne fell silent, frowning. Harry stood and shifted over gently wrapping an arm around her.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said.

Hermione sighed and joined the other two on the couch resting a hand on Daphne’s knee. “It’s alright if you’re not, Daphne. It’s just us here.”

“I will be fine. Alright? It just dredged up some confusing memories. I already talked over all this stuff with Tracey the other day,” Daphne said.

Harry nodded. “She doing okay? I heard that she killed Malfoy.”

A large grin split Daphne’s face. “She did. That seems to have helped her heal far better than I
ever managed to. I’m not sure what that says about us as a whole, but I’ll take it.”

Hermione shrugged. “You can’t be expected to fix everything, Daphne.”

“I know. I’m going to have my hands full trying to fix the wizarding world soon enough. We have a responsibility now after all,” she finished with a smirk at Hermione. “We’re the Witches-Who-Conquered.”

Hermione groaned and collapsed back into the couch. “Please don’t remind me of that. I don’t know how you dealt with it for so long, Harry. I haven’t been able to escape anyone! Between the media, our schoolmates, the staff, the owls from ‘supporters’…ugh!”

“Bet Daphne is loving it though,” Harry said winking at his blonde partner who simply chuckled in return.

“To a degree. As long as it dies down at some point. I prefer to run things from the shadows after all. The spotlight isn’t exactly my thing.”

“Well if either of you get too tired of it, we’ll just sic Luna on them,” Harry said laughing.

The others chuckled and leaned into him. Hermione ran a hand down his arm tracing the scars starting from his left palm and running along his arm. Her hand paused as it reached the edge of his shirt sleeve. “Do these hurt?” she asked softly.

“A little,” Harry said wincing slightly. “Pomfrey said they won’t get much better than this. I should’ve just taken the crucio.”

“Can I…can I see them?” Hermione asked. Her fingers lightly traced the lines again with a slight wince on her face.

Harry nodded and shifted enough so that he could pull off his shirt. As it was dropped to the floor he heard a slight gasp from both of the girls. Daphne gently touched the unbroken double lines etched down both arms and across his back causing Harry to cringe slightly. “I know they’re bad…I understand if you girls want me to keep my shirt on from now on when we’re together…”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed though before she could say anything Daphne had grabbed Harry’s head in both hands and turned him to stare into her gaze. “Harry James Potter, you stop that self-pitying right now! You have scars, so what? Hermione’s missing a finger! Millie is missing a foot! I can barely hear from the right side! Su has scars across her cheek!” She huffed and leaned closer until their noses were practically touching. “You just defeated Tom Riddle! Mione and I may have killed him, but you were the one who beat him! You! You have confidence now. Act. Like. It!”

“Well, I wouldn’t have put it quite like that, but I agree. If I don’t need to wear a glove, you certainly don’t need to wear a shirt, Harry,” Hermione said hugging him. “Okay?”

Harry reached up and gently took Daphne’s hands off his face. “I get it and I’m sorry. Still trying to kick that habit. You both realize you’re going to have to keep yelling at me about this for another few years until it’s not my go-to thing right?”

Hermione squeezed him before letting go and leaning back chuckling. “I’ve been doing that for five years. I’m used to it.”

“I just like bossing people around,” Daphne said shrugging and winking at them both. After a moment her easy grin morphed into something saucy and hungry. “Speaking of which…”
Hermione, I feel like we should demonstrate in detail how we are unaffected by Harry’s scars. Take off your shirt.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows in response and she crossed her arms over her chest only serving to highlight her bust. “Excuse me?”

“Take off your shirt, please,” Daphne corrected visibly holding in her chuckle.

“Why of course! There’s no need to forget manners, Daphne.” She paused with her shirt halfway off before snorting and shaking her head with a smile. “Unless you’re sleeping with Nym, then you’re free to forget them.” Her shirt quickly joined Harry’s on the floor and Harry tried hard not to stare at the bright jade bra she was sporting underneath.

“Err…”

Hermione chuckled and patted his cheek. “I thought it appropriate considering I was hanging out with a Slytherin.”

“It nicely offsets my red one for Gryffindors,” Daphne commented drawing Harry’s attention to the right only to be confronted with his other partner also sans shirt, her breasts covered only by a lacy red number.

Swallowing Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Girls, I love you. I just wanted to make sure I said that while I can still speak.”

“That’s good, because I do believe your mouth should be occupied elsewhere now,” Daphne said smiling and leaning over to briefly capture his lips before gently pushing his head down to lodge it in her cleavage. “Mione, if you’d be so kind as to assist…”

With an amused murmur of agreement, Hermione reached around behind the two and popped the clasp loosing the red lace binding Daphne’s chest. A quick roll of her shoulders saw the bra falling to the couch utterly forgotten by all three. Harry didn’t need Daphne’s hand on his head to know her thoughts as he shifted his attention from light, trailing kisses to teasing her peaked nipples. A soft gasp and her palm pushing against the back of his head harder told him he’d gotten it right and he let himself nip slightly harder eliciting a sharper gasp.

Hearing a settling sound, Harry reached around behind Daphne and found Hermione by touch alone as his hand trailed along her now bare back. A soft sigh escaped from his partner as his fingers left her spine and traced her side. As he shifted from Daphne’s right breast to her left he tried to move his hands to pleasure Hermione’s as well only to find his questing passage blocked. “Hmm, someone’s been talking with Tracey…” Daphne murmured. Harry opened his eyes and pulled back enough to see that Hermione had pressed herself firmly against the blonde’s back and was slowly moving up and down in an erotic parody of a massage.

“One must be prepared for all circumstances. As a Slytherin you should know this, Daph,” Hermione replied moaning slightly at the end.

Harry had opened his mouth to reply with an anecdote of his own but was cut off as Daphne grabbed his head and brought him back to her breasts. “Not done, Harry. Back to work.”

Chuckling against her, Harry decided he was done playing fair and started to murmur to her in parseltongue. The quick vibrations from his tongue along her peak had Daphne gasping in moments. He wasn’t content with just one girl getting his sole attention however so he abandoned the pursuit of Hermione’s breasts and shifted his hands downward. He let one cup her arse while
the other threaded into her pants. Another moan from Hermione followed as he let his fingers trace the outside of her knickers pushing in just enough to feel the dampness on the material and provide a small amount of friction.

“I’m not the only one who’s prepared it seems!” Hermione gasped as Harry rubbed against her button for a moment. She ground her lower body into his hand to prolong the contact and twisted her own hands around Daphne’s body.

Daphne groaned and clutched Harry’s head with both hands as a shudder ran through her. “No kidding. Merlin’s beard that’s good! How did parseltongue ever get labeled as a evil?!” Her breathing turned to pants and she shuddered again. With a final groan of approval, her grip around his head slackened and she collapsed back into Hermione. The move served to firmly wedge Harry’s fingers directly over Hermione’s most sensitive spot again bringing a pleased sounding yelp from the brunette. Lifting his head, Harry noticed the surprised grin on Daphne’s face and saw it morph into her more typical playful smirk.

Daphne wasted no time in starting to grind her arse against Hermione using Harry’s trapped hand as an impromptu tool to get the other girl off. The increased stimulation and friction swiftly had Hermione panting and shaking. Hermione bit down on Daphne’s shoulder muffling her cry of release as Daphne finally lifted her arse enough for Harry to remove his fingers from his partner’s knickers. Shaking his hand to restore some feeling into his extremities Harry smirked at the two women collapsed back into the couch. “You both realize, I’m expected to satisfy four women, right? It pays to be a quick study.”

“Probable helps that one of your partners is a Veela,” Daphne replied with a laugh as she shifted her bum to avoid sitting directly on Hermione.

“I was comfy like that,” Hermione’s murmur of displeasure brought smiles to the other two as well as a red face from the bookworm.

Rolling his eyes at Hermione, Harry turned to Daphne and raised his eyebrows. “Daph, you’re getting along smashingly with Mione; you’re more than welcome to join in with Fleur or Tonks as well you know.”

“One step at a time, Mr. Hero. One step at a time.” She took a breath and twisted her head to share a look with Hermione. As one, the girls turned back to leer at him with nearly identical smiles. “Now, we should shed the rest of these clothes. Two out of three isn’t bad, but I do believe we should be aiming for a hat trick; don’t you agree, Mione?”

“While I’d argue semantics on the use of ‘hat trick’ here,” Hermione stated before chuckling and shaking her head, “I’m in complete agreement on the spirit of the statement.”

Harry traced the hungry gazes from both girls and the remainder of his worry about his new scars vanished into the wind. “If this is my reward for conquering Dark Wizards maybe I should be an Auror instead of a shopkeeper,” he mused with a smirk.

“Not on your life, Potter. Can’t have you risking that fine arse too often after all,” Daphne commented. She leaned up and grabbed one cheek to emphasize her point. “Trousers. Floor. Now.” At a soft cough, she amended, “Please.”

Laughing Harry arched an eyebrow at Hermione who shrugged. “You heard her. Please ditch the trousers, Man-Who-Conquered. We have a hat trick to complete.”
The extended Potter family stepped off the plane into Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with Tonks clinging to Harry’s arm and a very amused Hermione trying to hold in her chuckles as she walked behind them. “See, Nym, safe and sound back on the ground,” Harry said patting her hand with a smile on his face. “We told you it was safe.”

“Safe my arse,” Tonks mumbled. “Give me a broom or a portkey any day. Hell, give me a freaking hippogriff!”

“You know, statistically speaking, it’s safer to ride in a plane than a car,” Hermione said. “And for some reason I rather doubt that a hippogriff would be able to last for an entire flight across the Pond. Or that you’d be okay on a broom for that long.”

“We could’ve taken a portkey. We’re not exactly wanting for money…” Tonks said glaring at the girl.

Harry leaned up and kissed Tonks’ cheek. “But then you wouldn’t have experienced travel that doesn’t hate me! We’re proud of you for soldiering through and humoring me, Nym. We can apparate to the facility from here.”

“Thank Merlin,” Tonks muttered. “I still say we should’ve waited for this trip until your O.W.L. results came back. Having more to rub in the old goat’s face would’ve been fun.”

“Yes, because there is so much doubt on how we did,” Daphne commented with a dry tone.

Lily shook her head and led the small group out towards the airport exit. “You’ve taken them, that’s good enough. I’ve waited long enough to confront Dumbledore and I have no intention of postponing this trip just to hold out for test results.”

“Breathe, Lils,” Shiva said placing a hand on the other woman’s back and rubbing a slow circle. “Remember, no dismembering of old men.”

“I’m not going to dismember him. I’m just going to strangle him with his own beard.”

“I almost did that,” Tonks volunteered finally letting Harry slip from her grip as she held up a hand with a smile. “Ah, good memories that.”

Harry snorted and rolled his eyes. “Says the person who hadn’t just gotten his arse kicked from fighting a chimera.”

“While zis is true, Snowball is soo adorable zat I zink you got the better end of ze deal from zat battle,” Fleur commented while grinning and patting Harry’s head as if he was in his animagus form.

The group laughed at that and made their way into the alley. With a short apparition jump all seven of them appeared in an alley near the mental facility the Flamels had directed them too and strode towards the gate. Harry took a deep breath and set his features resolving to not let anything Dumbledore said get to him. Shiva appeared to do the same as did a few of the other girls – though Tonks’ red hair showed off the ex-Auror’s feelings on this meeting rather clearly.

“I should’ve let Sirius come,” Harry said as they walked. “There is far too much estrogen in this group.”

“Ah, but you can handle ze women far easier zan ze men, mon amour,” Fleur commented with a wink.
Hermione wiped a hand across her face and glared momentarily at Fleur obviously trying to ignore her blush. “Let’s stop with the innuendo for a bit, shall we? Please? We should aim to get this finished with as little fuss as possible.”

A chorus of amused consent greeted that proclamation as all present dutifully said, “Yes, Hermione.”

They came to a halt in front of the gates and Shiva stepped up waving a hand in greeting towards the guard. “Hi, we’re here to see Mr. Brian. The Flemmings should’ve called ahead.”

“Yes, they did. Hang on a moment and I’ll get someone to walk you up. This is a private meeting correct?” the man asked as he picked up a phone.

“Yes, please.” The guard nodded at her answer and spoke into the line for a moment before opening the gate and waving them through towards an orderly walking up the drive. The group followed along in his wake until they reached a side room with several comfy couches and armchairs scattered about.

They only had to wait a few minutes before the door opened again and a familiar looking old man walked in. Harry had to blink a few times to make sure it was really Dumbledore thanks to the changes in his appearance. While the ex-Headmaster didn’t seem noticeably older he did appear visibly exhausted. When he walked he dragged his feet, when he paused he slumped, his beard was frizzy instead of well-groomed…the thing that most threw Harry off though was the thoroughly normal clothes that Dumbledore was wearing. The logical part of Harry’s mind knew that the staff wouldn’t have let Dumbledore use his eye-wateringly colorful wizard robes, but that didn’t prevent the shock of seeing the old man in sweat pants and an ‘I Heart The Liberty Bell’ t-shirt.

As soon as Dumbledore saw them he stiffened and stood up straight, his hand instinctively reaching for his – missing – wand. Harry raised his eyebrows at the move and had to resist a snort at the reaction. Thankfully, Dumbledore appeared to possess enough frame of mind to wait until the door closed and Hermione activated a Privacy Stone before he started his ranting. “Harry, my boy, you have returned…”

“He’s not YOUR boy!” Lily snarled rising to her feet with one hand balled into a fist and the other white-knuckled around her sparking wand. Dumbledore’s reaction was extreme. As soon as he took notice of the red-head, the old man’s mouth dropped open and he swiftly backed up until he was pushed against the wall with one hand held forward as if he could ward her away with the limb. Once upon a time he probably could…Harry resolved yet again to never piss off the Flamels.

“Easy, Lils. Down girl,” Shiva murmured standing and running a hand along one of Lily’s arms while her other reached down and carefully plucked the sparking wand from her hand. “Why don’t I keep this until we leave? Just to be safe.”

“He’s your son too! Why aren’t you screaming at the old fool!” Lily growled never once removing her eyes from Dumbledore despite allowing herself to be guided back to a sitting position.

Shiva took the comment in stride and simply nodded as she grasped the other woman’s hand. “Because I’ve already screamed at him several times for that comment and you have it well under control for the both of us. I don’t need the old goat’s approval, I just need Harry’s. Breathe, Lils.”

After several deep breathes, Harry watched his mother close her eyes and nod. Dumbledore
however stayed in his defensive position. “Harry…you actually did it…I had hoped…I had hoped that it was embellishment. That you had not fallen so far…Necromancy? Truly? How could you desecrate your own mother’s grave?”

Another growl issued from Lily though this time it was joined by a quieter one from Tonks. “How dare you…” the metamorph whispered as her hair flipped through a kaleidoscope of colors before settling on a deep crimson bordering on black.

“Nym,” Harry murmured shaking his head. Tonks scowled, but waved for him to continue as she leaned back into her chair and crossed her arms. “Mr. Dumbledore, perhaps if you had actually followed my parent’s wills instead of sealing them we would have had a far more congenial relationship. My mother managed to create a combination of enchantments that left me with protection against Tom Riddle by using herself to power the charm. When I touched her body as it laid in stasis the enchantment ended and her consciousness was returned, which served to end the stasis. Lily Potter never died Dumbledore. By ignoring the instructions left by my father, you effectively buried a woman alive for 14 years.”

“Impossible!” Dumbledore yelled. His wide eyes and wavering hand served to show the truth of his feelings.

Daphne snorted and glared at the man. “Impossible? Why? Because you are the Great And Powerful Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore? Because you cannot possibly be wrong?”

Hermione sighed and shook her head. “Deny it all you want, Dumbledore, but your denial does not make it untrue. Simply because you did not think of it does not make it impossible.”

Dumbledore shook his head violently enough for his beard to flop against his sides. “Even if that is true, it changes nothing! Harry is Dark. He has installed his own puppet as a Minister and has a harem of willing slaves! He has an army of schoolchildren he has trained to be elite killers!”

Fleur chuckled and shrugged at the raised eyebrows from the others. “What? Zat last one is actually true! You did raise an army and several of zem were still in school.”

“I can be a slave in bed if you guys want,” Tonks said raising her hand and winking at Dumbledore who shuddered.

Harry groaned and rubbed at the scar on his forehead. “You people are impossible…Tonks please stop trying to give the ex-Headmaster a heart attack, Fleur please stop egging him on.”

“Sure take away all my fun,” Tonks murmured rolling her eyes. Fleur simply smiled and shrugged again.

“Dumbledore, I didn’t raise an army,” Harry said turning back to the man who had finally sunk into a chair as far from the group as he could get. “I helped establish alliances between England, France, Bulgaria and Australia along with ensuring that the Goblins, the House Elves, the Centaurs and the werewolves were all treated better and given more favorable living/trading conditions in exchange for their help. All I did for my mates in Hogwarts was to make sure they could properly defend themselves. Something that all of your Defense teachers utterly failed at besides Remus.”

“And I would like to establish that I am most certainly not a ‘harem slave’. If anything, I am the reason that Harry is even dating multiple women!” Hermione huffed glaring at the old man. “He is Heir to two Ancient and Noble Houses, he needs at least two wives. I pushed him to accept that fact to better integrate into the wider wizarding culture. Daphne and Fleur both love him as much as Tonks and I and with their need to continue their own family names, the Consort arrangement is
perfectly justified and acceptable by the standards of the community!"

Daphne couldn’t resist chiming in at that. “You are old enough, Dumbledore, that you should remember such situations being commonplace.”

Dumbledore narrowed his eyes at her. “You are completely biased. Your family is as Dark as they come! You have corrupted a good, self-sacrificing young man with your wiles and you have even managed to sway Miss Granger and an Auror!”

Daphne sighed and leaned back looking pointedly at Harry and Hermione. “I told you I should’ve stayed at home with Tracey and Luna. This is pointless and all I’m doing is antagonizing him further.”

“You deserve to be here, Daphne,” Harry said shaking his head.

“You helped kill Voldemort, you have as much right to be present at this conversation as the rest of our family,” Hermione agreed reaching out to squeeze Daphne’s hand.

That set off a new goggling from Dumbledore as he stared agape between all the others in the room. “Voldemort is dead…?”

“That’s right, old man, the Dark Wanker is dead and buried! Well dead and blown away to be more accurate,” Tonks replied sending a toothy grin towards Dumbledore as she got up and wrapped Harry, Hermione and Daphne into a giant bear hug.

Fleur nodded with her own grin as she explained, “‘arry trapped ze arrogant fool inside a barrier before tricking him into zinking it was a spell battle when it was really a rune battle! ‘arry’s counterattack left Voldemort crippled and barely able to move. Zen ‘arry’s Hands – Hermione and Daphne for ze mentally challenged – arrived and finished him off togezer.”

“As I stated in the Infirmary,” Hermione said with narrowed eyes. “You took the prophecy far too literally.”

Dumbledore sat back into his chair shaking his head and wiping his eyes. “You fools! You fools! He’s not gone! He’ll be back, even stronger than before now! He’ll be more prepared and he’ll –”

“Shut it!” Lily snarled. “You arrogant tosser! You don’t hear a single thing we say do you? ‘He’s not dead!’” She stood and threw off Shiva’s restraining hand to stalk forward and poke him in the chest. “Shut your mouth arsehole and listen when we speak!” Dumbledore pushed back into his chair and stared wide-eyed at the screaming Lily Potter. “Diadem, purified. Locket, destroyed. Cup, purified. Ring, destroyed. Diary, destroyed. Snake, killed. Harry, purified!”

“Impossib–”

“I said shut it!” Lily yelled grabbing his beard. The people behind her tensed slightly, but Lily merely used her leverage to jerk his head up so their eyes were only a few inches apart. “My son nearly doomed himself to being possessed by that abomination when he revived me. You left him with that thing inside him for over a decade! A DECADE! It was only linked to the scar at first! My enchantment kept it from linking to him for – at minimum – several months if not years. That was more than enough time to have the section of skull surgically removed before the soul fragment could begin to be a problem. But no, if you couldn’t see the solution it didn’t exist did it! Never thought to ask for a second opinion did you?!

“You let the fucking thing fester inside my child. We had to watch as he almost killed himself twice to get rid of it! He had to practically invent an entirely new branch of magic in order to
destroy it without any danger.” Lily paused and grinned down at Dumbledore. “How do you think he managed to save Rowena Ravenclaw’s Diadem or Helga Hufflepuff’s Cup? Harry James Potter did in months what you, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, couldn’t do in years! Stop blaming my son for your own failures and act like a man for once you pathetic excuse for a has-been wizard!”

Lily let go of Dumbledore’s beard and stepped back, the group behind her collectively let out a small held breath and relaxed their grip on their wands. Dumbledore could only weep as he stared between Lily and Harry. “It’s just…not possible…” the old man whispered. “Harry is corrupted…he has to be, it all fits…”

“Why?” Lily asked softly looking at him. “Because he survived something worse than Ariana did? Because Harry didn’t turn to suppression and rage like your sister? Why must Harry be evil, Dumbledore? Can you even answer that yourself?”

“I…I will find the truth one day…I must!” Dumbledore breathed out between his sobs.

“Does anyone else need more closure?” Harry asked with a sigh. “Because I’m done trying to make him see sense.” As he received head nods from those assembled Harry stood and looked to Dumbledore shaking his head. “I’m sorry you can’t see past your delusions Dumbledore. Goodbye. Come on, mother, let’s go.”

Harry gently reached out to take the rune stone from the table, deactivating it as he pocketed it. He reached the door and didn’t even look back as he led the small file outside…never to see Albus Dumbledore again.

The morning started off as pleasantly normal as every morning for the past three years. Petunia Dursley had seen Vernon off in the morning with a nice plate of breakfast for him. She smiled as she set a new plate down in front of Dudley. Her little boy was taking the time during the summer hols to better his diet and exercise regime with his friends. The wrestling team had already served to remove some of the baby fat from her boy though he had to work on the rest by himself to ensure that the improvements continued.

As Petunia plated his meal a frown briefly crossed her face as her mind involuntarily dredged up bad memories. It was only a few weeks past the anniversary of the day that her…nephew had left them for good. They weren’t entirely certain that the boy had ever made it to his new home—he certainly wasn’t sending them a letter and why should they have to track the little runaway after what he’d done to Marge and Ripper? Vernon had made the recurring event into a sort of family holiday and used the excuse to take them all out to a wonderful dinner on the town. Of course her husband conveniently forgot that once the boy had vanished, Petunia had been forced to relearn how to take care of the house. Cooking, cleaning, laundry…weeding. The yard work had been some of the worst. Dudley was always being so sociable so she couldn’t ask him to do the work and Petunia couldn’t be expected to simply give up her Best Roses award now could she?

It had taken some time, but she’d finally figured out just how the Potter brat had managed to get her garden looking so beautiful. Petunia had already been informed that she’d won the Roses and the prize personnel should be arriving shortly to drop off her trophy. It would fit nicely on the mantle next to the picture of Vernon accepting his new promotion that they had heard about this morning. She couldn’t wait to hear all about it once he returned!

The doorbell’s ring saw Petunia quickly rising from her seat and waving Dudley to keep at his food as she moved to the front. Taking a brief moment to puff up her hair into an appropriate presentation, she opened the door all smiles. “Hello, I’m so glad you’ve finally seen the effort put
forth into my roses again and –” Anything else she was going to say degenerated into choking, inarticulate sounds of distress and terror. The woman coming to her door was more appropriate to a visitor during Christmas. A ghost from the past. A *dead* woman.

“Hello, sister,” Lily Potter nee Evans said with a sickly sweet smile spreading across a face framed by flaming red hair falling barely below her cheekbones. “I think it’s about time we had a bit of a chat don’t you?”

Petunia finally found her voice again and let out a high-pitched scream. She held the note for nearly five seconds with the ghost of her dead sister smirking at her before the world went black and she felt the floor rush up to meet her.

Moaning, Petunia reached a hand up to rub her forehead feeling a small bump there. “Well that’s a perfect way to handle the stress of receiving my award,” she muttered to herself. “Humph as if she’d come here.”

Sighing, Petunia opened her eyes and searched for Dudley, assuming he’d been the one to carry her to the couch. Her eyes roamed over the occupied seating across from her before making their way to the kitchen doorframe. They’d covered half the distance before her mind caught up with her sight and Petunia’s head froze. Ever so slowly twisting her head back around to stare across from her, Petunia saw the horrifying visage from her nightmare staring back. Her hand flew up to her chest while she kicked her feet back. The move succeeded in flipping the couch over and dumping Petunia onto the ground where she scuttled back towards the wall and tried to blend into the wallpaper while still screeching.

“Wow, Lils, your sister has a set of lungs almost as impressive as you do,” an amused voice came from the other couch.

“Honestly, this would be funnier if Harry had felt comfortable enough to come inside with us,” Lily Potter replied with a sigh.

“True.”

Petunia finally had to stop screaming in order to breathe. She took in a shuddering breath and stayed very still for a few seconds longer to see if she could escape from the ghost. She’d have to find Dudley on her way out…

“Oh for crying out loud, if you’re not getting her up, Lils, than I will,” the second voice said. A second later Petunia screamed again as she was thrown into the air by invisible hands and plopped down onto her newly righted couch. “Better now, Mrs. Dursley? Not that I really care how you feel of course, but we should at least *try* to be polite about this. I’d rather this not end in bloodshed and as demonstrated by our last difficult meeting I need to be the one to maintain my cool.”

Petunia finally noticed that an unknown woman was sitting next to the ghost. This ‘visitor’ had light brown hair and wore shorts with a t-shirt though the wand in her hand left no dispute about the freakish nature.

The ghost snorted and leaned back into the couch crossing its arms. “Honestly I think you may be the one my dear sister should be more worried about here, Shiva. I’m pissed at her, but I unfortunately *expected* behavior like this from her. Maintaining a near constant state of disdain for your sibling really tends to tone done the vitriol that you can muster up at a moment’s notice. I’m sure I’ll get there by the end of this…conversation.”

“Shiva…you’re that woman! The whore!” Petunia screamed. She scowled and turned to glare at the ghost. “So this is just a trick by that little freak! Bravo, well done! Now kindly get out of my
house before you infect my son!”

The ghost’s mouth set into a thin line though the bitch that had ‘adopted’ her wayward nephew was the first to react. “A, I am not a whore. B, yes, I am the one who adopted Harry. C, this is not a trick, your dear sister is indeed among the living again; actually that is thanks to Harry from a certain point of view. D…keep your bloody opinions to yourself or I start cursing everything in this room.”

“Told you, she had to worry about you instead of me,” the ghost said with as her mouth relaxed into a smirk. “For the record Tuny, I really advise against commenting on the sex life of my girlfriend.”

“Girl…girlfriend?!” Petunia sputtered. “But…but…but you’re dead!”

“Try to keep up, sister. I never actually died. I’ve only been – in the words of a story greater than mine – Mostly Dead,” Lily said.

Petunia felt the fear coil up inside her like poison. If Lily was truly here and not an illusion or an echo…she tried to scowl again and hide her terror beneath bravado. “Well, if you’re alive than you obviously cared less for your child than we did. Dumping the little freak here with decent normal folk like us…” Petunia trailed off as she noticed the temperature in the room had plummeted and her breath was visible as she breathed out. The visible wand in Shiva’s hand was vibrating and sparking while Lily’s eyes had closed and she was breathing in short pants. Petunia performed probably one of the most intelligent acts of her life then as she very carefully stopped all movement.

After nearly two minutes the wand had stopped sparking and Lily was breathing more normally. Shiva unclenched her fisted hand and flexed her fingers before speaking extremely slowly, “Petunia Dursley, I am trying very hard to avoid killing you. I’ve already done it to several people who threatened my son. Please. Stop. Tempting. Me.”

Lily nodded. “Petunia, I was in a coma until a little over a year ago. I have done everything since waking up to ensure that I was there for Harry to make up for his…upbringing with you. You had my son for twelve years and he never even called you a family. Shiva had been his mentor and friend for less than four years before he thought her as his mum. Perhaps you should consider that when you cling to your precious ‘normality’.”

Petunia frowned at that. She knew she’d never treated the boy like family. She didn’t need her perfect little sister to explain that. Harry Potter simply hadn’t been family. He’d been a freak just like Lily. He’d had the power to do things that Petunia could only ever perform in dreams. He hadn’t been like her. He hadn’t deserved to sit at the same table as her son and let Dudley grow up just as bitter and hateful as she’d been. It had only been right to try and ensure that Harry had learned what it was like to do things without the universe bending to his will…hadn’t it…?

“Mrs. Dursley,” Shiva said breathing out a long breath and shaking her head. “The only reason we haven’t come here before now is because we’ve been busy killing Voldemort and his posse then dealing with the aftermath. Now that we’re done though – ”

“That insane terrorist is dead?” Petunia blurted out. Even she remembered the stories of the monster that Lily had spoken of so long ago. That he was finally under the ground…

“He is,” Shiva said cocking her head to the side and staring curiously at Petunia. “Harry brought him to death’s door and his girlfriends kicked him the rest of the way.”
Harry’s smile was mocking as she replied. ‘Yes. That, ‘worthless little freak’ managed to defeat the most powerful magic user of our generation. Funny how that works out isn’t it? Oh and he’s also rather intelligent too for that matter. I’m sure you’re proud of Dudley finally understanding that he actually has to attend class in order to graduate, but my Harry managed to start his own business before he turned fifteen. He’s been so successful with it that he’s entered into a partnership with a long established owner in Australia of all places.”

Petunia could only goggle at the two women. Harry wasn’t smart. He barely managed to achieve passing grades and he’d always been so slow to pick up anything that they tried to teach him and… and it had all been an act. Petunia scowled at that thought.

“We’re here trying to figure out how to deal with you,” Shiva said rolling her wand between her fingers. “Harry’s sole request has been to not hurt Dudley. Nothing about you, nothing specific for Vernon other than that it be painful both mentally and physically.” Petunia couldn’t help a shiver running down her spine at those words and she wrapped her arms around her chest. “Now my vote was for Azkaban…child endangerment and abuse is taken rather seriously in our world you know? However, Lily has successfully convinced me that this would only serve to make you feel justified in your hatred of us and your treatment of my son.”

“So we have a better idea,” Lily said smiling as she leaned over and put a paper and pen onto the coffee table between them. “You’re going to write a letter to the local paper. It will detail everything that you did to Harry while he was in this house. Shiva and I will review it to make certain that nothing is missing. We’re not expecting you to make anything up, Tuni. We merely want you to write the truth.”

Petunia felt the color drain from her face as she thought of what the neighbors would think reading such an account. How they would be horrified. How they wouldn’t understand that she hadn’t had a choice; she’d had to make sure that he grew up normal. That he…that he… “Oh god…please no!”

“Do you finally understand, Mrs. Dursley?” Shiva asked softly. “What better way to prove how unnatural you and your husband have acted than by having your own peers explain it?” She laughed softly before continuing. “Oh and a copy of the letter is going to be sent to the police as well.”

Petunia felt herself start to cry as she shook her head back and forth. “Please…”

“You did this to yourself, Petunia,” Lily said, all amusement gone from her cold, hard voice. “I understood eventually why you hated me, Tuni, and I made peace with that. But with Harry…all you had to do was treat him normally and you were just too blinded by hate to do that…you brought this punishment down on your head all on your own, sister.”

Petunia wept louder and stared at the paper in front of her. Without another word she reached her shaky hand for the pen and started to write.

Harry twirled the high-backed chair around in a circle. Using his feet to kick it fast enough that he grew slightly dizzy, Harry kept the speed up for almost half a second before finally stopping the spin and wobbling back and forth. “Why doesn’t Hogwarts have these? We need to bring some of these to the castle!”

A snort of amusement and a shaken head was his answer as Shiva leaned over and playfully
slapped the back of his head. “You’re practically more mature than me, kid, and you’re acting like a toddler with a new toy. There is no way that spinny chairs are making an appearance in the school. No way.”

“Always spoiling my fun,” Harry pouted.

The phone on the desk in front of them buzzed and the third person in the room reached out and pressed the intercom’s button. “Go ahead, Mary?”

“Mr. Dursley is on his way up, Sir.”

“Thank you, Mary. Everything is ready for his arrival?”

“Yes, Chairman,” the voice on the other end replied.

“Excellent, thank you, Mary, that will be all.” He took his finger off of the phone and the line went dead. Turning a smiling expression on Harry he winked at the young man and nodded. “If you wanted to maintain the surprise, Mr. Potter, you should probably turn back around.”

Harry sighed and sat up straighter. “Yeah, guess it’s time to get serious. Thanks for your help with this, Sir.”

Harry saw the Chairman nod again before his face was hidden from sight by the high back of the chair. Shiva reached down and gently squeezed his hand before she quickly left by the side door to wait for her cue with Lily. Harry followed the door as it clicked closed and shut his eyes allowing the sound to cement his resolve and set his spine. He’d made it through years under this man, his mother had finished dealing with Petunia in the morning…he could keep his composure with Vernon long enough to make this work. He’d just have to keep thinking of it like it was all a grand prank by the twins. It was all mental. It was all…mental.

The main door to the corner office opened and thudding footsteps pounded into the room. “Chairman Brown, it’s such an honor to meet you!” Vernon Dursley rumbled. Harry could already see the smile plastered onto the face of the walrus without even needing to turn around. He forced his mouth into a smile imagining the walrus bobbing his head and clapping for fish with that giant grin. “When I heard this morning that you wanted to see me personally, why I couldn’t wait to tell my wife the news! I am so very proud to have been so recognized, Sir! That the Board itself has taken notice of my work…it’s simply astounding!”

Yup, there was the head bobbing. Harry had to suppress the laughter bubbling up inside him. Letting it out before his cue wouldn’t have nearly the right effect. Chairman Brown chuckled softly and said, “Mr. Vernon, I have never heard nor seen your name before this morning. Frankly from what I’m seeing at the moment, I’m amazed you’re able to fit behind your desk quickly enough to get any work done.” Harry didn’t need to hear the blubbering to picture the wide eyes, slack jaw and bulging vein. “Thankfully for you, my opinion is rather immaterial at the moment. Grunnings Drills has a new majority owner and he has specifically requested to meet with you this morning to discuss your future here.”

“Well, let’s see how well you do with that shall we?” Brown asked, the sarcasm practically thick enough to choke on. “Harry? Mr. Dursley has arrived.”
Harry made certain that the huge smile was still plastered on his face as he kicked his chair around and stopped it directly facing Vernon. The walrus was sitting in a chair at the far end of the table with his blubber spilling out over the edges of the armrests. As Harry’s turn completed and Vernon caught sight of him, the vein bulged and the man’s face reddened. Vernon’s eyes widened and his mouth snapped closed hard enough to rattle his mustache. Slaming his hands onto the table the walrus surged to his feet and raised a shaky finger to point at Harry. “You! You little FREAK! What have you done to the Chairman?!!?! You’ve used your freakishness on him!”

Harry shifted his smile into a confused frown and cocked his head to the side before leaning over and asking the Chairman in a loud whisper, “Do you have any idea what he is talking about, Mike?”

Brown shrugged. “Not even an inkling,” he replied in the same stage whisper obviously meant for Vernon to hear loud and clear. “Perhaps he feels you drugged me?”

“That’s gotta be it,” Harry nodded rubbing his chin as he leaned back into the chair giving it a slight spin for effect. “He always used to accuse me of drugging his family, apparently he thinks my skills have improved if I can get the head of a major company ‘under my spell’.” A quiet snort of amusement from Brown greeted that comment and Harry barely managed to maintain his solemn face as he saw Vernon’s face crimson.

“You’ve used your little stick on MY COMPANY, you little freak! How dare you!” the walrus screeched, his jowls trembling.

“Well that’s just rude!” Harry said gasping and holding a hand to his chest. “To imply I’d stoop to sexual favors is underhanded, Vernon! And the fact that I’m still only 16…are you accusing Chairman Brown of being a…a pedophile?”

Vernon’s lips curled and spittle flew from his lips though he couldn’t seem to muster a coherent reply beyond a growl. Brown saved him as he sighed and shook his head. “I see this is getting us nowhere. Perhaps proof would assist in moving the meeting forward. We are all busy men and this is already looking to extend beyond the schedule.” He reached over and tapped the intercom. “Mary, please send up, the owner’s assistants with their acquisition paperwork.”

“Right away, Sir,” the intercom voice squeaked.

Harry had just enough time for a half spin of the chair before Shiva opened the main door of the room and waltzed in with several sheets of papers. She laid one in front of Vernon and waltzed around the table to place two more in front of Harry and Brown before standing to the side and looking through the rest in her hands. “Those are the declaration pages, gentlemen. Harry, Lily will be up in a moment with the entire document. They were taking longer to copy than we had expected since the machine jammed.”

“That’s fine, Ms. Babbling,” Brown said waving off the ‘issue’. “I imagine the final page is more than sufficient to assuage your worries, Mr. Dursley?”

Vernon swiped the piece of paper off the desk with one meaty paw without even glancing at it. His eyes locked onto Shiva’s and his face turned puce. “That harlot is the same sort of freak as the boy! They’ve played with your mind, Chairman! Arrest them and throw away the key! The whore has already sold herself and she has been teaching the freak since he ran away!”

Harry’s control slipped and the pens around the table vibrated for a brief moment while his green eyes seemed to flash. He clenched his hands and with a Herculean effort he forced a smile onto his face – though one would have to be blind to mistake it for something natural. “Still with the sexual
references, Vernon? I had hoped we’d be able to keep this civil, but you’re not really helping that effort…”

Vernon’s face darkened even further all the way down to purple. Harry wondered for a moment if this was all going to end up being pointless since the man seemed only a few seconds away from a lethal stroke or aneurysm. His ponderings were interrupted as the office door opened again and his red-headed mother walked in. Lily was carrying a pile of papers so large that her face was hidden behind the stack. “Mr. Chairman, your secretary said you were waiting on the acquisition stack? I have three copies here, Sir.”

“Mr. Dursley was the one who needed it, but might as well distribute the others here as well so we can answer the man’s questions. If he ever gets around to reading the work. I don’t see why you’re still bothering to continue with this meeting, Mr. Potter. He doesn’t seem very open to anything you have to say and I hate to show such discredit upon my company to the new owner…” Harry snorted softly and shook his head at Brown’s sad tone. The man was apparently a far better actor than he was!

“It’s no problem, Mike. We shouldn’t be too much longer after Vernon takes a moment to peruse the documents and verify it’s all legal and I haven’t used any trickery,” Harry replied.

Lily dropped a stack of papers close enough to skim Vernon’s hair and mustache before she walked around and regally set the other two stacks down in front of the others. “The signed pages are tabbed, gentlemen. Mr. Dursley, you should really breathe before you pass out.” Her amused sneer joined Shiva’s muffled snort.

“That BLOODY BITCH is DEAD! The FREAK has used his MAGIC to raise her from her GRAVE! KILL HIM NOW before he murders US and brings us back as PUPPETS like he did with his two WHORES!” The walrus’ vein was bulging so hard and so fast that it was almost hypnotic as Harry watched it.

Brown held two fingers to his head and murmured, “I think we’ve heard enough. If I let this go on much further, I’m going to kill the man…” He didn’t even have to reach for the intercom before it buzzed again. “20 seconds out, Sir!”

Harry sighed and spun his chair once more as Vernon started sputtering and seeming halfway between running towards them and throwing his chair. “Vernon, I want to thank you for making this easy. I honestly thought I might have to actually try considering we’re sitting with the Grunnings head…but apparently you’re even more idiotic than I remember.”

“Oh and Vernon?” Lily said crossing her arms, leaning against Harry’s chair and grinning evilly. “I already said hello to my sister this morning.”

“YOU UNDEAD HARLOT!” Vernon’s internal struggle ended and he knocked his chair to the side as he tried to rush around the table. He made it a quarter of the way before the door was kicked open and five police officers rushed in. Vernon’s hands were outstretched towards the three smirking members of the Potter family as the first officer came to a halt and raised his hand from his belt. Harry’s grin grew so wide it hurt as the copper let loose with the taser. Vernon reached the end of the table just as the little points of metal embedded into his back. A shrill shriek of surprise and pain sprung from the walrus as he flopped onto the floor twitching at Harry’s feet.

“Excellent timing, gents,” Shiva said saluting the police. “Appreciate that save.”

“Please tell me we kept this fool going long enough to gain the rope to hang him with?” Brown
The officer with the taser shut it off and nodded slowly. “We were only moments away from calling it off ourselves, Sir. I’m…truly sorry you had to live through that…that…vitriol again, Mr. Potter.”

Harry just shrugged. “I learned to try and tune out Vernon Dursley years ago, but I appreciate the sentiment, Sir. I won’t have to appear at the trial now?”

“No if I have anything to say about it,” the cop muttered. He walked over to the walrus and scowled. “Vernon Dursley, you are under arrest for child endangerment, threatening a minor, attempted assault, attempted battery, aggravated assault, aggravated battery, child neglect, child abuse, attempted murder…” Harry tuned the man out as the remaining officers lifted the fat fool from the floor and began dragging him out of the office.

Lily moved from her perch and reached down to hug Harry hard enough to leave bruises. “I am so sorry,” she whispered. “One day, I’ll figure out how to make up for you being forced to stay with him.”

“It’s alright, mum, it’s in the past,” Harry murmured patting her back and kissing her cheek. As she pulled back, Shiva moved in and lightly hugged the red-head from behind. Harry smiled to his rescuer and turned back to Brown giving the older gentleman a genuine grin and a deep, formal bow. “Chairman, thank you so much for helping us. I know this little show took up a lot of your time, but I really can’t say how much it means to me being able to see that man behind bars.”

Brown looked up and nodded to the young man with a warm smile. “I was happy to help, Mr. Potter. I am ashamed that such a person was employed by my company for so many years. Surely there were signs to his nature evident…a thorough investigation is already being launched to ensure that anyone who ignored the problems is brought to task.” He paused and chuckled softly before continuing. “Are you certain I can’t convince you to actually purchase part of the company? I think your imaginative tactics could greatly help Grunnings as we move forward and it might help you heal a bit to partially own something that your abuser once thought was rightfully his.”

“No thank you, Sir,” Harry replied with a shake of his head. “I’m honored, but that’s a bit too expensive for me at the moment. Besides, I have my own business to run. We really shouldn’t take up anymore of your time. If yourself or the police need to contact us, you have our number.”

“I do,” Brown said. Harry and his mothers stood and moved to the door. “One more thing, Mr. Potter, now that the microphones are off…was there any actual magic involved?”

Harry paused with his hand on the doorknob. He looked briefly to each of the women flanking him. Shiva sighed and turned her eyes to the heavens seeking divine assistance while Lily just rolled her eyes at him and waved her hand in a ‘whatever’ fashion. Chuckling, Harry turned just enough to meet the man’s gaze. “Nothing today, Chairman Brown. Have a fantastic day, Sir.” He twisted the knob and led his mothers outside breathing content that finally the Dursleys were getting their due.

The day after his relatives had been dealt with the local Surrey papers were having a field day with Petunia’s confession and Vernon’s arrest. Harry had read enough to know that both his Aunt and Marge were also expected to undergo trials before he’d set the paper aside and invited some friends to spend the day. Tracey, Neville and Susan had jumped at the chance and were currently lounging on his couch while Harry amused them all by having his stuffed bear ride a toy broom around the
room. The bear might be fully Muggle, but a simple sticking charm kept it in place while the broom was enchanted to maneuver and avoid any objects and walls.

“Gotta say, figured you’d be a griffin person,” Tracey said laughing as the bear zipped past her and curved around towards a small bookcase. “Or maybe panther or lion guy. I mean, you must have the stamina for a bear so that does make some sense…” her grin widened at the blush spreading over Harry’s cheeks before she continued on, “but bear is really more of Neville’s thing. Right, Sue?”

Susan rolled her eyes at her friend. “Sure, Trace. Neville, is a bear.”

“Oh, Harry said wincing in empathy for the other young man. “She’s still mad at you huh, Nev?”

“They both are,” Neville replied with a deep sigh. “Hannah dropped off cookies this morning – they were completely burnt, top and bottom.”

“Of course we’re still angry at you!” Susan huffed and crossed her arms glaring at him. “You tried to fight an army. ALONE! You’re not off the hook with either of us until you prove you understand just why we’re angry.”

“I will never get women,” Neville confided with a sad shake of his head towards Harry. “I feel for you, mate, stuck with four of them and two mums.”

Harry chuckled as Susan rolled her eyes and punched her boyfriend in the shoulder. “Thanks for the sympathy, Nev, but I’m learning to deal with it. It’s a constant battle.”

Tracey snorted and waved her hand in dismissal. “Hey, none of you have to deal with Luna. She’s worth like six girls. I love the little ball of energy, but she is bloody exhausting! Harry, I’m totally stealing Daphne back tonight. I need a break.”

Harry’s eyebrows raised at that. “Daphne is a break huh? Wow…Oh and by the way, the bear was a gift from my mum. It’s hair is like mine too!”

“Ah, now I understand,” Tracey nodded sagely while Neville took to peering closer at the bear as it kept zooming around. Dobby popped in with a plate of biscuits just as the stuffed animal zoomed in front of him. The elf squeaked in surprise and jumped back narrowly missing getting a broom tangled in his ears.

“Bad Bearsy,” Dobby muttered glaring at the offending toy amid the chuckles of the humans. “Dobby must be checking landing area next time.”

As he set his tray and popped back out, Susan rolled her eyes at the manic elf. “I wish our elves were that awesome. Hey did you guys hear about Snape?”

Neville perked up and nodded quickly with a wide grin. “Oh yeah! He’s leaving Hogwarts! Finally the greasy git is running for the hills!”

“I admit to being slightly disappointed he didn’t die in the battle…” Harry said grimacing. “I suppose he probably found a corner to hide in as soon as everything started though.”

Tracey shrugged and grabbed a biscuit. “Yup, never left the sanctuary. Millie said he claimed to be ‘providing necessary potions to the wounded’. Arse didn’t even try to fight; probably too scared of being seen on the losing side to risk doing anything. Mum said that Slughorn is coming in to replace him now that he’s resigned. From what I hear, old Sluggy is supposed to be awesome so
that’s a plus!”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, my mum only had good things to say about Slughorn. Snape sent word to her that he’s going to establish a little apothecary in the middle of nowhere. Works out well for everyone I guess. We don’t have to see him, he can keep living in his fantasy world that Lily Evans still cares about him and best of all he is going to be kept far away from children.”

Tracey smirked. “Broody and alone in the woods running a shop for other broody, gits. Better than he deserves.”

“Could be worse,” Susan shrugged. “He did somewhat help us with his information this past year.”

“He was never as evil towards your House as he was towards ours, Sue,” Neville said. “I doubt we’ll ever agree on this one.”

“Probably not,” the red-head said.

Before anyone could respond to that Harry caught sight of Fleur entering the room and looking around with a mild frown etched on her face. “Has anyone seen ze wayward metamorph? I was supposed to be teaching her how to cook ze cakes, but she has disappeared.”

“Nym? In the kitchen?” Harry asked wide-eyes locked onto Fleur. “Fleur, are you insane?”

“If I can teach Gabi, I can teach anyone!” Fleur said. She shook her head and muttered, “So many fireballs to ‘cook ze cakes’…I wish ze girl had done it to annoy me…zat she actually zought it was easier…” Trailing off Fleur frowned and turned her attention back to her current missing cooking partner. “If I could find Tonks I could train her. Ze woman is hiding from me, I am certain of it…”

The chime signifying a returning guest sounded then and all eyes turned towards the main entrance as clomping boots resounded through the hall followed shortly by a muffled greeting. “Morning, Skelly! Looking good and dead like always!”

Harry blinked at that and his mouth dropped open in shock as his currently pink-haired partner tromped past the door to the sitting room. “Nymphadora!” Harry finally managed to call just before she passed beyond the frame completely.

Tonks stopped and turned back cocking her head to one side. “Yeah? What’s up, Wonder Boy?”

Harry worked his mouth for a few moments trying to find the correct way to address her. Around him the rest of the room’s occupants had fallen completely silent and were no help whatsoever. His eyes took in the combat books, soaked in both water and grime; the military camo pants, covered in ash; the giant metal tanks on her back, connecting by a large hose to a nozzle-gun contraption Tonks held nonchalantly over her shoulder clutched in her fingerless black gloves. Finally Harry managed to shake himself out of his stupor and ask her the all important question: “Nymphadora, luv, is that a bloody flamethrower?!?”

Tonks smirked and shifted the nozzle-gun. “Yup,” she replied popping the consonant. “Just taking care of some loose ends, you know. Torching some zombies and all. Hate those undead bastards. It’s all good now though; cave’s been cleared. I’m just going to throw this back into the storage shed. See you all in a few!” Without further ado, Tonks bounced away whistling a jolly tune.

Harry slowly closed his mouth and leaned back into the couch as all eyes shifted from the open
door towards him. Running a hand through his hair Harry groaned. “I lead a weird life…”
Chapter 49: Epilogue

7 Years Later

Hermione Granger Potter scowled in annoyance as she signed the latest bill crossing her desk. She hated passing these types of pureblood-tradition-preservation funding bills. Narcissa Black had done her job well though and managed to convince the Wizengamot that any discriminatory practices were excised. Hermione had gone through the fine print of the bill herself to such a degree that her eyes had practically bled, yet she couldn’t find anything to disagree with. Narcissa was a bitch, but she honestly only seemed to care about keeping some of the centuries-old traditions alive for another generation…something Hermione really couldn’t bring herself to veto. So with a sigh, the Potter wife moved the bill to her outbox and watched it fold into a paper airplane and zoom out of the room, skimmed past the nose of a surprised Daphne Greengrass who had just opened the door.

“Wow, I know you’re annoyed with the job, but trying to kill me with paperwork seems rather harsh,” the blonde quipped with a smile as she pushed the door shut and perched on a chair across the desk.

“Haha, very funny. I hate you, you know that?” Hermione replied dryly. “Sure I get to make changes, but the politics involved in this job are awful! Just how many of your people did you have to buy off to get me into the seat anyway?”

“Less than you’d expect,” Daphne shrugged. “I actually had to accept a few to promise to try and talk you into it. Considering I’d already talked to you about it…well I’m not one to pass up free money, but it felt like taking candy from a baby.”

Hermione groaned and leaned back to rub her eyes as another paper folded itself up and flew out of the office. “Seriously? I’m twenty-four! What country votes for someone who hasn’t even hit a quarter century to lead them!? I can’t believe I let you talk me into accepting the Minister position…”

“You’re the Witch-Who-Conquered,” Daphne said with a grin and a waggled eyebrow. Hermione scowled in response and crossed her arms sending Daphne into a chuckle. “Honestly, Mione, I think people were just exhausted from the string of idiots we’ve had to deal with before Amelia and with her son on the way there was no chance of the woman running again.”

Hermione cocked her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. “Son? Sirius finally got her to agree to check the gender then? He must be thrilled.”

“He is. Stopped by the Manor about an hour ago and couldn’t stop gushing about how he was going to get Remus and Cissa’s son together with his own so he could start corrupting them into the Marauders 2.0. Lily had to grab his ear and make him swear to wait until they were old enough to choose for themselves.”

Hermione nodded. “That was not remotely detailed enough for that man…I’m still surprised that he accepted the Bones surname…”

“I’m not,” Daphne said shrugging. “He always hated his family, he’s still not fond of the Black Manor despite the cleaning efforts, ‘Sirius Black’ carries Azkaban baggage whether or not he ever
admits it, Harry is officially the Black Lord…Sirius Bones nicely wraps all of those problems up and tosses them away while helping Amelia keep her own name going so Susan can take Neville’s.”

“I will never understand the politics in this world,” Hermione muttered. She returned her narrowed eyes towards Daphne and huffed, “Tangent aside, nothing you said explains why I had to run for Minister.”

“Well it was always going to be you, Harry or me. One of the three of us had to take the vacancy and we both know there was no way in hell of getting Harry to agree.”

“You could’ve done it,” Hermione replied glaring.

Daphne just snorted and waved it off. “No. I work from the sidelines.”

Hermione just huffed and kept her glare going. It wouldn’t do to let Daphne win so easily if she hoped to be able to use this against the woman for a bit of leverage eventually…that emerald ring had looked ever so nice… “I still don’t think we needed to be on the first ballet after Amelia left.”

“Better to push our biggest changes through while we can still ride our big win and people still want to be our best friend. Give me ten years and I can get a good chunk of the corruption out while still forcing the Old Guard into the closet and bringing the Muggleborns into their vacant seats.”

Hermione sighed and leaned forward to read through another sheet from her inbox. “Fine, fine, I can agree that many of your reasons are valid though we will have to agree to disagree on some. You still owe me a lot though, Daph.”

“Agreed,” Daphne said smiling and obviously assuming the argument had been won.

Hermione almost smirked as she flagged the document for further review and idled tossed her bomb towards Daphne. “I think I’m going to call in a small section of that debt.”

“Oh,” Daphne asked leaning forward and sounding eager. “How so?”

“Luna stopped in earlier…” Hermione trailed off and waited until Daphne started to fidget slightly before she continued. “She mentioned that you were still putting off having children and Tracey keeps saying how the house feels empty sometimes. She went on to explain – in great detail – how Tracey managed to convince her that a child right now was the absolute best idea in the world.”

“So that’s why Trace has stopped asking about whether I’m still waiting…she shifted targets…” Daphne muttered. She sighed and looked up with her mouth quirred into a sad frown. “So you want me to try and talk Luna out of having a kid? I don’t know how you expect me to be able to do that. Only Harry and you have ever been able to talk that girl out of anything.”

Hermione’s composure broke at that point and she sat back in her chair laughing and shaking her head. “No, Daphne, I don’t care whether Tracey and Luna want a child. That’s their decision and you have to fight that particular battle yourself if you’re against it. What your job is…is to convince Harry he’s going to participate.”

Daphne blinked a few times with her mouth hanging open. Hermione just kept laughing barely composing herself before Daphne got her own wits back. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Luna warned us years ago that she expected Harry to be her sperm donor when she was ready for children.”
“Yeessss,” Daphne frowned before her eyes widened and she fell back against the chair back chuckling. “She was serious. I should’ve known she was serious! She’s still against doing it the fancy Muggle way too so isn’t she?”

Hermione shrugged and rolled her eyes. “I rather doubt that Luna has anything at all against IVF; she’s simply looking to sleep with Harry as much as she can until she gets pregnant.”

“So sneaky little minx…” Daphne commented. “Well, I can’t really blame her and we already share him between the four of us. You ran it by Fleur and Nymph already?”

“Of course. Fleur is intrigued and Nym’s only comment was that she’s amazed it’s taken Luna this long to ask.”

Daphne nodded and shrugged. “Okay, so it doesn’t sound like an issue. Why are you calling in a favor for this?”

Hermione’s eyebrows rose as she stared knowingly at Daphne. “Harry has to be willing.”

Daphne’s grimace showed she finally understood. “Ah, good point. Curse him and his noble nature…who would’ve thought we’d ever be conspiring to get our boyfriend to want to sleep with another girl…We sure that we can’t simply ignore this for a few months?”

“You live with Luna half the time,” Hermione replied laughing again. “If we don’t get Harry onboard she’s just going to start showing up naked in our bed spouting innuendo left and right until he’s worn down enough to agree!”

Daphne startled laughing along with her friend. “Damn, you’re right, she would do that. We spoil her far too much.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been able to ever refuse that girl anything when she turns those eyes on me,” Hermione said with a smile.

“None of us have,” Daphne replied. “Okay, I’ll give it my best. Why me though?”

Hermione smirked and raised her eyebrows. “Daph, Harry does whatever you tell him to do. The rest of us have him wrapped around our fingers to one degree or another, but you might as well have him whipped. For you, he’ll whine and put up a fuss for maybe ten minutes then he’ll cave. Fleur or I would have to work on him for a week or a month at least. Tonks would probably give in to him and we’d be back to square one.”

Daphne snorted and crossed her arms. “Surely it’s not that marked of a…” She trailed off as she started thinking over the past few years. “Wow, it really is isn’t it? I feel like I should add another title to my name – the Woman-Who-Whipped-Harry-Potter. Or I should just spend more time at Potter Manor. Maybe I can convince Tracey to move in there for a few months while Luna is pregnant – or trying to get pregnant at least.”

“Up to you really,” Hermione said shrugging. “The last thing we want is for your relationship with Tracey to be strained. We do have a nice schedule set up as it is.”

Daphne nodded at that. “Agreed. It is nice knowing that some specific nights are reserved for each of us alone.” She leaned forward and draped a hand over Hermione’s own as the brunette returned to the stack of papers in front of her. “So are you coming home anytime soon, Mione?”

Hermione sighed and shook her head. “I still have so much more to look through. It’ll be a few hours I think.”
“Hermione Granger Potter,” Daphne said with a stern tone, “will you tell me what day today is before you make that your final decision?”

Hermione frowned and ran through her internal clock. “Wednesday the 15th.”

Daphne reached over and tapped the calendar on the desk in the far corner. “Hermione, luv, it’s the 16th, otherwise known as…?”. “Our Anniversary…” Hermione murmured as her face paled. “Oh my god! What time is it?! I need to leave! We need to leave! The paperwork can wait until tomorrow. I need to tell my secretary that I’m heading home. I need to tell the Department Heads. Daphne, let’s go!”

Laughing, Daphne stood and shook her head. “Relax, Mione, I already told your assistant that you were heading out and we still have a few minutes before the party starts. We’ll use your Floo. Grab your things dear.” Hermione nodded and rushed to grab her purse and the few items she always took back to the Manor at the end of the day. In less than ten seconds she was standing next to Daphne at the fire grate and hitting the locking rune in the corner. At her nod, the blonde picked up a pinch of Floo powder and tossed it in stepping into the fire immediately after. Hermione took a brief moment to compose herself again before following her partner into the glowing green flames.

Harry plopped down onto his couch with a groan and rubbed his eyes. Shiva looked up from her book and smirked. “Long day at the office, kid?”

Harry rolled his eyes and looked over at Shiva. “I’m old enough now that ‘kid’ doesn’t really apply anymore, mum.”

“You’re impossible,” she replied waving her hand. “Tomayto, tomahto,” Harry said chuckling. “Yeah, long day. I think I finally managed to get the initial plans created for a portable version of the Fortress. Still have a long way to go, but I’m almost certain I hit on the right concept this time. I’ve been staring at that thing so long though, my eyes hurt…” He smiled and shook his head reaching over to his bag. “Oh and I got word from Millie in Sofia. She sent pictures of the new store.”

She’s the manager of that one right?” Shiva asked looking through the photos that Harry handed over. Millicent was standing in front of the doors with her arms spread wide and gesturing to the front display in the first. The second had Krum beside her as the line behind them slowly progressed inside. “Looks like business is going great.”

“Yeah, asking Viktor to help market the Superman harness really jumped up business.” Harry frowned as he continued, “I don’t why I didn’t do that years ago…”

Lily walked in and handed a mug of cocoa to both shrugging. “Didn’t Hermione try to get the professional Quidditch players wearing them a few years back?” She sat down next to Shiva and took out a potions book and a red pen. “Hmm, I thought Daphne and I had corrected this in the last draft,” she muttered leaning over the book and marking her corrections. “Need a new publisher.”

Harry ignored his mother’s muttering and shook his head. “Yeah, Mione tried to get them to adopt it as a safety regulation, but too many complained that it ‘removed all the risk from the sport’. Now that Viktor is wearing one though they’ve apparently changed their tune.”

“Wotcher, all,” Tonks said as she pranced into the room. Harry rolled his eyes and silently started his countdown. Just as he hit zero Tonks’ foot caught on the carpet and she squeaked as she
started to splay forward. Harry just held out his arm, snagged her on her trip to the carpet and deftly pulled her onto his lap. “Stupid carpet. The bloody thing hates me just as much as that troll leg at Grimmauld,” she muttered glaring at the offending piece of upholstery. “Thanks for the save, Wonder Boy.”

Harry rolled his eyes and kissed her forehead. “You’re welcome, Nym.”

“Maybe I should try to stay off my clumsy feet for a bit. Best to be careful for a few months,” she replied with a grin and a wink.

“I doubt a few months are going to make much difference in restoring your balance when years haven’t done anything to help,” Harry replied rolling his eyes. Lily paused and looked over to Tonks with a questioning tilt to her head before snorting at Harry.

“So, did you tell them we were invited to the wedding, Harry?” Tonks asked avoiding meeting Lily’s gaze and never losing her grin.

Harry shrugged. “I was getting to it! Mum, Mother, we’re all invited to Millie and Viktor’s wedding. Your card is in my bag. I can’t give it to you though because Hedwig would take offense at not getting to play messenger.” As if summoned, the white owl flew into the room and settled onto the arm of the chair bobbing her head at Harry and staring intently at his bag. He laughed and held it out towards her while Tonks chuckled and reached out to pet Hedwig’s wing.

“Hey, girl, did you do anything fun today?”

The owl poked her head into the bag pushing items around until she came out with a fancy yellow letter. As soon as she came up for air she dropped the letter in Tonks lap and barked at Harry, tilting her head to the side. “Okay, okay, business first.” Before Harry could satisfy the impatient avian Tonks reached over and handed the invitation to Hedwig who carefully clutched it in her outstretched talon and flew over to Shiva and Lily, dropping the letter between the two. Chuckles resounded from pretty much everyone as Hedwig gave an amused bark and flew back over to Harry and Tonks butting her head affectionately against Tonks’ hand.

Harry raised his eyebrows at the bird. “Good now?” Hedwig barked at him and bobbed her head. “Okay then. How’s that barn owl I saw you flying around with a few days back?” Hedwig covered her head with her wing and Harry grinned. “That good huh? Well there’s certainly room in the roost if you decide to keep him around.” Hedwig glared at him and fluffed her wings. “Don’t get snippy, girl, you bug me about my partners so I can bug you about yours.” Hedwig turned her head around and stared at the wall. With a final bark she took off and headed back upstairs.

“She’ll come around eventually,” Tonks said with a laugh as she looped an arm around Harry’s neck and kissed his cheek. “Suitors and babies always make females a little insane.”

Harry snorted at that. “Well then I’m going to have to step extremely carefully whenever you get to that point considering you’re already halfway insane.”

Tonks raised her eyebrows and her hair switched to blue. “Well if I’m halfway, you’re completely there. You’re really not getting this are you, Wonder Boy?”

“Nah, I admitted to being partially insane years ago, Nym!” Harry replied kissing her nose. Tonks rolled her eyes and Shiva slapped a hand against her forehead.

“Nymph? Nyyymmmmmph?” Fleur’s musical voice floated into the room followed shortly by the Veela herself. “Ah, zere you are! I zought we were going to get ze food before settling down?”
“I asked Ginny and the twins to grab it all,” Tonks said shaking her head.

“Ze twins? Seriously?” Fleur planted her hands on her hips and glared. “You entrust zose pranksters with our Anniversary dinner?! If not for my condition I’d be zrowing a fireball at you!”

“My point,” Tonks muttered to Harry rolling her eyes.

Harry just frowned up at Fleur and shifted Tonks enough so he could sit up straighter. “Are you sick, luv?”

“Sick? Why would you zink zat?” Fleur asked cocking her head at him. She turned back to Tonks. “I could’ve sworn we told him zis morning…”

Tonks laughed as Shiva let her head slam on the table with a groan. “I thought so too, but apparently loverboy is a bit denser than we had anticipated.”

Harry glanced between all four women present. Shiva still had her head on the table, Lily was holding her hand over her mouth obviously stifling her laughter, Tonks’ chuckles were pleasantly shaking her bum against his chest and Fleur was looking to the ceiling for assistance from on high. “Okay, what am I missing? I know I’ve been a bit distracted with the expansion lately, but I didn’t think I had ignored something big.”

“Kid,” Shiva murmured picking her head up and looking at him with pity. “You are even more oblivious than when I met you.”

“Don’t tell him!” Tonks said with a grin. She leaned up and lightly kissed Harry. “He’s cute trying to figure it out!”

“He is, I will grant you zat,” Fleur said rolling her eyes. She walked over to him and briefly kissed him as well. She pulled back and ruffled his hair saying, “Ze children will have you wrapped around zere finger in no time.”

Harry shrugged and nodded. “Well yeah, if I can’t say no to you women how the heck am I supposed to say no to my kids? The trick is going to be making certain that they know I shouldn’t be trying to overrule Hermione or Daph.”

“Oh so we are ze chopping liver?” Fleur asked with a raised eyebrow and crossed arms.

“No, that’s not what I meant! I mean, of course if either of you say no then I’m not going to let them do it anyway! I’m just saying that you both are less likely to glare and yell than Mione or Daph. And you’ll both probably cave to the little ones just like me!”

Lily finally lost her internal battle and let out her laughter in deep rolling chortles. “Harry, honey, stop talking. You’re just digging yourself in deeper!”

“You can say that again…” Harry muttered. “At least I don’t have to worry about this shite for another few years…” Tonks and Fleur shared a look at that and rolled their eyes together.

Before anyone could say anything further, the Floo flared green and Daphne stepped through followed almost immediately by Hermione. “I hope we’re not late! I got so distracted and I didn’t even realize the day let alone the time! Is there anything that I have to do? Is there anything that we missed? I feel like I’ve forgotten something else now! The Minister job is turning out to be even more hectic than the N.E.W.T.s were!”

“Mione, mon amour, breeze,” Fleur said moving over and hugging the frantic brunette. “Calm
down and breeze. Ze Weasleys have been dispatched to get ze food and we sent Daphne after you expecting you to have been consumed in your work.”

Hermione took a few deep breaths and nodded slowly. “There aren’t any fires to put out?”

“Well there’s a fire in my loins, but I think we should wait to put that out until tonight,” Tonks said holding up her hand with a wide grin and orange hair.

Daphne groaned and shook her head. “Already, Nymphadora? We’re here less than a minute and you’re already trying to get us all into bed?”

“Well I’ve got to make the most of it,” Tonks replied wiggling her eyebrows and winking at Hermione. “Gotta do it while I’m still mobile! Well…mostly mobile…minus the falling and the tripping and the banging into things…”

Fleur wiped a hand down her face and playfully slapped Tonks on the back of the head. “We have monzs before zat is an issue and even zen I have a book zat has better positions for us. I am sure zat Mione is already well versed as well.”

“Wait…” Hermione said as she and Daphne both halted in the middle of the room and narrowed her eyes at Fleur and Tonks.

Harry saw the metamorph’s answering smirk widen and Hermione’s eyes grew round followed shortly by Daphne’s. “Okay, these two figure out the big secret within moments and I’m still sitting here clueless! Come on, people! Someone tell me what the bloody hell I’m missing!”

Hermione smiled from ear to ear and ran to Fleur holding her by the shoulders for a brief moment before crushing her into a bear hug. “You’re pregnant!”

“Congratulations, Nym, Fleur,” Daphne said with an equally large smile plastered on her face as she walked over and leaned down to hug Tonks. “Just try and wait a few days before we tell Luna okay? She’s looking to try for her own and I still need to convince Harry first. The little blonde won’t leave us alone once she knows you’re both already expecting,” she said chuckling and drawing back.

In the midst of all the hugging and shouting Harry could only sit there and stare with his mouth hanging open far enough he could be mistaken for a metamorphmagus himself. He made an odd noise in his throat as the girls started chattering amongst themselves. Hermione found her hands cupped in Fleur’s own and held over the taller girl’s stomach while Daphne settled in near Tonks to discuss more practical things like colors for the babies’ rooms and whether Dobby would be allowed to take care of the kids unsupervised. It took a good five minutes before Harry could finally close his mouth and another three before the dryness receded enough for him to form words. Finally, Harry gulped loudly and looked very, very slowly between Tonks and Fleur. Taking another deep breath he carefully asked, “I’m going to be…a father!”

A large grin split across his face as his family laughed and nodded around him. “I’m going to be a father!” He laughed with them and squeezed his arms around Tonks, drawing her against his chest as hard as he dared. “I’m going to be a father!” Tonks squealed as he hugged her and the others started to shake their heads at him.

“Finally figured it out huh, kid,” Shiva said smirked. “They’ve only been discussing it for the past ten minutes.”

“Who cares! I’m going to be a dad! Twice! And – ” Harry stopped short in mid-sentence and
frowned. “Wait…Daph…what was that about Luna?”

Daphne’s leer and wiggling eyebrows were answer enough. Harry groaned and leaned back. He snaked an arm out and grabbed Fleur dragging both her and Tonks back to cover and shield him from the room. “Mothers of my children, protect me from the insane blondes!” The room burst into laughter and Harry just held his shields and prayed for the strength to maintain his sanity in the months to come.

One way or another, his family would help him work it all out. After all…he was going to be a father!

- **Current Rune Stones: Bold items are sold through Potter Runes**
  - *Extravagance Rune Show:* makes a fancy light show, without a suppressor is very unstable and explosive (constructed 1st Year)
  - *Fortress of Solitude:* establishes a 10m radius bubble shield that absorbs all spells to reinforce itself, bubble is centered on the rune stone (continually in progress, expected completion 1995-1997)
  - *Slow Burn:* works like a *lumos* charm but lasts for about an hour (constructed 1st Year)
  - *Lockpick:* works like an *alohomora* but can get past doors spelled to resist that charm (constructed 1st Year)
  - *Gold Digger:* transmutes lead into gold, exceedingly complicated (continually in progress, expected completion late 2000s-late 2010s)
  - *Slow Burn:* works like a *lumos* charm but lasts for about an hour (constructed 1st Year)
  - *Lockpick:* works like an *alohomora* but can get past doors spelled to resist that charm (constructed 1st Year)
  - *Gold Digger:* transmutes lead into gold, exceedingly complicated (continually in progress, expected completion late 2000s-late 2010s)
  - *Ninja:* a combination disillusion and silencing charm which also masks scents, activating any other rune stone or spell will discharge the *Ninja* sometimes rather violently (constructed 2nd Year)
  - *Concussor:* works just like the *confringo* spell, can be rapid fired (constructed 2nd Year)
  - *Blastor:* works just like the *diffindo* spell, can be rapid fired (constructed 2nd Year)
  - *Reductor:* works just like the *reducto* spell, can be rapid fired (constructed 2nd Year)
  - *Slugvomit:* prank rune stone, activator expels slugs every time their mouth opens for an hour, single use only, sold through Potter Runes (constructed 2nd Year)
  - *Reflector Lenses:* rune cluster added to glasses that reflects back any magic cast at it, primary use is gaze attacks but potential expansion exists (constructed 2nd Year)
  - *Boomstone:* works like a super loud boom box designed to stun opponents with the loud sound, currently tuned to a lorry horn, localized silencing charm is applied to the user upon activation (constructed 2nd Year, Runic Tattoo 4th Year)
  - *Feedback Stone:* chains a feedback loop of failing explosion runes effectively creating a magical grenade, can be modified to work from several different bases including the *Concussor/Blastor/Reductor*, single use only (constructed 3rd Year)
  - *Comm Stone:* works like a cell phone, can be miniaturized into earrings (prototype constructed 3rd Year)
  - *Fishing Line:* works like a combination of a summoning spell and fishing line, hook the target then jerk the rune stone and the target is flung in indicated direction a short
distance (constructed 3<sup>rd</sup> Year). Alternate Use: if the hooked target is fully anchored then the rune stone is drawn to the target with speed proportional to how much magic is channeled through the rune (discovered 4<sup>th</sup> Year)

- **Silver Spirit**: works similar like a *patronus* spell, only requires happy thoughts during the initial creation, can be used to kill Dementors, contains a Soul rune (constructed 3<sup>rd</sup> Year)
- **Spiker**: launches a large earthen spike, can be modified to metal or wood (constructed 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, Runic Tattoo 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Freezer**: shoots out a fountain of water then freezes it solid after two seconds (constructed 3<sup>rd</sup> Year)
- **Reflector Robes**: same as the *Reflector Lenses* except on robes, too many spells in short order result in robes disintegrating (constructed 3<sup>rd</sup> Year)
- **Keep Warm**: a rune stamp that maintains a constant temperature of 58°C, designed to be used in conjunction with a mug (constructed 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Keep Cold**: a rune stamp that maintains a constant temperature of 4°C, designed to be used in conjunction with a mug (constructed 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Metahair**: prank rune stone, changes the target’s hair color, can be set to pink/purple/blue/yellow/orange/green (constructed 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Tech Bane**: a rune stamp that locally amplifies a small amount of magic effectively shorting out any nearby electronics (constructed 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Tech Assist**: a rune stamp affixed to electronics that locally suppress magic allowing the tech to work (continually in progress starting 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Chain Reactor Beam**: chains a feedback loop of cascading failure runes into each other forming a magical Beam of War, single use only (constructed 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Tracekey**: works similar to a portkey but locks onto the last portkey activated in a 333m radius and designates that origin/destination as the *tracekey*’s destination, tunnels through any wards at both origin and destination (continually in progress starting 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Summoner**: works like the *accio* charm (Runic Tattoo 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Knockback**: works just like the bludgeoning spell, can be rapid fired (constructed 4<sup>th</sup> Year, Runic Tattoo 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Yamato Cannon**: variant of the *Chain Reactor Beam* with an increased energy output and damage ratio sacrificing duration of the beam, essentially creates a large energy ball of destructive magic that is shot at high speed (constructed 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Lava Bomb**: variant of the *Freezer* modified to shoot molten lava instead of water, unstable and difficult to turn off (Runic Tattoo 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Dementor Anchor**: a soul anchor linking a person’s soul to the body, specifically designed to function as defense against a Dementor’s Kiss yet allow the soul to depart naturally after death, contains a Soul rune (Runic Tattoo started 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Breath Keeper**: replaces anything in the lungs with nearest source of fresh air within 333m, activates upon breathing in, primarily designed to avoid breathing toxic fumes from potions mishaps but can be marketed to swimmers, divers and healers as well (prevents water from entering the breathing pathway beyond the nose/mouth, removes any fluid accumulating in the lungs via interior bleeding) (constructed 4<sup>th</sup> Year)
- **Windrunner**: focuses a concussive wave using directed feedback to effect a pushing force on the caster, practically speaking it creates a useful application of Newton’s Third Law when directed against a solid surface, can be used as “a poor man’s maglev
substitute” on a carefully balanced load (Runic Tattoo 4th Year, constructed 4th Year)
- **Superman**: a wearable harness with several rune clusters, acts as a combination momentum slower and feather-light when activated, designed to be a safety measure for Quidditch players though can support a second person up to 70kgs (constructed 4th Year)
- **Armor Robes**: a set of robes with stone and metal inlays along the outer layer, absorbs a certain amount of spells, too many spells in short order will result in outer robe disintegration (constructed 5th Year)
- **War Gauntlets**: a pair of connected bracers that channel spells through one palm and out the other, leaves radiation burns of increasing severity depending on the power of the intercepted spell (concept 5th Year)
- **Soul Viewer**: makes souls visible as auras surrounding people, contains a Soul rune (constructed 5th Year)
- **Stamina Stone**: increases sexual performance longevity, comes in male and female varieties, recommended usage is less than 4 hours per day (constructed 4th Year)
- **Soul Cage**: based on a modified version of an Ancient Egyptian Soul Render, designed to banish souls from objects, with modifications can be used on living subjects, contains a Soul rune (prototype constructed 5th Year)
- **Privacy Stone**: encases an area approximately two meters in diameter with layers of silencing, notice-me-nots and various other privacy spells (constructed 5th Year)
- **Tech Assist**: a rune stamp affixed to electronics that locally suppress magic allowing the tech to work in high-magic areas, cannot function on organic tissues (constructed 5th Year)
- **Fertile Ground**: a rune stone that subtly encourages the growth of plants via enriching the nearby ground (constructed 5th Year)
- **Live Wire**: a rune cluster that connects to the local ley line and channels a portion of the magical power through the user, similar to the *Chain Reactor Beam* in that a beam of raw magical power is unleashed, user should expect burns after prolonged usage (constructed 5th Year)
- **Comm Relays**: larger versions of the *Comm Stones* designed to link with multiple locations at once for a prolonged period of time (constructed 5th Year)
- **Mortar Circles**: larger versions of the *Yamato Cannon* designed to function as a static defense, consists primarily of a large runic circle and a focusing stone directed by the operator, can fire magical energy balls at a rate of 6-8 per minute (constructed 5th Year)

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